

## Interval Research Corporation's Online Communities Mini-Conference

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### Conference organizers:

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The First Ever Interval Gathering on Online Communities took place May 17 - 18 at Interval Research Corp. in Palo Alto. Invited guests tapped into and analyzed the online landscape, its diversity, contradictions and challenges. We talked about censorship, the government's plans, privacy, multiple identities, accountability and the implication that underlying views on a range of issues has on design.

Despite the importance of technology to cyberspace, the conference focused as much on issues about communities and people. There's a concern about a diminishing sense of community in many of our physical realities. Concerns about network communities paralleled those in the physical world.

We discussed utopian and dystopian visions, considered a range of online activities and participated in a net-jam while an episode of *Wild Palms* played in the background.

This meeting created a sense of community worth preserving and many said they hoped to return next year despite author Howard Rheingold's warning that we are staring down the barrel of change that may make it impossible to repeat such an event.

One attendee wore a T-shirt with the slogan: *Life may not be the party we hoped for, but while we're here, let's dance.*

Terry Winograd, explained the background for the meeting, noting that we are looking at an area that surely holds many unpredictable twists. *"There is no agenda to come out with a statement or a product. Let's give people who have a lot of experience in this area a chance to talk together, share what they're doing, think collectively about ideas of where we are going."*

Doug Englebart, whose inventions provide the underlying and essential technology that most of us use in cyberspace, made a point that was later echoed several times:

*"It isn't so much the technology that inhibits; it's the paradigm. If you want to go after something different then you have to get people to move into your paradigm in order to have a common vocabulary to talk about new kinds of things."*

Doug also previewed another topic by noting the significant distinction between a natural community and an intentional one.

*"If you really want to get things done you have to think of an intentional community."*

Lee Felsenstein, the founder of Community Memory, described the similarity between the popularization of personal computers and online communities, both of which are linked to the urge people have to connect. He discussed both technology and community.

Lee defines "agora" as the place where social, commercial and political transactions are at least partially carried out in public. *"Deny this function to people and you deny a certain basis for civilization."* He warned about the danger of the increasing privatization of the commons of information.

*"What people have for community is very degraded."*

*"For all of the improvements in the technology, we haven't yet seen the kind of improvement in the concept -- perhaps the paradigm -- of computer conferencing that can keep pace with the progress in the development of the hardware and software. We have a long way to go in terms of bringing the technology forward and then to bring forward the capability and tendency of people to form community."*

### **The Well: "Let a Thousand CompuServes Bloom"**

Conference organizers intentionally set up the conference agenda to bring about a discussion of online community rather than simply the technology of being on line. Hence, the first session was a panel talking about this successful, though low-tech conferencing system.

Cliff Figallo, former general manager of The Well, talked about its history. Carefully planned would not be a way to describe its development. Rather, he invoked Yogi Berra's *"When you come to a fork in the road, take it."* And he said it was a *"combination of vision and accidents. Ownership, neglect and the under-capitalization of the times."*

Stewart Brand's aphorism, "To operate a business as a service and a service as a business," guided the early implementors. The first rule for Well subscribers was *"You own your own words,"* in order to convey a sense of responsibility to people." Founders did not intend for anonymity to serve as an outcome of The Well experience. Free accounts given to interesting people made The Well an exciting place to hang out and served as a shrewd marketing decision. The absence of a board of directors and a business plan meant *"The locus of power was shifted to the users. With this fortuitous lack of oversight came a sort of giddy freedom."*

John Coate brought a background in communities and auto mechanics, not computers, to his position as marketing director for The Well.

*"Rather than being in the computer business I saw I was in the relationship business. I urge people to find the best part of somebody and speak to that. So you can take the best part of somebody and introduce it to somebody else."*

Marc Smith is a sociology student who has studied The Well. He noted that sociologists talk about how it is possible that there is order and he has attempted to understand this in cyberspace.

*"A lot of conservative theorists believe that which is owned by all is valued by none. Now this empirically is not the case. A lot of very good research shows that commons have existed for as long as there are people. The question becomes, Why do some succeed? Why do some fail?"*

Office parties held regularly by The Well have helped the community get to know each other. These have been important for showing the sense of community among people on The Well and for helping to foster that.

A discussion followed which brought up a number of issues. Rob Tow noted that The Well is more than a community but rather *"a complex topology of sub-communities."* Lena Diethelm noted the tendency people have to retreat into private conferences, a situation she labeled *"virtual suburbs."*

Other subjects that brought comments were: exclusivity (the ability to set up "Bozo filters"), the use of technical fixes for social problems vs. the likelihood that online communities will simply repeat the mistakes made by other types of groups, privacy (The Well's stated policy of not allowing members to publish posted information elsewhere. Said Dave Hughes: *"You've made it exclusive with the rule. And I've broken it."*

### **Online Gaming**

A surprise to some attendees was the insight from this part of the conference that as important to playing games on line is the social interaction that takes place among the players. It's not so much people looking for a solitary game of chess but a chance to mingle with others around a poker table.

Alan Emrich, the online editor for Computer Gaming World:

*"I am where the people are plunking down their hard-earned bucks because they want to be entertained. It's all real consumer driven. People who log on to networks, at some point they all type GAMES."*

Stuart Moulder with The Sierra Network and who *"left the business world to do what I'm doing; games are a lot more interesting than general ledger systems,"* said that technology has sometimes pushed people apart and with games it is possible for it to bring people together. *"Gaming is like a hook... to get people on line, in a social situation."* He described a *"social inversion"* that occurs on the network so that people who are handicapped have found the network empowering.

Chip Morningstar and Randy Farmer, developers of Habitat, which has been successful in Japan but not in the U.S. where the Commodore-64 was a dead system by the time it came out, talked about that experience and described their plans to design a global system for business, education and entertainment.

### **MUDs (Multi-user Dungeons)**

Amy Bruckman of the MIT Media Lab and Pavel Curtis from Xerox PARC discussed these improvised on-line communities and the issues they bring up.

*"I think that this can create an authentic context for kids to learn reading and writing and programming,"* said Bruckman who talked about self-motivated learning and some of her research and her hopes to encourage girls and women to be more comfortable with computers.

*"It's not an information super highway; it's a maze of twisty little passages, all different and all filled with MUDders."*

Pavel talked about Astro-VR for use by the professional astronomy community on the Internet and Jupiter, for use by researchers at Xerox PARC. Jupiter will include live and audio and video in an effort to capture casual communication. Unlike the typical MUD which use plain, unformatted text as the sole medium, PARC is assuming that users have digital audio and graphics. He raised such questions as: How and to what extent do systems self-organize? Can you offer people technical or social tools and expect them to take the responsibility and initiative to make things happen?

*"We're creating the notion of doppelgangers where you can have multiple presences in the virtual space and inhabit them as you choose."*

There's also an experiment with virtual doors as a method of obtaining privacy on a system. Jupiter is easier to use than picking up the telephone and will have a wide range of applications including communicating with administrative and support staff.

*"We're wiring all our common areas, people's offices and trying to make it possible for them to casually communicate with others. And we want to try using it for a much richer telecommuting experience."*

## **Discussion:**

moderated by Sandy Stone, one of the founders of the Cyberspace Conference

Sandy Stone: "I hear people taking expectations regarding the way social systems are constructed, knowledge systems are constructed, symbolic systems are constructed and meaning is produced and maintained on the side of the real and mapping it over on to the virtual without very much attention being paid to what happens when you cross that boundary. So theme number one, can you do that, what happens when you do? Are they the same? Is there a translation factor when you start mapping things from the real to the virtual?"

"Two is we find a pervasive binarism particularly in regard to gender but also in regard to ethnicity. There isn't any reason why we need to have a gender binary system in the virtual communities.

"And the last one is the bandwidth question. Are wide bandwidth systems better in the sense that what sorts of things that we would like to see in social environments do they enable. And conversely what sides don't they enable or interfere with? In other words, does high bandwidth bias things that we want in terms of community?"

Pavel Curtis: "I think that there's a certain sense in which it's inescapable that those mappings will take place. Because for all of the technology mediating things it's the same

people and that's why I keep telling Amy it's OK to be exclusive because people are exclusive in the real world out of a need they have, a human need. It's still only humans on the virtual side, why should you expect it to be different."

Amy Bruckman: "Of the kids I've studied so far, all of the boys have said I get to choose my sex, OK I'll be male and they march off. All the girls, every single one, has hesitated and then decided to be male or neuter. My point here is there is some really interesting stuff going on here and there's a potential to learn more about ourselves."

David Reed: "It's foolish to think that any of these environments is really isolated from the world. You're augmenting the world."

Anna Couey: "I'd still like to see a place where there is social experimentation, and not simply that we're offering E-Mail services and information services and that it's just going to be a replication of what we had before."

Chip Morningstar: "...There is a naive belief that with higher bandwidth communication channels we're going to get better communication by being able to do things like send video or send audio and thereby send a truer representation. But in so doing we may be distorting the signal in some way which really does injury to it or is transmitting information you don't want carried."

Tom Jennings: "Virtual rape will remain virtual. Physical violence is physical violence and electronic violence is electronic no matter how obnoxious. I'm not saying it's good but it's different. It does not carry the same weight because it doesn't involve the human body. You can unplug the connector."

"There's a place in the real world to try out all things: It's college and we were all there. But we're not there anymore." -- Lee Sproull

"You can go online and damage people and we're going to have to figure out how to deal with that." -- Stuart Moulder

"I could see my daughter assuming a male persona. And one of the issues I have around the notion that we should always have our real names attached to us is that not only for children, but for adults, that kind of activity is instantly precluded and you're immediately relegated to a cross-dressing ghetto instead of having the opportunity to be taken seriously in this social laboratory." -- Brenda Laurel

"I know if I walk up to someone and make a certain remark that can change the course of my life. I can get hauled into court; I could go through a whole bunch of things so I'm always very aware of the future consequences of my actions. If I'm on a MUD the worst that can happen is I log out, right?" -- Terry Winograd

"If I hit someone or do something in a virtual world and I have spent the time investing in this persona then it does matter. -- Sean White

### Online communities, designed and emergent

Where do online communities come from? They may emerge naturally as in the case of The Well, or they may be intentional, formed by a group of people with a common interest and shared goals.

We heard from such designed communities as: Anna Couey (Arts Wire); Seth Fiery (Smart Valley); Mary Furlong (Senior Net); Patricia Seybold (Patricia Seybold Group); Dave Hughes (Rogers Bar).

We heard about emergent communities from participants/organizers such as: Bob Carlitz (Kidsphere); Mark Graham (Pandora Systems); Tom Jennings (Fidonet); Kathy Ryan (America Online).

Dave Hughes offered these principles for online communities:

1. Rooted in real cultures.
2. Universal (grass roots) access.
3. Public technical standards.
4. Start furthest from centers of power (rural, remote, foreign).
5. Always evolving (technically, connectively, individual/group/community skills to higher orders).
6. End users do not just connect. They create.
7. My (sysop) role is to enable and empower.

Kathy Ryan, America Online. AOL has been around since 1985. It has more than 250,000 households on line. *"We noticed that members who came on line actually stayed on line longer if they became involved in a community. They often came on-line because they wanted to get news or be able to get stock quotes or look something up in an encyclopedia. But they actually stayed members because they met someone or a group of people and started finding that their social or emotional needs were met through interaction with that community. In our annual report we have the affinity strategy. And actual groups of people that we go out and target. In some cases we allow communities to emerge and we help them along by providing special areas on line. SeniorNet is a perfect example. We actually wanted to have them and their people on America Online."*

And who can forget those wonderful graphics created by native Americans with Hughes' NAPLPS' graphics tools.

*"Oh you never are alone when you hear that modem tone. Keep logging on."* – Dave Hughes

### Electronic Cafe

Kit Galloway and Sherry Rabinowitz showed us and talked about their use of electronic media to break some of the barriers between communities. Rather than facilitating the way a community interacts, they try to provide a bridge between communities. They seem to take advantage of the distancing that comes through the use of the electronic medium to break down inhibitions. Technology as a means, not an end.

### Closing Remarks :

Howard Rheingold

*"I understand the networking game but not when you start bringing in the cable companies."*

*"Politics trumps everything else. We're living in a bit of an illusion. We've been piggybacking on this wonderful, historical accident. It probably took trillions of dollars and hundreds of years to wire up the world to this global switched telecommunications network. And it took about half that time and some billions of dollars to create powerful computers that individuals could afford. Nobody on either side knew that in 1994 a kid could go get some junk computer and a cheap modem and have this extremely formidable power. It's many to many, enables people to connect to each other and it is the channel of convergence of all other media."*

*Now every kid with a cheap computer, a telephone and a modem can become a broadcasting station, a publisher. That is a formidable power. The big boys are carving up the world, even as we speak. I don't think they knew about it for a long time. I think we rode on their ignorance for a long time.*

*Maybe what the people in this room are going to do and what the people who own this room are going to do after we leave it, maybe we will be able to keep pushing in that direction and have some leverage against this enormous force that is going to crush us like bugs.*

*That's how it's always gone in history. People with money and power sooner or later understand what the choke points are in new communications technology.*

*It's not impossible to make it illegal to plug a modem into your telephone line. It's not impossible to limit this to an elite of one kind or another.*

*Three things people are talking about in America in terms of electronic democracy that the technology makes possible. One is citizen access to information. Another....is trying to influence our elected representatives. The third element is the lateral communication between citizens. When you take those three things together, I'm still enough of an idealist to believe there is something worth trying to design there with technology that has accidentally given us this great power.*

*We all have a huge task: Besides understanding this stuff and creating this stuff, we need to explain it to people.*

## Flames

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We asked attendees to volunteer a flame so we could get a better sense of our various points of view and interests.

### **Amy Bruckman**

Here are a few issues I would enjoy discussing at the workshop: Ideals of virtual democracy versus real world constraints; Children on the net: Freedom of speech and information access versus the need to protect children on the net from "inappropriate" information; Will disruptive behavior increase when there are hundreds of thousands of nine year olds on the Internet; How does one study the impact of virtual communities?

### **Anna Couey**

Online communities can involve people in the collective creation of new forms of human relationships, new behaviors and social constructs. Free of the constraints and demands of physical existence, free of existing hierarchical structures of mass communication, such communities have the potential to transform existing barriers of geography, profession, class, and culture. However, while network systems have been the sites for numerous innovations in community building, and creative human interactions, they are still generally populated by a small, educated, and comparatively wealthy group of individuals, often with strong technical backgrounds. If online systems are truly becoming a realm for public participation, we must consider what "public" and "participation" really mean. Online systems depend on existing socio-economic constructs. Access to many online communities costs money, and thus replicates existing economic barriers to participation. Cultural and gender specificity in interface design and communication styles, not to mention technical proclivity, impact the demographics of who actually participates. The disproportionate participation of a particular socio-economic class establishes a limited perspective from which new communities are created. As they grow, will online communities serve to foster creative social and cultural structures? Or will they simply be yet another manifestation of the society we already know? Will online communities contribute to the preservation of endangered cultures and foster new cultural hybrids? Or will they become yet another medium for monoculturalization? The extent to which the ideal potential of online communities is realized depends on how we address economic, political, cultural and technical issues that impact access and participation.

### **Lena M. Diethelm**

Everyday life is the interplay of trance states and sub-personalities. When you log on, just \_who\_ logs on? Which trance state is induced? You shift between and among them constantly. How much awareness do you have of the interplay of your trance states and sub-personalities in Cyberspace? Now realize that everyone else on-line brings their own myriad of sub-personalities and trance states. They, like you, shift between and among them rapidly. Perhaps even more rapidly in Cyberspace. Conflicts arise when people touch up against the edges of trance states that are different, not shared, uncomfortable and/or rough and rocky places. Then, what? It is a myth that everyone is equal in cyberspace. There are majorities/minorities in on-line communities. Arnold Mindell in *The Leader as Martial Artist* says: The minority-majority split is basic to all fields; only the issues and language change from situation to situation. There are a primary group identity and a secondary, disavowed identity in every group process. This split is always characterized by tension, segregation, anger and hate. It is inevitable for individuals and groups to create minorities by creating an identity that demarcates an accepted from a rejected form of behavior. Every group has an identity that states, "We are this and not that!" (p. 102) What minorities exist in each on-line communities? What are you doing to know them?

### **Glenn T. Edens**

I am attending to learn so it is difficult to create a really valuable flame, however, what will make the average human get off their butts (sofas) and really interact with television or whatever? How will society come to value an on line or connected community? To what extent will the "government" wreck it? What are the minimum technologies required to get the wheel rolling in an unstoppable big way?

### **Christina & Douglas Engelbart**

Consider an online community (team, organization, ...) as a social organism, and the emergent digital technology as providing a striking improvement to its nervous system. A superior nervous system can yield a number of improved functional characteristics -- e.g., better sensory perception, faster reflexes, or better physical coordination. Many targets of the emergent technological communication infrastructure address similar improvements to these. But when we think of the "intelligence" of an organism, we consider a set of functional characteristics considerably beyond the above -- e.g., memory, reasoning, conceptualization, foresight, integrating experiences into applicable knowledge, planning, etc. This has long been my dominant professional objective: the augmentation of individual and collective human intelligence. I have experienced and learned much of value, and I have developed explicit concepts, technologies and strategies to facilitate large-scale pursuit of these targets. The focus of all this now is the creation of special "communities" comprised of participating organizations (other communities, corporations, agencies,...) for collectively exploring and implementing the means to improve their "Collective IQs" -- and re-deploying their new, collective capabilities to "get smarter at the process of getting smarter" (bootstrapping).

### **Lee Felsenstein**

See my article "The Commons of Information" in the May issue of Dr. Dobbs' Journal.

### **Cliff Figallo**

Too little emphasis is put on the personal emotional content of communication via the relatively narrow bandwidth of today's electronic networking media. By not acknowledging the very common problems of miscommunication due to too-literal understanding of other users' contributions, much of the potential "connection" between users is lost. More extensive discussion, better human "moderators," better interfaces and tools can all contribute to improving this situation so that more important problems can be worked on through electronic networking and less time is spent in needless over-intellectualized and recursive discussion. Real human communication takes place on many deeper levels than the literal and intellectual.

### **Kit Galloway & Sherry Rabinowitz**

Life is too --- short!

### **Steve Gold**

If you believe that eventually everyone's going to be "connected" to this ocean of information and services, then we're going to have to figure out an easier way to navigate them than CompuServe, Prodigy, and the stuff I've seen for the Internet.

### **Dave Hughes**

Flame: My principal concern is, that in the rush to evermore whizzy-bang high bandwidth, advanced personal and elite group telecommunications, that we are becoming dangerously divided along techno-class lines. I try to do something about it by popularizing universal standards for telecom, develop software and systemic links between the high (cost and tools)

end and lowend (installed base and comm) in language, graphics, (Naplps) and in the future, sound. And use cultural art as the medium.

### Tom Jennings

I worry not about hardware and such; I worry about the social structures of access behind the boxes. As 'computer networking' becomes more embedded and transparent and invisible, and more oriented towards bulk delivery of services (news, entertainment, etc.) I hope that it doesn't become as lopsided as "community access" to cable video has become.

I work towards broadscale access to networks both PUBLISH and consume, for fringe, left-out people most importantly. You never have to worry about normal people, or those with money. They always get things.

Social change always comes from society's edges, not from the center of the bell curve, for countless reasons. Besides most normal people are boring.

### Ted M. Kahn

"Where is the Life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" (T. S. Eliot, chorus from "The Rock") My/IRL's interests in electronic communities are based on challenging a common assumption about the prime value of electronic networks as \*access\* to information. The quote above also deals with the relative value individuals and society now place on \*acquiring information\*--and even knowledge -- to the exclusion of the development and growth of cultural wisdom. The NII focus and availability of large funding for building the information highway emphasizes a model of universal access = high bandwidth computing and wiring (whether it be via phone lines, cable, optic fiber, or wireless). But access has a lot more to do with social issues within and between electronic communities than most people realize (hence the term, "electronic ghost towns" for those groups who had great starts but have long since been silent...).

We believe really authentic learning takes place as a part of people becoming members of various "communities of practice," not by just acquiring more and more information. The second issue that interests me and others is one which Christina Allen (now at Northwestern U.) and others at IRL called "reciprocal evolution" in designing technology around the real work, learning, and recreational practices of users. For example, we are particularly interested in \*design communities\* which involve kids, parents, teachers, university faculty and students, professional designers as a kind of "Virtual Bauhaus." The Bauhaus is an interesting model for building a virtual community because of both what it achieved and what it failed to achieve. Even though Walter Gropius intended the Bauhaus to break down a hierarchical relationship between fine art and crafts, Germanic traditions of hierarchy #005# still continued viz. between "master" and "apprentice. Access to and use of members of the surrounding community was one of the founding principles of the Bauhaus, but social and cultural issues did not allow this to really happen as it was intended. What would a multimedia-based "virtual design school without walls" and a community engaged in collaborative design be like? How would we "design" social structures to allow and encourage real participation to bring out the most creative participation by various subgroups and individuals in this kind of community?

### **Brenda Laurel**

The next two decades will bring radical changes in how information is defined and transmitted. "Western objectivity" (insidiously defined as the absence of point of view) is on its last legs. Point of view in information is becoming as important and tangible as "content", and new media are evolving in ways that enhance its expression. We're already seeing more explicit demands for diversity and authenticity of voice, especially in interactive media. Geopolitical developments will increase our hunger for what Seymour Papert called "epistemological pluralism." McLuhan predicted that new technology would bring about a retribalization of human cultures, and we are experiencing this today in political fragmentation on every level. But we also see a trend toward globalism, as expressed in our art, our idealism, and our planet-wide institutions. The future will force us to see that "retribalization" and "globalism" are not polar opposites, but two forces whose intricate complementarity must be understood if we are to survive. "Content providers" will provide streams of information that will be reworked and re-presented by cultures and individuals and transmitted informally, from one to one and few to few. Much will depend on the quality and availability of tools that facilitate this process. If we wish to be a part of the successor to the dying broadcast paradigm, we who propose to invent the future should take our lead from forms and practices that are emerging in communities of use - desktop publishing, computer networking, home-brewed video. The age of one-to-many information transmission is drawing to a close.

### **Joy Marcus**

Where I'm coming from: I'm most certainly the E.T. (as in Extra-Terrestrial, not Entertainment Tonight) of Interval. I have yet to meet anyone here who's had less experience than I in the high-techworld. On the other hand, I've had extensive experience in communications (as a journalist, publicist, writer, editor, poet, artist) and with people (as an administrator, psychotherapist, community organizer, movementactivist/leader, and mediator). When I hear or see the word "community(ies)" my antennae vibrate. People intentionally organizing themselves (or not) has been a major interest of mine over the past 3 decades. I don't know enough yet about on-line communities to have a position—so no position statement from this kid. My mission at the conference is to listen and learn.

### **Chip Morningstar**

It's easier to say what the future of online communities is not going to be than to say what it will be. Except that a lot of people are making sweeping statements about The Future that I don't think hold up to scrutiny. What the phone companies have been telling us about The Future was made up by their ad agencies and bears little resemblance to what they are actually doing. What the industry pundits have been telling us merely reflects the fads of the moment (expert systems, VR, pen based computing, multimedia, you can probably think of lots more) and will change the next time the winds of fashion shift. What the government is telling us defies description, and now that we have an administration that is actually interested in our little corner of the world, some days I fear that the end of our industry is near, a victim of that old Chinese curse, "May your deeds come to the attention of people in high places." Of course, cluelessness is not exactly new to our field. This, in a twisted sort of way, is an optimistic statement. We have come as far as we have through decades of confusion and chaos. We have survived IBM, FORTRAN, punch cards, CP/M, and worse. I am confident we will survive Unix SVR4 and NREN. With a little luck we may

even survive MS-DOS and Microsoft Windows. So let's ignore the pundits and marketers for a while. This group looks like it has a higher than usual density of people who have actually done real things that have been used by real people. I want to hear what you all think the future will be like.

### **Evelyn Pine**

On-line networks have a great potential to crystalize the existing power structure and economic inequality. How can we ensure that computer networking becomes a tool for social change, rather than an instrument of social control? I always love stories about people who aren't "knowledge" workers building or infiltrating on-line networks.

### **David P. Reed**

Communities depend on having stuff in common. Adult environments are heavily focused on filtering communications through various standard representations that enable commonality. Standards such as ASCII, NTSC video, RFC 1822 and so forth inevitably boost community, by enabling more commonality. At the same time, they impoverish the world we share, by providing rigid filters that focus our attention on aspects of the world that are effectively coded in those standards. Programmable devices offer a way out of this trap, yet online communities are typically built without any capability for programmable extensibility, whether designed or "emergent" (such systems are typically WORSE!) My ideal online community would allow for its users to participate in building and evolving it over time -- there's a smidgeon of this in Lotus Notes, but it could be a lot better.

### **Howard Rheingold**

How are virtual communities like real communities and how are they different? Do virtual communities constitute an opportunity to revitalize what Habermas called "the public sphere?" Most important: How do citizens preserve the freedom to communicate and publish in the face of big money and big power? I believe we are at a unique point in history: We have some retrospective knowledge about the way previous communication technologies triggered social changes, the way citizens' power was coopted, the relationship between new communication technologies and changes in power relationships. We are piggybacking on the power gained by plugging computers into switched telecommunication networks. How long until the big boys figure out how to seize it, censor it, and sell it back to us?

### **Andrew Singer**

I'm especially interested in how we guarantee that online systems will have the level of privacy that will be necessary to enable the new kinds of communication that they make possible.

### **Marc A. Smith**

I would like to see a compendium of existing research on the subject along with pointers to on-going research.

### **Lee Sproull**

Technologists and policy makers today mostly think of the Internet and its evolution as an environment for individual information processors, be they individual people or agents acting on behalf of individual people. Thus technologists are thinking about tools to help

individual people find information and navigate the net. Policy makers are thinking about pricing schemes to bill individual people for using the net. While this view is not wrong, it is certainly incomplete. The net is also a social technology. It makes it possible for people to find others with like interests, to communicate with them, to create shared meaning and experience that are sustained over time. I am working to try to understand electronic group processes and their effects on members, groups, and the larger social system. I am also working to try to convince technologists and policy makers to pay attention to the net as a social technology.

### **Jonathan Steuer**

Most online communities are still somewhat exclusionary in the sense that they require complex and expensive hardware to access them, and require mental gymnastics on the part of new users in order to gain access. I hope that designers of new systems take these factors into account in order to make online communities of the future accessible to all via natural communication methods. We need to examine the relationship between real-life social interactions and those that take place online. The need for a social perspective for examining online systems is suggested by a diverse range of net.happenings including the following: the net-jam, WELL Office Parties and other face-to-face gatherings of online acquaintances, MUD weddings, alt.irc.recovery (and online addiction in general), the use of online environments to explore concepts of self, and concern over users inability to distinguish between real and mediated interaction. These situations suggest important design questions that need to be addressed before and during the implementation of new online systems, lest we be nastily suprised after the fact. Examining both existing online systems and other related media such as telephone and television may help to provide the answers.

### **Rob Tow**

Certain astonishing things happen when people are free to explore the construction of alternative elements of identity, including but not limited to gender. This sort of thing is one of the areas of interest in the work that I and others at Interval Research are conducting.

It seems important to me to realize that the same basic technology may be expressed in *very* different ways—much as is seen in the architecture of buildings—defining/enabling/limiting the relations and roles of the individual and the group. When the major innovators of a technology **design** they may influence a school, a generation, a society. Their design is the original mutation, the primeval stock—Lucy walking the veldt. Part of the challenge for technologists is exactly this opportunity. The same skills of design and architecture may be expressed to give the vast cubie land of Hewlett-Packard or the individual offices of Microsoft or PARC. Similar choices abound all about us in the design of the computer and communications systems that are what we coming to call cyberspaces and online communities.

### **Sean Michael White**

- Be connected. Be conscious.
- Take back the media. Broadcast is in the hands of a few monolithic industrial powers. Recreate the symmetry of communication.

- Break out of the box. A generation has grown up using keyboards and monitors in isolation. We need to escape the limitations of the box by expanding inside it (connecting with others) and eventually removing it (new physical interfaces).

## Contact List

### Interval's Online Communities Mini-Conference

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Principle focus in the field: design of tools which facilitate autonomic development and re-development of community.

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Principle focus in the field: Effective personal communications via electronic networking; maximizing signal vs. noise.

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Principle focus in the field: Developing of grass roots community telecom systems tailored to the ways peoples communicate within their cultures.

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Principle focus in the field: setting up low-cost, accessible networking of all kinds

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Principle focus in the field: The emergence, development and social organization of virtual communities

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Principle focus in the field: Social science research addressing the relationship between the formal and structural features of mediated environments and the types of interactions and relationships that develop on such systems; also host of the infamous Internet Jam Session (aka net-jam)

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and have reasons to use

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