

today: Partly sunny, very windy. High 44. Low 24. Wind 20-40 mph.
 Thursday: Mainly sunny, blustery. High 32. Wind west 15-30 mph.
 Friday: Temp. range: 33-48.
 Wind chill: 18. Details on D2.

The Washington Post

FINAL

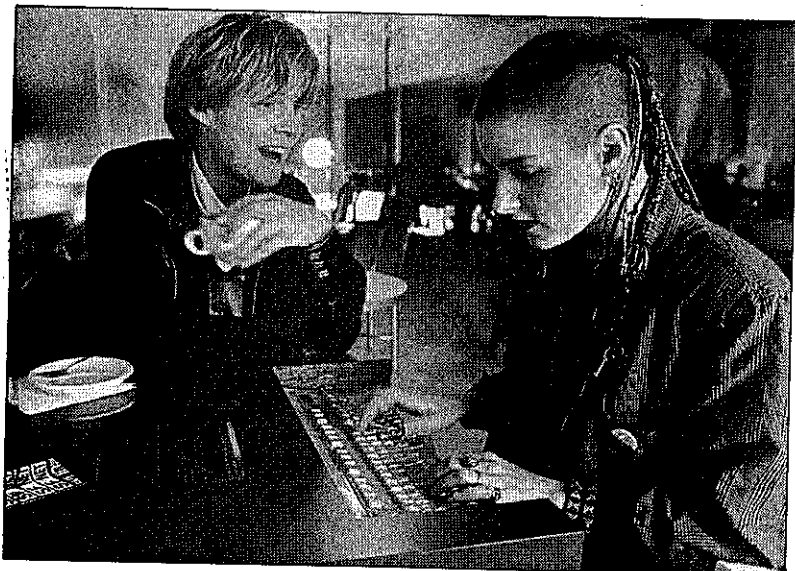
 Inside: Food
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116TH YEAR No. 74

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1993

 Prices May Vary in Areas Outside
 Metropolitan Washington (See Box on A2)

25c



Molly Mirbane networks at the Caffe Mediterraneo in Berkeley while an unidentified patron kibitzes. "When you get out and the chips are flying, it's really, really fun," Mirbane says.

A Cuppa and a Computer

Coffeehouse Cyberpunks Seek Love and the Meaning of Life

 By John Boudreau
 Special to The Washington Post

SAN FRANCISCO

Flat Top slips into the cafe, a smoky bohemian scene with scruffy walls and posters announcing a protest against U.S. intervention in Somalia. Here, the clothing color of choice is black and everyone looks like a poet.

Flat Top immediately launches into wordplay—on a computer. Fingers fly as he jumps into a coffeehouse electronic bulletin board, where cyberpunks and twentysomething slackers meet physicists and professors in fast-paced discussions on everything from the purity of

God to the importance of being anarchistic and "transcending reality."

Across the Bay at the Caffe Mediterraneo in Berkeley, Warlock Scar, a.k.a. Bill Woods, has found his computer paramour, Ultra Crab, on this misty winter night. After playing verbal tag for an hour, the two arrange a coffeehouse rendezvous. "You can create your own persona," Woods, 24, says excitedly. "I do this three times a day. I'm not much of a flirt in person, but I am on this thing!"

It's all about anonymous conversation. Flat Top, otherwise known as Alex Robertson Textor, a 22-year-old writer with closely cropped hair and such a serious look he could

stare down any beatnik, pauses to puff on his cigarette. He explains the rush people get when they tap into the offbeat network called SF Net: "The anonymity of this opens people up. It gives people a liberty."

The computer age has crashed the cafe culture. San Francisco's coffeehouses, once the creative playground for Kerouac and Ginsberg, will never be the same. Each cafe computer is built into a low table with an inlaid keyboard and is tied into others in 20 other coffeehouses around the fog-shrouded city and in Berkeley. A plastic cover, dubbed "keyboard condom" in net-speak, protects the keys from slosh-

See COFFEEHOUSE, D2, Col. 5

Cafe Computer Network

COFFEEHOUSE, From D1

ing cups of cappuccino. Eight minutes of computer time goes for 50 cents. The network, also available through monthly subscriptions to home subscribers, has about 900 regulars, nearly half of them plugging in from coffeehouses.

Unlike other electronic billboards, SF Net is accessible to anyone who happens to wander in off the streets. "It's the most important thing to happen to democracy in a long time," says Wayne Gregori, the system's designer, sounding serious. "It embraces people who are at the lower end of the economic strata."

There's an underground feel to SF Net. Netters go by an eclectic array of names: Splat, Estro Gen, Felonious Monk, Earth Blossom, Jungle Goddess, Amadeus ("Twitching and liking it") Asmodeus, Prince Romeo, Kat Eyes and Kat Mandu. Even Dan Quayle makes an occasional appearance.

Huddled over the cafe machines, this new breed of computer networker looks trance-like amid hipsters reading Sartre and Camus, or just sitting with vague looks on their faces and steaming cups of java. Many netters are young slackers who, disenchanted with society, have checked out of workaday life and live on the edges, roaming city streets and coffeehouses and "couch surfing," sleeping in friends' living rooms.

"This is a '90s version of the '50s beat cafes with the poetry readings and bongo drums," says netter Aleister Crowley, 40. Crowley, wearing his beret pulled down against the cold, is a Berkeley street-corner psychic. "You can be whomever or whatever you want to be. We have a 14th-century pope who comes on now and then."

The flow of conversation is endless. A young man rants about unresponsive San Francisco women: "Do I need to buy a motorcycle and get my eyebrows pierced? Or do I stop eating until I get that 'cute emaciated guy' look that seems so popular?" A group of women debate the ethics of sleeping with a friend's lover. A woman writes a remembrance of her dead father.

Netters can hook into numerous topical conversations: politics, philosophy, the environment, astrology, metaphysics and, of course, books and poetry. (An SF Net offspring features the works of unpublished writers.)

The most popular service is the nonstop, live "chit-chat session," in which several dozen people flail and flirt with each other in a barrage of stream-of-consciousness typing. Netters participate in numerous discussions simultaneously, as well as private chats not open to others online. It's a world of non sequiturs. There's even "computer sex," graph-

ic dialogues between people who never see each other.

The net attracts people from all segments of society, from corporate attorneys to a veterinary technician and a math teacher. An advertising executive logs on to test new ideas on the percolating masses, a hooker enters the system looking for customers, slackers tap in searching for fun and a couch to sleep on.

Indeed, netters never know who they will interface with. "I have met lesbian feminists who were peep-show chicks, homeless prostitutes, casual couch scum like myself, regular old employed people, some people in the computer industry, musicians, artists, students," says 23-year-old Molly Mirbane, a "recovering slacker." After graduating with a degree in theater from the University of California, she says, she worked for eight months before dropping out of the 9-to-5 world. "I was completely random."

Mirbane, who is no longer homeless and has a retail job, says SF Net was perfect for her lifestyle: Friends could always contact her by leaving messages on the system. "There's a lot of energy on-line; the feeling of possibility with all these people hooking up. Sometimes it tends toward the dogmatic and annoying, rather like a cocktail party. I like being fluffy and irreverent. When you get on and the chips are flying, it's really, really fun."

"This is the best example of cyber space," explains Gregori, a 35-year-old San Franciscan who, with his wife, Jill, created the network a year and a half ago because he wanted a career that he believed would improve society. "There's something so spiritual about getting to know someone only through words. It's like a living novel, a drama that plays itself out 24 hours a day. You can really get lost in this thing."

Gregori says the net is about tolerance, though he has booted more than a dozen people off the system after they spewed racist, anti-homosexual and other hate rhetoric. Each netter also has "jerk protection" at his or her fingertips: They can block out any conversation they find offensive. Fascists are welcome as long as they present some sort of logical argument, Gregori explains. Usually, he observes, "the guy is verbally bludgeoned. You'll have three liberals taking on a bigot with everyone else watching. But there's no ugliness and noise. It's an intellectual brawl."

Not everyone is enamored of the cafe computers. Some former users complain conversations too often dip to sophomoric levels. "Unfortunately, it's a lot like CB radios, except the white trash now wears black instead of baseball hats," says David Brown, a 23-year-old San Francisco art gallery employee. "I think face-to-face conversation is inherently more enjoyable and interesting."

For some others, the coffeehouse network is the only means of social interaction. "I've seen people who are ordinarily crazy on the street, but once they are on this machine they get automatic acceptance," Crowley observes. "Nobody can see them, or smell them. A borderline schizophrenic can come in here and have a meaningful conversation with people."