

In the world of e-journalism

Not long ago, the Internet was a fad for many, especially the journalists. Use of the Net, for them, was restricted to sending and receiving emails. Now, after e-ducators, e-ntrepreneurs, e-shoppers, it's time for e-journalists, writes **Ekram Kabir**

In the developed countries, journalists are no longer not stuck with choices of working at newspapers, magazines, wire services, TV or radio stations, in public relations, or corporate communications. There is what one might call "Online News". Opportunity for trained Web journalists, western press gurus say, is growing quickly and will soon match the old media.

This is all about using Multimedia. Radio, television and text journalism practices are converging through digitisation on the Internet towards a new hybrid profession, Multimedia Journalism or e-journalism. Digital multimedia communication is part of Multimedia Journalism that include classes in Web page design, online reporting, computerised design and production, and even a course that teaches students how to produce multimedia CDs-ROMs and other projects on CD-ROM.

Most of the traditional media outlets around the world have started editions on the World Wide Web, while new start-up publications have created Web-only operations. In fact, the world has never seen in the history of communications such a velocity in the expansion of a new medium. The impact of this phenomenon on journalism has been tremendous. The Internet is not only a tool for journalists to glean information, but it is also an excellent medium through which to disseminate journalistic products.

The main focus is on the understanding of the phenomenon and its impact on journalism, with special attention to the search for a new style of narrative -- one that could take advantage of the simultaneous use of text, hypertext, photos, images in motion, audio and databases.

Successful news sites are already getting huge audiences. For example, says an American online journalist, Steve Outing, on a monthly basis, some of the top Web news sites in the US get millions of hits.

ZDNet, a technology news site, gets 5.9 million people visiting during a typical month; CNet, 3.3 million; Weather.com, 4.8 million; CNN's Web sites, 5.9 million; USA Today.com, 2.5 million; and New York Times on the Web, 1.6 million. USA Today.com estimates that it gets just under 1 million unique visitors on a typical day. Its circulation is 1.6 million daily. Mercury Centre, the Web site of the San Jose Mercury News, has a daily online readership of about 100,000 visitors. The parent newspaper has a circulation of 290,000.

There are many other examples. The point is, for those online news sites where the owners have made a serious commitment to online journalism in terms of investment, online readership is fast catching old media readership.

Online journalism has now become a tremendous career

opportunity. Companies like CNet or APB Online are both Web-based news ventures. CNet, based in San Francisco, has about 50 people working for its News.com site -- working as reporters, editors, designers and producers. It also has another four people working at CNet Radio. Pay scales for journalists at CNet are in most cases more than what journalists at major newspapers get.

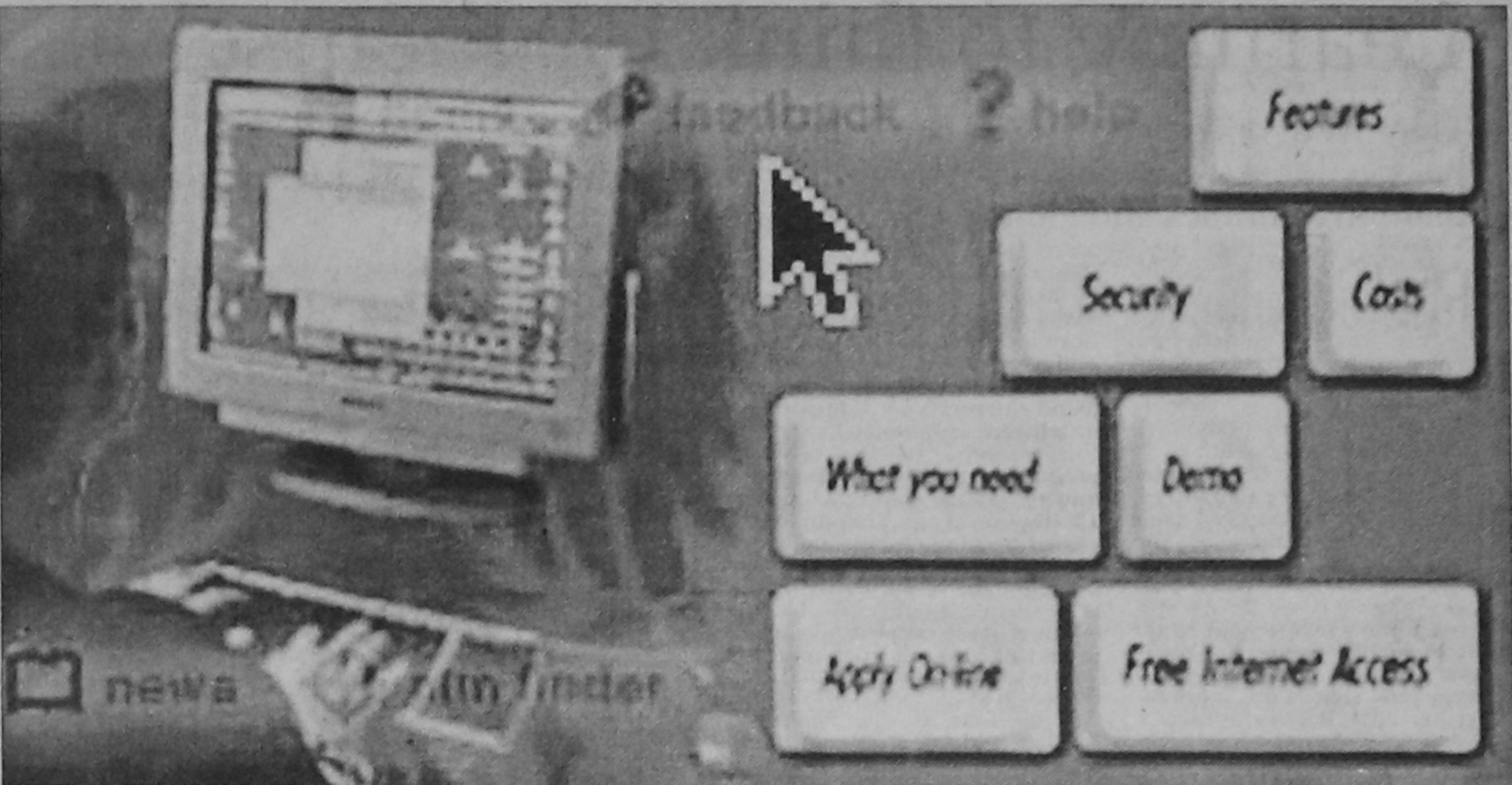
The journalistic work at CNet is similar to newspaper editorial work, but it is "much harder" -- because the news-gathering and writing process is much faster, and there are still the same demands for accuracy and completeness. Instead of a once-a-day newspaper, CNet's journalists have deadlines throughout the day. The goal is to get copy up as quickly as possible and beat the competition. What they are trying to do is, "to provide the quality and depth of a magazine or newspaper at the pace of television."

USAToday.com, for instance, has more than a hundred employees, Washingtonpost.com has about 180 people working in its online division.

But according to many, the Internet is damaging some social institutions because it takes away from direct social contact with other human beings. They feel that the Internet erodes the average time people spend in office environment, decrease auto commuting, and will increasingly lessen time spent by people using other media. They advise, "For the short run, don't count on television as a strong career choice because that medium is on the decline. Longer term, however, the Internet and TV probably will merge, meaning more career opportunity in the 'new TV'."

While the Internet's growth has come largely from America, it's generally the consensus that as other parts of the world get "Net mania" to the same degree, the nature of the Internet will dramatically change. Just look at neighbouring India and a log-on to india-today.com or indiatimes.com would show how rapidly the Indians are advancing in this field. Surveys indicate that globally nearly 90 per cent of Web pages currently are in English. That is going to change in the next few years. US-centric Web sites are being used today by people in other cultures because that's what's available. But as Arabic-language sites offering value become available, for example, Arabic-speaking people will naturally move over to Internet services that reflect their cultural identity. The BBC's Bengali Service (www.bangla-radio.com and www.bbc.co.uk/bengali) does this job pretty well.

Several schools in America have now programmes using multimedia on the Internet as the venue to teach students the "multilevel storytelling techniques" that the newsrooms of the future will value, and, in



Now, just "click" through news-sites

some cases, even demand. The emphasis is on interactivity and making use of the Internet's potential for presenting viewers with not just news and information, but also experience. In traditional television news, words are combined with pictures to tell a story. In the genre of television news now being taught for delivery by the Internet, words, pictures, sound, and graphics are combined to present the viewer with a first-hand experience of what it is like to be in a certain locale or situation. In essence, multimedia journalism via the Internet is fulfilling the promise of electronic news since its infancy: the ability to allow the viewer to interact with a story as if he or she were actually there as it unfolds.

Online is now a strong medium for news presentation in its own right -- when news sites like MSNBC.com and

CNN.com get more daily users than there are daily readers of some of the largest newspapers in the United States. And online permeates every traditional media -- from major newspapers that spend millions of dollars building accompanying Web services, to TV stations and networks preparing for a future when their viewers will not only watch their programming but "interact online" as well.

"There is a long tradition of dissatisfaction regarding the limited one-way communication of mass media. Lack of interactivity was a concern for media critics long before the term 'interactive' became an inflated buzzword in the age of the Internet," says Tanjev Schultz at the Institute for Inter-cultural and International Studies in University of Bremen, Germany.

Media theorists have raised the issue that people easily become passive consumers of mass media's manipulated, or at least commercialised, content. The hierarchical structure of modern mass communication imposes a "don't talk back" format on audiences. In recent years, the movement for public journalism has therefore focused on mass media's lack of interactivity, among other things and thus brought in the concept of "interactivity".

Traditionally, professional journalism has offered the audience few direct opportunities for interactive communication. A well-known means for feedback, especially in print journalism, is the Letters to the Editor section. Readers usually write letters as a reaction to media messages. The communication remains reactive, however, unless journalists or other readers respond to the initial

communication. In principle, the same applies to call-ins that are used frequently on radio and television shows.

The Internet extends interactive options in journalism. Web-zones offer special tools, such as email links (to politicians and the editor him/herself) and discussion areas (bulletin boards), which enable readers to make their own statements.

Interactivity has been discussed as a challenge for journalism that can now be met by the thoughtful development of Internet sites. The Internet allows for quick movement from an asymmetrical mode of communication to a more interactive mode.

Statistics used has been acquired from <http://www.newslink.org>, <http://cjr.org>, <http://www.ascusc.org> and <http://newsport.sfsu.edu>.

Microsoft falls out of love

The outbreak of Love Bug prompts severe criticism of the software giant for its "permissive" security posture

By **Cliff Edwards**, AP Santa Clara, California

DREW Harris answered the call of MotherNature.com when the online retail company offered him 20 off and free shipping for any purchase.

The San Francisco man ordered about \$40 worth of hair care products and shaving cream under the one-time deal and never went to the Web site again.

"For me, it was because I wanted the free stuff," Harris said. "It's just as easy to stop by the barber shop and pick up (hair products) on the way home because it's much more convenient than it is to sit down at a computer, order it and wait for it."

Internet businesses are offering everything from free shipping to giveaways of millions of dollars to build a base of preferred customers.

But many startups are learning a hard lesson. Consumer behaviour is essentially unpredictable. And now privacy concerns are making it more difficult to track consumers -- a key reason why many online retailers will fail in coming months, analysts say.

About 127 million, or 63 per cent, of American adults were using the Internet as of February, according to research firm Dataquest. But only 58 million bought anything in the previous three months, and most of those sales involved relatively low-profit margins on items such as compact discs, movies or books.

"Shopping online is an accident," Dataquest analyst Harry Hoyle said flatly. "Most people have Internet connections for either work at home, games or a child's education" rather than e-commerce.

So how can companies turn

window shoppers into Web buyers?

In the bricks-and-mortar world, retailers try to target customers by keeping records of previous sales and exchanging or selling that information to others. That's why you might receive an offer for a home decorator's magazine subscription or fliers for new appliances from Sears after you are approved for a bank mortgage.

But in the new world of e-commerce, there's concern that information is being exchanged more easily, resulting in unwelcome intrusions into consumers' personal lives.

"The best way to find a buyer is to see whether they've bought before and what they bought before," Hoyle said. "But so far, no one has been able to figure out a way to do that passes scrutiny."

Indeed, online advertising giant DoubleClick created a controversy last winter when it suggested it would combine all the online information it had amassed from Web surfers -- tracked by software attached to your browser with identification numbers -- with offline data that included a person's name, address and phone number.

Many consumers were unaware that bits of information, known as "cookies," collected as they browse the Web, allow companies to track their online movements. The idea of attaching names to that information raised alarm bells and has led to a Federal Trade Commission investigation of DoubleClick.

The world's top Web destination, Yahoo! Inc. also revealed it is the target of a federal investigation into whether it is violating consumer protection and privacy policies.

The concern about where to draw the line is making it difficult for online retailers to compete effectively against each

other or stand out in their respective crowded fields, as the number of Internet newcomers slows and experienced surfers stick to their familiar brand names.

Funding for online retail companies suddenly is in sharp decline, stocks have tumbled, and Forrester Research predicted late last month that "the tide is turning against dot-coms" and many companies will fail within the year.

Many have sought to stand out by spending millions on advertising.

And at MotherNature.com, customer incentive programs are still key.

"We do believe that some inducement is necessary to get people to try us," chief marketing officer Jeffrey Steinberg said. "We've tried a lot of different methods and are happy with the \$10 off on your first purchase we currently are offering."

Although the company continues to lose money, he said 48 per cent of MotherNature.com's first-quarter revenues came from returning customers, up from 42 per cent the previous quarter.

Others, such as new Internet portal iWon.com, are trying a tactic used by long-distance phone carriers years ago when they were locked in costly battle for customers. I won offer surfers the chance to win \$10,000 daily and \$1 million a month as it attempts to build in a loyal following.

But history has shown consumers like to window shop and are fairly fickle about loyalties, Hoyle said.

"People can be bribed, but that doesn't guarantee a lifelong relationship," he said. "It's become increasingly clear that the first-mover advantage is terribly important."



Beleaguered Bill ... the Microsoft magnate surely has a lot to explain to the Windows user.

Tide turning against .coms

The online retail companies are really struggling to turn window shoppers into Web buyers

By **Rob Lever**, AFP Washington

MICROSOFT is facing growing criticism over the security of its software following the recent spate of computer viruses that spread around the globe.

Computer security specialists have been pointing the finger at Microsoft following the outbreak of the ILOVEYOU computer virus, which propagated through the Microsoft email programme Outlook.

Although Microsoft this week moved to implement new security for Outlook, the ILOVEYOU outbreak has prompted renewed criticism of the software giant for its overall security posture.

Paul Strassmann, a consultant who lectures on information warfare at the National Defence University and author of a 1998 article calling Microsoft's dominance of operating systems a "threat to national security," said the virus outbreak confirmed his fears.

"There is a long list of incidents -- the Love Bug is just one that has attracted attention -- that confirms my early assessment," Strassmann said.

In his 1998 article in Computerworld magazine, Strassmann said that because of Microsoft's dominance,

"infoterrorists and criminals will take advantage of flaws in the gigantic Microsoft operating systems that are on their way to becoming the engines for running most of our information infrastructure."

The Gartner Group, a leading technology consulting group, issued a statement following the ILOVEYOU outbreak assailing Microsoft's "permissive" security posture.

The statement noted that Gartner in 1997 warned about security flaws in Microsoft software and urged companies to install additional "filters" to protect computer systems.

Others point to other security flaws found in other Microsoft software including Internet Explorer, Hotmail and Windows 2000.

"From an administrator perspective, it is hard to imagine how a security hole could be worse: Windows lets you think all is OK but in reality something else happens on the wire," Sami Vaara of the Finnish information security firm Net-Seal Technologies wrote on an Internet security message board.

In light of the criticism over ILOVEYOU, Microsoft this week announced it was offering a free software "patch" aimed at improving the security of its email programme Outlook.

But the fix comes with a price: users of Outlook will no longer be able to open certain types of attachments and require users to handle more functions manually, says Chris Le Toeq, research director at Gartner.

Le Toeq called the Outlook fix a move "in the right direction, but sometimes the cure is worse than the disease. Microsoft produced this fix in a hurry, and we anticipate there will be more refined fixes."

Le Toeq said the ubiquity of Microsoft products is a double-edged sword.

"There are advantages to having a pervasive system in terms of the instant spread of productive applications, but you also have the instant spread of destructive applications," says Le Toeq. "It's not a perfect world, you have to have a balance."

A Microsoft spokesman, in response to an AFP query, said the problem of ILOVEYOU and other viruses is not unique to Microsoft.

The software firm "has continuously listened to its customers and is always working to enhance the security of its products," the spokesman said.

"We continue to seek additional security measures that will offer our customers a higher level of security while still maintaining the ease of use that they have come to expect."

Thinking micro-IT

Inclusion of the vast majority of rural people into the mainstream should be on the government's agenda for development, writes **AMM A'abad**

clients with economy budgets? Like the Grameen Bank micro-credit concept, (which has shaken the very foundation of the traditional capitalistic-materialistic economic theories, especially of banking), the masses at the base level are waiting for the micro-IT revolution. This is the domain of the local experts and entrepreneurs. They have to come up with the ideas and the models to influence their Administrations to address long-term national and regional policies.

The super-speed growth rate of the Internet network caught the professionals by surprise, and the giant Microsoft is at the receiving end of legal battles on monopoly suits, causing the IT stock exchange (NASDAQ) to tumble and become unstable. Old ideas are being replaced with new ones in the fast-changing IT world. The South countries cannot escape the side effects, nor can shut the windows. Awareness is not enough, the untapped markets have to be tapped.

Recently, there has been positive change of policy by the government to encourage the IT related sectors, starting with growth of software export, and training of a vast number of local IT personnel at the lower

At present, the satellite and cable television, and VCRs are touching the mufassil towns, and in some villages where electricity is available. Another innovation is the mobile Grameen phone being hawked by women in villages (five Taka per call; demonstrated to Clinton). In India, audio letters with video still photo can be sent and received from small wayside booths (starting payment Rs. 25) for family communication with the expatriates residing and working abroad.

The Global Village is touching the vast rural areas in the Asian continent where two billion people live. It is a big potential market, but what the Information Technology has to offer? The mega projects of the multinationals is the vener at the top level of trading confined to large specialist markets, confined to a small percentage of the global inhabitants.

But where are the tailored services to suit customers or

keep pace with the IT technologies and policies.

The centrepiece would be the private sector, and it must be doing its homework to brief the government for co-ordination and interfacing without the traditional obstacles that cause delays. Can two separate Ministries of S&T and Communications be able to deal with this 'smart' baby, or is a separate and new IT Ministry required? This question has cropped up in the press, and the government has to keep the sector informed about its long-term vision. Bangladesh needs an IT Vision.

While the export booms to feed the hi-tech, high 'power' and high 'speed' computer markets overseas, the local experts have a side home work, in national interest: start thinking of a cheap and simple computerised IT network suitable for the developing countries. Where there is a demand, there are solutions. To re-term the old proverb: necessity is the mother of invention.

The teething period is one of excitement. Bangladesh, like India, has the talent and human resources to take up the challenge, and the lead (the latest news is that the US is willing to assist our universities in science and technology teaching). Bangladesh is poised for an economic take-off: why not fly on the wings of IT?

The writer is associated with the electronic media

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