

# **ELECTRONICALLY, WE'RE ALL NEIGHBORS: A PERSPECTIVE ON COMMUNITY**

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Community used to be a simple concept, back when we had a simpler society. There was a time when the whole town was your community because you knew everybody in it. In the small town I grew up, all the adults knew all the kids, so I learned early that any mischief I got into always found its way to my parents. Small towns often had only a few churches, so your religious community was the same as your secular community. And your secular community was so small that everybody recognized a stranger in town.

But today it's different. As our society has become more mobile and fragmented, many of the old rules (related to geography and neighborhoods) no longer apply. Cities are far too large for us to know every person living in them; houses of worship are far too numerous for us to claim membership in "the" religious community; and frequently we can't tell a stranger from a resident on our block or even in our own apartment building.

Use of the term community is stretching and expanding – and not just in the online world where every site from Yahoo to Ragu talks about their “community” of users. Communities are important to us. Communities occur because people need other people. We like to belong. We like to identify with something that's important to us. But what is community, anyway?

- Saturn motor company talks about a “community of Saturn owners.” Harley Davidson owners group together at events all around the country, including an annual gathering in Sturgis, SD, which, like a pilgrimage to Mecca, is seen as a “rite of passage” or the achieving of an important milestone in the Harley riding community.
- AOL talks about its service as a "community" and, at 8-10 million users, its equivalent to a mid-sized city.
- Churches still consider themselves communities, as do Boy Scout troops, the American Legion, and unions.
- In addition, there are hundreds of communities identified by the many specialty magazines covering such varied topics as hunting, fitness, food, quilting, home-design, computer programming, and photography.

With little effort, we can all find ourselves members of half a dozen or more different communities.

Each of us has stories to tell about our communities and this is my opportunity to entertain you with a few of mine. I'm going to focus on electronic communities. I've been in one or more of them for about eighteen years – from Control Data's PLATO system, several phases of the PRODIGY Service, and to a venture called HOGWILD! I also want to introduce you to CitySearch, a fascinating hybrid that unites physical, "real-world" community building efforts with a strong electronic or "virtual-world" component. I have a story about why the WELL remains the icon for virtual communities and another one about Blacksburg, Virginia, the most wired town in America. Each story has given me some lasting insight about communities. It is my hope that this knowledge from past and present electronic communities will help us all move forward without repeating someone else's mistakes.

There'll be no quiz at the end and no need to take notes. Should you find my comments relevant, I'll be happy to send them to you via email along with a list of reference materials.

THE TERMINAL AFFAIR

How many of you understand the phrase "terminal affair"? Maybe you've had one. Let me tell you about mine.

In 1981 I joined Control Data Corporation in Minneapolis, MN. As a new employee, I was required to complete several courses using the PLATO system, the corporate computer-based education system. Today Control Data would be known as an "early adopter" of this form of education, but back then they were the "early creator." It seemed like Control Data opened a new window in electronic communications every month. We had an Intranet for management reports and information and, I soon discovered, a separate underground version of it. It was like a private club; someone had to know and vouch for you before you could get the secret ID and password, which would get you into this underground world. Best I could tell, the group had been started by sci-fi fans as they'd taken names of characters of their sci-fi favorite novels in order to remain anonymous.

There was liberal freedom of expression about company issues (perhaps due to the lack of any top management participation in the group) as well as a surprising amount of camaraderie. I was sponsored by an individual I'd met in one of CDC's remote locations whose online name was Fiona (after a character in a Roger Zelazny book). Our public notes and written repartee led to private email, these led to "term-talk" (an early form of one-to-one chat), and an every increasing number of phonecalls. We supplemented our electronic relationship with snail mail and visits in the "real-world." I don't know about your terminal affair, but mine is in its seventeenth year, the last sixteen as husband and wife. And, Email is still part of our relationship, even when I'm not on the road!

This was my first meaningful connection with an electronic community. What sticks with me about it are these two points:

- Number 1: Online communication can augment (or begin), sustain, and support real-world relationships. Online introductions are much less stressful with no blind-date trauma. Online communication encourages relationships of the mind, which can lead to relationships of the heart.
- Number 2: You don't need sophisticated graphics or fancy virtual environments to "reach out and touch someone" online.

## EARLY PRODIGY DAYS

Several years later I found myself managing Prodigy's west coast business in Los Angeles. One day I was contacted by a woman in San Francisco, a Prodigy member who regularly participated on the Food & Wine Bulletin Board, whom I'll call Barb. Barb said that some of the participants on the food board had decided they wished to meet face-to-face and had, in fact, planned a meeting the following Friday evening at the Red Dragon Café in Los Angeles. They'd be traveling by plane and auto from all over California and could I join them? I was delighted to be included and showed up with appropriate trinkets such as Prodigy T-shirts, mugs, pens, etc. While instantly popular with attendees, I soon realized the star attraction at this event was someone else. The real attraction for these people was each other as they met for the first time face to face.

The most memorable part of the evening occurred for me soon after we'd been seated. My contact, Barb, asked me if I'd come to her table and meet someone. She introduced me to a woman in a wheel chair who appeared to be in her sixties or seventies. "Liz," she said, "is my best friend. "We've known each other just over a year, but until this afternoon when I met Liz at the airport, I did not know her race or that she lived in a chair."

I came away from that event imprinted with something that is really intrinsically obvious: that you learn a different part of people online. There are few clues to someone's age, religion, race, physical appearance, income level or even gender. This can be a beautiful thing, or not. I'm sure we've all seen the famous New Yorker cartoon of the two dogs in front of the computer with the one telling the other "On the Internet, no one knows you are a dog." Seriously, it also means that developing the social context of relationships takes longer – and not everyone is ready to invest the hours it takes to figure out, in an online community,

who are the leaders, the gossips, the hair-brained radicals, and perhaps – most importantly – “others like me.”

## SHARING A DRINK AT THE WELL

Before I continue with my next PRODIGY story, it seems appropriate to insert a sidebar about the WELL. If you're an Internet veteran, you already know that the WELL is an acronym for "Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link," that it was started by Stewart Brand and that it was consciously designed as an experiment in community and communication. It's long-lasting success and reputation for online community strength is due, I believe, to its grounding in a physical space and not only a virtual world. At one time or another, nearly all early WELL participants paid a visit to monthly picnics or WELL office parties in order to merge the physical with the virtual world. The geographical focus was elemental to this community. All members shared the city of San Francisco, the earthquake, the Oakland fire, the newspaper strike, and Diane Feinstein (eventually). Face to face encounters cemented this community together and helped participants feel like a cohesive gathering of people instead of a group of disparate user ids.

## PRODIGY: THE LATER DAYS

PRODIGY was an amazing learning experience. But I wouldn't call it an epiphany. It was more a process of maturation. I matured; PRODIGY evolved. And we're both still in process.

PRODIGY began life as TRINTEX – a trinity composed of CBS, Sears, and IBM. The “text” in “TRINTEX” stood for “video-text.” Although they were down to two partners instead of three even before the service launched, it is interesting to see how the deeply held beliefs, biases and mindsets of each of these three companies contributed to their online offspring.

The folks from CBS saw the system basically as another form of “broadcast.” Their thinking was to get some exciting, colorful, interesting programming, or content, and put some commercials around it. It would be the beautiful younger sister to network television. Sears, on the other hand, saw PRODIGY as “the catalog experience of the future. Pictures and descriptions of thousands of items, one click ordering, 24-hour shopping, consumers would be lined up to buy the software. Think of the convenience, the time savings, the profit margins!” You get the picture.

IBM seemed to have less avant-garde ideas. IBM executives were more interested in building a new, state-of-the-art, distributed architecture network. It would be a technical marvel--elegant, reliable, and available to millions of homes simultaneously. Everyone would love it and use it because...well...just because it works so damn well. Not the first time I was to experience the mistaken belief that the technologically superior product would always win.

Hindsight is always sharper than foresight, but not necessarily 20/20!

As I look back on those years at Prodigy, it was clear that *some* people did spend *some* time shopping (mostly for airline tickets and stocks) and *some* time with the “official” content--the content PRODIGY had paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to acquire-- but what the vast majority of people really ended up doing was talking with each other. Member interest in the features that utilized content contributed by other members, such as email, bulletin boards and chat, was so strong that PRODIGY added an hourly surcharge to these features.

Although minute-by-minute charges are passé these days, that doesn't explain why PRODIGY today has fewer than 1 million people while AOL has over 8 million. The reason may have been unveiled, I think, in a panel discussion I saw August 26, 1993, during a conference in Denver. All of the online services were represented, including PRODIGY and AOL. The topic was the future of online services. At the time, Prodigy had over two million members and AOL reported just 225,000. I extolled our glorious service and all the wonderful things members could do online and the incredible depth of our content. During her presentation, Kathy Ryan from AOL, made following statement. I thought it was so important that I wrote

it down. She said, “Our most compelling content comes from people, not corporate entities. We aim to provide easy ways to bring people together without interference. Communication is the core business and product; everything else is ancillary.”

Not everything Prodigy did was a mistake. As a pioneer, PRODIGY confronted many problems that came from being the first of its kind, and the Prodigy Services Company solved hundreds of problems on both the technical and policy level that been a tremendous boost to the entire online industry. Prodigy confronted many complex issues for the first time. For instance:

- All of the issues related to censorship: Is criticism of management allowed? Is free speech permitted? Is any speech permitted? Are any topics taboo? If any speech is permitted and no topics are taboo, do you allow illegal or libelous messages? What responsibilities do system operators have for user created content? Who determines if they are or aren't? Do you allow people to post their intention to commit suicide? Does the system operator have a responsibility to act if they see such a posting? What action? How does this scale, e.g. 1-2 suicide threats per night? The list goes on and on. Every online service and bulletin board service operating in the United States has been affected by PRODIGY's experience.
- Also, to what extent can or should participants be self governing and self-regulating? Conflicts arise regularly; what is the process for dispute resolution? The physical world has established certain methods but the electronic world is still working on it.

Like the famous stainless-steel car, the DeLorean, PRODIGY was—and is—beautiful, innovative, and daringly different. And like the car, every flaw, every minor nick, was visible to passers-by, because anything that unusual attracted attention. Never mind that flaws could be repaired and mistakes fixed, when the shine is gone, people move on. But we can all benefit from PRODIGY's history.

## HOGWILD!

During my days at Prodigy, I wished to experiment with advanced ideas of building online communities. My ideas came from books like *Creating Community Anywhere*, by Carolyn Shaffer and Kristin Anundsen. *Creating Community Anywhere* had not one word about online communities, but I found you could take ideas for creating community in the real world and with some modification, use them in an online context. However, like many large companies, PRODIGY was unable to move quickly or to accept the risks inherent in some of my experiments, so I proposed setting up my own bulletin board system in my basement. I had a benevolent boss who told me to go ahead. “It should be interesting,” he said.

Those were pre-Web days, so I bought a fairly powerful desktop computer, ordered several phone lines, bought some BBS software and created “HOGWILD!,” the nation's first BBS for Harley-Davidson owners. If you are thinking, “What would a group of wild, unwashed, ex-cons who ride the countryside terrorizing small villages and towns be doing online?” you are several years behind the profile of today's average Harley owner. Believe me; they have real jobs, children on the honor roll, and big houses with nice garages to store their bikes. And, despite all the patches that say “Born to Ride,” they typically log fewer than 5,000 miles per year in the saddle. What they like to do, though, is talk to each other and to talk about bikes. The board was a hit and news of its existence, augmented by small ads in a couple of biker magazines, spread rapidly. Soon, hundreds of Harley owners were logging on, uploading photographs of their bikes, trading favorite riding routes, creating chat rooms, and helping each other with maintenance advice. My role was that of Inn Keeper. I gave them a place to gather and stayed out of the way.

Some of the things I was beginning to suspect were true at PRODIGY were proven with HOGWILD!

1. The audience, or users, will contribute the editorial material of highest value. The content the service provided, such as the database of Harley models, the recordings of Harley sounds, etc., were just window dressing, the building façade if you will, that defined the conversational area and provided a common ground in which strangers could introduce themselves to others. The value, and the reason people kept coming back again and again, was meeting other people like themselves – the sharing of a mutual passion. .

2. As Howard Rheingold says in his book, *Virtual Communities: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, you can reflect a culture but you can't create it. Communities grow organically. Leaders are more like gardeners than builders. Many business people working on the web today attempt to "build" an online community, as if it was a product or a piece of code. Most of them fail because that is not how it works.
3. When people participate in the creation of a community and contribute to its ongoing well-being they become extremely loyal. They feel part of that community. A commerce function that is introduced into an existing community typically establishes high-value, life-time customers among members of the community. This is true online as well as offline.
4. Although people appreciate good services within their community, such as fire and police protection, public parks, and garbage pickup, it is when individuals contribute to a community, such as during a time of crisis or by holding public office or by hosting neighborhood watch programs, that they really begin to feel part of the community and to care about it. Observing a community in action doesn't make it real; participation is what generates an emotional bond that links the members together.
5. Content created by users has unique value and is difficult, if not impossible, for a competitor to replicate. Personal experience bears this out.

After HOGWILD! had been operating about a year, Harley-Davidson's legal department notified me that they own the rights to any use of the word "HOG," and to make a long story very short, I shut the board down. To this day, even with several attempts, Harley-Davidson motor company has not been able to stimulate the level of participation or the spirit of camaraderie or community online that I was able to achieve in my basement with one PC and some phone lines.

#### SEARCHING IN COMMUNITIES WITH CITYSEARCH

Let me segue my reminiscences about PRODIGY into a dream-come-true. Building on the HOGWILD! experience, during my last year or so at PRODIGY, I created a program called "communities of interest." We looked internally at the communities that had developed on our bulletin boards (over 400 of them), and began adding content and a sense of place related to the areas that had grown up organically around people's interests. Although I was happy with much of the results, we still lacked the connection with the real world that I was beginning to see was all important.

After I'd left Prodigy and during a period of independent consulting, I had a chance to fantasize about what I would do with communities of interest. So, I wrote a business plan for a national network of local online services. I fleshed it out, thought through the financials, showed it to a few folks, but was then forced to set it on a back burner until I had time to pursue financial backing.

Before that day arrived, I read something about a Bill Gross start-up company in Pasadena called CitySearch. It sounded a lot like my idea, so I reached out to Bill and sent him a summary of my business plan. He asked Charles Conn, the recently named CEO of this nascent effort to call me as it appeared we were thinking along the same lines. Before I knew it, I'd joined the founding team at CitySearch.

CitySearch embodies many of the lessons I have learned about communities. It is a hybrid mix of a strong online effort focused 100% on a single, local community. Each CitySearch community is:

- Built from within the community, using local resources, working with local governments, Chambers of Commerce, and local media outlets;
- Each one is economically dependent on strong support from locally viable businesses;
- Every CitySearch community offers the opportunity of participation in this new medium to thousands of small and mid-sized businesses – local restaurants, flower shops, car dealerships and dry-cleaners...everybody!
- CitySearch makes sure that each site is a forum for local content, information that is almost impossible to find anywhere else, including a point of view created by local writers and editors, and incorporating contributions from all users of the system within the community.

Today CitySearch has sites in Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, Portland (Oregon), Austin, Nashville, San Francisco, and Pasadena. We've partnered with the *Washington Post*, who has licensed the CitySearch technology and process for Washington, DC. We've made arrangements similar to the *Washington Post* with the *LA Times* to do Los Angeles, with Fairfax Holdings to launch CitySearch communities in Sydney and Melbourne, and the *Toronto Star* to do Toronto.

From CitySearch I gleaned a new appreciation for the effort required to initiate intentional communities. It's difficult but ultimately possible, as evidenced by CitySearch' success. It is essential to find the right conference leaders or moderators. They must be able to carefully honor and nurture the discussions that spring up. Just as it is difficult to coax a few sparks from a piece of flint into a strong, life-sustaining blaze, it is tough to nurture a fledgling electronic community into a viable, self-sufficient entity. But it can be done. Perhaps the future will show us that this is one key to how we may save our cities. Who knows?

#### A PIXEL ON THE MAP

Consider, for example, Blacksburg, Virginia, a dot on the map southwest of Roanoke. Blacksburg also happens to be the most wired town in America. It is the longest running geographically local online community of its type. It happened before CitySearch, before Sidewalk. It happened without PRODIGY or AOL. It happened as a joint project of Bell Atlantic and Virginia Tech. The Blacksburg electronic community went into operation in October of 1993.

One early local critic of the effort, a therapist, said, "People will exchange real human intimacy for computer screens." In reality, the opposite has occurred. In one survey, 185 out of 219 people said, "Being online has brought the community closer together." C. Elliott, a retired person, said: "The way the Net has opened up the outside world is like a fairy tale." People report meeting neighbors they wouldn't ordinarily have gotten to know. And churn, long the bane of services like PRODIGY and AOL, is less than 2% in Blacksburg. I can assure you the large online services would be happy if their churn rate was only 20%.

In Blacksburg it appears that the Net has not replaced the real world but instead complements the physical space with new public spaces in which the entire community airs topics of interest and concern. In his book *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg laments the loss of communities as a place for healthy debate. Oldenburg theorizes that all stable communities center themselves around three places; home, work (or school) and a THIRD place. In America originally it was the church, in Europe it was a café, a lodge, or the piazza. But America does not have a stable third place now and that is part of the problem. Can "Online" partially be this "third" place? Blacksburg may yet give us the first answer to that question.

In his forward to the new book *Community Networks: Lessons from Blacksburg, Virginia*, Andrew Cohill writes: "A community network is not about technology; it is about giving people a new way to communicate with each other." Cohill reports that the biggest benefit for the physical community is that an electronic community makes it easier to keep in touch with people who are important to us. He says, "We all just communicate with each other more easily and more conveniently." The most commonly used feature is not net-surfing but email. This is followed by newsgroups and forums. And can you guess the two most common topics of conversation in Blacksburg's electronic community? Where to get your car fixed and where to eat?

I'd like to conclude my comments with five or six, or maybe even ten, pearls of wisdom about developing and nurturing online communities but I can't. I've been participating in them for almost twenty years—long enough to be an "old-timer"—and I'm still a novice. Sure, we've learned a few things, just like scientists have learned about outer space. All we've really learned is that there's more to learn. But I can tell you this:

- When starting a community, think of it as a baby. It requires a lot of time and effort to get it to be independent, and once it achieves that, it'll be completely out of your control and may even disown you. There is no guarantee of continued loyalty to the creator.
- Follow Cohill's advice from Blacksburg and "Plan Lightly." In other words, technology is changing so rapidly it's difficult to see ahead more than 12 months.

- Focus on EDUCATION not TECHNOLOGY. Getting people in the community doing the right things is more important than choosing the right kind of wire or network topology.
- The most important “content” is participation from within the community.
- And finally, find Project Champions and get the Community involved. Budding (and even established) communities all need “evangelists.” Recruit them from the Chamber of Commerce, health organizations, libraries and museums, tourism bureaus, schools, government agencies, civic groups and clubs, arts councils, local newspapers and magazines and senior citizens. Everyone is a resource.

Before I step down, I want to tell you briefly about my current company, Net Perceptions. We make a software product that fosters communities in a different way from others I've worked on. Using something called collaborative filtering, we allow web sites, those running online businesses or other services, to understand and respond to their customers as individuals. Customers like Amazon.com use it to create a sense of community on its web site while providing customers the ability to tap into the knowledge base of other users of the system to get highly accurate and personal book recommendations. We power E! Online's Moviefinder site and Planet Direct will use our product to help people find others like themselves on the Net, people with like interests and concerns. It is a terrific product and you can find out more about it at [netperceptions.com](http://netperceptions.com).

Thank you for your kind attention. On the slide now is a group of resources that you may find useful in the study of this topic, including all of the references in my remarks. If you would like me to forward this list to you, I would be most happy to do so. You need only send an email request to the address listed on the screen, [steve@stevelarsen.net](mailto:steve@stevelarsen.net).

Best of luck to you in YOUR communities.