

Surfing the Internet: A Political Guide for Beginners

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Are you the kind of person that is interested in progressive politics and enjoys a good conversation?

Do you find that some of your friends just do not have enough time to exchange ideas over coffee?

Well, take courage because there is help over the Internet! The electronic superhighway is here to stay and it offers many opportunities for contact with like-minded people from all over the world.

Of course communicating on the Internet is not the same as actually meeting someone--the warmth of human presence, the magic of the dialectic over a teacup is not there. But participating in a discussion over the net is better than intellectual isolation and compromise, and in some respects it even advances over actual conversation!

For people not experienced in the Internet all that probably sounds confusing and implausible. I can hear strong voices from the back of the room: "What exactly are you talking about?" they ask.

The Internet refers to an international electronic network that connects computers over long distances, and so it also connects the people that use them. In the last year or so the Internet have hit the public conscience with a vengeance. It seems that everywhere you look there are books that try help to learn how to get connected. So assuming that you are a new user, what we are trying to do here is to provide some basic information that might make your net experience more enjoyable. We would like to think that if you have never logged in, what follows would entice you to get a connection from a local provider.

Actually "connection" is an ambiguous term, because there are many types of connections. For example many people only have access to electronic mail (email), i.e. they can send messages through the net to other people who are also connected. Email is of course a very powerful way of personal expression, but it is restricted to only two people and to the subjects they find interesting in common. The particular kind of service we are going to examine here, though, is the USENET newsgroups.

Every newsgroup is like a bulletin board on which people can post messages, except that in this case we have electronic messages. If you find something interesting, you can just respond to it, by posting your message commenting on it. Believe it or not there are thousands of discussions groups on the USENET. It is difficult to be sure for the exact number because almost every day new groups are formed, and old ones are dissolved when interest in their subject has fallen.

Roughly though there are more than 7000 groups on the USENET, ranging from groups dedicated to computers, to political and cultural issues. Before we discuss some of them a word about their names.

Newsgroups of similar content come together in groups called hierarchies. Every name of a newsgroup is a series of strings of characters separated by dots. The string that denotes the hierarchy comes first. For example a discussion group dedicated to the discussion of beer has the name:

alt.beer

In this case "alt" for alternative, the name of the hierarchy in which this group belongs. Some of the more popular hierarchies include:

comp for computer subjects
sci for discussion of scientific subjects
rec for recreational subjects, hobbies etc.

As in many other areas in the Internet, there is a flexibility in the process of name selection. For example we do not know exactly why beer was put in the "alt" hierarchy and not in the "rec" one. We certainly find newsgroups such as:

rec.food.drink rec.food.recipes ...

in the "rec" hierarchy. Whatever the reason a particular the name might be, the name chosen for a group is supposed to reflect the content of the discussion. That is easier said than done, consider for example the following two groups:

alt.activism alt.activism.d

which on the face of it they look almost the same. Somewhere along the line someone proposed the second group, and after the appropriate discussion and required voting, the second group came to be. We looked up the descriptions and they both talk about radical political and environmental activism. The mystery of the two names aside, the content and subject of the discussions is similar. Here is a small recent sample from alt.activism.d.

Subject: Re: Justice in onion fields Date: 15 Apr 1994 17:33:30 GMT

These union demands seem reasonable to me. Especially the part about the effect of heavy containers on inducing back problems. It would have been better if the article had said how much these workers make.

--

He who refuses to do arithmetic is doomed to talk nonsense.

One of the things to notice here is that on the subject line we see the string: "Re". That denotes a response to somebody's previous posting whose subject was "Justice in onion fields". Another recent posting:

From: Subject: Re: Men's Rights Movement Date: 14 May 1994 20:23:50 GMT
writes:

>>I'd rather rise above the feminists and show that people in the men's
>>movement (and anti-feminist movement) can say something nice about

>>women. Women are not the enemy, feminists are.
>you imply in that first sentence that feminists have only bad things to
>say about men. that simply isn't true -- for me or for many of the
>feminists i either know personally or read. if i make a statement about
>women being discriminated against or otherwise disadvantaged because of ... I
don't think you two are talking about the same kind of feminism. You don't seem
like the more common type that say that all sex is rape even in marriage and
marriage should be banned and all men are evil... ...

The interesting thing to notice here is that the response by Name-1 includes the text of the message the prompted the posting. The text of the previous message has in the start of each line the character ">". Notice some of the lines begin with ">>", and that is because Name-1 responded to Name-2, who responded to Name-3! This is one of the points that justifies the talk about the Internet creating a community, fostering relationships, and taking us beyond the limitations of email.

Another interesting group is the one dedicated to the discussion of the political views of Noam Chomsky: alt.fan.noam-chomsky. Prof. Chomsky, a prolific writer with strong views, not surprisingly generates a lot of heated discussion. Here is representative recent sample:

From: Subject: conspiracy in the media? NOT! Date: 19 May 1994 08:48:15
GMT

... And while I sincerely believe Noam Chomsky's advocacy that the U.S.
government purposely prevents any true democracy in countries that it wishes to
control, I find his theory regarding media conspiracy takes things just a little to
far.

While his evidence is overwhelming, I draw a different conclusion; If in fact there
is a group of individuals who are conspiring to keep the masses ignorant, then
they have done a masterful job, and they have done it in such a way as to not
require any direct conspiracy inside the news media. Our whole society is
designed to bring us up from the time we are...

Not surprisingly there were many responses, and one of them read:

From: Subject: Re: conspiracy in the media? NOT! Date: 20 May 1994 11:50:58
+0100

In article writes:

>It seems that one of the central points in Noam Chomsky's arguments is
>that a select group of the privileged conspire to keep the masses
>complacent through ignorance; by controlling the news media, and in fact all
>media.

I hate to be one of those who 'say what Chomsky says' (why can't he post here - he has an
account at MIT?) but I don't think, from all the interviews I've seen with him and the books I've
read, that he claims there is some sort of 'organized conspiracy controlled directly'. What he does

suggest is that the social forces at work in the media, through job selection, peer pressure, commercial pressure from the business owners and advertisers, work together to create a 'consensus' that consists of:

- uncritical acceptance of US Corporations and their policies - labeling of contrary or alternative views as 'extreme', etc, or ignoring them
- marketing of the current highly exploitative and oppressive global system as 'democratic', 'free' and 'American'
- generation and selling of agreed 'views' on world crises to the exclusion of more humane viewpoints, ie that the Gulf War was Good and Necessary (even though the US encouraged Saddam to take Kuwait through secret diplomatic maneuvers) or that Chomsky is 'sick', 'an extremist' or that all nations want and desire 'free-market' economies, etc

This 'consensus' could easily look to an alien as 'though it is the result of organized propaganda work, but the US and Western media have reached a far greater level of sophistication than that of Goebbels or Stalin; they no longer need to appear directly oppressive in suppressing alternate views and many of the people who work in the media may themselves believe they are part of a healthy, functioning informative society. The pressure is insidious and subtle, but it is there.

That's why, at the end of the day, we are getting the same 'received wisdom' and 'analysis' from CNN, CBS, etc, etc, etc and nauseam. ...

As far as we know Prof. Chomsky does not participate in these conversations, if he does he does not do so very often. The purpose of including these excerpts was to entice you to taste these groups, or if you are not yet connected to get connected soon! But the above groups are not the only ones.

There is a tremendous variety of groups and a good start would be (including the above) to subscribe to the following:

alt.activism.d alt.discrimination alt.fan.noam-chomsky alt.politics.clinton
alt.politics.correct alt.politics.economics alt.politics.radical-left alt.politics.reform

What is political, and what is not, it is at times difficult to specify. Being interested in politics should not mean though that you stay away from an informed position about issues concerning technology, and culture. A good start in that direction are the following groups:

alt.politics.datahighway alt.privacy alt.culture.internet alt.wired .

The last group is dedicated in the discussion of articles and subjects in the Wired magazine. Wired, a monthly magazine, focuses on the Internet, and new technology and their impact on society.

We could go on for some time talking about the USENET groups, but pretty much you have a flavor of what goes on in them. It is time for you to make your stand and experiment by

subscribing to at least some of them. The dozen groups recommended above are but a start. With time and experience you will find the groups that are close to your interests. Happy surfing!