When something is abstract we frequently need metaphors to explain it. The world of Internet is full of metaphors that help us understand how it works. We have spiders that crawl the web. We have trojans, we have Navigator and Explorer.

The way we describe something affects the way we perceive it and this, in turn, affects the way we use it. Metaphors are powerful. At least one study has found that the metaphors used to describe the internet vary between and women (regardless of age) and between people who are new to the internet and expert users. Women tend to use metaphors like frontier -perhaps suggesting a place of peace- and men use metaphors like jungle -perhaps suggesting a place that has to be "conquered". Women also used the highway metaphor. Novices tended to use metaphors that were finite, tangible, limited, closed and delineated -which may indicate a lack of comfort level to understand something so vast and amorphous- while expert users used more metaphysical, intangible metaphors. Understanding how different users conceptualize the idea of the internet is very important for the future development of search engines, classification of information, web education and e-commerce.

Architects Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio in their project Blur for the Swiss Expo 2002 created an artificial cloud floating over Lake Neuchatel. The Building, basically a steel tensegrity structure with a fog-making system, neither floated nor really looked like a cloud, although it was probably as close as could have been technically achieved. As any architectural project, the original idea suffered numerous changes, but originally was a metaphor for the Internet. It included a LED text forest inside and the cloud around it represented an “ether”, “the unimaginable magnitude, speed and reach of telecommunications”.

Service providers, first in telephony and then in the Internet, started referring to their own networks as clouds -as an abstraction of the mysterious technological regions that take in traffic, process it and then deliver the information somewhere else- and today the metaphor has become omnipresent, from Amazon’s data centers to Apple’s iCloud. The National Institute of Standards and Technology defines cloud computing as “a model for enabling ubiquitous, convenient, on-demand network access to a shared pool of configurable computing resources (e.g., networks, servers, storage, applications, and services) that can be rapidly provisioned and released with minimal management effort or service provider interaction”. The underlying concept of cloud computing, however, had already been imagined in the 1960’s, when the potential of computation already started to be compared to electricity.

Clouds are not all the same. In the Internet you can have private clouds, community clouds, public or hybrid. And in the physical world there are numerous types of clouds, of course, some which can have an effect on our state of mind and mood. Patchy clouds that let sunlight through them and pass slowly, that look like cotton -or like the sheep of Apollo, to the ancient Greeks. There are thick clouds that are dark and menacing and oppress us, and there are majestic cumulonimbus clouds that rise to above 50,000ft into the sky and impress us. We have low-lying clouds that just seem to hang there and fast moving clouds before a thunderstorm. And then you have Dutch clouds like the ones Amsterdam-based artist Berndnaut Smilde wanted and has managed to recreate indoors. Beautiful clouds that float elegantly inside rooms. Smilde uses a smoke machine but has to carefully monitor humidity and atmosphere to achieve these delicate cloud formations.

Sources:
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