Getting on the Internet

Internet by their TV cable system. With the cable connection, as soon as they turn their system on they are hooked in, removing the need for a telephone, Mr. Mahony said.

The cable connection is hundreds of times faster than current modem technology. Copying a detailed photograph to your computer through a standard modem could take 90 minutes. Using a top of the line modem, the picture is copied in less than half that time. With the cable connection it can be done in under 10 seconds.

Mr. Mahony said the price of commercial Internet services has dropped dramatically in the past year, down from about $50 per month to around $10 with some providers. Individual packages can cost more.

Any library service can be duplicated by the system, said Mr. Mahony. "However, it's not a static library. It's updated instantaneously."

It can also be used to transfer information, in the same manner as the mail service or the telephone. Mr. Mahony said it is fast becoming a tool for business to get feedback on their products, while consumers use it to lobby producers.

The original project of linking networks to form the Internet came out of a United States defence initiative to maintain military communications in the event of a nuclear war. Universities used the link to exchange academic information. As more and more people graduated from university or left the military having used the system, they began to set up links to it.

The military has backed out, now that their communications links with satellites have become more advanced.

David Cairney, general manager of the Internet provider Burlington Network Services, said he has long wondered why the U.S. military would knowingly create something which no one could control. Mr. Cairney predicted attempts by big business to gain control of the Internet system will fail, because it is so decentralized.

According to Mr. Cairney, the most visited spot on the Internet is the Playboy site, primarily because it is a no-charge marketing tie-in to the popular men's magazine. However, there are dozens of sites which are sexually oriented and invariably require a fee, usually charged by credit card.

Developing a secure payment system is the biggest hurdle facing businesses using the Internet. Major credit card companies are working on one that would allow use of your card, while keeping the card number and the user's name from the business accepting it.

Mr. Cairney said credit card use is fairly safe now on the Internet, but not entirely secure. He likens it to standing by the side of a highway and trying to read a newspaper which is in a car travelling 120 mph.

"It is possible to read it," he said. "Difficult but possible. If someone wants to read it they will. Locked doors only keep honest people out."

Industry sources indicate about 30 per cent of homes have a home computer. That is expected to increase to about one-third of all households by the end of 1996. Modem use is expected to increase 50 per cent in 1996.

The main reason is the World Wide Web. The web is only one segment of the Internet, but it is probably the most exciting. If you are surfing the 'Net, the World Wide Web is Waikiki.

The World Wide Web uses something called Hyper-Text Mark-up Language or HTML. Thanks to this programming language, the World Wide Web makes point and click access possible and removes the need to learn tedious computer commands. In addition the web features sound and photographs, which older sections of the Internet can't offer. Mr. Cairney predicts motion pictures will be available within six months.

Web sites are currently popular. Mr. Cairney said he has clicked in on one which shows the surf conditions at a particular California beach. He decided to check on it early one morning and was surprised by a black screen. It took him a moment to realize it was still night on the Pacific coast.

Visiting the Louvre web site, one is faced with an index, or menu of what is available, each segment of which is in bold print, indicating hyper-text links to another page. Information about upcoming exhibits might also be displayed with hyper-text links, or one might be invited to purchase tickets. Since users simply skim the surface until they find an interesting subject, the process is called surfing.

"The web provides the ultimate way of sharing information," said Mr. Cairney. "Each site has a home page and you can copy the information you access to your own computer and borrow bits of the programming to create your own web page. Everything is in packets of information,"

He says there are two million new users joining each month, with an estimated 20 to 50 million users already connected.

Milton businessman Pat Kelly called the Internet frustrating, but admits to seeing some economic potential. He is currently deciding how best to access it. "I'm interested because it's there, because of all the hype." However, "In my specialized business area (chemical sales) I have better sources of information."

Mr. Kelly said it's difficult thing to get a handle on the cost of accessing the Internet. There are various packages available to subscribers, which provide a specific number of hours on the system. If you simply browse through the Internet, or enter some discussion groups, those hours can be chewed up rather quickly and the costs escalate.

He said he wants to avoid long-distance charges by using a local Internet provider. He also wants to be sure he would get access on demand. Mr. Kelly, and anyone else on their way through the village of Cyberspace, would likely describe their first trip to the village as merely a lark: Just passing through.

After a few more trips the confusion will likely abate, the stops and shops will become familiar. Internet tourists might even like it well enough to set up an address of their own.