

WOOD AND FIBER SCIENCE

JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF WOOD SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

VOLUME 29

JANUARY 1997

NUMBER 1

THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY: ITS ROLE IN OUR SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

In early 1995, I could easily count the number of wood-products-related sites that were on the World Wide Web. Today, there are literally thousands of forest and wood-products-related web sites, which indicates that our community has gained significant access to the "information superhighway." This recent explosion of information in our community is continuing at an increasingly faster pace. On WebCrawler, a world wide web search tool, I was surprised to find over 140,000 references to web pages pertaining to both "wood" and "products." Obviously, many of these pages dealt with items such as news releases and even art and had very little to do with our traditional community of "wood products." A more directed search yielded slightly more than 6,000 web pages to the wood products community I am accustomed to seeing. Still, 6,000 web pages is a lot of information to sift through to find what I need. Is this new information technology a revolutionary breakthrough as some claim? Or, is it the latest fad that just adds more to our daily information overload?

The recent article in the *Forest Products Journal* {46(5):19-25} by Vlosky and Gazo provides a good background on the internet and discusses its potential role for the forest products community. This article states that the internet can provide "an opportunity for participation in this global communication environment for anyone, for the largest corporation down to an individual consultant." Hence, equal access and free exchange of information between anyone at any location in the world promise to be a new revolution in communications technology. In looking at my list of 6,000 references to wood-products-related web pages, many of these, in fact, rep-

resent lesser known associations, smaller industries, or individuals who typically do not communicate through traditional means such as technical journals or trade magazines.

But I oftentimes question whether this "revolution" is working for us or against us. With an increasing access to an abundance of information (and "mis-information"), more time and effort are required to sift through all of the "junk mail" for those tiny morsels of information that are useful. While the goal of the internet is to document free information at high levels of quantity, the goal of traditional scientific media is to document repeatable experiments and unbiased facts at high levels of quality. This is why two hours of my time is much, much more productive in the library reviewing textbooks and peer-reviewed articles than two hours on the web.

The internet and the world wide web are fascinating new ways to communicate and can greatly enhance the way we disseminate information to more people. However, they are not better ways to conduct scientific research nor are they better ways to teach. New information technologies just add to the list of many good tools that allow us to communicate better and more inexpensively to a broader audience. But as information becomes more accessible and voluminous through such new information technologies, we are faced with a continuing challenge. We must always keep a sharp focus on what has made our scientific community successful in the first place: good people, good scientific methods, and an unbiased peer review process.

Earl Kline
Associate Editor
Wood and Fiber Science