



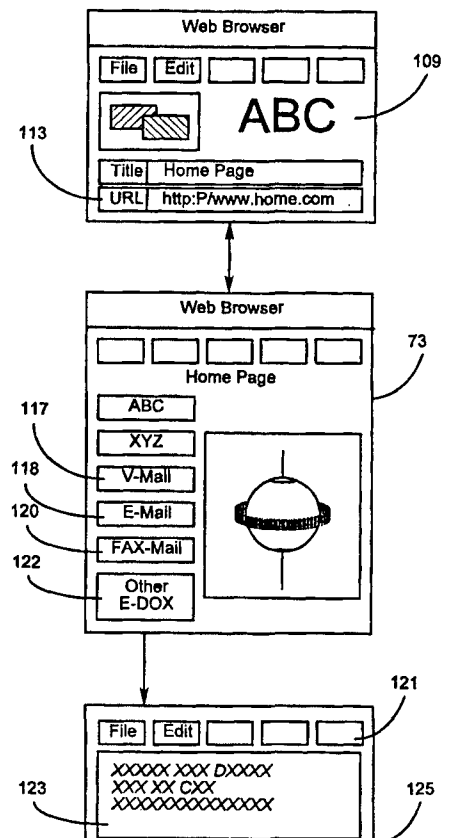
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(54) Title: SERVICE INDEPENDENT ELECTRONIC DOCUMENT SERVER

(57) Abstract

A retrieval and auditing system for electronic documents specifically addressed and forwarded over an Internet connection, including e-mail, voice-mail, and facsimile (FAX) documents, provides a gateway interface in a home page retrievable without regard to a particular Internet Service Provider granting access to the Internet. In a preferred embodiment a security protocol is required to launch the gateway from a home page, ensuring that the person granted access to specifically-addressed electronic documents is the addressee.



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Service Independent Electronic Document Server

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Field of the Invention

The present invention is in the area of electronic data-transmission services and is particularly relevant to Internet users who need service-independent access to their electronic documents.

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Background of the Invention

By using an Internet service provider such as CompuServe, MCI, Prodigy, America On-line, NetCom, or any one of a number of such on-line services, many computer owners and users, individuals as well as businesses, gain access to the Internet communication system. This Internet service has exhibited remarkable growth worldwide in recent years partly due to introduction of an information-locating software tool called the World Wide Web (WWW), also known in the art simply as the Web.

The Web is a graphical interface. It is based on index and text searches and facilitates access to world-wide computer-stored data, also known in the art as hypermedia, which may represent text, sound, graphics, video, or mixtures of these. Web access is available through a growing number of service providers, some of which are listed above.

Web systems typically feature software utilities called browsers, which help users in searching through on-line information. A browser interprets the Web's hypertext markup language and provides a graphical on-screen interface including screen buttons and data-entry and display fields, which aid a user in finding, selecting, viewing and transmitting information. A browser also facilitates exchange of electronic documents by one user with other users anywhere in the world.

Electronic documents on the Web may take many different forms, among them electronic mail (e-mail), voice mail (v-mail), faxes, scanned documents, electronically created documents, software, sound recordings, and video recordings.

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Typically, Internet users who permit public access to their own data bases for commercial or educational purposes use a home page a gateway to their information resources. A home page is a graphical interface unique to an individual user, and it functions in part as a table
5 of contents. For example, a computer manufacturer may provide a home page on the Internet WWW with active selection areas (buttons) directing control and display to such as product information, prices, system product capabilities, and other web sites. Buttons and the like on one web page also can cause control to jump to another web page. A
10 home page is created with the hypertext markup language.

E-mail is an Internet service separate from individual home pages. E-mail differs from home pages, browsers, and the like in that it uses different protocols and languages. Internet service providers such as CompuServe Information Service, MCI Mail, Genie, America
15 On-line, NetCom, and others typically provide access to e-mail via a menu or icon which switches control to an e-mail utility.

Because an e-mail gateway doesn't provide direct access to the Internet service, users cannot access e-mail through a Web server or access and browse the Internet through an e-mail server. Users typically
20 access their e-mail by means of a dialed-up telephone connection to a local e-mail service provider, and therefore, no long-distance telephone charges are associated with e-mail service.

Up to the date of the present invention, users cannot access their e-mailboxes without using the service of their e-mail provider, and
25 therefore, they cannot take advantage of all what the Web has to offer. What is clearly needed is a system that enables Internet subscribers to access their e-mail anywhere in the world using the facilities of the Web, independent of service provider. Such a system may take the form of a customized home page which operates in conjunction with a special
30 gateway interface inserted between a standard Internet server and electronic document servers. The home page in this configuration provides both a pathway and a security barrier through which internet subscribers can access their mailboxes at their e-mail service provider.

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Summary of the Invention

In a preferred embodiment of the present invention, an Internet home page interface is provided comprising indicia identifying the home page owner; and an on-screen active selection area for access to an electronic document data base containing electronic documents addressed specifically to the home page owner. Selecting the on-screen active selection area launches control routines connecting the user through an on-screen window to an electronic data base containing documents addressed specifically to the home page owner. The home page owner may activate the on-screen window and select and review stored documents therethrough.

Also in a preferred embodiment a user is required to practice a security protocol to activate the on-screen window providing access to the specifically-addressed electronic documents. The security protocol can be as simple as a password entered and verified. The specifically-addressed electronic documents may be e-mail documents, facsimile (FAX) documents, voice mail files, or other sorts of electronic documents sent to a specific recipient. The invention provides a unique electronic document auditing system usable from any station providing Internet access, regardless of the service provider controlling such access.

The present invention provides a means for an Internet user to access electronic documents over the Internet, such as e-mail and specifically addressed to the user, even though access to the Internet user's usual Internet Service Provider is not available. The advantage is a dramatic saving (long distance phone charges) and convenience for the user.

Brief Description of the Drawings

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Fig. 1 is a block diagram illustrating incompatibility of Web service with e-mail service as it exists in the current art.

Fig. 2 is a block diagram illustrating how Internet users may remotely access their e-mail using the facilities of the Web independent of provider, according to an embodiment of the present invention.

35 Fig. 3 illustrates a sample set of windows providing a user

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