

Freemasonry and the Internet

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CAVEAT: It is now 2025 and a lot has changed since this paper was written.

Introduction

Worshipful Master, Brethren, thank you for this opportunity to present a paper to this lodge. I have selected a topic that should be relevant to the members and is of personal interest to myself. Freemasonry and the Internet.

In keeping with the technology theme, this is an audio-visual presentation.

Tonight I will present this paper in four parts, each part will deal with a separate topic and the paper will end with some thoughts as to where Freemasonry may go with the Internet.

What this paper is not is a chance to learn how to use a computer or the Internet. In the time available, we will be able to consider all four of the topics in some depth, but not down to the level of which button to press, or when.

First, we will consider what the Internet is, how it started and how it has grown into several distinct branches.

Next we will examine what makes a good Web site and what to avoid from some well intentioned but less well executed sites. We will also look briefly at some E-tiquitte, the peculiar system of conventions that have been developed to assist communication and enable the exchange of ideas on the Net.

We will then look at how Freemasonry has used the Internet to present itself to the public. This will be the good bit, where we will connect to the Internet and surf a few Web sites.

Finally we will look at how the Internet can help Freemasons and the lodges that we form. How we can better communicate by using the Net, and why our forebears were wise to include the phrase, "or otherwise them delineate" in the first degree.

After each of the sections, there will be the customary break for questions that I will attempt to answer.

Before we continue I would like to know how far computers have penetrated into our members lives. Could all of you who use a computer at least once a week please raise your hand. Thanks, it seems that about xx percent of you have regular access to a PC. Now how many of you have access to the Internet, that is to say, at least once a week you would be able to use a PC to surf the Web or download email? Thanks, it seems that about xx percent of you have regular access to the Internet. Please remember the results of this straw poll as the percentages are higher than you might expect.

And lastly before we start, to give you an analogy of my abilities with the Internet, consider the Internet as a car. I liken myself to a stock car driver. I know how to drive around the track and usually go quite fast. Sometimes to get to where I am going, I crash and bounce off again. And when it comes to looking under the bonnet, yes I do understand what most of it does but I am not a trained mechanic. So I can tinker around and usually make things work, but a trained mechanic could do a better job.

What is the Internet?

To help us understand the Net, let's look at its origins.

During the cold war the US department of defence needed a secure means of communication. One that was robust and that would ensure that communications would get through. A system that could not be targeted at any one central location, such as a telephone exchange. And so, the Internet was born at UCLA "around Labour Day", the first of September 1969. It started with just four computers.

Over the next several years, this fledgling Internet grew steadily but unremarkably. Email and the Internet made their first public appearances in 1972 at the Internet Computer Communication Conference.

The methods for connecting to files remotely, transferring files over the Net, and sending and receiving electronic mail appeared in the mid- late 1970s. And the World Wide Web began in 1989.

In 1990, the U.S. government officially decommissioned ARPANet, the government body that facilitated the Net, and the National Science Foundation (NSF) took over the role of managing the Internet backbone. In 1995, the NSF in turn withdrew, turning the backbone over to a consortium of commercial providers.

The Internet grew at about 10% per month, but didn't really take off until 1994. It has grown a bit since then.

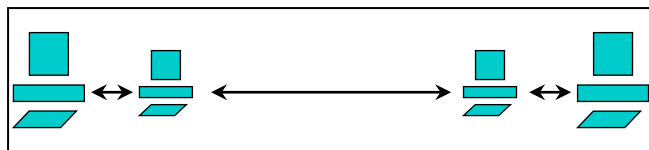
Internet business intelligence firm Cyveillance claims there are currently 2.1 billion unique, publicly available Internet pages. The company's new study, Sizing the Internet, also says the Internet is growing at a rate of seven million pages a day.

Given that these statistics were published on 10 July 2000, there should be over half a billion more pages on the Web by now!

At that rate, the number of pages on the Internet will double by early next year.

How Does the Net Work?

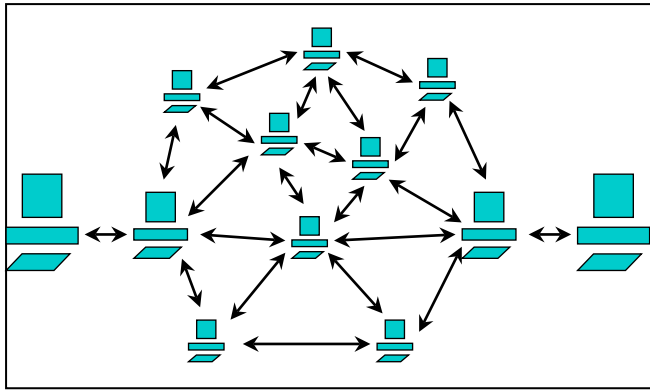
Consider the following diagram:



The computer on the left could send a message containing an address to the next computer and it would 'know' to pass it on to the next computer. The next computer in turn would pass it on until it found its destination computer. The first example was kept simple and it worked!

Since then millions more computers have been added to the Internet. And all computers on the Internet are interconnected.

Now consider the next diagram that shows how you would connect today:



If you consider the computer on the left to be a user, they would dial in to their Internet Service Provider (ISP) such as Clear or IHug or any other commercial provider. The ISP would then send the message to the Net. The message carries its own address and finds its way through the Net to the ISP for its destination. The next time the destination PC user dials into their ISP, the message is waiting there to be retrieved. The Internet is reasonably secure in that the message you send is broken into small packets and they may use different routes through the Net to reach the destination.

The following two slides indicate different paths the same message might take to reach the destination in our small Net.

There are four main ways in which the Web is used and we will look at each of these now so that we can better understand how we as masons can use it.

The World Wide Web

Although the terms Web and Internet are often used synonymously, they're actually two different things.

The Internet is the global association of computers that carries data and makes the exchange of information possible. The World Wide Web is a subset of the Net, a collection of interlinked documents that work together using a specific Internet protocol called Hyper Text Transfer Protocol (HTTP). So, the Net exists independently of the Web, but the Web can't exist without the Net.

The Web began in March 1989, when Tim Berners-Lee of the European Particle Physics Laboratory proposed the project as a means to better communicate research ideas among members of the far-flung organization.

The Web uses individual pages, usually combined to make up sites. Web pages are written in HTML, or Hypertext Markup Language, which tells the Web browser how to display the page and its elements. The defining feature of the Web is its ability to connect pages to one another, as well as to audio, video, and image files, by using hyperlinks. Just click a link, and suddenly you're at a Web site on the other side of the world. Before the Web, you had to type in the exact Net addresses or wade through a whole series of menus to get where you wanted to go.

The Web Site

The above was the technical description of the Web the analogous description follows:

The Web part of the Internet is similar to a library, a chaotic library. Now there's a contradiction in terms: "a chaotic library", but it is accurate.

Essentially each Web site can be regarded as a book and the Web as the library. Anyone can write a book and shove it into the library, where anyone else can go and find it. But “how do you find anything” I hear you ask? And indeed you should.

We have seen that Web sites must be published in HTML and there is a small amount of order imposed on the Web in that the domain name, that is the name of the Web site has to be unique. But they are about the only constraints.

So to find what you want you use links or a search engine.

What is a Web search engine?

When you absolutely have to know something about Cretaceous Mongolia (and, after all, who doesn't?), there's nothing quite like the instant gratification offered by the Web. But there's searching, and then there's finding. Understanding how various types of search sites and programs work can make searching much more efficient.

There are three primary types of search sites on the Web: search engines, Web directories, and parallel and metasearch sites.

Search engines such as Excite and HotBot use automated software called Web crawlers or spiders. These programs move from Web site to Web site, logging each site title, URL, and at least some of its text content. The object is to hit millions of Web sites and to stay as current with them as possible. The result is a long list of Web sites placed in a database, which users search by typing in a keyword or a phrase

Web directories such as Yahoo and Magellan offer an editorially selected, topically organized list of Web sites. To accomplish that goal, these sites employ editors to find new Web sites and work with programmers to categorize them and build their links into the site's index.

Since both approaches make sense, all the major search engine sites now have built-in topical search indexes, and most Web directories have added a keyword search.

Parallel and metasearch sites ride piggyback on the Web crawler sites. Parallel search programs, such as Vironix Software's WebFerret, launch simultaneous searches on all the popular search engine sites, returning all the results in a single window.

Metasearch sites go a step further. One of the problems with searching on the Web is that the searching vocabulary varies from search site to search site. For example, when you search for “Cretaceous Mongolia” on Yahoo, the search term should look just like that. But the same search performed at Infoseek would be more effective if you entered “+Cretaceous +Mongolia”; at Galaxy, it should be “Cretaceous AND Mongolia”. Metasearch sites, such as Metasearch.com, take care of this for you. They let you enter a term in a single field and then automatically account for all the particulars for half a dozen or more popular search sites.

We will have another look at search engines in the next section when we use them to explore the Masonic Web sites on the Net.

Email

Email is the way that messages are exchanged between individuals or small groups. Just as the fax improved letter delivery, email has raised it to a new level again. Email is the medium of choice for modern business. It is fast, it is cheap and it is efficient.

Lets look a little more closely at how it works.

Very simply, you type a message and send it to the recipient. But the difference is that unlike a letter, an email is usually delivered within minutes, anywhere in the world. And not only can you send formatted text, you can also attach pictures, movies and programs.

Another advantage is that email programs automatically archive the email so that you always have a record of your correspondence, and of corse they have spell checkers.

Also, it is just as easy to send emails to groups of people as it is to individuals.

All of this sounds good, but it does not stop there. You can configure your email system to automatically notify you when your email is delivered and when it is read.

The uses go on. (You may have guessed by now that I am a big fan of email.)

Once you receive an email, your options increase. Normally you read it on screen, but you can also print it should that be easier. After it is read, it is very easy to reply and normally you include the original email. When replying to questions asked, you can easily insert your answers under each question, which saves having to retype the question.

Because it is so easy to forward emails, you should be very careful about including any criticism or people or events. Even if the email is not deliberately forwarded to an unintended recipient it is easy to debate another topic back and forth, each time adding to what was said before, and then to widen the audience for that topic forgetting that there is a damning criticism lurking at the bottom.

Newsgroups

A newsgroup is an open forum where groups can discuss things. What things? Just about anything. There are work related newsgroups where programmers for example exchange views and ask for problems to be solved, right through the spectrum of handcraft, genealogy, sport, politics, investments, religion and freemasonry. A couple of the members of St Alban's Lodge joined a newsgroup about the particular breed of dog that they owned.

Unless a friend has recommended a newsgroup, the way to join a group is to search for a topic and then have a look at the results of the search. You will usually have several to choose from. It is a good idea at first to just 'listen in' and see how the group is going and what the different participants are like. A silent listener is known as a "Lurker" in Web speak.

Once you decide to join the group, treat it like any other bunch of people that you know as you interact with them, but always remember that it is an international group and that colloquial speech or jargon does not usually translate well.

If you are replying to an existing thread, keep to the topic and keep it brief. Do not just reply to say, "I agree" or "me too".

Newsgroup Hierarchy and History

The beauty of news groups is that if you visit them regularly it is easy to keep up with the new topics. Your browser will change the colour of news items that you have read to give a visual clue as to where you are up to. When you open an item a tree appears showing any replies in hierarchical order. If there are several questions or points in the original item, there can be several threads of replies.

You must always remember that newsgroups are public and anyone can see your contribution.

I was stung the very first time that I ever posted an answer to a newsgroup. It was about six years ago and I answered a question on a Surveying newsgroup. It was a simple question; I gave a polite reply and thought nothing more of it. About a couple of weeks later I received an email from an unknown person in America suggesting that I was a good family man with a strong moral sense and would be interested in working for good in the world. This seemed OK, but as you read further it became very apparent that I was being asked to join the KKK or something very similar. The Web being fairly new to me at that time, it took a bit of deduction to work out how they had found my address and sent me the invite to join.

Chat

Now would be a good time to tell you that the branch of the Net I don't know a lot about is Chat. The information presented here has been suggested by colleagues of mine or gleaned from the Web. Chatting can take a lot of time and is generally for pleasure only, I do not have a good business case for doing it.

Chat groups are an on-line version of a discussion. There are virtual chat rooms and once you find one you like, you chat to virtual friends anywhere in the world. This is the modern equivalent of having pen friends, only you don't have to wait for the post.

Different rooms have different 'personalities'. My Aunt became addicted to chatting and when she and her husband went on a world tour, they were able to visit a lot of their virtual friends and stay with them in obscure places. They were lucky.

A lot of chatters pretend to be someone that they are not. They give themselves hyped up names like Superman, or Stud or similar.

If you think you would like to chat, try a room recommended by a friend, or search for one and then lurk for a while until you get the feel for it.

The acronym IRC maybe used and it stands for: 'Internet Relay Chat'.

The Good, the Bad and E-tiquette

Just like anything else, there are good Web sites and bad Web sites and codes of practice to be used on the Net in the different areas.

Shortly we will now look at a few of each so that you can see for yourselves what is out there. We will then look at some simple rules to follow that can ensure that any Web site you have responsibility for is one of the good ones.

What will we learn from some of the sites we will visit?

Well, for a start they are a different medium of communication, different from traditional printed media. And just as the language and style of a newspaper is inappropriate for a novel and the style of a novel is not correct for a technical journal, so the Internet has developed a style of its own.

How should we achieve a lodge website?

By design is the obvious way. I would suggest that you pick and mix from the suggested uses below and decide what your site should achieve. Once you have an overview, decide how to stage the implementation. Also early on in the design, you should define the style to be followed. A consistent style will hold a site together and give it a coherency that will spell credibility to users. Within the guidelines, which should be simple and few, you must be flexible.

Web Page Tips

Not in any particular order.

Alignment

Keep your content aligned neatly. Try using tables to order your data. One of the first impressions you will get is the overall layout of the site.

Colour

You must be able to read the content. Is your wallpaper (or background) too strong so that the text gets lost in the graphics? Can you really read the light yellow font? Will people really be attracted to a site that is all shades of pink and purple?

Uniformity

Use a few styles a lot of times rather than a lot of styles a few times.

Size (or resolution)

Not everyone has the latest wizzy computer. Make sure that your Web page will look OK at a resolution of 800 x 600.

Graphics

Publish thumbnails of graphics and have them link to the full graphic for download should the user want to. Make sure that you compress the graphics to the maximum extent possible.

Links

Links are the defining advantage of Web pages. It is important to get these correct. You should link to other places in your site and to other sites of a like nature. In turn the other sites will probably link to you, giving you greater exposure.

Email

There are only two points that I would like to make about the use of email:

Jokes don't always translate, use ☺ (smilies) to indicate it is a joke, but even then be careful. It is hard to know what the sender has in their mind when you can't see their expression or hear the tone of their voice.

DON'T USE ALL CAPS, this is the online equivalent of shouting and is sure to alienate any recipient very fast.

Netiquette

Never forget that the person on the other side is a human being.

Even though you are using a computer to communicate don't forget that other people are on the receiving end. Millions of people all over the world could be reading your words. Avoid personal attacks. Don't speak (type) hastily—try not to say anything to others that you would not say to them in a room full of people

Be brief.

With millions of people participating, you'll find that Newsgroups generate LOTS and LOTS of words. Other participants will appreciate your ability to stay on topic. If you say what you want to say succinctly, it will have greater impact. Likewise, don't post the same message on more than one Newsgroup unless you are sure it is appropriate.

Your messages reflect on YOU—be proud of them.

Although you will meet thousands of people through the Internet, chances are you won't meet many of them in person. Most people will only know you by what you say, and how well you say it. Take time to make sure that you are proud of the messages you send. Take time to make sure your messages are easy to read and understand.

Use descriptive Subject headings in your messages.

The subject line of your message is there to help people decide whether or not they want to read it. Use the subject line to tell people what your message is about. For example, if you are sending a message to an Automobiles Newsgroup, a subject like "66 MG Midget for Sale: Oregon" is much more informative than "Car for Sale."

Think about your audience.

Stay on topic. Post your messages in the appropriate Newsgroup. By reading a number of the messages before sending one yourself, you will be able to get a sense of the ongoing conventions and themes of the Newsgroup.

Be careful with humour and sarcasm.

Without the voice inflections and body language of personal communications, it is easy for a remark meant to be funny to be misinterpreted. You can convey the emotions that words alone cannot express by using such online conventions as "smileys." :-)

Summarise what you are following up. When you are making a follow-up comment to someone else's message, be sure to summarise the parts of the message to which you are responding. Summarisation is best done by including appropriate quotes from the original message. Don't include the entire message, since this could be irritating to people who have already read it.

Give back to the Community

If you send a message to a Newsgroup requesting information, and you get lots of responses via electronic mail, it's a nice courtesy to prepare an edited message compiling your responses to the Newsgroup where you originally posted your question. Take the time to strip headers, combine duplicate information, and write a short summary. Credit the information to the people who sent it to you.

Likewise, be a "giver" as well as a "taker" in this online community. If you have good and valuable information to share, please do so in the appropriate Newsgroups.

Try not to repeat what has already been said.

Read responses to messages before you chime in, so that you are not needlessly repetitive. And make sure your responses have substance—answers like "Yup" and "I agree" probably won't be widely appreciated.

Cite appropriate references.

If you are using facts to support a cause, state where they came from.

Chatiquette

Play by the rules

Microsoft Network and America Online have guidelines banning profanity, racist remarks, threats, and harassment; those who indulge in these can be banned from the chat area. IRC channels also have ground rules. Follow them and life will be good for everyone.

Don't hog the conversation

Unless you're familiar with the channel, it's best to 'hang out' or 'lurk' and listen to the conversation for a while before jumping in. (Start with a hello.) If you have a long thought to express, don't type in the whole paragraph; cut it up with ellipses (Yesterday I heard a funny joke...It was about an old lady and a dog...).

Don't ignore people

Remember that chat is a social arena, so just as in real life, talk with your fellow chatters. If someone asks how you're doing, give an answer.

Learn the lingo

Aside from smileys (expressions made by using characters on the keyboard: :) for smile, :(for frown, ;) for wink, {{ }} for hug, and so on), chatters use all sorts of abbreviations. Below are some of the most frequently used chattisms:

symbol	translation
Y	why
U	you
C	see
BRB	be right back
<g>	grin
<bg>	big grin
<vbg>	very big grin
BTW	by the way
LOL	laughing out loud
OIC	oh, I see
OTOH	on the other hand
POV	point of view
ROTFL	rolling on the floor laughing
TTFN	ta ta for now

Freemasonry on the Internet

This section is browsing of Web sites and use of search engines.

The search engines we will look at are:

www.Google.com

www.Yahoo.com

www.askjeeves.com

Also we will look at some newsgroups.

Maximising Freemasonry's benefits from the Internet

We should use the Net as a primary source of disseminating information to our own members. I say 'A' primary source and not 'THE' primary source because it would be quite unfair to insist all brethren spend two or three thousand dollars to buy a computer and then learn to use it to continue their membership. That would be ludicrous.

But consider the possibilities. Especially for a research lodge that publishes a lot of information. Most lodge notices are already typed up on a computer and then printed onto paper to be manually stuffed into envelopes, addressed and posted. What would be the economic benefit of only having to print and post half of your notices and send the other half by email? Mores the point, what would be the time saving to the secretary? By reducing the mundane tasks, it would free up his time for more creative pursuits.

How can Freemasonry make the best use of the Internet?

Just as modern businesses are using the Internet to their advantage so should we. But we should be careful. Everyone has heard the hype about the Internet start-ups, the 'dot-coms', but less well known is the fact that most of them are not profitable. All of the hype is based on expectation.

Let us look at the two branches of the Web that lend themselves to use by Freemasonry. Firstly email and then Web pages

Email

We have already considered emailing the Lodge Summons out. And I seriously commend this to your attention. St Alban's Lodge has at least three members in England and why should they wait a couple of weeks for a notice that costs the Lodge an arm and a leg when they could get it the same day for free?

Also consider organising events. You can float the idea by email to two or three others and they can reply in their own time. No playing telephone tag, trying to reach them at home at the same time that it is convenient for you. The idea gets tossed around, the participants can see the input from the others and a plan gels from the discussion. Duties are delegated by email and because the person who has to execute the task sees the discussion attached, most of the questions will be answered without being asked and without repetition. The details of the event being finalised, notification is emailed to the members.

Yet another application: A brother is unavoidably detained and a charge he is to give must be delegated at the last moment. Email the request to three or four of the brethren who are capable of giving it and see who replies.

These are but a few of the uses.

In reality, I receive a large number of jokes from the brethren of my Lodge and only recently have I started swapping documents with them via email. As an example, the program for our next installation has been emailed to a brother for editing and will be emailed back to me for final formatting, before being mastered for the printers.

Essentially, any communication task to a known group of recipients can be done with email.

What do Lodges hope to achieve with Web pages?

First, we should learn from what others have done. Freemasonry has already embraced the Web with a multitude of lodges, provinces, districts and grand lodges hosting their own Web pages. But we have to ask ourselves why?

It is very easy to be trendy (not something that mason's are usually accused of) and say that we NEED a Web page. But it is a bit like saying we need a book to be authored. What is the topic, what is the purpose?

The Web pages we have seen tonight primarily seem to be a front window to masonry. A vehicle to say to the public, "Look, we are here, we are alive and well, and even on the Web". And that is good, but I would suggest that we should go further.

How about posting the summons to a password protected Web site? This could be set up to include an automatic email notification to members that are 'wired'.

On the theme of programs, you could set up a database on your Web site that shows each charge a brother has done along with the date, then should another brother want assistance with that charge or be unavoidably detained and need to find a substitute, they could look at the Web site and see who to ask. Now I know that a lot of you will be thinking "any good Master would just know that" and you are correct. But does the Master Mason who is doing his first big charge? The Internet is about making information available to everyone who is allowed to know it.

The Lodge's social program could also benefit. Publish this on the Web and make it available to the world. In my experience it is usually through our social events that new members make initial contact. All right, maybe making the social program available to the world is going a bit far, but at least make it accessible to our wives. When wanting to know the details of an event, I would suggest that it is easier to hit the Web page that you know the location of, than to find the Lodge Summons that was posted six or eight weeks ago. Well it would be in our house; maybe your paper filing system is better than mine.

We have to get into the mind-set of making information available to everyone who can legitimately use it.

You could even publish the ritual on the Web, password protected of course. I know that at least one English Lodge has scanned and edited their ritual book and now has a customised version where the red rubric instructions can be enacted perfectly according to the layout of their lodge room. What is a more convenient way to make this available to the members?

Web pages can offer a lot more than just a photo of your Master and of the Lodge building.

“or otherwise them delineate”

When these four words were included in the obligation all those centuries ago, the “masons” of the time could have had no idea as to the ways they could be delineated today. And moving rapidly to more recent times the early writers of our constitutions had no concept of what today’s delineation techniques could be.

Indeed, 10 years ago when I was Master I had a struggle to be allowed to post out the minutes of the Lodge with the summons, and it was discontinued as soon as I left the chair. A couple of years later it was reintroduced and is now considered ‘normal practice’.

So too, the Internet will present challenges to our rules and constitutions. To best use the power of the Internet some rules will have to change. The challenge is to get the best from the Internet without losing sight of the landmarks of the order. The challenge is for those of us in a position to influence the governance of the craft to be open to change for the good. And to change in a timely manner.

Finally brethren, consider what could be done for this Lodge with a Web site of its own: