

San Francisco Examiner

COMPUTERS & TECHNOLOGY

SFNet leads a cyber-revolution

Local BBS rewriting the rules for cyber-socializing

I am the quintessential cusper, one of those second-wave boomers who is neither yuppie nor slacker. But at this ripe old age, would you believe I've also become a netter?

Back in the late '70s, when I was a high school student in Oradell, N.J., 1995 seemed like it would never come — at least I hoped it wouldn't. That would mean that I had made it to an age that was decidedly "middle": 35. Those were the days when no one over 30 could be trusted, and when everyone who was young longed to head to the epicenter of youth culture — the Haight. I was one of those "nice kids from the 'burbs" who wanted Fillmore West in lieu of a junior dinner dance at a country club, who longed for revolutionary speak-outs or sit-ins versus the mundane fights to wear miniskirts and dungarees to school.

So having missed the Haight's hippie era in the '60s and '70s, I'm happy not to be too late to be part of another San Francisco revolution: the '90s netter revolution South of Market.

What's a netter, you ask? If you live in San Francisco (which I do part-time) and subscribe to SFNet, a netter is a sort of balanced, social member of a *next-generation cafe society*. If you live anywhere else in this country, a netter may be someone else entirely. For example, in New York, my official hometown, netters run the gamut from chic geeks to potential axe murderers.

SFNet is one of a whopping 64,000 BBSs (Bulletin Board Systems) in this country right now, according to latest estimates. These computer systems provide files for downloading and areas for electronic discussions. Most of them are run by and for local users, though many now provide Internet access, as well. SFNet was founded about four years ago by an entrepreneurial couple who continue to serve as SYSOPS (system operators). Their

sense of family and normalcy pervades their net, whose thousands of subscribers reside primarily in the Bay Area.

Having started out as a national netter, it's been really interesting for me to see the differences peculiar to the San Francisco cyberscene. For one thing, the rules are different. It seems like in the rest of the country, the first words out of people's mouths (or keyboards, I should say) are, "M or F?" and then, if you're the desired sex, "What are your stats?" On SFNet, it is politically incorrect to ask about gender or height, weight or looks.

The non-gender-specific nature of SFNet lends it an air of mystery — and freedom. In the real world (or "TTRW," as we netters like to say), gender is one of the primary ways we establish stereotypes about one another, the first thing we look at when trying to determine how a person fits into the puzzle of humanity. Our instinct may be to deny that we communicate differently depending on whether the listener is male or female, but study after study seems to

have established that we do.

In the PC world of SFNet, you can escape those strictures. Some people's genders may seem obvious from their screen names, but in other cases it's much less clear-cut, if not deliberately misleading. A new netter friend of mine told me she's often surprised to attend an SFNet social gathering and discover that the man she's been talking to for the past few weeks is actually a woman (or vice versa).

But the key difference between SFNet and the national services goes beyond questions of netiquette. It's the difference between a sociable pastime and a guilty pleasure.

In San Francisco, netting is at least as sociable as touch football on the Marina green on a Saturday: Members of SFNet log on, chat

SFNet leads a revolution

it up, and often make plans with fellow netters to catch a film, share a pizza, or go for a run. Unlike the national services, SFNet is a place to compare notes on local hangouts, to find out about the can't-miss events taking place that weekend, or commiserate about the lack of parking in Cow Hollow.

In New York, netting takes place behind padlocked doors: New Yorkers mumble when they admit they net. Even new romances forged in cyberspace are explained away as "someone I met through a friend of a friend" or "someone I met at the laundry."

Granted, folks around San Francisco have a comfort level with technology that's just not to be duplicated elsewhere. But that alone doesn't seem to explain the experiential chasm that exists on SFNet versus other networks.

The other night, for instance, I netted on a national forum, AOL, looking for evidence of the sense of community on SFNet. To even out the playing field a bit, I chose a forum geared toward a specific community, the Jewish Singles Lobby, figuring the people in this chat room would have at least two things in common, and maybe a sense of camaraderie akin to that on SFNet. No such luck.

After chatting briefly with a couple of men (yes, the first fact established), I somehow found myself trapped in a cyberconversation from hell. It began with this fellow referring to single Jewish women as "Scud missiles" (apparently he's an irresistible target). He went on to complain that most of his cyber-experiences have entailed socializing "down the food chain." So much for cyberspace being considered the great equalizer!

In the couple of years I've been on-line, I've had conversations with hundreds of fellow cybertravellers — I've had to, given that I founded American Dialogue, the first marketing research service in cyberspace. But this one conversation made me realize how different my conversations had been on

SFNet. A friend of mine once said to me, "Remember, it's *America Online*." It's true: the full spectrum of American society can be found there, good and evil, fascinating and mind-numbingly boring. But that's the true of SFNet, too.

What's different is that in San Francisco, netting has an almost small-town flavor; the commonality of geography and, perhaps, outlook seems to have created a sense of community that limits flames or at least directs them into a unique form of, shall we call it, *edutainment*? That makes sense, given that the person you flame on your computer one night might be the same person who shows up for a meeting at your office or at a common friend's party the next day.

On nationwide commercial services, the vast anonymity seems to breed a different sort of netter. These folks pretend to be whoever they want — and behave in whatever manner they want — safe in the knowledge that no one has any idea who they really are. (Where is "Caller ID" when you really need it?)

In the coming months and years, it's likely that more and more cities will establish their own local networks. This certainly won't be the first time that a West Coast trend has taken the country by storm. New York, as a matter of fact, already has one that commands occasional headlines. It's called ECHO, and some people say it is the twin of The Well.

ECHO and The Well both seem to serve their communities well, but since on-line soirées on them often remind me of gatherings of Ivy League grads (kind of like Left Coast intelligentsia meets Junior League enlightened), there is still room for a broader BBS, a genuinely New York Net. Kind of like a virtual corner coffee shop.

NYNet needs to be a place where the taxi driver from Canarsie chats it up with the Merrill Lynch stockbroker, where the Vassar graduate "milk-and-cookies mom" swaps insights with the French painter who spends 14-plus hours a day in his Chinatown loft. The challenge: Can we translate New York style on-line in the way that SFNet's entrepreneurs, and

its netter community, have done?

My fear is that New York will import the details of SFNet without really understanding the mind-set. Like what's happening with the current invasion of chains of coffee stores/cafes named Dalton's, New World and Seattle, which have managed to mix the worst of Starbucks' universality with the pretensions of Manhattan.

Whereas San Francisco cafes are a mix of cozy and cutting edge (love those on-line terminals, comfy chairs, and cafe cats!), these brand-new, decorated-in-sparkling-metal/high-tech cafes are merely affected, all staffed by waif-like boys who paste on their bored, Lord of the Manor looks before asking whether you're going to be so inconsiderate as to require assistance.

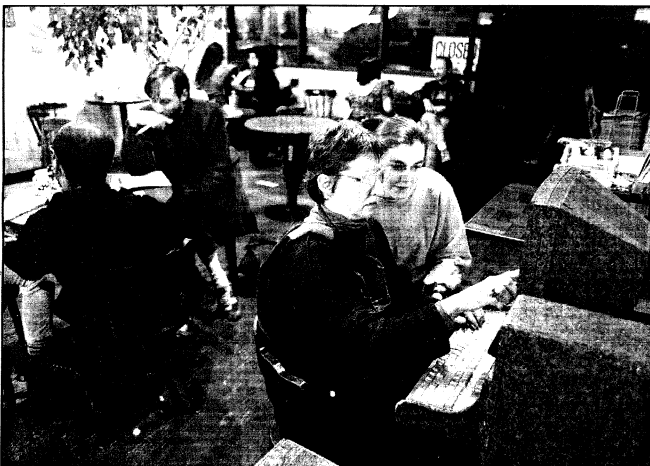
What I'd like to be a part of is a NYNet that retains New York's hyperactivity and cultural diversity, but also imports San Francisco's sense of small-town community. As much as I try to explain to my East Coast friends the differences between our national online experiences and those of SFNetters, I find that they simply aren't grasping the concept of true socialization in cyberspace.

For instance, when I told some New York friends that I had spent this past New Year's Eve at Cyberfoo (the unofficial name of First Night in Cyberspace, a party sponsored by The Well), my friends were quick to sympathize: "Damn, it must be awful to have had to work on New Year's Eve!" They couldn't conceive of the connectedness felt by everyone at Cyberfoo — both those who attended virtually and those who actually made their way to Noe Valley.

But they needn't have worried about me. After I celebrated the East Coast countdown on the net, I headed South of Market to ring in '95 on the West Coast in a bar that would have been right at home in SoHo or Chelsea. A no-tech bar. A place where party animals downed shots of Jack D. and fed me the standard guy lines ("Did anyone ever tell you you look just like the chick on the 'Today Show'?") How New York is that? Real bars, real drinks, real lies: cybermads?

VIEW
POINT

By Marian Salzman
SPECIAL TO THE
EXAMINER



EXAMINER / JOHN STOREY