

Hello, again, and welcome back. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Let's work together to learn some interesting information, and improve our American English at the same time. Today we talk about something that has changed our lives, and many of us wonder if we could ever again do without it.

This month marks the 25th anniversary of the invention of the World Wide Web. What started as a way for scientists to share information has changed nearly everything. We will provide some history, and then hear what may be the future for sharing huge amounts of information.

It is nice to have you with us as we start a new week, looking at the world ...As It Is.

It all started in March of 1989. British scientist Tim Berners-Lee was working at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research in Switzerland. Scientists would come to CERN from all over the world. But others could not see their research because of differences in computers.

Tim Berners-Lee thought it would be easier if all the computers could talk to one another and exchange information directly. So he proposed linking the machines. His proposal would later become known as the World Wide Web.

It took two years before researchers could successfully link a computer server and web browser through the Internet. It would be officially launched in August 1991. By 1993, there would be more than 500 web servers. Now, there are more than 1.7 billion people on the web worldwide.

James Hendler is the director of the Rensselaer Institute for Data Exploration and Applications in Troy, New York. Mr. Hendler spoke to VOA on Skype. He says one of the main issues slowing web growth has been the use of the English language in computer coding and on keyboards. He says that problem has been solved. And he thinks Asia can look forward to more and more Web access.

“In the US, we are at somewhere in the area of 80-90 percent of people already having access and, you know, not much growth. In China, you see about 25 percent and, of course, a country much bigger than ours. India, I don’t know the current number, but again a small number growing very quickly. So most of the growth we expect in the web will actually be in those parts of the world that don’t yet have it.”

Jim Hendler has worked on the World Wide Web since its early days. Paul Levinson is a professor of communications and media studies at Fordham University in New York. He says recent events have shown the power that the Web has put in the hands of everyday people.

He notes examples like the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement. Professor Levinson spoke to VOA on Skype. He says the web is a tool that he considers unequalled in its reach and influence.

“(What) we have now is a battle. On the one hand, the governments are more aware of these devices, and they are more aware of what used to be called and still could be called ‘citizen journalism.’ But on the other hand, there are more smart phones out there than ever before. And I think so far – and this is good for democracy and the expression of human ideas – so far the people are winning.”

Twenty-five years after its invention, billions of people now use the World Wide Web. But James Hendler of the Rensselaer Institute says only a small part of the web’s potential has been realized.

“Here is this force that has really changed society in so many different ways. We understand sort of the mathematics of the computer network underneath it and the engineering of that, but we really don’t understand the social impact. There’s more and more research that’s starting to study what are those different effects? How do they affect society? How do we build the web and keep the web open and free? How do we really understand the impacts of this thing we call the World Wide Web?”

Tim Berners-Lee went on to create the World Wide Web Foundation. The group says in its mission statement that it wants to establish the open web as a global public good and basic right.

O.K. We think we understand the Internet as it is today, but how might technology influence our lives 10 years from now? A new report has combined the “imaginings,” or opinions, of about 1,500 experts. The report was a project of the Pew Research Center and Elon University in the United States. Mario Ritter joins us with that part of the story.

Elon University Professor Janna Anderson was one of the lead writers of the report. She says the experts generally agreed on the kinds of changes that would take place. But she says their ideas were very different when they described how those changes would influence Internet users.

Many of the experts said they believe that the Internet would become less noticeable, but tied to daily life “like electricity.” The report said increasing the availability and use of the Internet would produce more connectivity between people and machines. This connectivity, it says, “will change everything from personal interactions to the decisions made by governments around the world.”

Many of the predictions are a sign of improvements in the future. But the experts also expressed concern. Pew Research and Elon University have been doing similar studies since 2004. Janna Anderson says excitement over technology has dropped somewhat over the past 10 years. In 2004, she says, most experts talked about all of the good things that progress in technology would bring.

Now, she says, there is more discussion about the negative results from the Internet. Janna Anderson says, “People are starting to realize that the power of communication can be used by anyone, good or bad.”

The experts told researchers the increasing reach of the Internet will strengthen connectivity worldwide. And they said this could lead to “more positive relationships among societies.”

The report noted that what some observers have called the “Internet of Things” will become more important. In the future, common devices from coffee makers to electric toothbrushes will be connected to the World Wide Web. The huge amount of information that all these devices produce will be linked with mechanical, or artificial, intelligence. This, the experts say, “will make people more aware of the world and their own behavior.”

Other important devices will be the ones people wear to improve, or augment, reality. These devices can study your daily activities and provide suggestions. For example, they could provide suggestions to improve personal health.

However, there were also predictions of increasing problems for the Internet. Some experts noted that “abuses and abusers” involved in pornography, crime and bullying will become an increasing problem.

The report warned that governments and businesses could threaten Internet freedom. And it says the idea of privacy will continue to disappear and be available only to those who have the ability to pay for it.

The report, of course, is only a set of predictions. But Janna Anderson says that after examining thousands of predictions about the Internet, many of them proved to be right. I’m Mario Ritter.

And I’m Jim Tedder in Washington. Thank you for being a part of our world ...As It Is ...on VOA.







