The Internet: is it useful or all hype?

The Internet is a vast computer network of computer networks. Estimates are that more than 30 million computer users populated this electronic global village by late 1996 and that some 8 to 10 million had access to the World Wide Web. During 1996, the number of registered commercial sites on the Internet increased more than 500%. The Internet is accessible in more than 100 countries.

Practically speaking, the Internet, also referred to as the Information Superhighway, is composed of people, hardware, and software. With the proper equipment, you can sit at your computer and communicate with someone any place in the world as long as that person also has the proper equipment. You can also use the Internet to access vast amounts of information, including text, graphics, sound, and video. You can search, send e-mail, receive electronic newsletters, and "chat" with others online.

In the late 1960s, a group of scientists wanted to share information with others working on similar research projects, many of whom were government contractors working at large universities. Thus, ARPAnet was spawned. When people at these institutions discovered the enormous utility of a network that linked them with colleagues around the world, the project mushroomed.
As the network expanded throughout the 1970s, members of the computer industry began to participate, and the Internet became an online haven for computer jocks, researchers, and academics. The first commercial online service, CompuServe, started up in 1969 and for several years was itself primarily an online hangout for computer jocks.
In 1986, the National Science Foundation (NSF) created NSFNET to connect supercomputer sites around the U.S. It also connected computers at research sites and schools that were near the supercomputers. Within 2 years, NSFNET had totally replaced ARPAnet.
In 1991, Vice President Al Gore, then a U.S. senator, proposed widening the architecture of NSFNET to include more K-12 schools, community colleges, and 2-year colleges. The resulting legislation expanded NSFNET and renamed it NREN (National Research and Educational Network). This bill also allowed businesses to purchase part of the network for commercial uses. The mass commercialization of today's Internet is the direct result of this legislation.

You can get basic Internet access with any computer that has a modem that is connected to a phone line. However, to take full advantage of all the Internet has to offer, you need either a Macintosh that has a 68040 or higher CPU or a PC that has an 80486 or higher CPU. With either system, you also need the following:
At least 4 megabytes of RAM (8 is recommended) A 250 megabyte hard drive A 14.4 bps modem (28.8 or faster is even better)

An Internet service provider is a company that provides access to the Internet. The cost of using the Internet has decreased over the years. In the past, the longer you were on the Internet, the more you had to pay. However, nowadays you can pay you ISP a monthly fee and gain unlimited surf time. This means you can be on the Internet for as long as you like without worrying of your phone bill increasing.

What you can do on the Internet depends on which resource you access. The basic resources are e-mail, FAQs, FTP, Gopher, newsgroups, and the World Wide Web.
E-mail. Electronic mail is probably the most popular and widely used resource on the Internet

FAQs. Frequently Asked Questions documents contain the answers to common Internet questions. Reading some of these documents, which can be found in many areas of the Internet, is a first step for anyone new to the Internet.

FTP. File Transfer Protocol is a method of transferring files on the Internet and a type of Internet site. Using FTP, you log on to a remote site, usually a server, view the available files, and copy them to your computer. The address for an FPT site begins with ftp.

Gopher. Developed at the University of Minnesota, home of the Golden Gophers, Gopher is a hierarchy of menus you can use to browse the Internet or search for a specific file. These menus are available on numerous Gopher servers on the Internet. Any Internet address that begins with gopher points to a location on a Gopher server.

Newsgroups. Newsgroups, a classic institution of the Internet, are found on the part of the Internet called Usenet. In a newsgroup, messages concerning a particular topic are posted in a public forum. You can simply read the postings, or you can post an article yourself.

The World Wide Web. The Web may be the most complete realization of the Internet to date. It was developed in the early 1990s at the European Center for Nuclear Research as an environment in which scientists in Geneva, Switzerland, could share information. It has evolved into a medium that consists of text, graphics, audio, animation, and video. The address of a site on the Web usually begins with http://www. The World Wide Web is a graphical environment that can be navigated through hyperlinks. From one site you click on hyperlinks to go to any number of related sites.

A search engine is a special Web site that you can use to locate Web sites based on specific keywords.