Web of Trust or Web of Greed? **Graham Farmelo** hears cash tills ringing as the Web’s creator argues his case

Visualising the virtual future

...O NLY THE MOST foolhardy would try to predict the future of the Web, but that didn’t stop its inventor, Tim Berners-Lee, from trying some crystal-ball browsing last week.

During “Internet, Web: What Next?”, a conference at the Cern atom-smasher laboratory in Geneva, Berners-Lee and others speculated on what they hoped the future might hold for the Web.

What technical improvements are we likely to see in the next few years? Will it become a gigantic marketplace with a few educational add-ons? What will happen if and when governments get their sticky fingers on it?

Berners-Lee still holds on to his vision of a network that users can access with equal ease from anywhere in the world — a single, universal space. He believes there should always be a place for every conceivable kind of material: the polished, authoritative global site, as well as personal scribblings.

The key advance that he foresees is the use of “metadata” on the Web: information about information. The idea is that instead of having related files scattered around the Web, which makes retrieval and processing across files difficult and time-consuming, metadata would label files, enabling search engines and other information processors to hunt more effectively for information across different sites.

Berners-Lee expects the first clear thinking on metadatabases to emerge towards the end of the year.

In the meantime, Berners-Lee wants to see the development of a more accountable Web, with more signed documents and more ways of gauging the reliability of information. He looks forward to a “Web of Trust” with an “Oh yeah?” button on every keyboard, enabling browsers to interrogate a database in order to see whether there really is good reason to believe a document is valid and trustworthy.

Governments are considering how to cash in on the Web, too

This should at least help to make news sites more accountable, an issue that concerned Mark Bernstein, vice president of CNN Interactive. At the moment, he said, news sites are a mixed bag, with some poorly checked stories finding their way on to usually reliable pages. He recalled how several sites recently announced, incorrectly, the death of the comedian Bob Hope. He blamed the error, which his site did not make, on a failure to follow basic journalistic checks. CNN itself is currently re-examining a report it broadcast last month on the use of nerve gas by US troops in Vietnam in 1970, after queries about the story’s veracity.

Nonetheless, Bernstein insisted that the Web is fast becoming Net users’ second news source of choice. He could hardly restrain himself as he rhapsodised on the success of advertising, which he described as the fastest growing activity on the Web, and currently worth about $1.8 billion annually.

Such potential has encouraged many governments to consider how to cash in as well, in the form of taxes and tariffs. At the Cern meeting, Robert Verrue, director-general of the European Union’s DG XIII, set out his conciliatory case for a moderate Web legislation that would deliver, for example, VAT on commercial transactions. But he will have a tough time of it as the powerful US lobbies push hard for a free market, tax-free Web.

Overall, Berners-Lee seemed wary of the Web’s future: “Perhaps we might one day look back at these early years of the Web and wonder at what a mess we made.”

After this conference, there is good reason to worry that we might soon be browsing not the Web of Trust but the Web of Greed.

Tim Berners-Lee’s talk is at [http://w3.org/talks](http://w3.org/talks)