

The Economist

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BUSH ON THE STUMP

page 16

MANAGING BRANDS

page 67

INSIDE BLACK HOLES

pages 91-93

WHICH FIRMS ARE BEST?

pages 21-24

Newsweek

COMPUTERS

Café Society

Computer bulletin boards aren't just for dweeby cyber-punks anymore—at least not in San Francisco. Entrepreneur Wayne Gregori has created SF Net, a decidedly sociable computer network that links up patrons of the city's dangerously hip cafés. From the Lower Haight to south of Market Street, high-tech trendies are interfacing over cappuccino. All you have to do is buy a ticket from the café, enter a number into an on-site computer and begin your techno-chat at \$1 per 15 minutes. The next Gregori test site: Seattle. ■

Tune in, log on: Techno coffee house



Lovebytes

LOS ANGELES AND WASHINGTON, DC

MANY prostitutes justify their trade by saying that they give their clients what they cannot get at home. Perhaps the sad state of American romance is to blame for the "success" of its commercial rival. Is red-blooded American love being undermined by technology?

Computers already dispatch romantic notes and Valentines with the same emotion as they send invoices. In "Sleeper" Woody Allen depicted a nightmare future where human courtship was reduced to a spin in the Orgasmatron. Pornographers are closely following the development of the "virtual reality" industry, where customers zipped up in their body suits and goggles interact with computerised images.

In San Francisco a new organisation called SF Net has computerised blind-dates. The network is based on a system of terminals that are fixed to tables in a dozen cafes. Customers pay to log on and gossip with other users. They can even plug in from home through their modems. SF Net is meant for normal conversation but its members can also



send individual messages to each other. This opens new possibilities for romance. Suitors can find like-minded friends somewhere in the computer without having to chat them up face to face, or jump to "lookist" superficial conclusions about their appearance.

Such practices have spread to offices with internal computer systems as well. At *USA Today*, a big, impersonal newspaper, one computer cupid confides that "you are nobody unless you give good message". More often than not, such messages are a substitute for romance rather than an introduction to it, but this is far from safe sex. Scared by an outbreak of wrist and arm injuries caused by too much use of keyboards, the management has banned computer flirtation at the newspaper.