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WebTV May Not Be for Everyone, but It's a Step in the Right Direction

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My family and I have been Web surfing on our Sony. No, we don't have one of the new Sony PCs. We're using our 10-year-old Sony TV, which is now equipped with a set-top box that connects the TV to the Internet.

The box, called an Internet terminal, is the first in what is expected to be a new generation of low-cost devices that will make it easier and cheaper to access the World Wide Web and send e-mail. The technology was developed by WebTV Networks of Palo Alto ([800] 469-3288 or https://www.webtv.net), which licensed the design to Sony and Philips Consumer Electronics; it also operates the Internet service that works with the devices.

The boxes themselves cost $300 to $350 and come with a hand-held universal remote control that looks and works just like the one that came with your TV. The WebTV service, which is available via a local phone call from most U.S. cities, costs $19.95 a month.

I didn't expect to like WebTV when I first heard about it. I'm accustomed to surfing the Web on PCs and Macs, and I assumed that looking at it on a TV set would be horrendous.

I assumed wrong. Most sites I've visited look just fine on my TV, and the performance

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is sometimes better than what I get with my PC and 28.8-kilobits-per-second modem. The text is large, so it's easy to read from across the room, and sometimes Web sites appear even faster than on a PC because the WebTV system stores popular sites on its own computer.

I still have some reservations, but after playing with WebTV and watching my family and friends enjoy it I now feel it may have a place in at least some living rooms.

The first thing I noticed about WebTV was how easy it is to install and use. You plug video and audio cables into your TV or VCR and connect the box to a regular telephone jack. Press the power button on the remote control and the box dials a toll-free number and asks you to enter credit card information.

From then on, it automatically logs you on whenever you turn on the set-top box's power. Unlike most PC-based Internet setups, you don't have to worry about IP addresses or any other techno-garble. It's as easy as connecting a VCR or cable TV converter. In fact, about the only thing complicated about my installation was plugging in the wires correctly so it would coexist with my cable converter.

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The remote control has arrow keys and scroll buttons that make it easy to select Web sites from a menu or move up and down a site. You can type in Web addresses or e-mail messages by using the arrow keys to highlight letters on a virtual keyboard that appears on the screen, though that's a real pain. The optional $60 wireless keyboard is highly recommended or, if you don't mind wires across your floor, plug a standard PC keyboard into the keyboard connector at the back of the box.

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Signing on the Internet is also easy. You turn on your TV and power up the WebTV set-top box. It automatically dials into the network and signs you on. If only one person in the family is signed up to use the service, you don't have to enter a user name.

Each family member gets a unique e-mail address and his or her own profile. Parents can choose to use Surfwatch's child-protection filters to keep their kids out of sexually explicit sites or, for maximum sheltering, can limit kids to only those sites that have been approved by Yahooligans (https://www.yahooligans.com/), the children's version of the Yahoo search system.

WebTV also has an excellent telephone feature for people with call waiting. When a call comes in, the service will automatically release the line so that you can take the call. After you hang up, the service will reconnect you to the Web page you were viewing before the call came in. That means Web surfing doesn't disable your regular phone service.

WebTV is targeted at families that don't have PCs at home as well as those that may have a PC that is used for work or homework but isn't connected to the Internet. A WebTV news release argues that its system "makes Web surfing a natural extension of the TV viewing experience and a comfortable activity to share with family and friends," but I question that assumption.

My family has a hard time agreeing which TV show to watch, but when and if we do

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agree, it's easy for us to watch it together. Surfing the Web or sending e-mail, however, is pretty much a singular experience. I can envision families gathering around during the initial novelty stage, but eventually people want to visit sites that reflect their interests.

There are some limitations. Although most Web sites I visited looked pretty good, WebTV was not able to display frames that are being used on a growing number of sites to divide the screen into panels. The service does allow you to play some short musical files (midi), but it doesn't currently work with the RealAudio Internet sound system or standard WAVE files. The company plans to offer RealAudio and other features in a free upgrade planned for November, said Bruce Leak, WebTV's chief operating officer.

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The fact that it is not a full-fledged computer is a mixed blessing. The advantages include simplicity, low cost and somewhat improved performance. But you can't integrate your Web surfing or e-mail with other computer activities, or save files to look at later, or paste material from your word-processing program into your e-mail.

Also, PCs allow you to choose your software from a variety of sources. You can use Netscape, Microsoft Explorer or other browser programs to surf the Web and take advantage of many other PC applications to enhance surfing, e-mail and the downloading of files. With WebTV, you only use the software that's built into your box or downloaded to the box by WebTV networks.

And, unlike PC users, you can't change your Internet service provider. If my provider raises its rates or degrades its service, I'll shop around for another provider. WebTV users are locked into WebTV Networks.

Of course, the WebTV is cheaper than a PC or a Mac, but if price is your main

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consideration, shop around for a used PC or a cheap 486. You're not likely to find a fully equipped system (with a modem) for less than $400, but you may find one for $700 or less.

Personally, I'd like to see the WebTV system priced at less than $200 and would feel better if you had a choice of Internet providers. Nevertheless, I remain open-minded about the possible success of WebTV. It's gone a long way toward making it easier to get on the Internet, and that is a big step in the right direction.

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