

IOC'S WORLD WIDE WEB SERVER & CD-ROM: NEW TECHNOLOGY FOR ALL

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE VISIBILITY OF THE IOC

The IOC traditionally communicates with the scientific community through its Action Addresses and IOC Depository Centres. However scientists and other audiences demand a more direct access to the IOC information and data resources.

Often we have observed that knowledge about IOC and its activities is minimal amongst the scientific community. This knowledge is mostly limited to small groups of specialists directly involved in IOC activities. The same applies to IOC publications: traditionally IOC publications and documents are mailed only to IOC Depository Centres (and to participants of the activity on which the publication reports). Although these centres can provide satisfactory services to their users, geographic and practical reasons make access to the documents difficult for many interested user groups (e.g. students, general public). Newsletters have been quite successful in reaching various user groups but are limited in their information volume capacity. Also they are often not frequent enough to be used for short-term announcements.

1.2 LOCATING INFORMATION AND DATA ON THE INTERNET?

Within the past five years the development of the Internet has been explosive. The number of Internet users has now reached nearly 4 million and is rising rapidly. The number of Internet servers is growing exponentially. Within this morass of information and data, the user has become totally lost. In this respect we believe that comparing the Internet with a library with the books on the floor is most appropriate. Indeed the exponential growth of the Internet and more particularly of the information available via the Internet has made it paradoxically more difficult to find information and data. The Internet, by policy, is an open environment where anyone can put anything at the disposal of everyone. However, the absence of comprehensive management tools enabling structured searching amongst the hundreds of thousands of servers and millions of files has already created a hopeless situation from the end-users' viewpoint. How often does one connect to the Internet trying to find particular information, software or data, only to disconnect hours later without the wanted item but with something completely different. Was this a useful

session or just a waste of time? For a scientist looking for specific data or information this situation is rapidly turning into a nightmare: whereas the WWW was initially considered as the ultimate tool to find information and data quickly and efficiently this clearly is often not the case anymore. Overload on the server often slows down access to speeds which are no longer workable. On the other hand we do see an increasing number of search tools (Yahoo, Webcrawler, etc.) which attempt to create some indexed structure in the Internet offerings. However, these tools are using very general topic definitions which do not correspond with the specific needs of the marine scientific community.

2. THE WWW SERVER

OBJECTIVES OF THE IOC WWW SERVER

In order to offer a solution to the above-mentioned problems the IOC Assembly, during its 18th Session supported the development of a WWW server *“as a central information point for users interested in IOC’s activities and will include jumps to Member States Home Pages if available, thereby emphasizing the partnership philosophy of the IOC programmes.”*

In July 1995 the first version of the WWW server was opened up. The server is now at its 5th release (version 1.5 of 5 October 1995).

The server objectives:

1. To provide information on the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission including: what is the IOC, where is the IOC and who is involved in the IOC;
2. To guide users to WWW servers in Member States
3. To assist users in locating marine data and information based in Member States
4. To provide information on IOC activities and programmes
5. To provide access to IOC publications, data and software products

The Committee will be invited to evaluate the IOC WWW server and to make recommendations for its improvement, continued development and management.

ACCESS OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Although the technological revolution in communication has had a tremendous impact in the developed world, it has, to a large extent, bypassed developing countries. If this is allowed to continue then the efforts and investments carried out at considerable expense by these countries and by donors will be lost. Communication between scientists and exchange of information and data is being carried out increasingly through electronic means, i.e. over the Internet, although

more traditional means such as CDs are also still effective. However what is the reality in developing countries: low-quality telephone lines, no Internet node and thus no access to the Internet. At best one has access to e-mail. Many projects have been developed to improve this situation in the past ten years. If we use Africa as an example then we can refer to over 15 communication network projects (e.g. AFRIKANET, NGONET Africa, ESANET, AFRINET, ARSONET, EARN, WEDNET, HEALTHNET, GHASTINET, UNINET-ZA, RECOSCIX-WIO, RIO Africa, WORKNET, RINAF, etc.) Many have provided valuable e-mail services to a large number of African countries. However, today there are still no real Internet nodes in Africa. Although X.25 access is available in many countries, the cost of using the network for international communication is generally prohibitively high, making its use for WWW access and FTP economically unrealistic.

If we expect developing countries to participate actively in marine sciences at the global level then actions need to be taken to extend the Internet into developing countries. The major donor agencies must be invited to assist in the development of Internet nodes for academic institutions in developing countries. Countries must also provide that access to their users at reasonable cost and without restriction.

In the meantime we need to ensure that the information and products provided through the WWW server can also benefit the developing countries, despite their lack of Internet connectivity. In this respect we may consider the distribution of a CD-ROM version of the IOC WWW server, incorporating WWW browsing software. This will allow the users to get familiar with the relevant software minimizing training requirements if and when Internet connectivity becomes available. Of course the WWW CD-ROM mirror will not allow the 'jumps' to other servers.

The CD-ROM may contain the following information and products:

1. WWW browser software
2. mirror of the IOC WWW server files
3. full-text IOC publications (mirror of FTP server)
4. OceanPC software, ASFISIS software, Micro CDS/ISIS software

The Committee will be invited to comment on the development of an IOC (WWW mirror) CD-ROM and to recommend actions for its development, if approved.

2.1 THE HOMEPAGE

The IOC WWW server is accessed through the homepage with the URL <http://www.unesco.org/ioc/>

In order to make the user interface as user-friendly as possible we have decided to use as few buttons as possible in the **Homepage** (Fig. 1). These include:

WHO, WHAT & WHERE

In this section we provide structural information on the IOC.

PROGRAMME ACTIVITIES

In this section we concentrate on the activities of the IOC.

SERVICES & PRODUCTS

In this section we provide direct access to a variety of IOC services and products.

NEWS

This section contains time-sensitive information as well as pointers to changes in all pages of the server.

Also, for new users we provide some basic information on the server and how to navigate through it. This information is accessed using the 'light bulb.' We hope that this is intuitive and indicates 'help.'

The first access point is the IOC WWW server where the user can find information on the IOC, its structure, its programmes and activities and its services. However if the user is looking for data or specialized information then the place to look may be somewhere among the Member States. After the launching of the first version of the server the IOC Secretariat requested the Member States to provide information on their 'first point of entry' WWW server. In this point of entry reference could be made to other national institution servers. Special attention could be given to Services and Products (e.g. data and information). This could then represent a contribution to the 'new' MEDI. A diagram showing the possible pathway is given by Figure 2.

Some Member States have informed us that they do not have a URL. In that case the IOC Secretariat is offering to host that Member State's information on the IOC server. In the case of developing countries the IOC Secretariat is prepared to assist with the development of some introductory pages on Marine Science programmes and institutions for that particular country.



Fig 1

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