

# Technology Journal -- Books: The Inventor of the Internet Speaks Out

By Robert Templer

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

"Tell us, exactly how rich are you?" is the sort of question that plagues Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web and man of modest means but extraordinary achievement. In a world of dizzying dot-com wealth, money often seems like the only measure of success on the Internet, the way in which boy billionaires keep score. Not for Mr. Berners-Lee, 44, whose work developing the Web while a computer scientist at CERN, the international particle physics lab in Switzerland, has led to one of the greatest explosions of wealth in history.

Mr. Berners-Lee's ideas for the Web grew out of the creative environment at CERN, where scientists came together from around the world to use a massive particle accelerator that smashes atoms. They gather their data and go home to analyze it, but still work together across time zones and despite language barriers. Mr. Berners-Lee took CERN as a small model of the world and set about developing a computer network that could link its varied, incompatible parts.

In 1989, Mr. Berners-Lee came up with the idea of a global hypertext system, using a way of inserting links from one text to another document. This, along with a way of identifying any document, created a way for the layman to find information by navigating between previously unrelated sources. After toying with such names as "the mesh" (too close to mess) and mine of information (the acronym MOI was deemed too egocentric), his innovation was named the World Wide Web.

## FULL TEXT

Weaving the Web

By Tim Berners-Lee & Mark Fischetti

(Harper, San Francisco, \$26)

"Tell us, exactly how rich are you?" is the sort of question that plagues Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web and man of modest means but extraordinary achievement. In a world of dizzying dot-com wealth, money often seems like the only measure of success on the Internet, the way in which boy billionaires keep score. Not for Mr. Berners-Lee, 44, whose work developing the Web while a computer scientist at CERN, the international particle physics lab in Switzerland, has led to one of the greatest explosions of wealth in history.

What incenses Mr. Berners-Lee about the constant questioning about missing an opportunity to become wealthy beyond imagination is that it "suggests a disrespect for the researchers across the globe developing ideas for the next leaps in science and technology."

For Mr. Berners-Lee, whose parents worked in Britain in the 1950s on the first commercial computer capable of changing its own instructions, the reward is the alchemy of research itself, or the way ideas come together through

collaboration.

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His contribution builds upon the earlier invention of the Internet in 1973 by Vint Cerf and Bob Kahn. The Internet initially functioned largely as a communications network used by universities and research institutions.

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Mr. Berners-Lee seems unapologetic that one of his legacies is the nine mouth-filling syllables we all must use when this is abbreviated.

There seems to have been no eureka moment for Mr. Berners-Lee in developing hypertext, only a succession of small ideas that blossomed into a major event. Soon after he publishing his proposal for hypertext in 1989, the Web began to take off rapidly in the scientific community.

Mr. Berners-Lee relates how at a conference in 1991, he was almost unable to demonstrate his CERN Web site because of the difficulties of getting Internet access. Two years later almost all the attendants at the conference had something to do with the Web. By taking the elite scientific communication system of the Internet and opening it up to the general user, Mr. Berners-Lee has probably liberated information as much as the printed word did half a millennium ago.

Given how momentous his invention has proved to be, Mr. Berners-Lee is preternaturally modest and a refreshing counterpoint to the hyped-up frenzy around the Web and its personalities. His account seems generous to a fault in detailing work by colleagues. And his concerns -- that the Web remain open and accessible not just as an outlet for commerce but for creativity -- seem heartfelt.

But although this is an important book that documents a major step in our technological history, it is not a particularly good read. He begins each chapter with interesting and contentious points about the Web but then slips back into eye-lid drooping litanies of meetings and technical specifications. Those who care about these things probably already know them, and the rest of us have to wade through some pulse-slowng prose. In these plodding pages, one gets little sense of how it must feel to change the world.

After chronicling the development of the Web, Mr. Berners-Lee turns his attention to his battles to keep it open to all. In the early days, there are attempts by companies to dominate the Web by setting up proprietary codes and by others who quickly turned innovations into commercial opportunities. He shows some distaste, for instance, for Marc Andreessen and others at Netscape for their commercial success in developing a browser.

The book also traces his lingering concern about the efforts at Internet censorship by states worried about free

speech and by groups anxious about the proliferation of pornography. Attempts at internal monitoring of the Web have had a mixed record. He recounts how the American Family Association, a conservative Christian group that called for Web censorship, had its own Web site blocked by CyberPatrol software because it judged it to be in the same intolerant league as white supremacists.

Yet for all of his advocacy of an open Web -- Mr. Berners-Lee now heads the World Wide Web Consortium and has a chair in computing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology -- at the time of his writing, he supported Microsoft Corp.'s bundling of its browser with its Windows operating system. (A U.S. District Judge has since ruled that Microsoft is a monopoly that exercised its power to hurt consumers and rivals).

Still Mr. Berners-Lee is not alone in his view. He seems to see no danger in Microsoft's intentions, maintaining that the Web is already too big for any one company to monopolize.

Although irritated by the constant wealth questions, Mr. Berners-Lee doesn't seem to oppose commerce on the Web, as long as companies don't succeed in roping off information for sale and harnessing the free flow of the Internet.

In his most idealistic moments, Mr. Berners-Lee envisions the Web as an international network of individuality and creativity that almost functions like a giant brain.

Like many scientists, he has only a slight sense of the human consequences of technology, which are rarely all good. One gets little sense of the dystopian possibilities of the Web, of where it might bite back. There is no view of a troubling world divided into techno-haves and have-nots or of the physical isolation that may come out of a wired existence.

His is a moderate utopian vision, defined by his experiences of collaboration at CERN and by his sense of the power of individuals connected together.

"Hope in life comes from the interconnections among all the people in the world. We don't find the individual being subjugated by the whole. We don't find the needs of the whole being subjugated by the increasing power of an individual. But we might see more understanding in struggles between these extremes."

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