Spelunking the Internet: Real Time and Time Shifting

In the near future nobody is going to go to the local Computer Hut drive-through window to pick up a box of software with a side order of documentation. For the most part, you don't really need to do that now. Software producers are doing what Kodak should have done. That is, give everyone a free camera so they will buy the film. Microsoft, Netscape and dozens of others are giving away software in the hopes that you will want to pay for better versions of it later. Sometimes these are called "beta" versions and sometimes "shareware." In the case of Netscape, you also get a free tool that gives you access to all sort of things that you might want to spend money on. It's the same reason that you don't have to pay extra for shopping carts at the supermarket.

As a communicator, the best software helps you either "time shift" things that usually require you to conform to a schedule, or make "real time" things that are usually delayed. These are two of my favorites: "Real Audio:" (http://www.realaudio.com/) A friend of mine said, "Oh great, so now you can turn your $3,000 computer into a $10 transistor radio." No, what you have turned it into is a audio version of a VCR with an huge assortment of rental tapes to chose from. If you missed last week's "NPR - All Things Considered" that talked about research at your university, you can go back and listen to just that segment of the program. Want to listen to San Francisco's take on the election results? You can do that. Want to listen to movie reviews while you work? You can do that, but don't tell anybody I suggested it.

"Cool Talk:" (http://home.netscape.com/comprod/products/ navigator/version_3.0/ communication/cooltalk/index.html) It comes as a standard plug-in accessory to Netscape Gold with Components. Not only can you turn your $3,000 computer into a $10 transistor radio, you can turn it into a $15 telephone. There are still a few glitches, but you can use this software to talk through your computer to other "Cool Talk" subscribers anywhere in the world. There is the additional benefit of a *white board* that allows you to cut and paste photo files or draw on screen to the person you are talking to. The advantage over e-mail? It's real time and interactive.

Dennis Hinkamp
Utah State University