

# The Value of the Internet for Christians

Sue Bohlin's article, originally written in 1995, asks, How should Christians deal with this new culture force? There are many worthwhile places on the Internet for believers, and this essay is heavily documented with the electronic addresses. The dangers of pornography and unwise intimacy with computer-mediated relationships are also discussed.

## An Exciting Technology

The internet is a cultural force that is changing the way we live and communicate, but many people don't understand it. In this essay we'll examine the Internet as a tool for Christians to use to the glory of God while at the same time employing discernment to be wise in our use of a most exciting technology.

The internet is like our highway system, only it includes both the destinations as well as the roadways. Just as you can travel in a car over a series of connected interstates, state highways, city streets, farm-to-market roads, and gravel paths, the internet lets you travel electronically through a network of computers that lets you get just about anywhere in no time flat. The internet also includes the destinations in your electronic travels, much like different kinds of malls, where the stores are right next to each other. There are entertainment malls, where you can see pictures ranging from fine art in the Louvre ([www.louvre.fr](http://www.louvre.fr)) to breaking news stories, {1} watch video clips of live performances, and listen to speeches, {2} music, {3} and radio stations on the other side of the globe ([www.radio-stations.net](http://www.radio-stations.net)). There are information malls where you can do research and gather information on everything from Caribbean vacations to the Crusades to castles. {4} There are library malls where, instead

of books, you can get files of everything from games to computer software to historical documents.[{5}](#) And there are conversation malls where you can talk to people across town or around the world.[{6}](#)

The internet also provides almost instantaneous electronic mail, or e-mail, which allows people to communicate so quickly, easily, and cheaply that e-mails now outnumber physical mail aptly nicknamed "snail mail." You don't have to track down paper and pen, handwrite the note or letter (and these days, legible handwriting is becoming all too rare), find a stamp and then walk it to a mailbox. Instead, those who can type find that it's a lot faster to zip off a letter at a keyboard, type in an e-mail address, hit the "send" button, and bam! Your letter is in the other person's mailbox waiting for them to log on and read it.

You can also subscribe to electronic, automated mailing lists, which are a blend of newsletter and discussion group devoted to a single, specialized topic. My friend Bill, whose 8-year-old daughter Cheska lost a courageous battle with cancer, was grateful for the Brain Tumor list.[{7}](#) Subscribers to this list are people with brain tumors, those whose families or friends have brain tumors, and health-care professionals who treat these patients or do research into the disease. Bill gleaned exceedingly valuable information and leads on research and therapies. He also gave and received support and encouragement from this virtual community of people bound by a common tragic bond.

The instant, easy communication of e-mail also made it possible for Cheska to receive prayer support from literally around the world. By sending prayer updates to a little more than 200 people, her father discovered that by word of mouth and computer, thousands of people all over the globe prayed for her. I discovered that same wonderful phenomenon when sending out requests for prayers and cards to the Barbershop (singing) community for my father during his battle with

cancer, and he was delighted to receive encouragement from all sorts of people he didn't know. The internet is one of the most exciting developments that the world has ever seen. Many Christians are both fearful and ignorant of it, though we don't have to be. Like any other kind of technology, the internet is morally neutral. It's how we use it or abuse it that makes the difference.

## **Home-Schoolers and Missionaries**

The technology of the internet has been a tremendous boon to families. Many of them have discovered that the internet's rich informational resources have provided a way to share common interests. One father and his son like to surf the World Wide Web to explore their passions for the Civil War and astronomy.[{8}](#) Another father-son duo used the internet to decide what historical places they would visit while planning a battlefield tour. Many families have enjoyed researching their vacation destinations before leaving home. In our family, we used the internet to learn as much as we could about Costa Rica before our son headed there on a missions trip. Our other son, researching a paper for school on the artist M.C. Escher, found biographical information and examples of his artwork on the World Wide Web. It yielded excellent information and saved us a trip to the library, making both of us happy campers!

Many home-school families have discovered the benefits of the internet. There is a great deal of information online that can supplement lessons and provide resources for the parent teacher. Online encyclopedias,[{9}](#) newspapers and libraries[{10}](#) offer more information to home-schoolers than has ever been available before. But for many families, the best part of the internet (as well as forums on the online services like CompuServe and America Online) is the support and interaction they can enjoy with other home-schoolers. Families in the most remote corners of Canada can enjoy an electronic camaraderie

with those in suburban Atlanta and even military families in Germany. They share insights and experiences with each other as well as brainstorming together on problems and challenges such as finding a different way to teach a child having trouble grasping a concept, or what to do with a special needs child. "Plugged-in" home-school families report that the encouragement of their online home-school communities is often what keeps them going.

As video capabilities become cheaper and more accessible, home-school families look forward to networking with others in some learning exercises. A family's geographical location won't make any difference in a virtual (electronic) classroom.

For missionaries and mission organizations, the internet has become a huge blessing. Radio and satellite links give missionaries in even the most remote outposts access to instant, inexpensive, reliable communication with their organizations and families via e-mail. The internet has shrunk the world, and missionaries no longer have to feel so isolated. One missionary in the former Soviet Union told me via e-mail that she was very grateful for almost instant access to loved ones as well as mature, wise believers who can encourage and guide her as she deals with the challenges of missions work. But the best thing, she said, was that she can ask people to pray specifically and immediately for needs and problems, and start seeing answers within hours instead of weeks or months. A missionary battling discouragement, homesickness and weakness, not to mention the intensity of spiritual warfare, can summon real-time prayer assistance from the other side of the world and experience very real support and a sense of being truly connected to the larger Body of Christ.

Whether a parent is saying goodbye to a child headed for the mission field, a foreign military post, or even to college in another part of the state, the internet has made it easier to separate knowing they can stay in close contact with their

loved ones, in a world that has grown considerably smaller as the internet has grown larger.

## **Dangers on the Internet**

The internet provides a wealth of information, but not all the information is edifying or wise. Much of it is downright silly, but some of it is actually dangerous. Fortunately, you don't have to worry that you'll turn on your computer and a pornographic picture will fall out of your monitor into your home; however, porn pushers are getting increasingly aggressive in finding ways to send their pictures to unsuspecting people, often children.

The key to protecting our children from online pornography is the same way we protect them from printed pornography: parental vigilance. Parents need to know what their children are doing at the computer, which is why it's wise to keep the family computer in a public place. And it's also wise to become computer and internet literate ourselves. But there are some powerful tools to help parents and schools keep adult-oriented material away from children: software programs that filter out objectionable sites and prevent access to them. The Dallas Association for Decency (DAD) ([www.4decency.com](http://www.4decency.com)) has invested many hours in evaluating internet filters, which examine the four sources of pornography: web pages, which are like magazine articles replete with pictures; Usenet newsgroups, a series of messages and discussions where people post pictures and text (and the internet's most egregious source of porn); Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels, electronic chat rooms where people can talk without any monitoring; and File Transfer Protocol (FTP) sites, which are like library stacks consisting of nothing but files for the taking. There are several filtered internet service providers (ISP), where the filter resides on a remote computer. This is the safest and most effective system, much harder for technically savvy kids and teens to circumvent than a

filtering program that you install on your own computer. One top-rated and well-respected filtered ISP is ViaFamily ([www.viafamily.com](http://www.viafamily.com)).

But some families don't want dial-up internet service, which is much slower than broadband (fast) internet (cable or DSL). In that case, the next best thing is a good filter on your computer. The two best, in DAD's opinion, are FamilyClick ([www.familyclick.com](http://www.familyclick.com)) and N2H2 ([www.n2h2.com](http://www.n2h2.com)).

Just having a filtering program isn't enough. Some programs work so poorly that they're actually worse than nothing at all because they give a false sense of security. Not all filtering software is created equal! Nothing will ever take the place of parental involvement and vigilance, and that will always need to be our first line of defense. But what about when our kids are at school? Administrators are very much aware of the dangers of the internet, while desiring students to have access to the incredible resources it offers. Many school districts are in the process of developing Acceptable Use Policies that will provide stringent parameters for student internet access. It's essential that parents check on the policies of both their children's schools and the local public libraries, which often provide unfiltered access to both adults and children out of a misguided (in my opinion) allegiance to the concept of no censorship.

Another danger of a very different kind also requires our vigilance. There are a lot of computer viruses floating around on the internet, which are transmitted when you transfer a file from a remote computer to your own (downloading), or from an infected diskette to a clean one.

A virus is an invisible program, written by programmers ranging from mischievous to mean-spirited, that attaches itself to a file and wreaks some degree of havoc on an unsuspecting person's computer. It's important to use software that scans your hard disk and diskettes for viruses and then

destroys them. I used to neglect to keep checking my computer for viruses, and when I turned it on the day of Michelangelo's birthday, March 6, the virus of the same name wiped out all my data—mine and a few other thousand people's! A little caution goes a long way. Be sure to use, and update, virus protection software by good companies such as Norton or McAfee.

## **Online Communication**

Both Ann Landers and Dear Abby have run an increasing number of letters in their advice columns about spouses who emotionally or physically abandoned their families after meeting people through the computer. Those who have never developed a relationship with someone who lives on the other side of a screen and a telephone line have a hard time understanding how such a thing could happen, but there is an electric thrill in the immediacy of computer communication, as if a radio personality suddenly started conversing with you through your radio.

The dynamics of computer conversation are vastly different from face-to-face discussion. There is no non-verbal element, which comprises 93% of our communication. When body language and tone of voice are missing, and words are all you have to work with, words become much more important. And words, especially those of a direct and personal nature, are very powerful. But words on a screen are enough to allow friendships to sprout up quickly and mature under the right circumstances. Many people count their online friends, some of whom they've never met, as among their most cherished relationships. And many Christians are grateful for the depth of fellowship with other believers they have found through the computer.

However, it's important to understand how online relationships differ from those in the "real world." Because we have very limited information about the people we communicate with, we project our preconceptions and fantasies onto them, quite

unconsciously. Real life can be ordinary and drab compared to the idealized image we relate to on the screen. One person finally realized that the reason she preferred her online friends to her real-life ones was that, as she put it, she “had imbued them with magic.”

That’s why there are emotional potholes in cyberspace. A false sense of emotional intimacy is easily achieved when all you have to work with is words and thoughts and feelings. What is missing is the fullness of another person’s whole personality and the context of his or her three-dimensional life. Therefore, what people experience is generally not true intimacy, although a relationship can indeed be extremely intense and most people are unprepared for the level of intensity that can characterize online communication. Sometimes, though, that experience of emotional intimacy can come at the cost of intimacy in one’s “real life” relationships. Many husbands and wives feel shut out of their spouse’s heart and mind because they spend hours a day at the computer, communing with unseen people with whom they readily share their deepest selves.

Women are especially vulnerable in online communication for two reasons: first, because God made us verbal creatures, and we respond deeply to words. And words are everything in cyberspace. Secondly, women are vulnerable because of the pervasive loneliness in our culture. Even those in marriages and families experience unmet needs for attention, warmth, and interaction. Many women are starving for romance, and any attention from a man can feel like the romance they’re starving for. When a woman receives focused attention from a man who is listening to her heart as well as her words, it can feel like the romance God designed her to receive, and that’s why a frightening number of women become infatuated with men they’ve never even laid eyes on, although this happens to men as well. The word of God tells us to guard our hearts (Proverbs 4:23), and this is wise advice for all online



communications and relationships.

## Christian Resources

Never before has it been so easy to access so many Christian ministries and their material. It's now possible for us at Probe to make our radio transcripts available to anyone in the world with internet access, without printing or mailing costs. And internet surfers can stumble across biblically-based, Christian perspectives without even meaning to by using search engines, {11} programs that scour the net for anything they can find on a given subject. For example, someone looking for information on angels will find Probe's essay {12} right alongside articles from a typically New Age perspective.

There are several web sites that offer links to many Christian ministries. Gospel Communications Network ([www.gospelcom.net](http://www.gospelcom.net)) is the home for InterVarsity ([www.gospelcom.net/iv](http://www.gospelcom.net/iv)), Navigators ([www.gospelcom.net/navs](http://www.gospelcom.net/navs)), and Radio Bible Class ([www.gospelcom.net/rbc](http://www.gospelcom.net/rbc)), where you can now read the well-known devotional Our Daily Bread ([www.gospelcom.net/rbc/odb](http://www.gospelcom.net/rbc/odb)) online.

If you have a computer, a modem, and an internet provider, you have access to literature and reference works beyond the scope of many libraries. One favorite internet site is the Institute for Christian Leadership's amazing "Guide to Christian Literature on the Net." {13} Here you can browse various Bibles, articles, classic essays, creeds and confessions, sermons, and reference works. They also offer the "Guide to Early Church Documents on the Net," {14} a real find for church history buffs. Wheaton College sponsors the "Christian Classics Ethereal Library ([www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)), offering writings by great saints such as Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards. Their collection of reference works is thrilling to Bible students. Here you can find a concordance, Bible dictionary, a topical Bible, and Matthew Henry's commentary. One of the best Christian resource is the Bible Gateway ([bible.gospelcom.net](http://bible.gospelcom.net)), where you can locate any

chapter or verse in the most popular English versions, as well as Spanish, German, French, Swedish, Tagalog, and Latin! If you're a teacher or pastor, check out the Blue Letter Bible ([www.blueletterbible.org](http://www.blueletterbible.org)) for wonderful study tools.

The internet doesn't limit itself to what can be seen, though. With software that comes as part of web browsers like Internet Explorer or Netscape, or by downloading the free software program RealAudio ([www.real.com](http://www.real.com)), it's possible to listen to a variety of audio clips. You can hear a sermon by Chuck Swindoll ([www.insight.org](http://www.insight.org)) or David Jeremiah ([www.turningpt.org](http://www.turningpt.org)). You can enjoy various kinds of music and radio stations, as discussed earlier.

There is a lot of information available to Christians. Want to find a Christian radio station near you or in a city you'll be visiting? There's a web site that lists hundreds of them ([www.christianradio.com](http://www.christianradio.com)). You can find Christian Clipart on the internet ([timoart.com](http://timoart.com)), and even download hymns and worship music to play through your computer's sound card.<sup>{15}</sup> If you want to stay current on new Christian sites, I have great news. Quentin Schultze has revised his wonderful book, *Internet for Christians*,<sup>{16}</sup> as well as a web site by the same name that features a continually updated "virtual appendix" to the book ([www.gospelcom.net/ifc](http://www.gospelcom.net/ifc)). Dr. Schultze also offers an excellent "Internet for Christians Newsletter" on the web site that is e-mailed bi-weekly free. I also recommend Jason Baker's excellent resource, *Parents Computer Companion*.<sup>{17}</sup>

Happy surfing!

## Notes

1. For example, Cable News Network's home page is [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com). You can also check the websites of newspapers and TV networks and stations.
2. Use a search engine with the keywords "+speech +RealAudio"

to see a list of speeches online.

3. Music is such a broad category that your best bet is to use a search engine (see Note 11) to find sites that offer the kind of music you would like to hear, such as “Country Music” or “Gospel Music” or “Japanese Music.”

4. The internet is a mind-boggling collection of information, and search engines—like instant, electronic librarians—are the best way to find information about whatever you’re interested in. See Note 11.

5. These “library malls” are analogous to FTP (File Transfer Protocol) sites.

6. The “conversation malls” are analogous to IRC (Internet Relay Channels) rooms, as well as the immensely popular chat rooms now available on the World Wide Web. You can find thousands of them by going to any search engine and typing in “chat rooms” as the keywords. However, be forewarned that these can be dangerous places for children, and I suggest that people stay out of them.

7. You can get information about this list, and other like it, by using search engines. For instance, use “brain tumor list” as the keywords to get information on all the lists available for this particular issue.

8. NASA’s home page is [http://www.nasa.gov/NASA\\_homepage.html](http://www.nasa.gov/NASA_homepage.html). The *Houston Chronicle* offers an exceptional web page where you can see various space-related photos and even listen to shuttle launchings and landings, as well as live transmissions when it’s on a mission; find it at <http://www.chron.com/content/interactive/space> and click on “NASA TV Video.” Another good route is to go to Yahoo (see Note 11) and look in the index under Hobbies, Astronomy.

9. You can get either comprehensive or free, but not both. Britannica Online ([www.eb.com](http://www.eb.com)) is comprehensive, but you have

to pay a monthly fee to access it. The free encyclopedias are not comprehensive; one place to find some is at [www.yahoo.com/Reference/Encyclopedia/](http://www.yahoo.com/Reference/Encyclopedia/).

10. The online services are probably the best sources for libraries (files contributed by members). One particularly good online community that includes a library is the Home School forum on CompuServe's Christian Interactive Network. You do not need a CompuServe membership to access this any more: [go.compuserve.com/cinhomesch](http://go.compuserve.com/cinhomesch).

11. There are several search engines available on the Internet, all of which are free. My personal favorite is Google, [www.google.com](http://www.google.com).

Here are some others to try:

Altavista: [www.altavista.com](http://www.altavista.com)

Yahoo: [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)

Lycos: [www.lycos.com](http://www.lycos.com)

Go.com: [www.go.com](http://www.go.com)

Ask Jeeves: [www.askjeeves.com](http://www.askjeeves.com)

I specifically avoid Metacrawler ([www.metacrawler.com](http://www.metacrawler.com)) because of the pornographic ads that appear on its results pages.

12. [Angels: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly](#)

13. [iclnet93.iclnet.org/pub/resources/christian-books.html](http://iclnet93.iclnet.org/pub/resources/christian-books.html)

14. [iclnet93.iclnet.org/pub/resources/christian-history.html](http://iclnet93.iclnet.org/pub/resources/christian-history.html)

15. [www.citilink.com/~dsands/midi.html](http://www.citilink.com/~dsands/midi.html)

16. *Internet for Christians*: Muskegon, MI: Gospel Films, Inc., 1998.

17. *Parents Computer Companion*: Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999.