

December 29, 1997

Options are endless once online

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is the fifth of seven columns by Steve Kellman, our newsroom computer wonk, on what to do with that new computer the Big Elf dragged down your chimney. It assumes that the reader is a first-time computer owner who has a PC loaded with Windows 95, word processing and other basic software, a printer, modem and CD-ROM player.*

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So you say you want to join the millions of people who are surfing the 'Net. That's no surprise. Checking out the World Wide Web and sending e-mail are the major reasons that many people are buying computers these days.

The easiest way to log on is through a major Internet service provider (ISP) like America Online. If you haven't gotten one of AOL's free startup disks in the mail, you must have had a cabin next to Ted Kaczynski.

Don't worry though, AOL software also comes preinstalled on many computers. Just double-click on the pyramid-shaped AOL icon or find it using the Start menu and the program walks you through the setup process. Make sure your phone line is hooked to your modem, or your computer if you have an internal modem, and be sure to have a credit card ready.

Some people prefer to go with local service providers, which are springing up all over the country and offer competitive rates to the AOL monolith. It's also usually a whole lot easier to call up a tech support person at a local ISP than to reach a human being at the major providers, an important factor when trying to figure out why your browser is unable to connect.

Browsers are the software programs that allow your computer to display World Wide Web sites, those Internet sites that offer both text and graphics (and, increasingly, sound and animated pictures). The two most popular browsers are Microsoft's Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator. You can probably find them on your computer too, by going through the Start menu to Programs, Accessories and Internet Services.

Later versions of both programs have built-in e-mail programs, while stand-alone e-mail programs include Microsoft Exchange and Eudora, which has a free version available for downloading over the Internet. More on downloading in a later column.

Once online, your options are virtually endless. You can make airline reservations, take virtual tours of foreign countries, listen to sound clips from new audio releases and download clips from new movies. More and more companies are doing business on the web, setting up virtual catalogs and even accepting orders.

A good place to start looking around is through AOL or the "home page" of your service provider, which will usually list a few links to helpful and interesting sites. Links are in another color from the normal text on the page, typically blue. Clicking on them will take you to another web page within the same site or to another site altogether.

Another place is a search engine like Yahoo, where you can search for words or phrases or look through the millions of sites that have already been categorized by Yahoo's online experts. Here are some basic sites to get started:

[Yahoo.](#)

[Switchboard](#), one of several electronic phone books that lets users search for phone numbers, street and e-mail addresses of people and businesses and map out directions.

[The National Newspaper Association](#), which has links to newspaper and magazine web sites throughout the United States.

[Federal Web Locator](#), A comprehensive list of links to federal government web sites, from Congress to the Smithsonian Institution.

[Disney's web site](#), with stories to view, coloring pages to copy and movie clips to download. There's even a free screen-saver to make your PC look like the Disney Channel.