



Far left, Stacey Merrick, "Baby Smurf," a 17-year-old senior at Bishop O'Dowd High School enjoys "netting" at Montclair's Royal Grounds Coffee Shop. Left, husband-and-wife team Jill and Wayne Gregori are the owners of SF Net. "Dan Quayle," below, a math teacher, won't reveal his real name. He uses the Montclair cafe's Net two or three times a week.



Cafe Computers Bay Area coffee houses offer conversation by network

Baby Smurf walks into the Royal Grounds Coffee Shop in Montclair and sits down at a computer terminal next to the long bar. After popping in a few quarters, she logs on, and in seconds, pounds away at the keyboard, participating in a dizzying conversation with 10 other people, all at once.

The late Saturday afternoon sun pours into the restaurant and creates an incredible glare on the terminal, blurring the characters as they fly across the screen. But this visual nemesis doesn't foil her conversation with Prince Romeo, who she queries about his date last night with one of her girlfriends.

As foolish as this sounds, Baby Smurf, Prince Romeo and the 10 other people on line are participating in SF Net—and they take this quite seriously. Like other computer bulletin boards (BBS) such as Prodigy, Genie or Compuserve, the "Net" (as it's known to its denizens) provides electronic forums for communication (known as "netting"). However, comparisons to the upscale BBSes ends there as SF Net started in cafes and has become something of a "people's" board.

The result, say "netters," has been to unite folks from many different walks of life who might never have the chance to interact with each other. Its users start at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder with homeless people, move on through Mohawk-haired punks on Telegraph Avenue, and climb all the way up to Market Street, financial district, computer geeks. Along the way you find people like Baby Smurf, whose real name is Stacey Merrick, a 17-year-old senior at Bishop O'Dowd High School.

What started some 14 months ago with one terminal at Brain Wash, a San Francisco SOMA coffee house, has expanded to 20 cafes throughout San Francisco, San Mateo, Oakland, Berkeley and Marin. The cost is meager: 50 cents for the first eight minutes and 25 cents for an additional four minutes. SF Net installs the terminal to the cafe for free and kicks back a small percentage of the take to the restaurateur. Other netters, with home computers and modems, subscribe for \$7 a month.

Netters communicate through an open "chat" table, as Smurf does; post messages on an open forum for anyone to respond to; or leave private messages

in e-mail. While the chat board conversations can seem frantic and ungrounded, the message board forums take on politics, arts, culture, sports, the environment, and dining (to name a few).

Besides Smurf and Romeo, other users identify themselves with "handles" like Kat Eyes, Al Kenyst, Goldie Gates, Marlboro Mania, Estro Gen, Cranif Superfest and Amodous Asmodeus.

For some, like "Dan Quayle," who waits to use the Net after Baby Smurf, the anonymity offers a freedom of expression that he might not have if he used his real name (which he won't reveal).

"Quayle," a 37-year-old math teacher, uses the Net two or three times a week, usually a half-hour at a stretch.

"It allows me to say things that I wouldn't want be responsible for under my real name," says "Quayle." "The whole thing satisfies creating an alter ego without compromising my real life. I keep up on the latest political ridicule with a name like that."

Meeting new people

For Merrick and her girlfriend Erin Glover (whose handle is Gandalf), the Net offers a social outlet. But they insist the content of one's messages is more important than the usual method of superficial judgments people hang on to.

"You can meet people first on the inside rather than the outside," says the 17-year-old Glover, another Bishop O'Dowd senior.

Whether it's dating or a smokescreen identity for your political bent, SF Net owner Wayne Gregori, says the Net's popularity reflects a thirst for communication in a world increasingly polarized by intolerance and indifference.

A former computer consultant, who now calls himself a social scientist, Gregori says the Net eclipses boards like Prodigy and Genie for its accessibility to non-computer users, and bringing together unlikely bedfellows.

Speaking in the backyard of his Noe Valley, San Francisco apartment, his eyes widen recalling the time a Tiburon attorney, who'd been "netting" for awhile, showed up to one of their monthly gatherings in San Francisco.

Pulling up in a brand new SAAB convertible, the attorney introduced himself to Gregori and asked where the other netters were. Gregori pointed all around him to the scruffy looking crowd of homeless people, punks and slackers (the coffeehouse inhabitants who've been pegged by the media as disenfranchised twentysomethings who would rather hang out in cafes than work).

According to Gregori, the attorney looked a little startled but sat down, found some of the people he'd been netting with, and began to engage in long discussions on politics and anarchy, thoroughly enjoying himself the whole time.

To its users, this democratizing effectsingles out the Net from other BBSes, making Gregori something of a Ted Turner on a local level. He doesn't rebut the analogy at all.

"My richest life experiences have been with people of other cultures," says the 35-year-old Gregori, who operates the BBS with co-owner and wife Jill from their apartment kitchen. "While we watch our society come to a screeching halt with racism and everything, you start thinking how are we going to change any of this stuff? It's through communications. It's through people talking to each other."

Media attention to date has disappointed many netters who say articles have only focused on it as a new forum of communication for homeless people and "down and outers."

"It's more than this trendy way of communication," says Aviva Rosenstein, who uses the handle Jerusha Rose when she's netting. "It connects people with others that they wouldn't have an opportunity to connect with otherwise. We tend to (communicate) by how people dress, where people hang out (or) their given social strata. It's a great equalizer."

The 27-year-old Rosenstein, who is considering doing a Ph.D on the Net's subculture, says meetings like the one

between the attorney and the homeless happen frequently. "It's good for both of them," she says in an on-line interview. "It challenges people's assumptions."

Jungle Goddess, who won't offer her real name, says that homeless and slackers only represent a fraction of the Net. "We come from all walks of life and are all ages," says the East Bay veterinary technician via e-mail. "The first person I met on the Net was a corporate lawyer living in Marin. We even went sailing once on his sailboat (not the stereotype at all). Another nettie on line is Day Tripper, a Ph. D. in biochemistry who is doing DNA research at Lawrence Berkeley Labs."

'You can meet people first on the inside rather than the outside.'

ERIN GLOVER "GANDOLF"
BISHOP O'DOWD SENIOR

Rosenstein adds that the Net provides a support group for many users. When most of her friends left the Bay Area, she found new ones on-line. Another user praised the Net for helping him overcome homelessness, and drug and alcohol abuse.

If there's a down side to all this, netter "Quayle" says it reflects an increasing "compartmentalization" of society. "It's sad (because) some people are on all the time," he says. "The only interaction is from within your house. There is a lessening of face to face (contact)."

Meanwhile, Gregori has possible plans for a Net in New York that would allow users to send e-mail between the coasts. He's also talking to local corporate types for funding a schoolNet to allow elementary and secondary school students to discuss things like math and social studies.

With more than 280 people subscribing and more than 600 users altogether, the quarters keep rolling in.

And Glover is no exception. She spends all her dimes and nickels first and saves all her quarters for the Net. Although she has a computer at home, she doesn't have a modem, or else she'd use it constantly.

Today was her second visit. "I just can't stay away," she says with a grin. "I'm kind of addicted." ■