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History Is Made by an Old-Fashioned chief.gov

By MARC LACEY
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Already the master of the rope line and televised town meeting, President Clinton took a technological leap into the computer age tonight by becoming the first president to participate in a live Internet chat.

The president, who describes himself as old-fashioned and technologically challenged when it comes to computers, never touched a keyboard or a mouse. He merely sat in front of a Toshiba laptop on a stage at George Washington University and responded verbally to questions sent to him.

His remarks scrolled word for word across tens of thousands of computer screens. The president appeared in a tiny video box, and could be seen -- albeit sometimes just barely -- putting his hand to his chin, sipping from a soda can and looking amused at the entire extravaganza.

"Like F.D.R.'s fireside chats and President Kennedy's live press conferences, this first presidential town hall meeting on the Internet taps the most modern technology for old-fashioned communication between the American people and their president," Mr. Clinton said.

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But on the computer, the affair looked far less grandiose. The video was often fuzzy. The audio sometimes sounded like Mr. Clinton had marbles in his mouth. And only the most powerful machines seemed able to handle the connection, Internet experts said.

Further, unlike a real town meeting, which allows back and forth between the president and the audience, this one had plenty of stage managing, with questions screened by the event's organizers.

"This was online but it wasn't a chat," said Mike Cornfield, a professor at George Washington University who specializes in online politics and watched the event from the audience. "This could have been a national conversation. Instead we had a bunch of politicians telling us what they thought."

Many of the questions were softballs on health care, gun control and other issues that Mr. Clinton has answered many times before. He mixed serious policy answers with chuckles at occasional technical glitches and some of the e-mail names of the questioners -- monikers like T Love and Sissy Bill.

A questioner using the name GBH1935 asked Mr. Clinton how people who were not computer literate would be affected by the computer revolution. Economic prospects for the poor would increase, Mr. Clinton said, if "we have the same density of computer and Internet access that we have with telephone access."

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Another questioner, Cynthia in Arizona, wondered whether Mr. Clinton would stockpile food for the start of the new millennium if he were an "ordinary citizen."

Mr. Clinton said there was no need for anybody to bunker down in fear. "The United States is doing fine and I wouldn't hoard food and I wouldn't hide," he said.

The president's participation in the virtual town hall meeting on Excite@Home was another first in the rapidly changing world of cyberspace, which has transformed entertainment, education and commerce and is moving rapidly into politics.

"For a sitting president to do this is not only groundbreaking but it shows how the Internet is becoming a fundamental tool in politics," said Tom Hockaday, president of Campaign Solutions, a company based in Alexandria, Va., that helps candidates use the Web to enhance their campaigns.

Those in the field envision a day when e-mail replaces 30-second television advertisements and even voting takes place with the click of a mouse.

Compared with other celebrity chats, Mr. Clinton's event, limited to 50,000 participants, was modest. Pop singer Britney Spears drew a record 234,000 participants in her celebrity chat on America Online.

The numbers for Mr. Clinton's town hall were about the same as those for past chats with Michael Jackson and Rod Stewart.

Mr. Clinton acknowledges that he is better at talking Internet policy than actually surfing the Net. Aides said that Mr. Clinton owns a computer but does not use it on his desk in the Oval Office and prefers to write notes longhand.

"He's definitely been on the Internet," one aide said. "He's sent e-mails but he basically is from the era of the typewriter."

Just the same, Mr. Clinton frequently mentions in speeches the need to connect schools in poor neighborhoods to the Internet and prepare for the next millennium with a technologically advanced work force. But Mr. Clinton has ceded technology to Vice President Al Gore, who unlike his boss knows that spam is not a processed lunch meat and that RAM is a computer storage device, not a horned animal.

Mr. Gore, who once boasted in an interview that he helped invent the Internet, held his first electronic town meeting in 1994.

It remains to be seen whether history books will make note of Mr. Clinton's chat, perhaps alongside Woodrow Wilson's first formal news conference and Dwight D. Eisenhower's media briefings over that cutting-edge technology called television.

"Someday this will look like the first flight at Kitty Hawk -- not too impressive, pretty crude, but it was the first," said Craig Crawford, editor in chief of Hotline, the Web-based political newsletter.

The event was as political and commercial as it was historic. The idea was conceived at the Democratic Leadership Council, which used the event to show off centrists it hoped would help fill Mr. Clinton's shoes in the next century. Excite@Home, the Internet concern that provided the technology, saw the chat as a way to tout its Internet software.

Participating from other sites across the country were Mayor Don Cunningham of Bethlehem, Pa.; Mayor Ron Gonzales of San Jose, Calif.; Assemblyman Antonio Riley of Wisconsin; Gov. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire; and Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend of Maryland.

Also involved in the chat were Al From, president of the Democratic Leadership Council, who was the moderator, and Marc Andreessen, the founder of Netscape.

Mr. Cunningham, who at 34 is one of the country's youngest mayors, said he used his computer every day, but understood why Mr. Clinton did not.

"The president is in the same generation as my father, the 50-something baby boomers," Mr. Cunningham said in an interview. "Some of them are into computers and some of them are not. My father just got e-mail. But the world is changing and this event shows that everyone has to get online, even the president."

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