

Fade to Black: Coffee-Pot Cam To Go Offline

Pioneering Web Site Had Millions of Viewers

By PETER S. GOODMAN
Washington Post Staff Writer

It began the way much technology does—as a means to avoid the needless expenditure of energy.

A dozen researchers at a computer lab at Cambridge University shared a coffee pot but they worked on different floors. When they climbed down the stairs for coffee, and found an empty pot, they did not like it.

So they fashioned a system to prevent such unpleasantness: They pointed a video camera at the pot and connected it to the lab's computer network. From that day on—now a decade past—a constantly updated photo of the pot appeared on every researcher's computer screen. No more wasted trips.

That probably would have been the end of it, this minor engineering triumph, were it not for what emerged two years later—the World Wide Web. The coffee pot became a cyber-destination for millions around the world. A digital inside joke. An icon of kitsch. An attraction made meaningful by the very absurdity of its being an attraction.

Until its creators decided to turn the camera off. Now, some are calling it the end of the Internet's beginning. The lab is moving this summer. The researchers have scattered. The computer network is too difficult to maintain. The lab will take the cam-

See **WEBCAM**, A17, Col. 1

Coffee Pot Webcam to Go Dark

WEBCAM, *From A1*

era offline this fall.

"I'll probably write an epitaph on the Web site," said Quentin Stafford-Fraser, one of the two research scientists—then 23—who designed the system. "It's had its day. It's time to move on."

But some won't let it go. The coffee pot webcam was one of the first of its kind—the mundane as virtual art. It has its place alongside Netscape's Fish Cam, a camera pointed at an aquarium. JenniCam, the window into a District woman's bedroom. The Coke machine, a Web site that tracks how much soda is left in a machine at Carnegie Mellon University.

"Please don't retire it," wrote one aficionado, Marc J. Brayton, in an e-mail sent to Stafford-Fraser. "It's fun (I can't explain why), different, and a great conversation piece to other people."

"It's a tradition I would not want to see disappear."

In the same odd way that a grainy image of a drip-filter coffee pot somehow became a global fascination, so has its demise. Obituaries have been published in the Times of London and the Manchester Guardian. Magazines in France and Germany have memorialized it.

Many view the coffee pot as a sort of digital fossil, a vestige of the first days of graphics and rudimentary video on the Internet.

"By itself, it didn't do much," wrote a correspondent to Slashdot.org, the Web site that has become a gathering place for self-identified geeks. "(I mean, it was just a refreshing picture of a coffee pot.) But it was the direct precursor of a lot of things we now take for granted."

In these times, nostalgia itself has taken on a postmodern flavor. Even things that were clearly ersatz at their inception provoke a longing for tradition from somebody when they go. The first golden arches above a McDonald's. The neon lights of a Las Vegas casino.

Even with that in mind, the downfall of the coffee pot highlights the compressed distance between past and future. The beginnings of the Internet are now artifact.

When Stafford-Fraser and his colleagues put up their coffee pot webcam, they were in the midst of developing sophisticated computer networks to carry broadcast-quality video. The coffee pot project was far more basic. But it was also new.

"It sort of showed you could do useful stuff with a little postage stamp-sized frame," Quentin-Stafford said. "It became famous, partly because, at that stage, there weren't that many cameras on the Web."

Visiting researchers came to the Cambridge lab and saw it. The coffee pot phenomenon spread by word of mouth. A local television station heard about it: The millionth visitor had been logged. That made the Trojan Room coffee pot the number one tourist destination in its region—at least, in a virtual sense—surpassing the King's College chapel.

As the Times of London reported, an American couple later visited the Cambridge Tourist Information Office inquiring whether they might get a look at the coffee pot in its real setting.

And now it will all be a memory, a milestone in the evolution of a medium so vast and exponential that even a virtual irrelevance—a joke whose punch line is the joke itself—can become a cultural event.

The coffee-pot webcam can be found at www.cl.cam.ac.uk/coffee/coffee.html.
