

## Technology

As thousands of Minnesotans clamor to get on the information superhighway, a cottage industry has grown up around small Internet access providers, many of which are mom-and-pop shops with a few phone lines and computers in the basement. But their future is threatened by the entry into their business of giants like AT&T, U.S. West, MCI and Microsoft.

# On-ramp entrepreneurs

*Many small companies satisfy growing thirst for access to Internet*

By Steve Alexander  
Star Tribune Staff Writer

There is no hint that Mike O'Connor's house, located on a quiet residential street in St. Paul, is part of Minnesota's burgeoning Internet access industry that provides people with electronic connections to the Internet.

But unseen cyberspace messages flit through O'Connor's basement, entering and leaving at tens of thousands of bits per second through black telephone cables that sprout from the basement wall. The cables snake across the wall's surface to a box of computer circuit boards, which in turn are linked to a floor-to-ceiling rack of computer equipment and two personal computers.



From this control center, sometimes shared with O'Connor's children and their electronic piano keyboards, O'Connor and his two partners, Jeff Altom and Ralph Jenson, provide Twin Cities-area corporations such as Honeywell and Deltak Corp. with high-speed ISDN (integrated services digital network) Internet access.

They say their 14-month-old business is best described by its name: gofast.net Inc. Gofast.net appears to be typical of about 100 mostly cottage-scale businesses in Minnesota that fulfill a growing hunger for connections to the World Wide Web.

It's hard to know how many people in Minnesota have access to the Internet, but some Internet access providers estimate that statewide there are about 20,000 Internet access accounts, some of them business connections which many people share. In the Twin Cities alone, there are more than 40 Internet access providers.

***"The threat is MCI, U S West, the cable TV companies, the people who have very deep pockets. I won't say that I'm worried. Just say that I expect that they are coming."***

— Greg Kemnitz  
President of Skypoint Communications

