

## OUT THERE: SAN FRANCISCO

Katherine Bishop

# The Electronic Coffeehouse

**S**AN FRANCISCO, July 29 — At first glance, the coffeehouse appears to have sprung full-blown from this city's famous bohemian era: young men and women dressed in black, smoking cigarettes and writing poetry or political manifestos, cool jazz playing on the phonograph, the espresso machine softly hissing in the background.

O.K., here a metal spike, there a shaved head, every now and then a pierced body part.

But this is not the North Beach of the 50's and Ginsberg and Kerouac, but rather lower Haight Street, 1992. Here at the Horse Shoe, the beatniks and Dharma Bums have given way to cyberpunks and slackers, this decade's version of dropped-out, disaffected young people living on the margins of society.

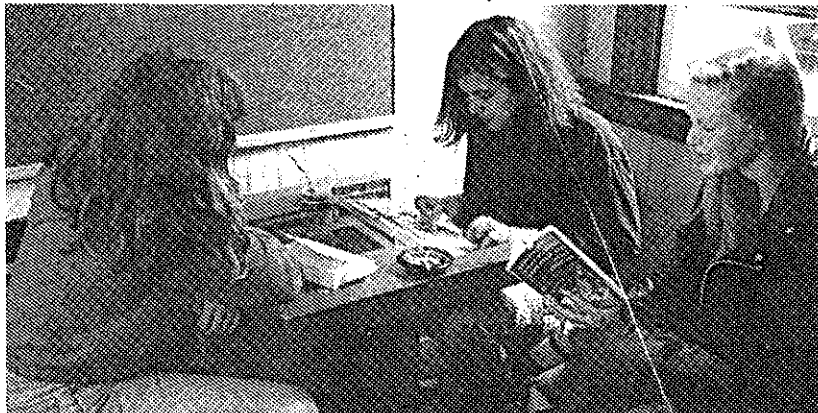
The heated debates over anarchism and "guerrilla ontology," the crude attempts at composing poetry and even the appeals for an emergency crash pad or cheap room to rent are being carried out, not face to face but via a computer network.

Electronic bulletin boards abound, of course, but the idea of combining them with traditional coffeehouse culture was the brainchild of Wayne Gregori, a 35-year-old San Francisco computer consultant. Mr. Gregori designed this computer network, known as SF Net, and installed keyboards and screens in tables that instantly fit their surroundings.

By inserting two quarters, users can purchase 20 minutes of time to chat or argue with people they otherwise might not know who are similarly whiling away a foggy afternoon at more than a dozen other cafes. Using self-concocted "handles" rather than their real names, they talk to each other electronically for hours or months before deciding whether or not to surrender their anonymity and actually meet.

Some San Franciscans, it is sacrilege to impose the anonymous computer hacker culture on the highly social atmosphere of the coffeehouses, which have for decades served as public salons. But Mr. Gregori argues that the electronic age has already worked a change by transforming these public cafes into refuges from phones and faxes, places to sit alone without being forced to talk to anyone.

Many of SF Net's regular users also said it is useful in overcoming shyness and youthful insecurities



Terrence McCarthy for The New York Times

At the Horse Shoe, Amber Clisura, center, sitting at the SF Net computer screen and keyboard set into a low table.

ing. And criticism is somehow easier to take, they say, when the critic is absent but can be yelled back at electronically for all the others on the network to read.

"No one is looking at you," said Amber Clisura, an acknowledged network addict who goes by the handle Kat Eyes. "You don't need to worry about rejection."

Or as Mr. Gregori put it: "There is no visual contact, no hearing of accents. People are judged on the content of what they say."

Should they choose to meet, he said, the cafes are safe places, and they do so in the knowledge that "if they've been accepted electronically, it will go very well on a face-to-face level."

Well, not always. Ms. Clisura said she met her current boyfriend through SF Net, but a previous attempt paired her with "a computer geek from hell."

"They sound cool on the board," she said, "but then you meet them and it's not pretty."

Hackers, or "net surfers," as they are known here, use their home computers to sample electronic bulletin boards like SF Net, but the young cafe habitués tend to be a distinctly different crowd, what Mr. Gregori calls "people who are not in the modem community."

Indeed, a visit to coffeehouses with the network revealed that many users are social dropouts in their early 20's who call themselves slackers: bright but rebellious kids who were bored with school and now choose to live on the edge, working only enough to support the basic necessities, spending their mornings sleeping, afternoons hanging out and nights go-

squatter in a nearby building closed because of earthquake damage. He occasionally works as a lighting technician at a club. Like many of his peers here, he lives without the comforts and conveniences of home and uses the coffeehouse and computer network as his living room/telephone/mailbox. He comes by several times each day to read his e-mail, leave messages for friends and check in with his extended "cyber family."

As long as his quarters hold out, he taps into conversations arranged by topic — politics, books, philosophy, the environment — while fueling up on espresso and waiting for his friends to drop in.

One of them, a young man who swears his true name is Alexandre Strange, said he likes to use the computer network as an alter ego to explore a different side of himself.

Still others say they use the network to provoke, to leave messages with racial, ethnic or sexist slurs simply to see the reactions. Mr. Gregori calls such actions the work of "cyber jerks" and frequently pulls the messages off the system. This has led to much debate about censorship on the network.

Those seeking serious conversation complain that it is sometimes hard to find much that is profound on SF Net. Much of the discussion comes from people trying to sell their futons or learn the answer to the eternal question "Where do hard rockers go to get their hair cut?"

But if some of those on the system sound as if they have spent too much of their lives watching "Star Trek," anyone who objects can simply exit the conversation with a touch of the