(Approx. 956 words)

The Internet as an Information Resource
February NNCUG meeting recap by Anne Moss, Secretary
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Brian started with an overview of the ancient history of software documentation to illustrate the impact of the Internet as an information resource. In real time, 30+ years. Software once came with manuals and disks (5-1/4, 3-1/2). A loose-leaf manual was designed for manual updating. Updating usually was tedious, time consuming, and almost instantly out-of-date. The problem was cost. Updates had to be printed, mailed, and then each manual updated manually. And updates could be out-of-date with the delay in the mailing process. This was costly both to the software vendor and to the company or individual who had to maintain their manuals.

Onward to Help File Systems. Remember those days? To get somewhere one had to search back and forth through hypertext trying to find an answer to a question. And then the documentation frequently *almost* but *not quite* answered your particular query and you ended up going round and round in circles trying to find a better answer. In addition, you could not update help files that came on disks.

So how do Help files now work? Click on "HELP" in the menu (or the F1 key), which formerly brought up a standard help format. Clicking F1 in a program brings up Help files that are now located on the Internet. This makes a lot more sense if you think about it. First, there is only one place to update; every user automatically has the latest information. Second, the user does not need to update individual installations and check others to make sure they updated. Third, updates and corrections are pretty much instantaneous. The major anti-virus vendors, Apple, Adobe, Microsoft, etc. now are following this same pattern. That doesn't mean "how to" books are no longer out there. Printed documentation is bought separately, or from third parties.

What about the tangible effects of the Internet on everyday life? Brian then reviewed changes in everyday life that are the result of information being available through Internet technology. Real Estate has always been a candidate for a database – Multiple listings actually began in the late 1800's and transactions were standardized in 1999 (RETS) by the National Association of Realtors. Realtors used to maintain paper files, and updated them frequently. This changed with Quick Response (QR) coding, which allowed a publication to show a picture or brief listing, with a QR code beside it, thus allowing the customer to access the data.

Banking is no longer just transactions by snail mail or in a bank branch. On line banking has grown exponentially in the last decade. How many tellers does it take this day and age to staff a bank branch? Instead customers now use the ATM and pay bills through a

secure website. On the other hand who needs an ATM if you don't use cash? Plastic card purchases comprise 66% of all in-person sales, and 31% of those are made with debit cards. Even bill paying can be set up automatically and half of all households have bills paid by automatic deduction from bank accounts.

Conducting transactions with your stockbroker is no longer by telephone, and choosing the best stockbroker for you is easy with an Internet inquiry and exploration of web sites.

We have all become used to using the Internet to find stuff, buy stuff, and these days fix stuff. For example, oops I have a broken keyboard. Do I take it to the shop or fix it myself? First, I'll need a replacement keyboard. Using Google, type in "replacement keyboard" and the computer model number. There are references to the part, as well as a YouTube video showing just what to do, and a downloadable manual. Not only is this useful for electronic parts, but ordinary equipment such as a simple three-hole punch can be repaired.

There are innumerable questions and updates available with the simplest of inquiries. For example, when planning to visit an out-of-town friend, use Google weather, and pick the city or Zip Code. What about next week when I will be traveling, just add a10-day forecast to the inquiry. Then find hotels and restaurants at the destination. Found the type of food you want? Specify if you want it delivered. Whatever the topic, Internet surfing allows the user to learn more than the original question. We really do carry around a mammoth reference library in our smart phones, tablets, etc.

Taking Classes: Maybe you would like to take a class in something. There are a lot of online accredited colleges. They are usually expensive and require that you complete entrance requirements. There are also a lot of non-accredited classes for a wide variety of subjects and generally they are very cheap. Some of them are offered by established brick and mortar colleges, and some offer feedback from students.

Udemy is one of many websites offering online courses. It also lists reviews of the courses. Udemy, and similar sites, do frequently offer discounts, some substantial, particularly if you get on their mailing list. Keep in mind that non-accredited courses will not count towards a degree or be used for a job application.

Remember: There are thousands of websites. Some are well documented and maintained by professionals and experts. Others are less reliable. So who to trust? As an example, Brian uses Wikipedia and finds it good for information that is non-controversial. For controversial and philosophical subjects, you may want to check with several sources.

Brian concluded by noting that the Internet is more than just iPhones and tablets; it is about information access!