

Norwegian browser Opera aims to topple reigning Internet Explorer

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No. 1 in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Belarus. It might not be a slogan to attract an avalanche of American Internet users, but the Norwegian company that makes the fastest Web browser you've never heard of sees a major opportunity in the United States and the rest of the world.

Since the Internet went mainstream in the 1990s, accessing the Web has been an either-or decision, if there were any choice at all -- Netscape or Microsoft's Internet Explorer? Or more recently -- IE or Firefox? But the popularity of the Mozilla Foundation's Firefox and the rapid rise of Google Chrome have broken that logjam.

With Internet Explorer on track to abdicate its long-held position as the

browser used by a majority of the world's desktop users, browsers are experiencing their most intense cycle of innovation since Microsoft vanquished [Netscape](#) in the 1990s, innovation that is giving users a faster and more powerful window to the Web.

"It's an exciting time to be in the browser business," said Al Hilwa, an analyst with the research firm IDC who tracks the market.

The shift has presented a big opportunity for [Opera Software](#), the Norwegian browser that rules in parts of the former Soviet Union but has a minuscule sliver of the U.S. market.

Opera Software's headquarters for North and South America is less than 3,000 square feet in a nondescript office building in Mountain View, Calif., down the hall from the Social Security Administration. It's not quite on par with its crosstown browser rivals -- Google's chic and expansive campus, or Mozilla's new digs. Not to mention the nearby Cupertino, Calif., campus of Apple, which makes Safari, the world's No. 4 browser.

The handful of engineers and sales people in Opera's [Silicon Valley](#) offices might be forgiven for feeling like David within a ring of Goliaths. But executives with the world's only leading browser not based in Silicon Valley or Redmond, Wash., say Opera is the world's fastest browser and offers American users with an important choice.

Opera's founders "had this idea that people would actually want to test out other browsers over time, even though Microsoft at the time had a monopoly," Opera CEO Lars Boilesen said in a telephone interview from Oslo. "It's been a long journey, but we are really excited because now that market is here, and now it's time to speed up the process in America."

As recently as 2003, Microsoft's browser controlled well over 90 percent of the market. But if current trends continue, [Internet Explorer](#) could sink below 50 percent of the world's desktop users as soon as this summer, data collected by the Web analytics firm StatCounter suggests. (A different firm, Netmarketshare, puts IE's share higher, just below 60 percent of the world market, but also slipping.) While Opera is the most popular browser in parts of the former Soviet Union such as Uzbekistan and Belarus, Firefox is now tops in Germany and other European nations, and Chrome is gaining ground, particularly in big, fast-growing nations like India and Brazil.

"Think back to how things were five or six years ago, with one player, no competition, nobody pushing each other forward," Firefox director Mike Beltzner said in a recent talk to the Firefox community in which Mozilla announced it would launch a new, faster browser, Firefox 4, later this year. "We're now in a space that's intensely competitive and all of it pushing each other forward."

The proliferation of choice, say executives with Google, Opera and Mozilla and other experts, is a key factor sparking big improvements in the speed and capabilities of Web browsers, such as the ability to synchronize bookmarks and other personalized browser data across multiple computers, software extensions that automatically translate languages, and better graphics and video. Those new abilities, and the migration of software from the desktop to the Internet "cloud," are making the browser a more central element of people's computing experience.

Google's launch of Chrome in September 2008 also helped consumers realize they had many choices, with Opera seeing a 20 percent jump in downloads after Chrome was launched. Google says Chrome now has more than 70 million users, up from 30 million a year ago, and agrees the competition is breeding better browsers.

"The browser space was dormant for many years, and Mozilla really reinvigorated it with Firefox," said Linus Upson, the Google executive who heads the development of Chrome. "The Opera folks are doing just amazing work as well. They've done spectacular things with their JavaScript engine," the component of a browser that interprets the web's programming language for users.

Opera began in 1994 as a research project in Norway's largest telecom company, Telenor, but quickly became an independent company. One of the company's mobile browsers, Opera Mini, became available on the iPhone April 13, and was downloaded by 2.6 million iPhone users in its first two weeks of its availability.

Hailing from a country with fewer people than the San Francisco Bay Area, Opera Chief Technology Officer Hakom Wium Lie says the company may have a more global perspective than its American competitors. Lie said Opera had an earlier and more intent focus on data privacy and the ability to translate content between languages, even rarely spoken tongues like Scottish Gaelic and Welsh.

"It's very good for software to be developed not only on the U.S. West Coast," Lie said.

Then, there is that Norwegian sense of humor. At Google's recent I/O conference in San Francisco, Lie stood up for a keynote speech before 5,000 software developers, put up a slide of a parade in downtown Oslo and dryly announced it as a celebration for a new standard of video compression technology. (It was actually the annual May 17 Norwegian independence parade.)

Lie's biography on the Opera website is not bland corporate-speak: "In English, my first name is unpronounceable, my middle name is shortened to a single letter, and my last name does not build confidence.

I therefore go by the name 'howcome' which, although grammatically dubious, is the closest pronounceable approximation."

Despite Chrome's rapid growth, Opera's top executive for the Americas, Roy Satterthwaite, said the Norwegian company does not see Google as a foe bent on its destruction. The two companies have a revenue-sharing deal that puts Google's search box in Opera's toolbar.

Opera and Google disagree, however, about whose browser is fastest. Opera calls its newest version 10.53 browser "the fastest browser on Earth," and points to three independent tests that found it loaded Web pages faster than all other browsers, including Chrome.

[Google](#), which has made Chrome's speed a key selling point, has a different view.

"Across a wide array of benchmarks, Chrome is not only faster but much faster than all of the other browsers," Upson said. "That said, I think the [Opera](#) guys are doing a wonderful job, and there are a small number of benchmarks where they beat us, and we're going to work very hard to make sure that doesn't stay true."

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