Cyberspace Innkeeping: Building Online Community

Early January, 1998

In the five years since I wrote the last revision to this essay, a great catalyst has propelled the Internet and all things online into the forefront of world consciousness: the World Wide Web. Of course, developments such as the manufacturing of inexpensive routers, cheaper computers and faster modems have played a crucial role; there would be no popular use of the Internet and Web without them. But it is this easy-to-understand platform that integrates multimedia and communication using HTML, a code that anyone can easily learn, that has propelled the Internet to center stage.

In the process, the once-obscure notion of online or "virtual" community has become commonplace to the point that it is now in vogue to declare almost any online gathering of people a "community." Recently I said in joking to a friend, "these days an online community seems to be defined as any group of people any place, for any length of time, for any reason, that communicates." And, indeed that may be right: I can concede that it is plausible to use the word "community" to describe a huge variety of social configurations.

The first two entries of "community" in the American Heritage Dictionary call it 1.) a group of people living in the same locality and under the same government; and 2.) a group of people having common interests. If you believe the "space" part of "cyberspace," and you consider that a Terms of Service for use of an online service could be called a kind of government, then #1 works in the online realm. Second, consider that "common interests" are the only real reason that people get online to communicate, then #2 works well too. Make a hybrid of these two and it gives a pretty good working definition of "online community."

But, assigning the mantle of "community" to one's enterprise before the fact as a marketing hook just serves to cheapen the term. Because it can only really be true if the people who are actively involved in it, declare for themselves that it is true: we are a community.

This essay has an orientation towards the "conferencing" environment, which is written conversation of the asynchronous or "bulletin board" style. Most of my own experiences at both the WELL and my current work at The Gate (www.sfgate.com) have been centered around it. But I have also worked for two companies, French Minitel and Ubique.com, where I focused almost entirely on real-time chatting. These principles work equally well for chat as well as MUDs and other forms of online communication.

Over the years much has changed but the advice is still valid: do these things and your online offering will allow your participants a better chance of developing real and meaningful relationships with the people that they meet online. Because at its essence the advice is to be kind, be interested and pay attention. Not so different than the rest of life. And that's the point. As virtual as you may want to make it, it is still reality governed by the same operating principles as the rest of life. Cyberspace doesn't live outside the rest of the universe. But it is still helpful to know a few tricks.

I. Something Old, Something New

When you log into an online service, you use new tools for an ancient activity. Even with all the screens and wires and chips and lines it still comes down to people talking to each other. The immense potential of this partnership of computer technology and human language is in this blending of the old and the new.

Language is so ancient a currency of communication that people of the Northern Hemisphere, from Europe to India, know of their common tribal roots mostly just by the remnant commonalities of the languages. Through all these thousands of years (sign language excepted), language has been either spoken or written. But online conversation is a new hybrid that is both talking and writing yet isn't completely either one. It's talking by writing. It's writing because you type it on a keyboard and people read it. But because of the ephemeral nature of luminescent letters on a screen, and because it has such a quick - sometimes instant - turnaround, it's more like talking. This act of conversing over computers is such a new twist that the lasting term for what it is has not yet been coined.

The new with the old. It is also new because you often feel a real sense of place while logged in, though it exists "virtually" in each person's imagination while they stare into a CRT screen. It's old because even if the village is virtual, when it's working right it fulfills for people their need for a commons, a neutral space away from work or home where they can conduct their personal and professional affairs.

My work with online services such as the WELL in Sausalito and The Gate in SF, is about building an online version of what Ray Oldenburg calls "the Third Place." In The Great Good Place he calls home the First Place and work the Second Place. "Third places," he says, "exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality. Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality. Third places are taken for granted and most have a low profile. Since the formal institutions of society make stronger claims on the individual, third places are normally open in the off hours, as well as at other times. Though a radically different kind of setting from the home, the third place is remarkable similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends."

I'll say right up front that my love for online interaction is because it brings people together. At the personal level it helps people find their kindred spirits and at the larger social level it serves as a conduit for the horizontal flow of information through the population.

In this piece, I will first describe some of the elements that can combine to create a village-like quality in an electronic environment along with some of the social dynamics at play in there, and then I'll offer a little advice for anyone who is, or wants to be, the innkeeper, so to speak, of their own online service.

II. The Virtual Village

Who does it attract?

Online systems attract independent-minded people. People who think for themselves and many people who work for themselves. Freelancers, contractors, entrepreneurs, and others who, because they are always looking ahead to that next job, need to have their shingle hung out. With so many people moving from one job to another, online public forums are good places to run into others who may lead you to your next work opportunity.

Online systems appeal to people who love wordplay, language and writing. And it appeals to people with active minds. The classic couch potato just isn't going to be that interested. Good conversation can be a hard commodity to find these days. If you love stimulating conversation - what I like to call an "intellectual massage" - it's a place to debate, joke, schmooze, argue and gossip.

Many people have fairly specialized interests and to find people with similar interests, you often need the opportunity to interact with a larger base of people rather than just the few in your physical neighborhood. And it appeals to people who have numerous interests because you don't have to go from club to club all over town to hang out and talk with people interested in specific things like boating or books. You can get around town without getting up.

And of course they are used by private groups to conduct ongoing meetings. It's an efficient way for a group to stay in touch, collaborate on documents, or plan other meetings and events. One of the great strengths of online conferencing is how you can switch from a relaxing and playful kind of conversation to something serious or businesslike with just a few keystrokes.

And then there are people who just have unfulfilled social needs and want to meet some people.

The mind pool

When it works right, an online gathering is a kind of organized mind pool. Everyone picks each other's brains. The informal nature of online conversation encourages people's amazing generosity in sharing the things that they know. It's a potluck for the mind.

The sysops don't create the information and sell it to everyone so much as the people themselves create the information and share it with each other. In a way we who manage online services are like operators of a picnic ground. We provide the tables and the people bring the food.

The information doesn't flow in a top-down manner, but rather horizontally among the peer group of the participants. I like to call it a People's Think Tank. People join online systems because they are useful personal tools. The horizontal information flow is really a by-product of this, but it has, I believe, a deep and abiding importance to all of us. Because the free flow of information among the people is essential to the health of a democratic society.

The sense of place

But something more is going on here. Dry terms like "think tank", "information exchange" and "conferencing network" are too flat, too monodimensional. They don't convey the reality that while you and the other people logged in are separated by miles of phone lines looking at CRT screens that just display written words, it feels like a real place in there. And those terms don't show that it's just about the easiest, lowest risk way to meet new people that there is. Nor do they describe how, via all this online talk, people form and sustain relationships. This is when it crosses over into something else, something fuller, something more like a community. In attempts to accurately describe this we conjure up familiar images like village, town, neighborhood, saloon, salon, coffee shop, inn. It's as if it is all of these things, yet isn't really any of them because it's a new kind of gathering. It just helps to hang something familiar onto it so we can picture it.

The tangible and the intangible

The tangible part is the hardware and the software - the physical network. Obviously you have to have that, and it has to work reliably. The intangible - the people part - is just as important because a system is as much defined and shaped by everyone's collective imagination as it is by the computers, discs and software tools.

All of this descriptive imaging about community comes from real people meeting there. But it goes much farther than that because traveling through the chips and wires, as a kind of sub carrier to the words themselves, is real human emotion and feeling. The spectrum of the "vibes" is just about as wide as it is when people meet face to face. It's sometimes harder to interpret them because there isn't any facial expression or body English, but they are there just the same and people feel them and react to them. Furthermore, the quality of the vibes - the atmosphere, the ambience - largely determines whether or not the people involved will develop any affection for the system at all.

Forums and hosts

It's important for public forums to have hosts who welcome the newcomers, try to keep the conversations reasonably on track and do basic housekeeping so there isn't too much clutter and confusion. They are responsible for maintaining some civilized

degree of order in the conference. Old extinct discussions are pruned out like tree branches. When people argue too heatedly and start tossing out the ad hominems, the host blows the whistle.

Every host has his or her own style and some forums allow a lot more tumbling than others.

Online conversation is, by its very nature, a mix of organization and chaos. This hybrid of talking by writing presents some interesting new challenges. Both talking and writing have their unique strengths. With writing, organization and a high concentration of usable information are desired. Online it's very useful to have labels for each discussion so you can get to the information you seek with efficiency. It's pretty difficult at a party to stand at the doorway of a crowded room where everyone is talking and determine which conversation is most interesting to you. In such cases, the benefits of the written word are strong. When talking, the whims of the people take the discussion off on any number of tangents. We have come to call this process of meandering "topic drift" and it often leads to the most delightful illuminations. So much so that many people find this to be one of the most appealing aspects of the whole online scene. But it can conflict with other peoples' expectations that a conversation will consist of material that is truly in keeping with the theme of the topic. This is where good searching tools are helpful.

Anonymity or your real name?

This is one of the most important decisions one has to make in the online realm, both as a provider and a user of a service. There is a definite tradeoff that will occur with either choice. One the side of anonymity you have: easy entry, greater safety, more freedom to play with one's whims and fantasies and higher population. With declaration of your real identity you get: commitment, greater likelihood that people will be truthful with each other, stronger chance that relationships formed online will blend into long-lasting "real life" relationships, increased confidence that minors could participate without being tricked, and a lower population.

My bias is towards declaring because when people don't have to take responsibility for what they say, then some of them will say a lot of irresponsible things. In an open group discussion, the signal to noise ratio develops a poor balance. Some situations are fine for open, "who cares" anonymity - single topic chats related to events like the Super Bowl, reader comments about specific current event topics, entertainment and fantasy sites that are focused on that purpose - but community as I define the word isn't likely to develop from it. Because we chose depth, reality and commitment, at the WELL, we required that people say who they really are. (Once in awhile there was an exception but that was one in a thousand. Actually it was possible to use an assumed name, but you would have to do it consistently with address and billing information and that required some motivation and dedication.) And it worked for us in a five-thousand-member environment that was mostly based in a specific geography where most people were fairly earnest cyber-pioneers who had some allegiance to the values of the Whole Earth Catalog organization that had started it, and thus, a sense of safety in being so open.

Here, in 1998, the online environment is far different and people must consider very carefully how easily they are willing to trade off their safety. These days, online activities are rarely centered in a single geographical region and participants can be very distant from one another, and the sheer numbers of online participants means that a higher number of unsavory people are out and about looking for sardonic amusement, or something worse.

When we first started a conference facility at The Gate in 1995, we wanted to make a responsible and valid discussion forum that would be appropriate for the large newspapers that owned it. And we wanted people to be able to communicate directly with each other so they could have one-on-one communication. So we required that people verify their identity with their actual email addresses. After awhile, one of the participants who disagreed strongly with a few of the people wasn't content to just contact those people in email. He found out where they lived and worked and started harassing them directly through the US Mail and even actual uninvited visits. This caused some of those people to leave the system and never return. Single women especially were wary of making any comments after that.

We knew we'd have to do something so we came up with a compromise that works quite well: you don't have to use your real name and you don't have to list your email address unless you want to, but you do have to have a consistent identity and you have to tell us, the managers of the system, who you really are so we can have a legitimate business and legal relationship with you.

A wide variety of topics

It's important to have variety. And if you don't see a topic covering what you want to talk about, you should be able to open up your own line of conversation.

What happens then is that you see the same people in different places and in different contexts, and fuller pictures of the people emerge as they reveal more dimensions of themselves.

The relationship of public and private conversation

Being able to converse privately in email or in a live chat with someone alongside a public discussion helps people form all kinds of relationships. It often starts with something like, "Hey, I liked what you said over in that discussion and I have a similar interest. Maybe we could talk more about it on the side." In the heat of debate, people use email to form alliances, and when people are moved by a touching story or feel agreement with a particular statement, they use email to lend support.

Encouragement of free speech

While system managers or hosts usually have the ability to remove or "censor" a given comment, I discourage it as a practice. And I especially dislike the approach where there are paid censors who prescreen everything to make sure it conforms to their standards. Better for people to speak freely and frankly to each other because when each individual knows that he or she may speak freely and

that they in fact take full responsibility for what they say, then it improves the content of the system.

I encourage all online systems to be places where controversial subjects may be discussed in a civilized way. Of course, how you defines "civilized" determines what you will allow. I frown on ad hominems, personal harassment, and threats but otherwise give wide berth to the variety of tastes and styles found wherever individuals gather.

However, a problem can arise if you have a registration system that allows the person to make public comments before you validate their entry. If someone is a nuisance to the other participants and you can't get them to stop and decide you must bar their entry, it can become a kind of game for the other person to continually come back in under new names and make the same comments. Then you either let them control the conversation or you have to assign someone to spend considerable time following them around erasing their remarks. So, again, a decision has to be made between easy entry and ability to control the conversation when necessary. You could just let anyone say anything at all and declare that anything goes, but those looking for some subtlety in human communication won't stick around.

Web pages and online conversation

When I left the WELL at the end of 1991, part of what I was hoping to help develop was an online environment that allowed easy blending of written online conversation with the more prepared written material of essays, articles, reports and books. Thanks to the wonders of hyperlinking and the World Wide Web, it is now common. This means that any conversation can contain immediate access to support or reference material. It isn't just everyone's opinion anymore. And with multimedia, it is possible to see pictures and listen to sound clips. This is a profound advancement of the art of online communicating. And, of course, any article could easily link to an ongoing conversation about that subject, which helps make it more vital.

In putting together a system or choosing one for participation, I would make sure that the software makes this linking easy for both reader and writer. Especially when the geographic distances are so great on the average, this ability to "show" as well as just "tell" makes a huge difference to the quality of the experience.

The face-to-face factor

When such things are possible, members of many online services like to see each other socially. A lot of online services host parties and get-togethers. The WELL has sponsored an open house pot luck party every month for over ten years. At The Gate we have had a few dinners. Participants in the online systems everywhere now regularly meet at dinners, mixers and parties.

On a smaller scale you can encounter someone online, start something up in email, and then take them to lunch, get up a card game, go to a movie, or meet them about a business project.

When a number of the participants in a discussion have met offline, the overall sense of familiarity in the online atmosphere increases. And this increases the sense of place for everyone, including those who either can't or don't want to meet anyone outside the online environment.

Professional and personal interactions overlap

This is where things really get interesting. Ultimately, any network is about relationships. I like to say that, rather than being in the computer business, I am in the relationship business. Some are ad hoc, some are long term, some are for business and some are social. Get online for business or for pleasure. While you can just do one or the other, many people use it for both. I know people who got online just for fun but made contacts that led to a new job. I also know people who joined for business reasons such as getting help on a computer application or doing research and made some new friends through conversing in other non-technical forums. Or maybe you are thinking of hiring someone you met online because of their technical expertise and by seeing their comments in other conferences you find that you also like their sense of humor. Or perhaps you don't care for their dogmatic attitude and that influences your decision the other way. The variations are endless.

One person who comes to mind is the radio producer who uses the WELL to talk shop with others in his field all around the country. When his two year old daughter became deathly ill, he would log in from way out on Cape Cod and would report, diary style, in the WELL Parents Conference about what they were going through. He would give the details and describe his emotional state and people would lend their support. It comforted him and it touched all of us who read it. Furthermore, this experience greatly increased his enthusiasm for what this kind of network can do and that spread to his business related activities online. Another described, over the course of a few years, his search for his biological parents. When he finally found them many of us rejoiced with him after reading his eloquent account. This guy works the same online crowd for his consulting business. I also know several people who found jobs via contacts at the WELL and The Gate that had come to it for strictly social reasons.

For the term "village" (as in "electronic village" or "virtual village") be applied to an online scene with any accuracy at all this blending of business and pleasure must be present. Because that's what a village is: a place where you go down to the butcher or the blacksmith and transact your business, and at night meet those same neighbors down at the local tavern or the Friday night dance.

III. Social Dynamics

Commonalities and differences

One of life's great paradoxes is that we are all the same and we are all different. One of the ironies of online interaction both public and private, is that, in developing relationships, people seek commonalities while displaying and discussing their differences. When people gather, much of what takes place as they develop these relationships and bonds, is a process of mutual discovery. This discovery produces a lot of the "aha! moments" that give

online life its kick. These moments, in which many talk back to the computer screen can range from empathetic tears, to "I feel like that too" to "oh, neat!" to "what a bozo" to "if he says that again I'm gonna scream!"

The level playing field

The great equalizing factor, of course, is that nobody can see each other online so the ideas are what really matter. You can't discern age, race, complexion, hair color, body shape, vocal tone or any of the other attributes that we all incorporate into our impressions of people. This, of course, will change as audio and video become common along with the written word. But, even then, a lot of people will play their sounds and show their video but won't show themselves. If the balance tips to anyone's advantage, it's in favor of those who are better at articulating their views. Some people are amazingly skilled at debating. Other people feel shyness around their own forensic or expressive skills. Posting a comment is "stepping out," so to speak, putting yourself "out there" to people you might not know. And many of them aren't going to reveal themselves because they are just "lurking" (reading without participating).

Posting and Lurking

In the online environment, just like any other social situation, the basic currency is human attention. In the public forums, you communicate with groups that may have as many as several hundred people involved - even if they don't all make comments.

Some people make so many comments they seem primarily interested in the attention, but many people don't say anything at all. In fact, most people who use online services don't post any comments. They lurk. In the world of online services theory the lurker/poster ratio is one of the indicators. Ten or more lurkers for every poster is common. Many people who do post comments are aware of this fact and orate at times as if they are addressing the Roman Senate, the online Continental Congress, or the lunchtime crowd at Hyde Park. I have heard online discussion called, "writing as a performing art." It sometimes reminds me of Amateur Night at the Apollo or the Gong Show, because you don't know what reaction people may have to the comment you make. Maybe you won't get any reaction. Maybe you'll get email voicing support or dissent, maybe someone will take you on in the discussion, or maybe you will have said something good enough to warrant a string of online "amens." At any rate, many are reticent to say anything at all because of this version of stage fright, while others take to it like Vaudeville troupers. An online system is a place where you have to give yourself permission to step out and participate.

The personality you project

Each person holds his or her own mental image of what the online society is and how it is structured. The corollary to this is the personality each person projects to everyone else. What you find here is that some people, viewing this as just another communication tool or social environment, try to make their online personality be as similar as possible to their personality everywhere else.

Other people change their personalities once they get online. This may come from the sense of safety and empowerment they feel in the sanctity of their room or office talking with people that they know can't deck them if they say the wrong thing. The online world might be where words can break your bones but sticks and stones can never hurt you. Others may be self-conscious about their appearance or some other handicap and, knowing that it isn't a factor in the interactions, simply feel more confident than they do elsewhere. For some others, the online environment is a place to "take time out" as MIT's Sherry Turkle would call it, by developing an imagined alternate persona and playing a kind of game.

I know some people who are much more bristly online than they are in person. And they enjoy the contentious nature of many of the conversations. They sometimes even agitate it to be more that way, as if it was a kind of "sport hassling." They like the ferment for its own sake.

Ferment

By its very nature, online discussion is going to involve disagreement. In our reach for analogies we often ask "is it a salon or is it a saloon?" Once again it's a hybrid. It's a salon, certainly, in the classic image of gathering for spirited, bright conversation where people of different backgrounds and disciplines come together for that intellectual massage that feels so good. But it's also like this Wild West saloon where you never know who's going to come in the swinging doors and try out their stuff on everybody. Somewhere on a system at any time there is usually some sort of ferment going on. Ferment is a necessary part of the recipe. Part of the scene will always be in flux. At times it will be argumentative and contentious. At other times it will seem like some sort of mutual admiration society. As a host or a manager, you accept that, and work with it.

There is concern amongst some participants that a topic or a forum won't feel "safe" to them. This elusive quality of safety depends on a few factors. The size of the group, the nature of the subject matter, the personalities of the people who happen to be in there talking, and the way that forum is hosted.

A forum environment that has a hostile atmosphere will discourage participation by those who have less aggressive tendencies. The hosting is important because in overseeing the discussion, you don't want things to sink down too far but setting too high of a standard for "niceness" can also kill off a discussion before anything worthwhile gets figured out. That means that some temperatures will rise some of the time. There will always be some rough spots whenever a group works to define itself. Without any ferment at all, the "brew" will quickly go flat.

Some of the arguments and debates we've had over the years have been pointless personal hassles, but many have led us to a fuller understanding of what we were as an entity, or what we thought we ought to be. It is important to note that policy and custom has been shaped at times by arguments and hassles that were often quite personal in nature. Like everything else in a scene there is a lot of blending of different elements. Disagreement about a point

or a matter of principle can get complicated when mixed in with dislike for the other person's style or personality.

The other side of this coin is the overt effort of people to lend affirmation and support to others. This may be something as simple as complimenting them on something they said or wishing them good luck in one way or another. It's like sending an electronic "get well" card.

Newcomers

Many of the regulars and old-timers know each other pretty well. To a newcomer it can seem like being a new kid in a high school.

When the face-to-face factor comes into the picture, things can get thicker still. People who haven't or don't see others "in person" may wonder if in-group tendencies get reinforced at social gatherings. In reality, the opposite is true for many people such as Carol Gould. She says, "My own experience at the WELL parties has been very positive. I was somewhat nervous about walking up to the group of people, none of whom I knew, but I was able to enter a conversation or two and before long I felt fairly at ease. People were curious as to who I was and, surprisingly, claimed they'd 'seen me around' on the WELL. At any rate, my sense was that people were curious and friendly, and it encouraged me to come to the next event. And I would have to say that I have never felt excluded or rebuffed by anyone."

Perhaps it's just a clique in which everyone is a member. As SF Chronicle columnist Jon Carroll observed, "I had a great experience at Howard's book- signing, which was my first Well event. I met all these folks for the first time, and the air was filled with, 'You mean you're onezie' and 'I think that's rabar over there' and glad cries and furious conversation and the other people in the bookstore were like, 'Who are these people?' In other words, I was member of a clique totally composed of people I had never met before."

There is, however, always a challenge for the regulars to remember what it is like for a newcomer.

It must be remembered by all that newcomers are essential to the survival of the group because they refresh the place, strengthen its vitality and replace the people who move on. Without new viewpoints and personalities the place becomes stagnant.

Ownership of words and intellectual property

Is it publishing or is it just conversation that happens to be in writing? The WELL User Agreement says "You own your own words." This simple phrase gets to the heart of the matter of intellectual property as applied in the online world, but, like all of these other issues, is fraught with ambiguity and is subject to myriad personal interpretation. "You own your own words" was intended to mean that you, and not the system operators or management, are responsible for what you say. You take the heat, but you get the credit. But does getting the credit mean that your every utterance is a standalone piece of copyrighted intellectual property that requires your express permission for reproduction?

Does the fact that anything you say in an online system can be downloaded and printed out by anyone who happens to read it create a different class of reproduction than quoting without permission for a commercial publication? If a journalist quotes something from an online system and they don't obtain permission, did they steal it, or did they overhear it in a conversation? We can't lose sight of the concept of fair use here. Like a publishing agent told me once, "if you think it's fair use, then it probably is."

While I don't like to see people get too maniacal about what happens to things they type into a system because actual control is already just about impossible, and getting worse, I do think that good manners and consideration of others' wishes are critically important, even into the far reaches of cyberspace.

Censorship

If a system is privately owned, what are the rights of the individual verses the right of the owner to remove someone's comment? Does a user of an online system waive certain absolute rights when they join a given network? Are the owners of a system responsible to their customers and the right of those customers to express themselves freely, or is the system responsible for making sure that some kind of community standards must apply to the electronic dialogue? Some of it is easy to answer because certain activities such as posting an illegally obtained credit card number or offering to sell controlled substances are clearly illegal and must be removed.

But what about "community standards?" Current obscenity law refers to "local community standards" having jurisdiction in deciding what constitutes obscenity. But in the online world, where people meet in virtual space even though the participants may be located anywhere in the world, are there any local standards that even can apply? Does the physical location of the system matter? If the WELL were located in Alabama or Georgia instead of Sausalito California, would it have to alter its method of managing the online society? Does the SF Gate need only to conform to San Francisco standards? The question can be posed: do you bring the service to them (in which case their local community standards would apply) or did they come to you to get it (in which case your community standards would apply)? To me, the latter of these makes more sense.

Opting out

I like to say that if you think you are in a community you probably are, and if you don't, you aren't. Online, this sense of community is far less obvious than it would be in a small town or a church community. In fact, it only exists as a commonly-held, ongoing agreement of the participants who make it be true *for them.* Ultimately, all communities are a set of agreements among the people and in any community (and especially these days when many neighbors hardly know each other), one can always have strong or weak involvement with the group. But the online environment lends itself well to a person who wants to interact online, follow rules, observe protocol and etiquette, and still being completely disengaged from any sense of belonging to a community.

There will always be people who will say, "uh-uh, not me. I'm just here for the info. I'm not part of any community, thank you very much." And I think that's healthy. Indeed, some of these people speak up at times when there seems to be an excess of "groupthink" taking place.

IV. Keeping it Running

Your primary job

As manager of an online service, everything you do boils down to one thing: keep the dialogue going.

In this sense it's like running a railroad or a cruise ship. In those kinds of businesses there is the need to keep the motors running or, in our case, the server running. But the customers must also be pleased aesthetically as well as other ways that are not so tangible as making schedules and keeping the restrooms clean. We have to have good quality conversations and the atmosphere has to be warm enough that it encourages people to open up. You can't have just one of these things going for you; it has to run right and people have to like it.

Being a service business means that success brings increased pressure to deliver a high standard to the growing number of people. A service business isn't like doing a painting or making a record. It's more like an airline that upgrades its planes as the technology moves forward. The basic product needs to be constantly refined and made more efficient. Furthermore, large sizes of people involved in the same conversation changes the dynamics of the conversation. Growth means the potential for more good minds and hearts meeting and relating and sharing what they know. But size could cause the conversation to deteriorate by becoming cumbersome and complicated.

The real fuel that drives the engine of online interaction is enthusiasm. And you work to build and preserve that just as much as you work to keep the equipment together.

An informal atmosphere

You need to have rules and policies, but leave a lot of room for judgment calls. I like to run it similar to the way they referee NBA basketball games. There actually is a certain amount of body contact that goes on, but at some point you decide to blow the whistle and call a foul.

While I believe that it is important to have wide acceptance of various personal codes of conduct, I do like to cultivate a social atmosphere where it's basically not OK to be a jerk. What that means in practical terms is rightfully a hot, ongoing discussion topic that helps a group arrive at its social equilibrium.

My feeling is that informality is essential to the healthy growth of an online community. According to Ray Oldenburg in _The Great Good Place_, "the activity that goes on in third places is largely unplanned, unscheduled, unorganized and unstructured. Here, however, is the charm. It is just these deviations from the middle-class penchant for organization that give the third place much of

its character and allure and that allow it to offer a radical departure from the routines of home and work." Hence, I favor just enough rules to get us by and no more.

Whoever's there: those are your people

You can target and you can recruit and you can bring in your friends, but a lot of the population of the scene is self-selected. And these people whom you, too, will be meeting for the first time are going to be your customers and, hopefully, your allies. The trick is to make your alliances with the best qualities in a person. Then, help introduce that good part of someone to the good part of someone else.

They aren't going to all agree and you don't want them to all agree. If everyone agreed on everything, the place would get dull fast. And they aren't going to all like each other either. While it would be lovely if everyone got along, even if they disagree about a lot of things, it's a pretty unrealistic expectation. So, you have to be diplomatic. You will have to perform all sorts of little mediations between people, even if it's just to say, "aw, he's not so bad, really."

The big suggestion box

Suggestions and advice happen at one time or another in just about every area of a system. In that sense the whole thing is like one huge suggestion box. While you don't have to do everything that everyone tells you, and ultimately you make the decisions, it is essential that people know that you are listening and that you not only listen to advice and suggestion, you welcome it.

You need a big fuse

If you want to manage an online system that is devoted to the free exchange of ideas and opinions, then you need to have your tolerances set very high so that you don't melt down when the disagreement gets too thick.

There will always be people who disagree with your views or your approach and sometimes they may even be right. This is your opportunity to show what you mean by tolerance, because you have to expect a certain amount of criticism and you can't freak out when you get it.

Use a light touch

Computers and and other high-tech gadgets call to mind images of Orwell's 1984 and other scary visions of people droning away at terminals while Big Brother determines their destiny and even their everyday actions. Ironically, among those most concerned about such possibilities are computer professionals themselves. As manager of an online environment you have a lot of clout, should you choose to wield it, so you need to be almost reassuring to people that you aren't interested in such heavy-handed control practices. Try to use a light touch in your actions and in the way you communicate to people both publicly and privately. Even if you are refusing to take a suggested action. People like to know that their views are respected and considered and that they won't

be treated in an arbitrary manner as if they were a number instead of a person. For a long time I have had the very strong impression that if I act too capriciously or with a heavy authoritarian hand, a bunch of people would sort of turn and say, "oh, gee I didn't know you were really the Brain Police. I guess I was wrong." Just about anything that smacks of heavy-handed administration has a kind of chilling effect on a scene that is based on the free flow of ideas. People won't stick around if it isn't any fun or if they feel they are being squelched. "Innkeeping" for an online scene is a balance between setting policy rules based on your own vision of things, and finding the "sense of the group" so that you may incorporate it into whatever decision you make.

Dealing with the dark side

The upbeat tone of this essay is not intended to deny the reality that there is a dark side to online interaction. This is an arena of real life, as valid and dynamic as any other. This means that there is both opportunity and risk. Especially now in these early days when there is so much excitement about this wonderful new meetingplace and the promise of a new community, a newcomer can have the illusion that the intentions of everyone they encounter in the online population are as good as they may appear from their words or tone of their conversation. It isn't always so.

As the manager of an online scene, you have a responsibility to inform people that there is danger and risk as well as opportunity. Think of yourself, perhaps, as the proprietor of a swimming pool or a beach resort. There is abundant opportunity for people to have fun, but if you aren't careful and aware, you could drown. Of course, you can't drown or get physically hurt from an online encounter or relationship, but you can get emotionally hurt and those wounds are just as real as they are anywhere else.

This is tricky stuff for everyone. How do you develop trust? Do you assume good intentions on someone's part unless they show you otherwise? Do you watch guardedly and only open up when someone earns it? The process of arriving at a sane balance is a journey that the group takes towards self- definition.

Censor and boot: the heavy artillery

The hosts of conferences, chats and forums have their own challenge in keeping things moving and energetic without it getting out of hand to the point that people feel intimidated or hurt. The atmosphere definitely varies from place to place based on how the host handles things. There are different tolerances for topic drift or what one person can say to another. Ad hominem statements are discouraged just about everywhere, but one host may, upon reading a comment that attacks the person more than

the statement, censor the comment outright. Another may just get into the conversation at that point and say something regarding ad hominem statements. Another may just let the fur fly. The balance is tricky when you want to build traffic because some people will want things quite polite or they won't say anything at all, and some people won't participate if they think there's too much control going on.

My own preference for censoring or removing a comment is that if someone says something that is outright illegal such as, "hey everybody, I just found this credit card. Here's the number!" then you remove it. But if it's something controversial or personally offensive, then I prefer to let the comment stay there and perhaps make a comment after it, saying something like, "here is an example of a truly offensive comment which says a lot more about the person making it than the person to whom it is directed."

Then there is the more extreme action: booting someone off of the system. In the six years I was at the WELL, we did this only three times. At The Gate, in three years, we have done it twice. I feel booting should be limited almost soley to deep and repeated harassment by one person to another. However, in each of these cases, the boot wasn't permanent. When the person agrees to shape up, they can re-enter. Rather than treating it like being exiled from a country, never to return, it is more like being told to step outside of the saloon until you cool down. Because the point isn't to get rid of people. The point is to try to make it so everyone wants to stay and talk.

Harassment, which means "intent to annoy," does happen online. To keep it to a minimum and to let the one who feels harassed make the determination, online systems should have user controls in email and in real-time interaction (like chatting) that allow you to block incoming messages from any given person. And, if you don't want to read anything that a certain person posts, it should be easy to filter it out.

The Management as part of the community

For many years I have been the manager of an interactive online environment. The people, the discussions they have, and the relationships that weave into the fabric of community are essential products of my business. But those of us who manage these products can also be a part of it. We too contribute to the discussions, joke and argue and tell stories about ourselves and the adventures we've had. We understand that it involves the heart as well as the mind. We don't have to hold ourselves separate from the folks. In that one may be akin to the innkeepers of old where the proprietor hangs out around the table and fireplace, sharing a cup or a good word with the guests.

Appendix. Principles of cyberspace inn-keeping

- The currency is human attention. Work with it. Discourage abuse of it.
- You are in the relationship business.
- Welcome newcomers. Help them find their place.
- Show by example.
- Strive to influence and persuade.
- Have a big fuse. Never let the bottom drop out.
- Use a light touch. Don't be authoritarian.
- Affirm people. Encourage them to open up.
- Expect ferment. Allow some tumbling.
- Don't give in to tyranny by individual or group.
- Leave room in the rules for judgment calls.
- Encourage personal and professional overlap.
- Think "tolerance."