Outposts

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When we launch into a discussion of the great lessons we learned as early Internet users in the 1990s, our children close their ears, roll their eyes, and say to themselves that mother is blathering again or that father is speaking into his soup. We tell them the stories again and again, but they never take the point.

No matter how hard we try, our children will never grasp that we once found tremendous pleasure in merely connecting to a distant machine, making its disk drive spin and its lights flash. Like many a dilettante adventurer, we cared little what we found on these machines, we only cared that the response came from far away.

VIRTUAL TRAVELS

On such virtual travels, we would uncover ordinary bits of information that we would treat as rare bits of exotica: the computer policies of a university in Florida, the lunch menus of a research laboratory in Geneva, the schedule for a faculty club in Rome. The actual discoveries were not important. We took pleasure from the mere fact that we could connect with a machine that sat on the far horizon.

When we reached such a machine, we occasionally found a lone outpost where a dedicated individual was trying to use digital communication for some noble purpose, much like a missionary trying to teach hymns to the natives. These outposts were not quite blogs nor even personal Web pages, though they pointed in the direction of both. They were usually just a collection of writings—crude, simple essays that found shelter in some digital archive. Accessing these archives would reveal a small body of followers who would discuss the texts over e-mail.

On my early travels through the network, I encountered dozens of these outposts, small communities devoted to obscure computer languages, science fiction, or the lyrics of heavy metal songs. At first, I would spend some time investigating these groups, but I soon found that they offered little of interest for me, and I quickly left them to pursue other adventures as I traveled through the Internet.

However, a digital library called “Letters from Sarajevo” did catch my attention. It was not, as I had originally hoped, actually located in the former Yugoslavia, but was found in the general-purpose computer of a small, midwestern college. It was the kind of school that tries to instill a global vision in its students but has limited success. Most of the student body has trouble thinking beyond their own county’s boundaries and find it impossible to conceive of themselves in a different country.

The digital library’s organizer was a student who used the name Holden Caulfield. The student explained that he had taken this nom de plume from his favorite book, Catcher in the Rye. He admitted that the book had nothing to do with Sarajevo, Yugoslavia, or computers. He even acknowledged that it was a little paradoxical to take a false identity from a character who professes to hate phonies and fakers. He merely liked the name and felt comfortable writing behind it.

“It gives me a sense of distance,” he explained. “I occasionally have a bit of a thin skin. When someone writes something that attacks Holden Caulfield, I find that I can put a buffer between me and that identity. I can pause, think for a bit, and then respond calmly and rationally.”

POLITICAL CONFLICT

At the time, there was little calm or rational discussion about the Balkan states. The fragile trust that had bound them into the single country of Yugoslavia had been snapping and unraveling for 15 years. One by one, the largest constituent states—Bosnia, Slovenia, Croatia, and Serbia—had stepped away from the union. Slovenia and Croatia moved first to declare their independence. Their actions were accompanied by justifications on their part and accusations by the states that remained. Every insult, every historical precedent, every ethnic snub was recalled and flung into public view. “We have been wronged,” claimed one side. “No, it is us who have been slighted,” responded another. “You both are lying, and we are the victims,” argued a third.

By the early 1990s, the conflict in Bosnia had invaded global computer networks. Partisans argued their points via e-mail and in discussion groups. At times, Usenet would carry two or three heated discussions about the Balkan region. Many computer
scientists found these discussions disturbing. “Where is truth to be found?” they asked. “Why is it our job to find it?”

In the winter of 1992, as Bosnia became the battlefield for the dis- solving nation, some researchers began to argue that computer net- works were not the appropriate forum for such political discussions.

“Have the networks been used inappropriately?” asked one observer. “Do or should the organizations running the networks have policies on this matter?” The answers to such questions were controversial in themselves. Some favored excluding all political commentary. Some were willing to draw the line at mass mailings. Some demanded a fully open network.

“It would be a major blow to freedom of speech to take such calls [for restrictions] seriously,” wrote one computer scientist. “They are remnants of communist thinking, where it was possible to forbid any activity under the pretext that it is political.”

**GLOBAL COMMUNICATION**

Caulfield cared little for the debates over the proper use of computer networks. He saw digital communication as an interesting tool and wanted to use it for his own purposes. “I was lucky enough to be on the ground floor,” he admitted. “I had dreamed for years of having a chance to communicate globally, to be in on the opening of the Soviet bloc to Western computer interaction.”

But from his corner of the world, Caulfield could participate in precious little global communication. He could listen, gather information, and put his thoughts into words, but he stood at the headwaters of a small tributary to the Internet. He knew no one in the former Yugoslavia, no Balkan partisan who might want to communicate with him. All he could do was stuff his message into a bottle and cast his ideas onto the waters with the hope that they might find a sympathetic recipient.

Caulfield was not alone at the water’s edge. Through the trees, he could see the fires of other small settlements, people who used the same software and the same systems to support some little community. There was a group that discussed Republican politics. Another that read European history. A third that was interested in the general problems of political discourse. Yet another discussed a musical band that seemed to be both popular and important. None of these communities was at the center of the Internet, at some major server that would attract attention. Each was led by a single individual who posted essays and called for responses from interested readers.

In time, the different groups began to establish paths between their organizations. The leader of one group would read the essays posted by another and add comments to the public discussion. “I spent about eight hours a day online monitoring 41 discussions,” admitted Caulfield. “I developed a methodology for deciding what I wanted to read and what was gibberish or garbage.” He added, “I probably missed some things, but not much.”

Caulfield claimed that he read about 70 percent of all the material in the discussions and contributed about 10 to 30 messages a day to the server. “I felt like I was trying to keep the standards of debate and discussion on a high plane, tempered by a good dose of reasonability,” he said.

**STANDARDS OF DEBATE**

At the start, Caulfield, like many network pioneers, had faith that any discussion on the network would naturally be well behaved and intelligent. He believed that the contributors would respect the technology and use it wisely. This proved to be a naïve faith, a false trust in the kindness of strangers or the inherent goodness of primitive men and women.

During the early days of the Bosnia conflict, when Caulfield’s discussion group was new and the participants were eager to demonstrate their mastery of the technology, if someone got out of line, the infraction was minor. Within a day or an hour or even a few minutes, other discussants would correct the individual’s improper behavior. The group seemed to be committed to Caulfield’s high standards of debate, and they were willing to enforce a common etiquette.

After a few months, this idyll was threatened by a new participant in the group, a young man who was very sure of his own opinions and was not prepared for others to contradict him. At first, the newcomer was a minor irritant, a commentator who wrote a note about every posting. However, he quickly grew bold and insulting. He mocked the contributions of others and began comparing Caulfield’s essays “to the writings of Hitler.” Soon, he was dominating the group and threatening the discussion leader.

“He refused to stop despite both private and public entreaties,” Caulfield recalled. “After a week of agonizing, I finally deleted him from the group. I really did not like doing it, but I felt he had backed me into a corner.”

The incident was a moment of growth, an event that taught Caulfield much about networked discussions. He found that the participants would not behave out of respect for technology and that bad behavior could easily

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In the decade since 1997, computer networks have become an arena of opinions and reactions. There are now at least 12 million bloggers in the US, roughly 4 percent of the country’s population. Many of these bloggers are isolated writers, individuals who send their ideas into the void and hear nothing in return. They write diaries of their lives, offer observations of common tasks, or comment on the events of their neighborhood.

Such work has its value, but it is little more than Holden Caulfield’s abandoned server. The more ambitious seek to be part of the grand blogosphere and gain the attention of the prominent blog writers such as Arianna Huffington, Steve Clemons, or Matt Drudge. However, most are satisfied with being part of a group of four or five bloggers. Without the attention and comments of others, they know that they are merely playing with an expensive toy, pushing buttons that make some lights flash and a disk or two spin.