

DigitalPop

Adapted from Philippine Internet History 101, written by Miguel Paraz, which appeared on the March 2001 issue of The Web Philippines. Edited and with additional text by Heinz Bulos.

Freedom of expression is one benefit of the Internet, and here Roberto “Obet” Verzola has been a pioneer. Before the liveInternet days, he has been operating an e-mail service for his NGO. Cyber-activism has since then been marginalized in the mainstream Internet community, except for the occasional forwarded e-mail espousing some worthy cause.

A small group of Internet activists representing the local Internet community has been outspoken and on guard against government policies and business moves deemed opposed to Internet liberty and consumer rights.

PLDTi or the Philippine League of Democratic Telecommunications, Inc., a consumer advocate group with Internet roots has been at the forefront of online activism.

When PLDT, their favorite nemesis, first brought up the idea of phone metering, the group was formed and the “No to Metering” campaign surprisingly was successful in raising public awareness on the issue, making the telecommunications giant to gradually back off. PLDTi has since proven to be a thorn on PLDT’s side.

It later took on the cudgels for Gerry Kaimo, webmaster satirist of PLDT.com and harsh PLDT critic, when the phone company sued him for P1.35 million. PLDTi has been known for its audacity, quick to threaten to sue the powers that be, from PLDT to the NTC. Its last two battles have been with the local PH domain registry DotPH on the DotPHONE issue, and the cell phone companies Globe and Smart when the two cut their free SMS allocations.

The “middle class revolt” of People Power 2, January 2001, was preceded by a rise in Internet activism, with mailing lists and Web sites both serious and spoof. Vicente Romano, a PR practitioner, initiated eLagda.com, which sought one million signatures for then-President Estrada to step down after the “Juetengate” exposé, and the Guerilla Information Network (GIN) posted news from anonymous sources. During the impeachment trial and during the People Power revolution, Web sites and streaming media accesses from overseas Filipinos hit a peak. Anti-Estrada jingles were converted to MP3 format, downloaded and spread around.

100% PURE Piny- UNMETERED ANGST, PAIN, QUE HORROR, tears, criminals, saints, choofies and more, PLUWRC, true and false data, bad jokes, true lies, untrue lies or a combination of both. The site everyone talks about but no one really reads. LAUGHTER and LIES FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY or what? Naka, Edo, BOLA. [Google](#) takes into the #1000s in their trend satire directory. *Mabuhay ang Pilipine? Pere Hindi lahat. Nabuhay ang Pilipinot Pero diW tatan.*

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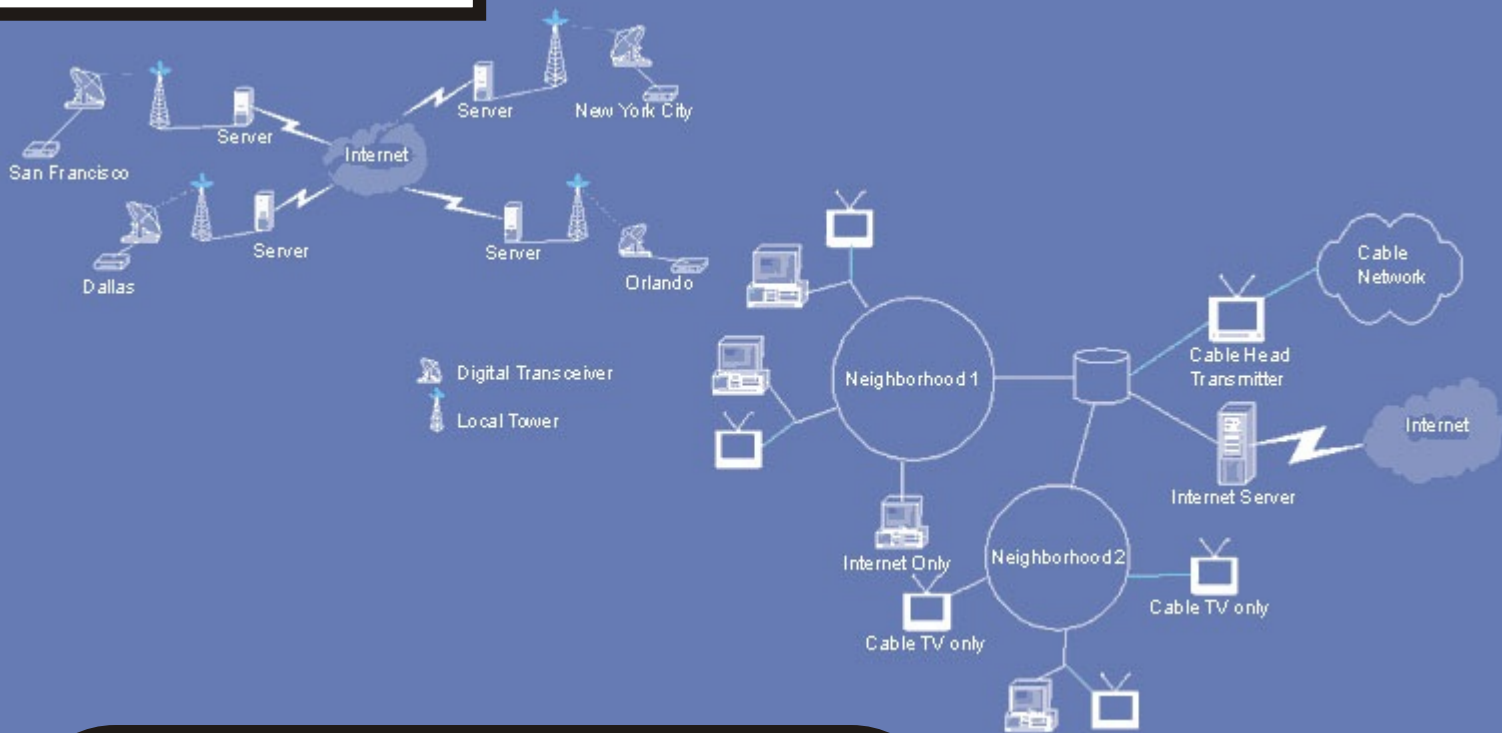
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Conrado tells it like it is:

What a guy, Ate Guy!
The country's most "popular" CEO in a matter of months has:
1. taken away from consumers 70% of "free" SMS text.



BROADBAND



Higher speeds were limited to corporate users who made use of telco leased lines. The home user had no chance to get faster service until Internet over cable TV ("cable Internet") was made available in 1998. Sky Cable had been conducting trials for some time, which was expected since it had a dialup ISP, but Destiny was ahead, initially packaging it with an Internet appliance. Home Cable started out in the Internet field with the Newgen Cablenet partnership, then followed with their NOW service in conjunction with Infocom, which became their sister company later.

Sky then came up with ZPdee, which differed from the previous offerings by having a metered service. Outside Metro Manila, ComClark provides service to Clark Field, Pampanga, and WebSprinter handles Cagayan de Oro.

Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) came in full force in 2000, with Globe Telecom and Eastern Telecom offering higher speeds over phone lines for business customers, and PLDT offering the same for business and residential installations.

Earlier, DSL was limited to building inside wiring, along with other building access network technologies like Ethernet. Mosaic Communications Baguio and Piltel were the first to put DSL technology out on the field in 1999. Fixed wireless service remains the territory of business applications. Players here include the new telcos Meridian Telekoms and Broadband Philippines. For the consumer, the closest a consumer could get to wireless service is on their mobile phone.

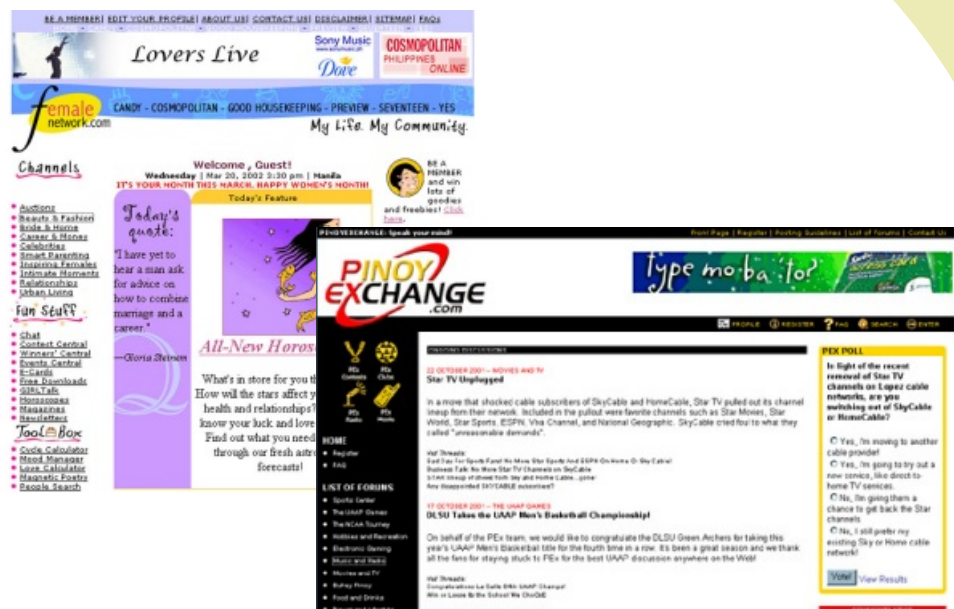
Broadband hasn't really taken off up to now. The high prices, unavailability in certain areas and lack of compelling content have discouraged the local market from upgrading from dial-up. More so, the terrible service and false advertising ("100 times faster than dial-up!") have created a backlash, with customers complaining about DSL and cable providers on mailing lists and online forums.

The first Filipino online community to gain prominence was soc.culture.filipino established in 1990 by Aimee Mañosa on the Usenet discussion system. While this became popular with overseas Filipinos in the days before the Internet, it did not catch on with Filipino Internet users as Usenet was not well-supported by local service providers.

The first Web-based discussion group was eForums, operated by Cybernet Live, but these became popular in 1999 with sites like PinoyExchange, now run by iAyala and FemaleNetwork, part of taipan John Gokongwei's Summit Interactive. The US-based eGroups, later acquired by Yahoo!, became the default home for Pinoy seeking to startup a mailing list. One of these, Ph-Cyberview, run by veteran Netizen Jim Ayson, is a source of a lot of historical and current discussions. Pinoy chatrooms started in global servers like Undernet, where they flourished and developed their own subculture.

Filipino netizens took to chatting in a big way when the providers such as Sky Internet promoted it with their own servers, and media and entertainment companies started with chat events. Filipino Internet-speak brought up the word "EB" for "eyeball" or face-to-face get-together, which became common for communities as the user base for chat rooms and bulletin boards grew. Chat was the killer app in the early days when the Net was starting to move into the mainstream. Stories about romances, casual sex, and newfound friendships abound.

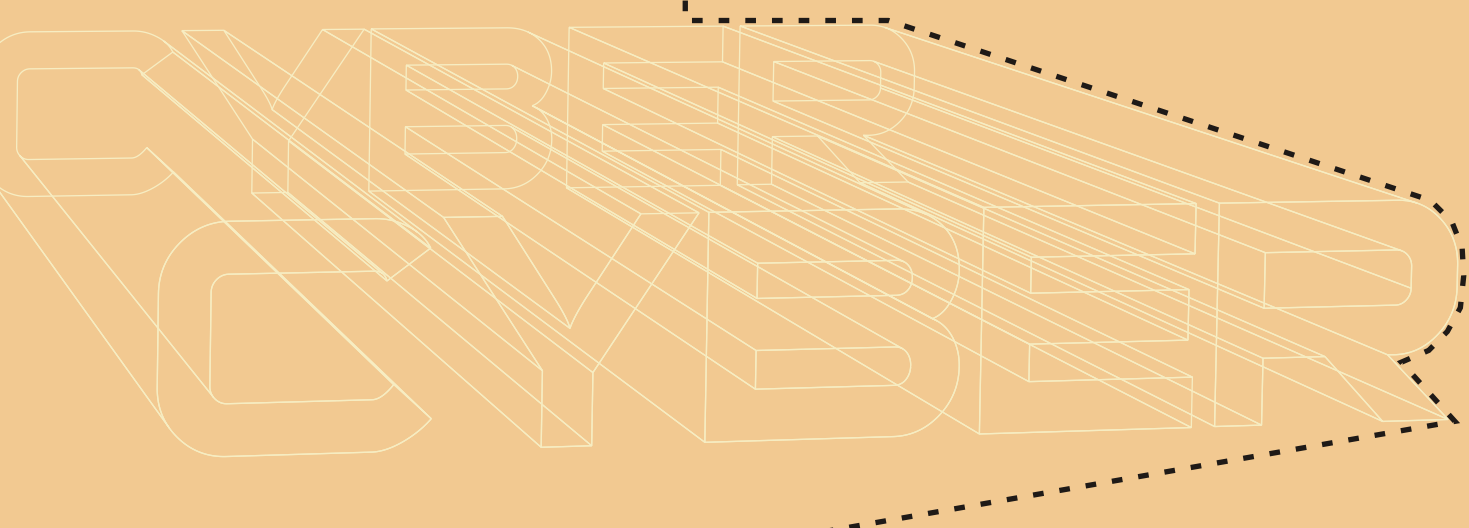
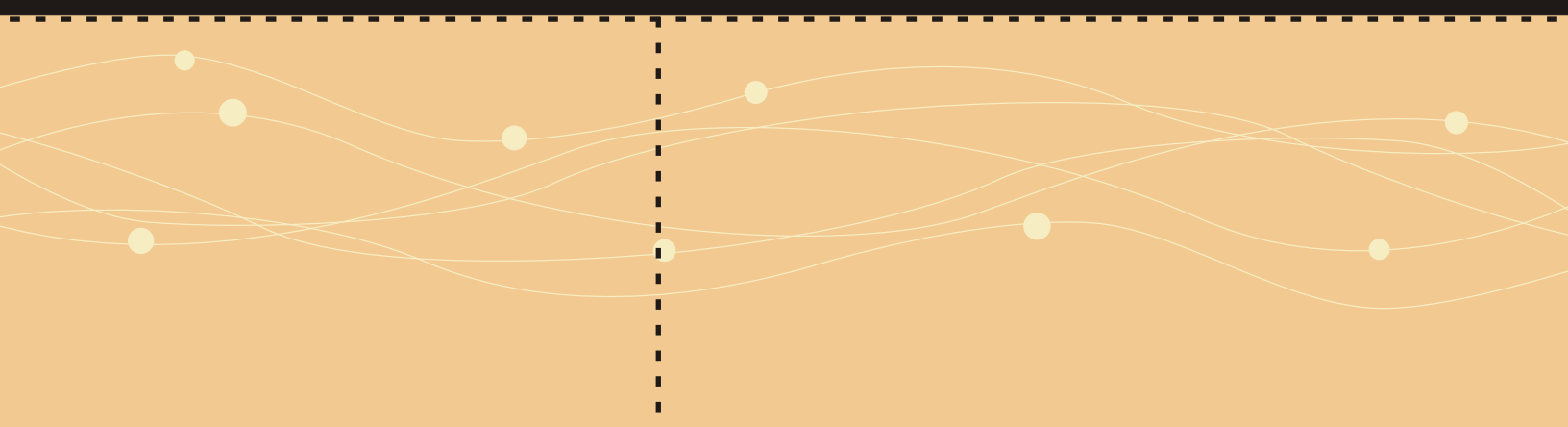
Almost every Netizen has a story of an addicted phase in their online lives. While instant messaging (IM) and texting (SMS) have become the preferred communication tools of late, online chats have moved from the underground to mainstream media, particularly in television networks and cable channels that integrate Internet chat, as well as into mobile phones.



CYBER CAFES

Public access terminals or “cyber cafes” served to bridge the digital divide for those without phone lines at their homes - a legacy of the country’s low teledensity - and for those who could not afford computers for their home. While this was mainly a mom-and-pop affair, there were upscale lifestyle ventures like the Jupiter St., Makati franchise of Cyberia in 1997 as well as expansionist strategies like the ePLDT and Philweb cyber cafe chains of 2001. The small café businesses shifted to LAN gaming, which do not need Internet connections at all. Cebu City is the often-quoted cyber cafe capital of the country, if not the world.

The earliest known cyber café is Web Link of Davao. For a time, Internet cafes sprouted like mushrooms in almost every corner of the major cities in the country, much like the desktop publishing shops a few years earlier, but on an even greater scale. The government’s program to build telecenters in all municipalities is largely based on this business model. Today, the hybrid cyber café-LAN gaming center continues to thrive, and will remain to play an important role in providing Internet access to Filipinos.



On the other side of the financial fence, the US Internet boom of 1999 and the rise of the dotcoms kicked off the Philippines' own surge of Internet interest. HatchAsia put idea incubation in the public eye, and everyone wanted his or her own pet venture. iAyala's ideafarm is the other well-known incubator. Those with more money in their wallets went out to make their own investments or derive their own Internet strategy.

On the extreme end, holding companies listed in the Philippine Stock Exchange (PSE) underwent name changes to become "technology stocks" overnight through backdoor listings. Acoje became AJO.net, Petrofields became iPeople, Pacemco became NextStage, Selecta Dairy became Philstar.com, Vantage Equities became iVantage. But PhilWeb, formerly South Seas Natural Resources, was the most notable of these, proclaiming fantastic revenues and project in early 2000, with the PSE insider trading scandal ongoing. DFNN.com was the first to be listed from scratch, hitting the bourse in 2001 after months of announcements and speculation.

The fall of the dot-com hype which started in the US in early 2000 and hit the Philippines in the second quarter has made the Philippine investors and innovators take a second look at their model and how to derive value from the changing face of the commercial Internet.

Until the dot-com gloom, businesses sought to make money out of giving the free services that consumers were expecting off the Net. Edsamil, launched in late 1999, is the most pervasive Filipino free service, offering free dialup e-mail. While only one other company, TeamMail, offers free dialup, a whole slew of Filipino operated or branded services offer free Web-based e-mail, with PinoyMail being the most noteworthy.

There were those that, even for a brief moment, enjoyed the limelight and infusion of capital. Yehey got funding from Catcha.com. GetAsia.com bought LegManila and Localvibe. PinoyMail was bought out by Doy Ve'a's group. ABS-CBN bought PinoyAuctions.com. iAyala invested in PinoyExchange. Unfortunately, the lucky ones were few and their luck quite fleeting. There were not that many casualties though.

Just a few layoffs and cost-cutting. The notable ones that did shut down were regional players with a Manila presence such as SurfingBananas.com and LatitudeWeb. Dot-coms here, as in everywhere else, are no longer in fashion. But the early experimentation nevertheless provided important business lessons, and those that survived have learned to rethink their business models and have now more realistic expectations.



The universities were the first to be connected to the Internet. De La Salle, it seems, has been most adept in wiring its students and using new technologies for enrollment. UP, on the other hand, is seriously into distance learning via its Open University concept.

The popularity of the Internet also has attracted enterprising regional companies, such as Purpletrain and CyberstateU to offer courses online. And the curriculum of IT colleges has incorporated Internet-related topics to further appeal to students.

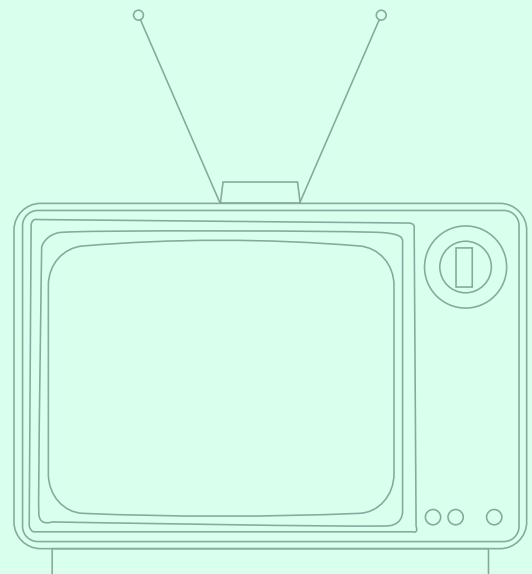
Recent years have seen a fresh entry of IT institutions such as NIIT, iAcademy, and Genetic Computer Institute.

Digital audio in the form of MP3 files has captured the Pinoy music lover at a time when the record industry is fighting piracy. In 2000, popular band Rivermaya surprised the industry by releasing an entire album in downloadable MP3, followed by an audio CD. This added fuel to the fires of intellectual property rights debates, and music ownership - the artist versus the record company. Officially sanctioned downloads were made available from sites like Singapore-based Soundbuzz and PhilMusic.com the first full-blown music site, which descended from Jim Ayson's "Filipino Music Netlinks."

The success of MP3.com for US independent artists led to local versions like MP3Manila.com. Filipinos continue to participate in online file-sharing activities, even after the glory days of Napster. While MP3 files of local artists are available online, the real enemy of the local record labels and musicians is digital piracy in the form of CDs sold for a fraction of their retail price.

The local movie industry has felt the pain too, with pirated VCDs and DVDs of both local and foreign films affecting their production and distribution business. The Philippines is in danger of becoming a pirate haven in Asia, and the battle, unlike in the States, is being fought not online but in the streets. The impact has been so severe that some insiders predict the death of the local music and movie industries in three years time. Consumers have responded that ordinary folks can't afford the pricey original CDs, VCDs, and DVDs.

One confused congressman even proposed a moratorium on raids against pirates to allow the masses to enjoy entertainment at affordable prices. It remains a major issue that might take a long time to resolve.



Internet World magazine spun out from the yearly franchised event series of the same name, brought in by Sequel Concepts. From 1996 to 1998, this was *the* event to attend and exhibit at, with the last outing occupying the Philippine International Convention Center (PICCC). Other local Internet shows were Connectworld and Internet Commerce Expo.

APRICOT (Asia Pacific Regional Internet Conference on Operating Technologies) is a yearly technical conference and exhibit that is held in a different Asian country each year. It was held in the Philippines in February 1998.

The total opposite of APRICOT in the glamour and glitz department is the Philippine Web Awards, which The Web Philippines magazine started in late 1998, and continues to this day. This awards series had its own set of intrigues, making it as close a Netizen could get to being in showbiz.

More personal events took place in 1999, when Netizens celebrated the fifth year anniversary of the Philippine Internet for the first time at a party, and in 2000 where a smaller one took place. A more recent parallel celebration, One Internet Day, has become a major event in itself.



E-COMMERCE

E-Commerce has been one of the driving factors of Internet commercialization, but until today access to Philippine based e-commerce for both merchants and consumers is still something being improved upon. The landmark event on the policy side is the passing of the E-Commerce Law of 2000. To this date, e-commerce over the Internet and mobile phone networks is still in the starting phases, with established financial institutions and start-ups competing for the digital peso.

The success of auction sites in the US such as eBay spawned off local versions for personal commerce, while their corporate counterpart, the B2B e-procurement exchange, took off in 2000. Aside from B2B e-marketplaces such as Bayantrade, PhilBX, CateringX, and SourcePilipinas, a promising e-commerce category is online banking, with the likes of Unionbank and BPI getting early in the game.

Urban Bank was actually the first to offer online banking but the service didn't take off, until the bank itself collapsed. More local banks have joined the fray, such as 1st E-Bank (formerly PDCP Bank), UCPB, Banco de Oro, and East West Bank, with others like RCBC and Security Bank offering the service initially to corporate clients.

It's doubtful retail e-commerce will take off anytime soon, despite the early proliferation of B2C sites such as myAyala.com, E-Store Exchange, Ninong.com, Pabili.com, eBili.com, 22ban.com, e-2door.com, Filgifts.com, and dozens of others. Online money transfer and other businesses targeting overseas Filipinos have better chances of succeeding.



The Philippine Internet kicked off with everyone offering connections to the US, and there was not much Philippine oriented content and communication. With growing amounts of data traffic such as e-mail being sent from one Philippine ISP to another via the US, it became clear that this was not sustainable. The local ISP mailing list became a fertile discussion ground for issues like this. Ricky Gonzalez proposed the formation of the Metro Manila Media Access Point ("MM-MAP"), which was adopted by PLDT who built the first local peering point, the Philippine Internet Exchange (PhIX), in 1997.

Only ISP's run by non-telcos initially joined the exchange point, but this changed later. The COmmon Routing Exchange (CORE) of PHnet, and the Manila Internet Exchange (MIX) of Eastern Telecom, completed the current trio of peering points in the Philippines.

Local connectivity increased due to the Internet exchanges and the private links between providers, whether for buying transit to the outside, or speeding up connections between each other. With this, the next step in moving the Internet locally is to house content inside the country.

This has been taking place in a small scale since the beginning of local ISP's, but it is only in 2001 that companies such as Ayalaport and ePLDT's Vitro started to offer data center services to host content and application servers on a large scale.

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Commercial providers started putting up their own international links in 1995, and were more profit-oriented in focus. Some were run by telcos - like the Globe Telecom GNET; others were private companies like SequelNet, which was introduced into the country by then-president Fidel V. Ramos. Mosaic Communications, which started with a Philnet link as a Philnet partner organization, started to get its own external connectivity as well.

Cybernet Live, The E-Mail Company, Portal and Virtual Asia were different by focusing on online services, such as proprietary forums, chat and file downloads, which were available only to subscribers. They branched out to offering full Internet service since consumer market demanded it. During the early days, e-mail was also available through hobbyist bulletin board system networks such as the Philippine Cybernet Association, or Cyberphil.

Today, Philnet - now PHnet - no longer provides Internet access, and buys its connection from a commercial provider. Educational institutions get their access from commercial providers, even as for-profit companies popped up to fit the school-oriented specialty market.

Like cyber cafes, ISPs multiplied a hundredfold. The capital-intensive, low-margin industry has seen tumultuous times, with closures, mergers, and consolidation in its short history. Offering prepaid Internet cards, beefing up their content, and promising faster and more reliable service were just some of the strategies they adopted to win a small market. They were met by the entry of big telecom companies, broadband providers, and legal obstacles that limited what they can do.

Pioneers like Moscom and Infocom have managed to survive and even prosper in these hard times. But as the market gradually shifts to bigger bandwidth, we will soon see the death of dial-up.



Republic Act 7925 of 1995 was responsible for building the commercial Internet. Prior to this, it was not clear if ISP services were considered telecommunications and therefore needed a congressional franchise. This Act made it clear that any company who purchased services from licensed telcos, and registered with the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) could become an ISP.

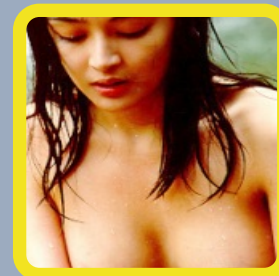
The invention of Voice over IP (VoIP) in 1996 gave the ISPs a chance to break their regulatory conditions and offer International Simple Resale (ISR). Over the years, companies offering illegal ISR without a license have been raided and shut down. Discussions have been going on regarding industry liberalization and legalization of VoIP, but up to the present the incumbent telcos still have the upper hand.

In 1996, with the increasing amount of youth spending time on the Internet, senators Blas Ople and Orlando Mercado sought to regulate ISP's into blocking access to objectionable material. This move was itself blocked from becoming law by the PISO, which favored self-regulation by its members. Some providers offered filtered services, such as Infocom, Netsafe, and CBCPNet of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, which has drawn some foreign press for the novelty of having a Church-operated service provider. In 2000 a Zamboanga City councilor proposed that minors be banned from cyber cafes to protect them from content, but this was shot down.

The E-Commerce Act was rushed into law due to the repercussions of the world's most destructive virus, the "Love Bug," which was unleashed to the world in May 2000, allegedly by Onel de Guzman. The lack of applicable Philippine laws prevented him from being prosecuted, and up to this day, the full implementation of the E-Commerce Law has yet to be seen. The first Internet casino in the Philippines, SAGE (Sport and Games Entertainment), was licensed in 2000 by the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR), the government's regulatory body. It hit hurdles with anti-gambling policymakers, and questions surfaced about its legality, especially during the gambling scandal that was rocking the Estrada administration in the later part of 2000. Even small businesses were not spared from regulation.

The booming Cebu cybercafe business was threatened with local legislation regulating their prices and imposing technical requirements. PLDT has been involved in two legal issues, one the consequence of the other. The first is the brouhaha over local call metering in 1996 as PLDT's means of recovering from losses on international calls. This led to the formation of PLDTi, the Philippine League for Democratic Telecommunications, which had its date in court with PLDT. The second issue of PLDT got started in 1998 when anti-metering activist Gerry Kaimo found that the domain PLDT.com was available, and registered it for use as an anti-PLDT political satire site. This came out at the time that domains and intellectual property rights were starting to get under the world spotlight. Up to the present, the PLDT lawsuit has hearings in court.

The current issues with the Philippine domain, .PH, are the latest chapter in a recurring story that started when Philnet requested to manage the PH domain from the administrator, Joel Disini. There have been different moves to enter into a dialog with Mr. Disini, with the current movement set up as the Philippine Domain Authority Convenors, tasked to take charge of the domain administration.



OPEN SOURCE

Open source software, free to download and use, is a child of the Internet. Thus it is appropriate that this software, most notably Linux, was one of the catalysts for Internet development.

The Philnet project and schools subsisted on early versions of Linux, long before it was fashionable, and to this date the majority of Internet servers in the Philippines still run on it. Linux conferences have taken place, doubling as Internet events - most notably Linux '99 Manila, and Linux 2K, held in Cebu and Manila.



ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations were formed in response to the challenges of the Internet age. Philippine Internet Service Organization (PISO), the ISP association, was the first one to be formed. It was born out of discussion on the ISP mailing list, in 1995. The rise of Internet commerce and security concerns led to the Philippine Internet Commerce Society (PICS) and the Philippine Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT).

Regional organizations sprung up, such as the Visayas region-based Cyberpromdi, and the Information Technology Society of Davao (ITSDavao), which participated in the One Internet Day celebration of the Internet anniversary. Marketing and Web professionals are represented in the PIMPS (Philippine Internet Marketing Professionals Society) and Philweavers.

Chuck Gardner's Cyberbayan and Ken Ilio's Tanikalang Ginto were among the first set of directories of content in and about the Philippines in early 1994. ISPs GSILink in Cebu and EpicNet in Makati started their own search engines in 1995. At this time, Philippine content was mostly the work of hobbyists and corporate pioneers starting to see the need for a Web presence. This was before US free hosting companies like Geocities came out and drew personal users to express themselves through their own pages.

Web directories went commercial in 1996. Alistair Israel, Dave Quitarano and friends started up what could be called the first Philippine dotcom, or Internet-centric company that was not a service provider. This was Fiesta Online Corporation with their flagship Yehey! During the same period, ISP Evoserve launched the competition, EDSA, named after Metro Manila's main highway.

By 1998 the early rumblings of the dot-com boom transformed search engines and content sites into the all-encompassing portal. With the portal craze, companies found it necessary to change their Web presence into a portal, and those who already had assets sought to build on them.

This marked the entry of big media companies into the portal scene. Media giant ABS-CBN, which had been operating a content site for some time, harnessed their Interactive group to put up PinoyCentral, perceived as a Yehey!-killer. The major print daily newspapers have had a captive audience with users seeking news, but the Philippine Star and Philippine Daily Inquirer took this a step forward in working out their sites into portals of their own. Inq7.net, the joint venture of the Inquirer and GMA Network has proven successful, as it is the top Philippine site in terms of traffic.



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SPAMS AND SCANDALS

Philippine Internet history would not be complete without the interesting tidbits. In the marketing department, an ISP called Neptune8 made its way to the public eye in 1997 by offering inexpensive access. It turned out that the company was a reseller of IBM Global Network but was not authorized to resell in the Philippines at the US rates. Today, Prosperity.com sells Web sites through multi-level marketing techniques. In 2001, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) charged it with illegal pyramiding by earning profits from members' joining fees instead of actual products.

Unsolicited commercial e-mail or spam has caught up in local circles, with some marketers ignorant or brazen enough to use mass mailing to push their products. These lead to incidents discussed on the local mailing lists, especially when it is a known or controversial company that does the deed.

On the malicious side, the Pinoy "hacker" subculture has been around, defacing popular Web sites by replacing their content. IRC channels sprung up to trade "hacked" or stolen dialup accounts that are abused to gain free Internet access at best, or to do criminal acts at worst.

WEB DEVELOPMENT

The demand from every company to have a compelling site stirred up a flurry of Web development companies, from ventures run from home to foreign heavyweights and local conglomerates. Even the Philippine Presidents since Fidel V. Ramos, the first on the Internet, have had their own sites, but erap.com has been the most celebrated and reviled.

Web design pioneers such as Nubook Interactive, Alchemy, W3BC, Web Philippines, and Binary Soup were the forerunners of today's heavy-hitters k2 Interactive, Asia Online, 25*8, Slingshot, and Big Dipper, among others.

There are still plenty of mom-and-pops and freelancers offering web design, but the trend is towards a more serious business, with the big ones offering value-added services such as Internet consulting and applications development.

There is no scarcity of talent here, as evidenced by members of Philweavers and the galleries of Halfproject.com. The Philippine Web Awards also remains a showcase for such talent. There's also a growing community of Flash developers, further honing our reputation in animation.



- home
- company
- organization
- partners
- services
- process
- portfolio



webdevelopment

The rise of mobile phones in the Philippines is due to the ubiquity of sending short messages (SMS) or "texting," of which Filipinos are the world's leaders. The next step would have been the Wireless Application Protocol (WAP), introduced by the GSM operators in early 2000. However, a lack of applications, pricey hardware requirements, and uncertain sales and marketing has kept WAP a mere curiosity until now.

What has taken off is using the SMS network as an extension of Web-based services, with Smart offering the ZED wirelessportal service to the consumer. They and Globe Telecom both cater to the web developer in enlisting wireless content, merging these with Web-based applications.

During the early days of SMS, before Globe started metering messages, enterprising companies equipped with a GSM phone, PC and adapter offered e-mail-to-SMS services. This complemented the international services that offered Internet to SMS, some of which had to block service to the Philippines due to high amounts of traffic. Chikka.com offers a compromise that pleases both telcos and subscribers. The mobile phone craze also gave rise to the popularity of sites for free handset logos and ring tones, an alternative to the mobile operators' paid downloads.

