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COMET HALE-BOPP ON THE WEB: A USEFUL EXPERIENCE

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The apparition of the bright Comet Hale-Bopp (C/1995 O1) spurned hectic activity on the World-Wide-Web. Following soon after the pioneering web-efforts surrounding the impressive Comet Hyakutake in 1996, this cometary event resulted in the creation of an even larger number of dedicated websites of various scope and content.

A 'Comet Hale-Bopp' website was set up at the European Southern Observatory in 1995, immediately after the discovery of the comet. In a series of semi-popular 'Updates' the development of the comet was documented in some detail (this effort still continues) and links were made available to most other related, comprehensive websites. The public interest, as indicated by the number of daily hits, rose constantly towards the epoch of perihelion on April 1, 1997, and then declined rapidly. Various technical and philosophical aspects of setting up and maintaining such a website will be presented, together with some information about the associated direct interaction with the visitors.

Altogether, this was a very positive experience. It may be useful for organisers of similar, future web-based communication projects which are likely to become ever more frequent in today's increasingly global information society.