

## **“Bypassing the Web: Shell Users and Alternative Experiences of the Internet”**

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“Since I discovered Gnus, I’m not surfing the web at all, almost,” writes Emacs user, Emanuel Berg on the help-gnu-emacs mailing list. Emacs, which has existed in a variety of versions and contexts since the 1970s, is a widely used software application for viewing and manipulating code and other text. The software can be — and often is — used from the command line without a mouse or graphical interface. While many software tools are tied to the latest hardware and the release cycle of proprietary operating systems, Emacs’ long release history and modest operating requirements allow it to run on computers of almost any age.

And while many users employ the application instrumentally as a tool for writing and maintaining software, a subset of that user base “lives in” Emacs, which has been likened to a text-based operating system. Users of Emacs can, with a bit of configuration, take on most of the everyday tasks normally associated with other software, from keeping a calendar to reading news, writing papers, chatting online, sending email, and browsing the web, which the program renders in plain text. As Hacker News user, pmr\_ put it, “For some people Emacs acts like a maelstrom for everything you do on a computer.”

And of course, Emacs is just one of the wide variety of “terminal-” or “shell-based” tools with which users operate their computers and use the Internet without the need for a graphical interface. Emanuel goes on to say he considers himself “text-based” and has largely “bypassed the Web.” Other similar accounts can be easily found online of users who prefer “the warm glow of a green screen full of text over the cold blockiness of a graphical interface.”

Users like these are likely to be highly computer literate — server administrators and programmers, for example, are commonly heavy shell users. And yet the version of tech savviness they display is distinct from the consumer-oriented rhetoric around owning the new iPhone or being skilled in the latest enterprise software. The ecosystem of tools, or “modes” that run within Emacs is under active development, but its progress narrative diverges from that found in the surrounding commodity culture. This talk would consider these users, their experience of the Internet, and the counternarrative they provide to the planned obsolescence and rhetoric of constant “innovation” that accompanies the rapid release cycle of contemporary Internet devices and services.