

www.20yearsold -- World Wide Web feels its growing pains

March 13 2009, by Peter Capella



British computer scientist and internet founder Tim Berners-Lee speaks at the Campus Party, the world's biggest online electronic entertainment festival in Valencia, July 2008. The creation of the web by Berners-Lee and other scientists at the European particle physics laboratory (CERN) paved the way for the Internet explosion which has changed our daily lives.

The World Wide Web (WWW) on Friday marked its 20th anniversary and its founders admitted there were bits of the phenomenon they do not like: advertising and "snooping."

The creation of the web by British computer software genius Tim Berners-Lee and other scientists at the European particle physics laboratory (CERN) paved the way for the Internet explosion which has changed our daily lives.

Berners-Lee and former colleagues such as Robert Cailliau, who originally set up the system to allow thousands of scientists around the world to swap, view and comment on their research, regardless of the distance or computer system, took part in commemorations on Friday at the laboratory.

"Back then there were 26 web servers. Now there are 10 to the power 11 pages, that's as many as the neurones in your brain," said Berners-Lee, who still has an active hand in the web's development.

In March 1989, the young Berners-Lee handed his supervisor in Geneva a document entitled 'Information Management: a proposal.'

The supervisor described it as "vague, but exciting" and gave it the go-ahead, although it took a good year or two to get off the ground and serve nuclear physicists in Europe initially.

Former CERN systems engineer Cailliau, who teamed up with Berners-Lee, said: "It was really in the air, something that had to happen sooner or later."

They drew up the global hypertext language -- which is behind the "http" on website addresses and the links between pages -- and came up with the first web browser in October 1990, which looks remarkably similar to the ones used today.

"Everything that people talk about today, blogs and so on, that's what we were doing in 1990, there's no difference. That's how we started,"

Cailliau told Swiss radio RSR.

The WWW technology was first made available for wider use on the Internet from 1991 after CERN was unable to ensure its development, and the organisation made a landmark decision two years later not to levy royalties.

"Without that, it would have died," commented Berners-Lee.

Cailliau still marvels at developments like wikipedia that allow knowledge to be exchanged openly around the web, but never imagined that search engines would take on the importance they have assumed today.

But the commercial development of the web irritates some of the founders, who prize its open and universal nature.

"There are some things I don't like at all, such as the fact that people have to live off advertising," said Cailliau, who preferred the idea of direct "micro payments" to information providers.

"And there's the big problem of identity, of course, the trust between the person who is consulting and the person who provides the page, as well as the protection of children," he added.

Berners-Lee, now a researcher at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States and a computer science professor at Southampton University in Britain, still heads the World Wide Web Consortium (3WC) that coordinates development of the web.

He expressed fears about the growing tendency to profile web users and detail their habits by collecting online data, often automatically.

"That sort of snooping is really important to avoid," he told the commemorative event here, heralding a future built on linked open data networks and mobile web use.

Lynn St. Amour, chief executive of the Internet Society, complained that the web is often wrongly confused with the wider Internet, a "network of networks."

"The Web is one -- albeit, the most influential and well known -- of many different applications which run over the Internet."

"The great achievement of Tim Berners-Lee was to recognise the power and potential in the Internet," she added.

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Citation: [www.20yearsold](https://www.20yearsold.com) -- World Wide Web feels its growing pains (2009, March 13)
retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-03-www20yearsold-world-wide-web.html>

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