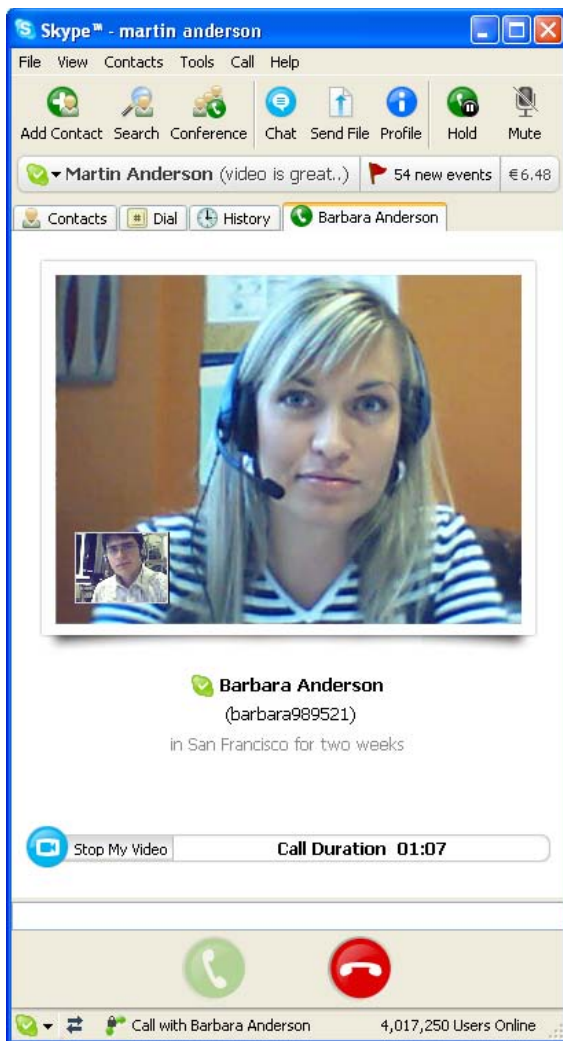


Wired to the World

by Ralph Lee Scott

Skype

Skype (rhymes with pipe) is an Internet-based free (well sort of) telephone network. Users of Skype can talk to other Skype users via the Internet for free using public computers in libraries provided they have a audio input/output jack. To reach traditional telephone lines (land or cell) Skype users have to pay for the call on a per-minute basis. This varies depending on the toll charges of the traditional phone country. This for-fee service is called SkypeIn and SkypeOut. The latest version of Skype <www.skype.com> for Windows 2 allows for video phone calls with computer mounted web cameras. Unix and mac versions are available also.



Skype was first released in 2003 in a test version to compete with the other major VoIP (voice over Internet protocol) providers (such as GoogleTalk) and was purchased by eBay in September of 2005. With SkypeOut users must deposit funds via check or credit card into an account from which they are billed on a per-call basis. SkypeIn works in a similar manner only users pay for a three-month period for a phone number to which incoming calls are sent to their computer. Generally speaking, in both cases the calls are billed at the local country rate rather than the international long distance rate. For example if you call Germany the call (at least for now) is placed at the local German in-country rate rather than the international rate. Skype of course has voice mail which is supposed to work like regular voice mail, only via computer. Both audio and video teleconferencing is available. If the other users are Skype members the conferencing is free. Currently Skype has some 75 million users and so far up to 6 million have been online at one time.

The installation of Skype was easy and fairly normal. Users are protected against hackers and tap-ins by an encryption system. With paid services like SkypeIn you get a higher level of encryption. Skype is banned in some countries (portions of China) and the French government discourages its use in public government agencies. There is an independent online journal about Skype: skypejournal <www.skypejournal.com>. Skype is also being integrated into online text messaging services so that you can transfer your "buddy" list from the other system to Skype. Recently Netgear <www.netgear.com> announced a Netgear Skype WiFi wireless phone that connects to Skype directly through your wireless router. Motorola has announced a similar device called the Accton Skyfone <http://www.mobilewhack.com/reviews/accton_skyfone_wm1185-t_cell_phone.html>

Libraries with wireless routers can now have users making phone calls through their networks without a computer! Libraries can also buy software that filters out Skype and other IM type traffic.

Some problems have been noticed by Skype users. There is sometimes a noticed time lag due to network congestion; calls have been dropped (heard that one before?); and noise is on the line. However for many the price is right, and users may be willing at times to put up with minor annoyances. In short the service is highly dependent on the Internet and we all know that this works flawlessly all the time! Give Skype a try; it's an alternative to traditional telephone service and is probably the wave of the future (at least while it's free!).