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A Special Report

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KUALA LUMPUR (Bernama): Don't be too surprised if one day you can leave the house for a long vacation overseas and still control everything that is going on in your home with the tips of your fingers.

Maybe the thought is too futuristic for now but it will definitely be a reality in just a few years -- thanks to the Internet.

"It can happen...just imagine, you could switch on the lights in your home just by touching the selected icon on the (computer) monitor. It does not matter where you are for as long as you have access to the Internet," said Dr Vinton D. Cerf, known as the Father of the Internet.

The inventor of the most profound technology of this century said the scenario just described could be a reality by the year 2000, when every electronic equipment could be controlled through the Internet.

Little did Dr Cerf realise when he began connecting different research networks with his colleague Bob Cahn back in 1973, that just 24 years later their particular network will "revolutionise" the world.

There are currently 400 million people connected to the Internet. Dr Cerf predicted that the number will increase to 700 million in the next ten years.

"We never expected the Internet would grow this big -- there's more than 200,000 networks today and that's not including organisations and corporate Intranet," he said.

The Internet is particularly exciting as it provides virtually an endless space for an individual to programme software applications limited only by their own imagination.

"There isn't any limit to the things you can programme, the Internet doesn't have any end, the functionality that it exhibits just depends on whatever ideas you have for writing (software) programmes," he said.

What the Internet technology will hold for the future is something that couldn't be predicted, to say the least. It is up to individuals who want to develop their own creative ideas into sophisticated applications which only a few years ago, were thought to be impossible.

Dr Cerf stressed that everybody should take the advantage of what the Internet has to offer as it is a very accessible technology, contains no secret, is not patented and the standards are all open.

"Anybody who wants access should have access be it in schools, homes or at the workplace," he said.

Nonetheless all of the excitement brought by the Internet would not have any meaning to a vast majority of people who are still deprived of even basic infrastructural facilities.

"How could certain communities have access to the Internet when they do not have access even to some basic necessities such as electricity and telephones?" he asked.

He emphasized that what needs to be looked into are ways to expedite the provision of basic facilities to rural areas to give opportunities for more people to have access to the Internet.

"We don't necessarily have to do it all at the same time, or, provide sophisticated infrastructure like the fiber optic backbone to every villages

-- telephones lines could be used.

"At least one computer terminal could be provided in a meeting centre or the library in every village," he suggested.

Dr Cerf said the issue of accessibility is important in the context of Malaysia's effort to make the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) project which has gained considerable international attention, a success.

"We need to realise that not every country or every part of the country have sophisticated backbone infrastructure such as what had been planned for the MSC," he said.

While expressing his disappointment for not having the chance to meet the man who mooted the MSC project Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Dr Cerf said Malaysia needs to think of ways to effectively channel applications from the MSC to other areas using compatible systems.

"He (Dr Mahathir) has done a good job, I don't know if there's anything else I can advise him...but these are the things that I would mention to him if we finally meet," said Dr Cerf, who has been to Kuala Lumpur twice.

According to Dr Cerf the future will be more promising as Internet access will be cheaper with the invention of WebTV which uses the television set as a mean of Internet access.

As it becomes more accessible it will also help electronic devices in the future interact with one another, and with people.

"What will happen is that what used to be a dumb stereo, or, a dumb television will have software in it that can interpret the data that is being sent to it.

"They can be an intelligent device that understands speech as opposed to simply carrying sound and images," he said.

Imagine asking a radio to search for a certain song and play it or a television to look for a certain movie and play it: For Dr Cerf, this possibility is not too far ahead.

"It's very hard to predict what will happen in the future, because the nature of the Internet is in its software.

"The fun thing is that you can do almost anything you want to," he said.

But with all this possibilities, one wonders whether one would end up like a fish in the net, very much the same way a "couch potato" is glued to his TV. -- BERNAMA

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