

## Computer bulletin boards are red hot

Once a haven for hackers, high-tech forums have gone mainstream

By Keay Davidson  
 EXAMINER SCIENCE WRITER

Want to discuss "Star Trek," socialism or sadomasochism? Or obtain stock advice, movie reviews and sports scores? Or perhaps just have a serious "conversation," unhindered by sexual stereotypes and body language?

Once the preserve of hackers and electronics buffs, computer bulletin boards have gone grass roots, attracting users from survivalists to sexual outlaws.

The number of bulletin board systems (BBS) in the United States has skyrocketed to 60,000 from roughly 40,000 just last year, experts say. And they're transforming American life, uniting — via electrons — individuals with

like interests and concerns. Some boards are run out of homes, oriented to a particular subject for little or no fee; others are giant information highways, operated by corporations for a profit.

At least 300 BBS thrive in the Bay Area, on topics from mysticism to sadomasochism and bird-watching to bisexuality. They're inexpensive to create, often less than \$1,000.

To millions of computer users, the electronic connection "is like being able to go to a gigantic building with hundreds of rooms where thousands of conversations are taking place... people talking about Elvis Costello here and people talking about Celtic folk music here... and you can participate in them," said BBS user Mark Theodoropoulos of Berkeley.

Successful operators of small bulletin boards — called sysops — "tend to be mid-30s male corporate burnouts who are very dissatisfied with their current career prospects

[See **BOARDS, B-3**]

cludes 19 terminals in coffeehouses, which users can connect to for 25 cents for four minutes.

A decade ago, when personal computers still seemed new and exotic, most BBS users were tech types comfortable with jargon. But now, as BBS have proliferated, they increasingly mirror society's diversities and controversies. As a result, some of society's outcasts, eccentrics or mischief-makers haunt a certain percentage of BBS — especially the grass-roots boards that don't charge high membership fees.

An East Bay board posts a long list of ways to obtain dubious goods including cobra and rattlesnake venom, "armor-piercing" ammunition, napalm, and a magazine that describes "pranks to play on the church, mail terrorism, 101 ways to kill your parents with an ax, and more."

BBS have also been used to transmit images of nude children to pedophiles. In early March, U.S. Customs Service agents raided 40 locations around the country, including San Francisco, and seized phone and computer hardware allegedly used in the porn ring.

"Basically, what we have here is a bunch of computer perverts," a Customs official said.

The sizable bulletin boards, such as Prodigy and CompuServe, handle unruly users in different ways. CompuServe relies on its sysops to decide what is and isn't objectionable prose. But Prodigy's computers are programmed to reject messages with obscenities or slurs against a race, ethnicity, sex or sexual orientation.

### Warning to snoopers

Defiantly, a Bay Area BBS called Tiger Team threatens legal action against authorities who try to snoop through its electrons. It warns: "While the (police) agency you work for might pay your legal fees and judgments against you, why take chances?"

The intimate messages on some boards offer a unique glimpse into the psychology and sociology of pop culture.

A prominent local fantasy board includes conversations that reveal the sadder side of the quest for alternative worlds.

"The occult used to be a lot of fun, before it blossomed into a fad... especially with the Bay Area attracting people who couldn't make it in their home towns," one user complained.

Another described dressing in a wolf skin at Christmas for a native ritual, only to encounter



SF NET owner Wayne Gregori, left, popularized the use of computer bulletin boards in Bay Area coffeehouses. Gregori is talking with Michael Stark.

### BOARDS from A-1

## High-tech talk is gaining popularity

in corporate America," said Jack Rickard, editor and publisher of Boardwatch Magazine. "But we've also got grandmothers running BBSs and 8-year-old girls."

### Commercial behemoths prevail

The best-known BBS are commercial behemoths such as the New York-based Prodigy, which claims 2 million users and is owned by Sears and IBM. These are as different from grass-roots BBS as supermarkets are from street-corner boutiques. Prodigy and other large boards — such as CompuServe, America Online, CEnie and Delphi — offer something for everyone: from movie reviews, sports analyses and electronic forums for "Star Trek" buffs to investment counseling and news reports.

Because of the anonymity of boards, users can overcome barriers to social acceptance.

"Surveys show that 13 percent of sysops are female but only 5 percent of on-line users identify themselves as females," Rickard says, joking that "there's an awful lot of men on-line who are women."

Patrizia DiLucchio signed onto a BBS with a man's name, and happily recalls "frolicking genderless in the primordial ooze." Later she encountered a man — a real one — while on-line and "we fell in love. We ended up living together for a year," said DiLucchio, 41, a registered nurse at Children's Hospital in Oakland.

New BBS are listed at the rate of 500 to 700 a month in Boardwatch, published in Lakewood, Colo.

One of the most literate is The Well in Sausalito, which has 8,000 regular users, many of them writers. The Well maintains hundreds of different "topics," among them Writers 736, titled "My First Book Just Came Out and I Feel Terrible."

Anyone can sign onto a BBS. Just sit in front of your computer, tell it to call a BBS number anywhere in the world, and within seconds your computer screen declares something like, "Welcome to the Mick Freen Center for Disinformation..." — a South San Francisco board "dedicated to providing information that is bypassed or mis-represented by our government and our society." Once connected to a typical board, you can read messages from other users, download information, or play games for an hour or so. To use the board for a longer period, or to access special files, you may have to pay a fee.

### 5,000 calls a day

One of the larger and well-established boards is Exec-PC BBS in Elm Grove, Wis. It gets more than 5,000 calls a day over 280 phone lines.

"Our gross revenues approach \$1 million a year," or about twice his annual investment, says founder Bob Mahoney, who runs it with his wife, Tracy, and two employees.

But few BBS are cash cows. In San Francisco, SF Net BBS makes just enough money for sysop Wayne Gregori, his wife and their two kids to "squeeze by every month," he says. SF Net, established to encourage conversation on a wide range of interests, in-

## BULLETIN BOARDS

### In Northern California

One of the most popular Northern California bulletin boards is The Well in Sausalito, which has about 8,000 members and more than 200 ongoing "conferences" on topics from art and philosophy to "Star Trek" and the Grateful Dead. There's even a women-only conference. For details, dial (415) 332-4335 (voice line) or (415) 332-6106 (computer line).

### Nation's top five

The following are widely considered the nation's top five bulletin boards, their voice telephone lines and the estimated number of users.

Name	Location	Phone	No. users
Prodigy	White Plains, N.Y.	(914) 993-8000	2 million
CompuServe Inc.	Columbus, Ohio	(614) 457-9600	1.2 million
GEIne	Rockville, Md.	(800) 638-9636	350,000
America Online	Reston, Va.	(703) 448-8700	219,000
Delphi	Weslake Village, Calif.	(800) 695-4005	Less than 100,000

### Bay Area computer lines

Below are computer lines (not voice lines) for a sampling of special interest boards, most in the Bay Area. To contact them it takes a telephone line hooked to a computer with a modem.

- **SF NET:** (415) 824-8747. Linked to computers used by customers of 19 coffeehouses in the Bay Area, plus a few hundred home subscribers.
- **INITIATIVE:** (510) 854-2253. A forum where "Marxists and other progressive people can debate questions of concern."
- **SKEPTIC'S BOARD:** (415) 572-0359. Attracts those who are "open-minded but skeptical" about "pseudoscientific" ideas such as UFOs, astrology, creationism and palmistry.
- **FOXTAIL INN:** (408) 778-5888. For horse lovers.
- **TEMPLE OF THE SCRAMBLING ELECTRON:** (510) 935-5845. "A safe haven for visionaries and paranoids."
- **SALT AND LIGHT:** (415) 368-0790. For those who seek "biblical understanding."
- **RIISING STORM:** (408) 739-8893. A feisty board for those interested in "emergency preparations, firearms, politics and more."
- **HISPANIC ON-LINE ACCESS:** (415) 252-0285. Hispanic issues and Latin American news.
- **FRANCOFILES:** (510) 651-3192. For fans of France and the French language.
- **BOUNDARY WATERS INFORMATION SERVICE:** (218) 365-6507. This Minnesota-based board lists interesting canoe trips — plus good hotels and restaurants to check out when you've put away your paddle for the night. Includes a section for birdwatchers.
- **NASA SPACELINK:** (205) 895-0028. The U.S. space agency's Alabama-based bulletin board for space buffs.
- **MINDVOX:** (212) 989-4141. This New York City board attracts "people with an in-your-face, anti-authority attitude who are both suspicious about the future and hopeful that they'll be on the cutting edge of it," according to a magazine review.
- **THE QUARTO MUNDISTA:** (206) 788-9628. An Olympia, Wash., board that caters to Native Americans.
- **STARSHIP JESSUP:** (912) 427-3310. This Jessup, Ga., board bills itself as "Southeast Georgia's premier Star Trek-related BBS."

### How to find out more

Hundreds of bulletin board listings are carried in two free publications available at news racks and computer stores throughout much of the Bay Area: *Computer Currents* and *MacTimes*. *Boardwatch Magazine*, with 55,000 readers, claims to be the largest and oldest of the BBS journals. A subscription to this monthly costs \$36. Phone (800) 833-6038 or write *Boardwatch Magazine*, 7566 West Jewell Ave., Suite 200, Lakewood, Colo. 80232.

EXAMINER GRAPHICS

## He lives to pass on art of self-defense

beating."

One recent afternoon, the Precita gym was alive with the constant motion of 30 to 40 boxers. But when Vidal gave advice to a boxer in the ring, the little world stopped.

"You listen to every word because he's right," said Felix Garcia, 39, who comes twice a week from Napa with his son, Gabriel, to be coached by Vidal.

"Experience, that's all that counts. That's what learning is and Johnny knows what he's talking about," said Gabriel Garcia, 19.

### 'Don't write about me'

Vidal would never give himself the kind of accolades the Garcias and others freely offer. He just wants to talk about his boxers. "Don't write about me, I'm old

"I tell my boys: 'The good Lord said it's better to give than to receive. Don't take a punch you don't have to.'"

— John Vidal

stuff," he said. "Write about the kids."

With a little prodding, Vidal talks passionately about the dozen boxers he coaches and about such Golden Glove legends as Jesse Flanagan, Pat Lawlor and Danny McGuire. He can tell you their every move and then reminisce further about boxing when he first started out.

"In our days, anyone who took up boxing loved to box — because there wasn't the money," Vidal said.

His passion for the sport began when he was a boy going to St. Vincent's School in San Rafael. Longing to be in the ring himself, he would read about greats like Jim Jeffries and Willie Ritchie. In 1919, at age 14, Vidal would sneak out of the house to go box.

### Boxing with the heavies

Because there were no amateur leagues, Vidal fought professionally at 111 pounds. And since there were no other 111-pounders, he would fight guys as big as 124

The Bay Area is full of unsung heroes who quietly and unselfishly make significant contributions to the community. Tell us who they are, and we'll write about them as part of an occasional series. The more information you give us, the better.

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points for the \$10 prize. Losers got \$5.

"I had a mean left," Vidal recalled. "Although I couldn't box my way out of a paper bag with my right."

Vidal gave his earnings to his unsuspecting mother, telling her it was extra pay from his job making silver cups and saucers for Shreve & Co. in downtown San Francisco. "You could buy a lot of groceries with that kind of money. Bread was only eight cents a loaf," Vidal said.

However, his career ended with a 2-2 record after one of his sisters told his mother how Vidal received what he remembers as a "very little mark" under his right eye. He refuses to speculate on how successful a boxer he might have been, shrugging and saying, "Oh well."

He wasn't ready to give up the sport, however. From 1924 to 1931, he coached at the Young Men's Institute, where poor kids boxed while the rich kids trained at the Olympic Club. In 1931, Vidal began coaching at Newman's Gym, where he was a fixture until last year when he came to Precita to help gym manager and longtime friend Sonny Marson.

### Coaching keeps him alive

"He's the best," Marson said.

"He's really like a father to me." Vidal shuns retirement because he says coaching is why he's still alive.

"I'm worrying about (the boxers) and forgetting my aches and pains," Vidal said, slapping the bad left knee that requires him to use a cane.

However, neighborhood officials in the Mission are looking to shut down the Precita gym to create recreational programs for younger children. Come June, Vidal might have to move on to some other gym.

"We have to find someplace," he said. "My wife doesn't want me to quit. How can I, after all these years?"

## California puts brakes on sales of pepper-based spray to public

ASSOCIATED PRESS

THOUSAND OAKS, Ventura County — The state is cracking down on sales to the public of a pepper-based spray that is authorized for police use only.

The spray, a tear gas made from cayenne pepper and alcohol, causes nausea and a burning sensation on contact with the eyes and skin. Police agencies use it as an alternative to lethal force against violent criminals.

The spray is available to the public through catalogs and at gun, sporting goods and bicycle stores in Agoura Hills, Thousand Oaks and Simi Valley, authorities say.

families singing "Jingle Bells" and bratty kids who pulled on his tail. "I made my excuses and split."

"It's proved to be such an effective compound that the last thing we want is for the bad guys to get hold of it," said Mike Broderick, manager of the firearms division at the California Department of Justice. "It incapacitates so much that you can't run after anyone."

Possessing pepper spray is a misdemeanor, punishable by up to a year in jail or a \$1,000 fine. Using it is a felony.

The state attorney general's office and departments of justice and pesticide regulation are sending letters to police agencies and store owners across California advising them about state laws concerning the spray.

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