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Bringing cyberspace to the people

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PAST a manicured sweep of lawn in KL's Technology Park, the taxi glides, blurring one building after another in a glint of glass and steel. We flash by Measat's satellite dishes, cupped to the sun like so many giant tulips; past the hexagonal Resource Centre, then finally come to Netcard's pristine blue offices, headquarters of Malaysia's first public internet kiosk.

Although this is Bukit Jalil, three kilometres off the Puchong highway and a testimony to Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's 1988 digital dream made flesh, it's tempting to draw parallels with Microserfs, American author Douglas Coupland's book. In it, he depicted a Microsoft "campus" with twentysomething technophiles chattering in geekspeak and moping about until Bill Gate's next e-mail. In fact, you'd almost expect them to stroll across the lawn now in their Gap gear, discussing their shipping dates.

But as you enter Netcard's premises this chimera shatters: in a bar is a silver, slightly space-agey Netcard kiosk, set off by the company's cafeteria's wicker chairs and spotlit lighting. No Microsoft den, piled high with Pizza Hut cardboard containers, would ever look like this - it seems way too neat and corporatised. But in Malaysia, where serious money (to the tune of RM4 million) has been put up for the shiny booths, companies like Netcard are anticipating the future of the Multimedia Super Corridor.

Netcard's brief is simple: it was to design an Internet kiosk, place it in a public access location, say, a shopping mall, then blanket the peninsula with Netcard stations (some 200 nationwide booths by the end of the year). In a bold flourish, it would be an Internet service provider for both the PC have and have-nots. And crucially, claim its makers, it would fling open the doors to an egalitarian cyberworld for all net virgins.

The customer-friendly carrot would be the software - the first all-encompassing Malaysian website that could handle e-mail, surfing the Web, chat rooms and offer localised travel, entertainment and shopping data as well. The feather in its cap would be its ticketing booths where, for example, you'd be able to buy an online plane ticket after having downloaded the airline's schedule (up and running only by the end of this year). It will even, promise its makers, deliver an interactive government via your modem in the near future.

When the first kiosk flickered into life in May 1996, Dr Mahathir, with one foot already in the Infobahn, was its first virtual customer. He purchased a bouquet of flowers with the company's memory card (akin to Telecom Malaysia's phonecards). To date, there are 50 kiosks in the Klang Valley, mostly in shopping centres and hotels, and 10 at the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport. Netcard has sold an estimated 2,600 cards (at RM20 each) so far, which works out to a modest 215 cards per month. yesterday, the company's website was officially launched by Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik.

So what's it like, you want to know. Quite effortlessly, this website makes other Malaysian competitors look lacklustre. There have been other attempts at constructing similar electronic spaces - Jaring's famously dull homepage, and the more imaginatively designed but bitty Silicon and Neuronet websites - but nothing has quite approached this site in terms of comprehensiveness and a packaged identity. Netcard, at least, has found

some sort of voice, however unpolished, for its targeted 16-25-year-old crowd. "We think of it as a link to your personal community," says Peter Chan, Netcard's programme director.

There are five multimedia channels whose soundtracks jangle at you when you click on their hypertexts: NetEntertainment, NetGeneration, NetShop, NetTravel and NetCard Corporation. Concerning the website's design, Netcard's managing director Leong Seng Keat explains: "We pictured them as TV channels because we wanted to keep the website interactive and friendly. The idea was to bring the familiar to the people," pointing out that their browser looks like a remote control.

Whatever you think of that, graphically, it provides an easy way in. Click on the entertainment channel and you can preview The Crucible clips, scan the reviews, dash off an e-mail missive if you don't agree - and in the future, purchase a ticket on the spot. Under the TV section, designed like a virtual Filofax, you need only to point your mouse at a date for TV3's programmes to be flashed up.

And if you need to buzz down to Lion City, you can download the Singapore-Kuala Lumpur train timetable, and in the future (again), be issued a ticket. For the youthful readership, there are hip articles on Jason Cottam and cyberfashion, including interviews with local couture gurus. Oh, and a review of Will Self's Junk Mail for the cognoscenti. Finally, there's the virtual holy grail of electronic business - online shopping. A CD need only be a click away now.

The brains behind all of this is Leong and Chan. Like most working within the IT industry, both are on the right side of 30, male, and are HTML (the language of computer programming) literate. Leong has a seven-year track record of working with Asia Computer Services and KE Technology, while Chan, whose office reading material ranges from Baudelaire to Baudrillard, founded Poem, the peninsula's first internet cafe.

However, it would be difficult to pretend that Netcard's website is the last word as far as the wired world is concerned. Grammatically, its English leaves something to be desired, while the quality of its writing looks a little rough around the edges when you compare it to an ezine like, say, Word ([www.word.com](http://www.word.com)). But given that the Net in Malaysia is at a fledgling stage, and that it has only two full-time writers, this isn't desperately crucial to its success right now. MIMOS deputy president Dr Mohamed Awang Lah, Netcard's partner, for one, thinks they're on the right track. "They've progressed incredibly from what they were at the initial stage. And I, personally, am really pleased."

More importantly, though, as worldwide trends attest, localisation is where the Information Super Highway is speeding to - and Chan is right to visualise Netcard's website as "a platform for the community". After years of trumpeting noisily about the Net's global wiring potential, the Infobahn, to paraphrase cinema hall jargon, is finally coming to a neighbourhood near you.

For example, in downtown Manhattan's Silicon Alley, where a batch of Web companies is based, one of New York City's first local listing sites, Total New York ([www.totalny.com](http://www.totalny.com)) was launched in 1995. Now it's worth more than US\$5 million and has been snapped up by a division of America Online. British Telecom has started up something similar called Touchpoint. And while Microsoft Network's Seattle-based Sidewalk introduced its first regional site this January, the original success story must be France's videotext version, Minitel, which has had 15 million users since the mid-80s.

As John Brothwick, the young mogul behind Total New York, comments in the Guardian: "Given that 80 per cent of purchases are made within a 20-

mile radius of the home, there's a tremendous opportunity for the Web to be central in local transactions and advertising." People want to know what's happening in their neighbourhoods, explains Brothwick. "The two things you want to do with local content - to search and update frequently - digital media does phenomenally well."

But other super machines that will in part replicate Netcard's services are not in some distant galaxy. In America, a new generation of super automated teller machines (ATMs) is springing up. You'll be able to buy stamps, movie tickets and traveller's cheques, in addition to carrying out the usual transactions. And like Jean-Claude Van Damme's thumbprint scanner in the film Double Team, these machines will soon be virtually fraud-proof.

However, Netcard's online shopping services should also prove interesting watching. American business magazine Fortune comments: "1997 will mark a turning point - the harried masses can begin surfing the net to save time (and money) rather than kill it." Citing virtual bookstore Amazon as a shining example of digital commerce, it reports that, after a quiet lull, online business is set to grow and grow. Last year, Amazon's revenue was zinging to the tune of well over US\$10 million - evidence that electronic commerce can beat a real-life bookstore anytime - and customers, in Amazon's case, are prepared to surf the Net rather than venture to their local MPH. And if Netcard can successfully get onto online shopping's virtual surfboard, it, too, will be riding the latest industry-wide wave.

But not all the kinks in Netcard's system have been ironed out. While its main target group fits the demographics of any Internet user - young, computer-literate and aspiringly upwardly-mobile - the earning clout of its under-35 customers very much remains a future potential. I spent two afternoons interviewing its regular and casual browsers, and while many thought that what it had to offer was excellent, for most, RM20 an hour on the Net was asking way too much. Others expressed misgivings about surfing in so public a place. Raymond Cheng, THB Asia Connect's president and CEO, has two questions. "Why would I spend RM20 just to buy an RM8 cinema ticket?" he asks. "And the thing that's most important to me is how they're marketing the company. I'd like to see just how they're doing that."

Then again, given the current thrust of the MSC's trajectory in Malaysia, this seems to be an industry that attracts more movers and shakers that can deliver, than it does unbelievers. Richard Cusson, general manager of Bull Information Systems, a smartcard KL-based company, is just such an acolyte. "I believe it's a very good idea because it's just like taking the internet cafes out onto the street, isn't it?" he says. "And Malaysia's the first country in which I've been where I've witnessed such mobilisation and drive by the government. I believe that this train will have to get moving - and it might take longer than expected - but once it does, people will be jumping on."

\* Netcard can be accessed at [www.netcard.com.my](http://www.netcard.com.my)

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