Esquire

Life in Cyburbia

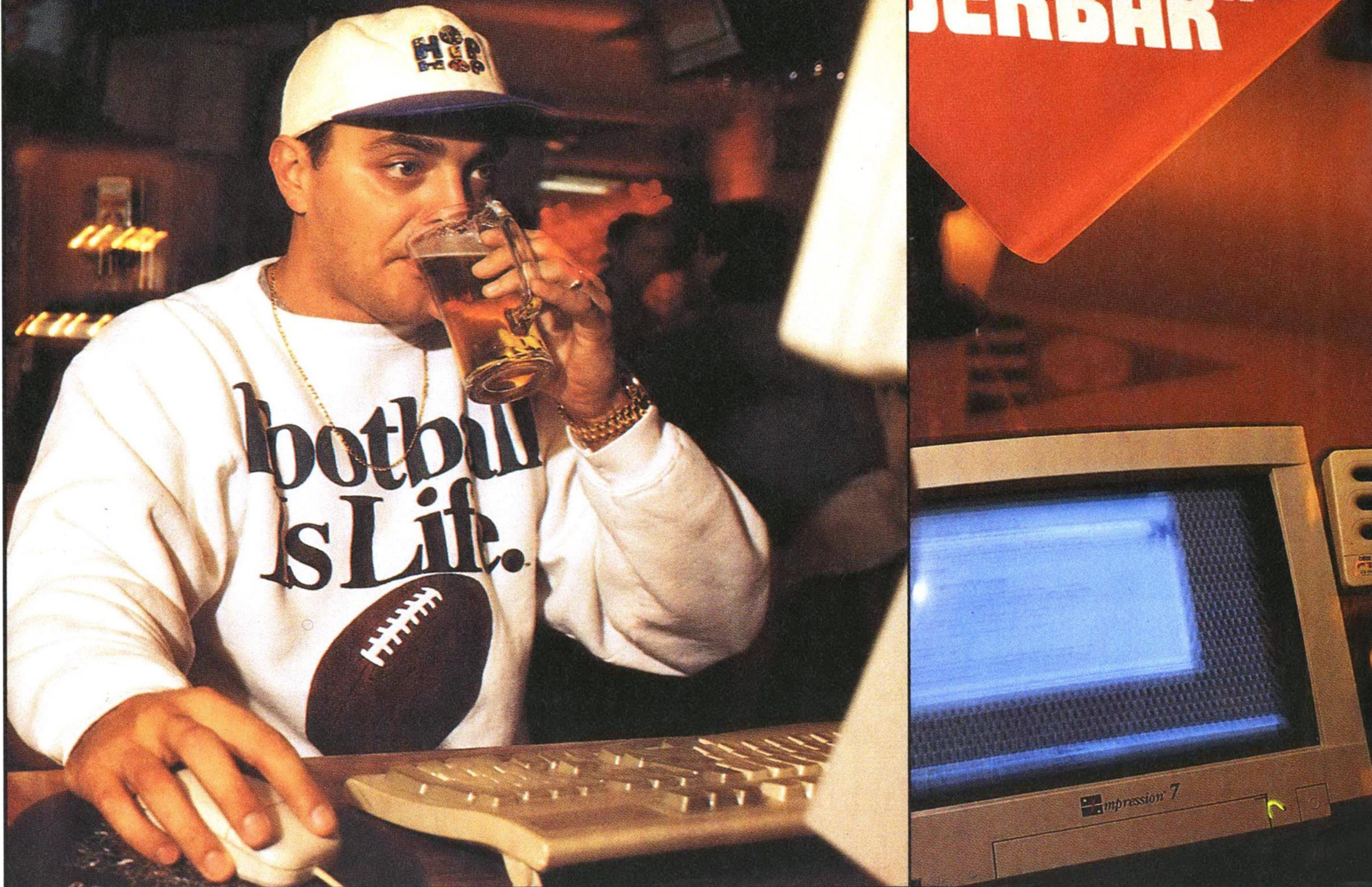
In the electronic village of Blacksburg, Virginia, the homes are wired, the schools are on-line, and you can even jack into the local pizza parlor. Is this a digital utopia or the end of civilization as we know it?

By Randall Rothenberg

Lions look pale and green under fluorescent light—especially when they're aging and Caucasian, as are most of the forty-one citizens gathered in the back room of the local Best Western for the bimonthly meeting of the Blacksburg, Virginia, Lions Club. Scientists and doctors abound—at my table alone sit three veterinarians—but that doesn't alter the sacraments that open every such conclave. The Tail Twister, a stern gentleman answering to the name Lion Andy, stalks from table to table, levying loose-change fines on those who have neglected to wear club pins in their left

DAVID BARRY

Blacksburg Electronic Village "mayor" Andrew Cohill: "For me, the issue is this: Computers are here; how are we going to make them humane? My job is to make us masters of our destiny, not slaves."



Bellying up to the cyberbar: "Everyone's tapping into it," says Bogen's owner Bill Ellenbogen. "It's a sea change in the way information is going to be disseminated."

lapels. After "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and the Pledge of Allegiance, eighty-three-year-old Lion Roy entreats the Lord to "help us be caring, loving, and serving in the Lionist tradition." Then, following the roast beef, potatoes au gratin, string beans, and peanut cake, Lion Matt, a dentist and the club's program chairman, introduces the guest speaker, a young woman whose message to the old men is as unsparing as it is enthusiastic: Get wired now.

"Forty percent of our town is connected to the Internet!" proclaims Susanne Huff, an administrator of the Blacksburg Electronic Village—the BEV, to its friends—a cyberspace equivalent of the physical municipality in which she and her audience reside. A grand experimental venture by the local government, Bell Atlantic, and Virginia Polytechnic Institute, the BEV is designed to "enhance the quality of people's lives by hooking them up with each other and with local businesses and with community groups," Susanne explains. She is as evangelistic as she is pert. "We started out with one hundred members. Now we have eleven thousand! We have doctors, lawyers, restaurants, grocery stores, on-line. People working at home and sending stuff in to their bosses. It's amazing what's going on! I can dial up a local call and pop over to France or Japan or anywhere I want to. Visit their libraries, download information. We're trying to enhance our lives. We're just using that line to connect all of us!"

Her breathless pitch concluded, she takes questions from the visibly excited crowd. Can you really order groceries on-line and have them delivered? Are there delays in accessing information from overseas?

Lion Matt is skeptical. "I don't know enough about what 'going on-line' means," he says. White-haired, hard-of-hearing Lion Roy does, and he is indignant.

"I'd like to know something," says Lion Roy, a former plant scientist. "After this talk of words like *excitement* and *enthusiasm,* I'm interested in Bible study, in business, and in investments. I'm not remotely interested in paying my bills in any way other than the way I do now. I don't want to buy anything I can't touch." He fairly spits his grievance. "*I can't for the life of me see what I can get out of this!*"

A murmur dashes from table to table. Finally, a Lion roars from across the room: "That's what they told Henry Ford, Roy!"

I have come to Blacksburg, Virginia, the most wired city in the United States, because, like old Lion Roy, I dangle uncomfortably between what the late British novelist C. P. Snow called "the two cultures," the intellectual and the scientific, whose lack of mutual understanding is cleaving the country into warring factions. At issue is technology—the microchips that are invading us from every direction, forcing us to reshape our institutions, our lives, and our culture to accommodate them.

Don't get me wrong. I love computers and the Internet. In October, a typical month, I spent more than fifty hours on-line, sending E-mail, participating in conferences, and downloading poetry and pornography. But I can no longer ignore the ravages

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that seem to derive from the vaunted new technologies: the disappearing jobs, the social separation, the interpersonal malice, the growing preference among our political leaders and cultural avatars for virtual reality over, well, real reality.

To those who've fallen prey to the scientific culture's propaganda, these fears are irrational. The Wired Ones—my term for those who follow the you-ain't-hip-if-you-ain't-on-line credo of *Wired* magazine—tell us confidently that you cannot stop technology, should not question it, and will ultimately benefit from it. They claim support from history, economics, and common sense and consider those who resist computers to be at best curmudgeons, at worst Unabombers. Defy technology if you must, but prepare to be, as *Wired*'s executive editor, Kevin Kelly, avers, "noble but marginal."

Were their pronouncements empty blather, the Wired Ones themselves would be marginal. But time and money are being spent to further their vision. Computers sit in about twenty-three million homes in this country, a number that's expected to grow by about 24 percent a year during the next three years. Eleven out of every hundred adults in the U. S. and Canada found their way onto the Internet last summer and autumn, according to a Nielsen survey, spending an average of five and a half hours a week on-line. This vast potential market has lured the local telephone companies to commit up to $150 billion to wire the nation with fiber-optic cable that can deliver the Net to every living room in the nation. By late November, investors had plowed $7.5 billion of their own money into the top three publicly traded Internet companies, an amount greater than these fledgling enterprises were worth.

What *Newsweek* has dubbed "technomania" has flooded from the geeky margins of society into the very heart of our political, intellectual, and social life. *The New York Times* devotes a weekly section almost entirely to the Internet. Once the domain of the überhip, World Wide Web sites have become de rigueur for marketers as stodgy as Chemical Bank (http://www.spectra.net/mall/chemical) and Kellogg's cereals (http://www.kelloggs.com). A book by a dyslexic MIT professor who believes "the change from atoms to bits" is both "irrevocable and unstoppable" shoots to the top of the best-seller lists. And the House of Representatives has elected a Speaker who wants to cut Medicare, Medicaid, and educational support but talks of the need for a "missionary spirit" that would tell "the poorest child in America, 'Internet's for you.' "

The opposition's pockets may not be so deep, but its voices are loud and influential. In books with titles like *The End of Work* and *The Cult of Information,* they tell us that technology is not empowering but diminishing us. It is no longer creating jobs, they say, but taking them away. Some, harking back to the nineteenth-century Yorkshiremen who smashed the new, mechanized mills that had taken their jobs, proudly call themselves neo-Luddites and, like their self-styled leader Kirkpatrick Sale, happily hammer computers into the kinds of bits you can see and appreciate.

The public is listening. About one quarter of all Americans say they have mixed feelings about computers, according to a recent opinion poll by Princeton Survey Research Associates. If employment and incomes continue to waste away, those numbers will certainly grow. The division of the workforce into the technologically adept and the uneducated and unemployable has become "the hottest unresolved topic in economics today," says Stanford University economist Gavin Wright. "You will find many economists, perhaps the majority, who would say it's technology that's eliminating the well-paying ordinary jobs and more or less putting people in minimum-wage or low-pay work, where most of the new jobs are available."

In Blacksburg, they have no such fears.

Bill Ellenbogen, a six-foot-five-inch, 260-pound leviathan who once knocked heads on the New York Giants' offensive line, seems an unlikely Virginia gentleman.

Back in the mid-seventies, he had a penchant for getting into fights, especially with the crosstown Jets. After playing for ten more teams—four NFL, two WFL, three Canadian, and one semi-pro—he returned to Blacksburg, where he'd been a standout for the Virginia Tech Hokies, earned a master's in education, tended bar, and, finally, bought a restaurant. He named it Bogen's. Thirteen years later, it's a pine-paneled local institution.

I ask him whether he keeps in touch with any of his old teammates. "Funny you should ask," he says, leaning against the barstool next to mine, talking above the crowd that's swarmed into the saloon to watch the World Series and quaff dollar-forty highballs. "A few months ago, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* did an article about the BEV, and it mentioned Bogen's and ran a picture of me. A day or two later, I got an E-mail message from Karl Chandler, who was on the offensive line with me. Hadn't heard from him in years." Reconnection: just one more in a long list of reasons that make the Internet, as far as Bill Ellenbogen's concerned, "akin to Gutenberg."

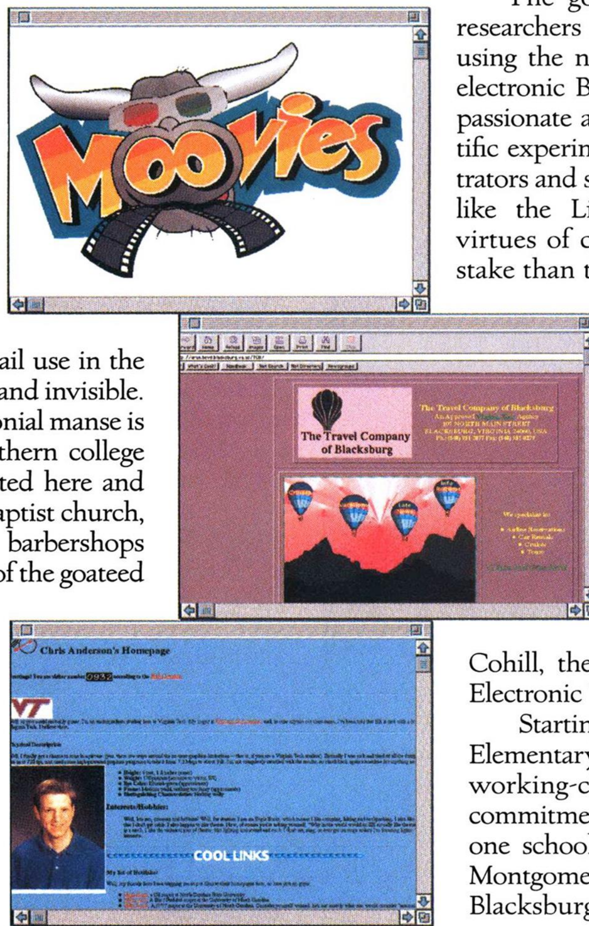
"I think it's the dawn of a new age," he tells me. Behind him, a pair of professorial types hop back and forth to the computer terminal he has placed atop a pedestal between

the pool tables and the dartboards. The men are settling a baseball bet by surfing their way to ESPN's site on the Web (http://espnet.sportszone.com)—exactly the kind of use Bill envisioned when he installed the Mac and began to advertise Bogen's as the "world's first cyberbar."

"Everyone's tapping into it," Bill says. "It's a sea change in the way information is going to be disseminated. The printed word will become less important. There's no reason for *The New York Times* to print that whole goddamn Sunday paper and fill our landfills when we can download it."

Bill Ellenbogen is a Wired One. In Blacksburg, of course, he is far from alone. The town, about nineteen square miles of university-dominated exurb nestled in the Blue Ridge mountains forty miles south of Roanoke, claims the highest per capita Internet and E-mail use in the world. The activity is largely private and invisible. Main Street up from Bogen's old colonial manse is what you'd expect in a sleepy, southern college community: a broad boulevard dotted here and there with a Mexican restaurant, a Baptist church, an ersatz British pub, and three barbershops cheek by jowl. There are few, if any, of the goateed and glassy-eyed cyberholics who haunt California's Silicon Valley and New York's Silicon Alley.

Yet imperceptibly, in houses and schools and stores, in apartment complexes wired for action, along lines made of copper or silicon, residents are surfing off the BEV's home page on the World Wide Web (http://www.bev.net) and checking out the new releases at the Moovies video store, posting apartment-for-rent notices on the "bburg.forsale" gopher, learning about the back-to-campus pizza-and-Coke special at VP Pie, studying which antibiotics can cause pseudomembranous colitis on Dr. Hendricks's searchable on-line database, investigating the availability of Jerry Pournelle sci-fi at the Tech library, and performing hundreds of other tasks each day.



Surf City—a sampling of BEV Web sites: The local video store (http://www.moovies.com/moovies), a Blacksburg travel agency (http://uran.bevd.blacksburg.va.us/TCB), and a Virginia Tech student (http://www.bev.net/users/homepages/chanders) have all gone digital.

Pioneering is nothing new to Blacksburg; the town was colonized by homesteaders who braved Shawnee raids to settle the territory. More than two centuries later—in 1987, to be exact—the settlement of Blacksburg's electronic village began when Virginia Tech invested $16 million to build a state-of-the-art digital telephone system that effectively placed a 19,200-baud modem on the desk of every student, staffer, and faculty member. At the time, the Internet was quite small, limited mostly to places like Bell Labs, Xerox Parc, a few universities, and some government agencies. The Hokies took to the technology, communicating via E-mail, downloading documents from the university mainframe, exploring the few public sites available. By the early 1990s, they were asking Tech's administrators why they couldn't go on-line at home. So the university struck a deal with the local phone company and the town government to wire Blacksburg with high-speed lines, establish community sites on the Internet, and provide residents with one of the least expensive Net-admission rates anywhere—$8.60 a month for unlimited access.

The goal is investigative—a team of Tech researchers is studying how and why people are using the network, making Blacksburg a sort of electronic Biosphere—but the project is far more passionate and purposeful than the typical scientific experiment. Week after week, BEV administrators and staffers descend on community groups like the Lions Club, proselytizing about the virtues of cyberspace. They see nothing less at stake than the survival of their own and similar communities in the nation's southern and midwestern backwaters, which were as savaged by the Industrial Revolution as eastern cities have been by the decay of manufacturing. Telecommuting, service industries, "knowledge work," can, they believe, restore them.

"The death of rural America—the network has the potential for turning that around," Andrew Cohill, the unofficial mayor of the Blacksburg Electronic Village, tells me.

Starting, perhaps, in places like the Bethel Elementary School in nearby Bethel, a rural, working-class community that—thanks to a commitment among the BEV's sponsors to wire one school in the poorer parts of surrounding Montgomery County for every school in affluent Blacksburg—has fifteen terminals with rapid access to the electro-byways.

One day not long ago, Melissa Matusevich, the district's social-studies coordinator, was approached by two fifth graders who wanted her to settle an argument—whether money was the same all over the world. She took them to a computer, did a Web search to find a currency-exchange-rate site, and rapidly developed an ad hoc curriculum incorporating both simple math and worldly investigations. Before long, the kids were receiving scanned-in pictures of foreign coins and paper money from E-mail correspondents around the world. "One of the most frustrating things for a teacher is to get a kid excited about a topic only to frustrate the kid when you can't find resources," Matusevich told me. "Those days are over!"

Big Bill Ellenbogen thinks it goes beyond resources. "It's like 1870, and a kid who could read versus a kid who couldn't," he says. "Computers are the reading of our era."

Couldn't that be a problem, I ask, especially for those poorer areas where, unlike Bethel, no patrons are available to provide for the have-nots? "It may be," says Bill, "but you can't stop it. You can try to stop the advance of technology, but it's not gonna happen."

We've been hearing that a lot lately, from none so loudly as Newt Gingrich and his acolytes. Their credo belies the root meaning of the political doctrine—conservatism—to which they claim allegiance. Instead, they want what the Speaker calls "a revolution," driven by technology, that "will empower and enhance most people."

Newt has written glowingly of the time, a decade or so hence, when "most Americans telecommute," when diagnostic chairs in our dens will allow doctors to examine us via cyberspace, when retraining for a new job will require us only to "enter the on-line learning system and describe what you need." But a purer version of his philosophy is proffered by a Washington organization with the unobjectionably nonpartisan name Progress & Freedom Foundation.

In another era—the 1950s, say—the PFF would have been called a front group. Its president headed Gingrich's own political-action committee before establishing the foundation. Its chairman was President Reagan's science adviser and the proud papa of the discredited Star Wars missile-defense system. Its "fellows" include Gingrich disciple Arianna Huffington. And its message, as relayed in the preamble of its "Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age," is as radical as it is portentous: "The central event of the twentieth century is the overthrow of matter. In technology, economics, and the politics of nations, wealth—in the form of physical resources—has been losing value and significance."

What this means in practical terms is quite stark. The easy availability of information via the Internet "spells the death of the central institutional paradigm of modern life, the bureaucratic organization," the PFF says. Governments will crumble, and with them, such government functions as Social Security, which has been "left behind by information technology that empowers consumers" to choose their own retirement vehicles. Cities, too, will be unnecessary, because "advanced computing power" will "allow people to live farther away from crowded or dangerous urban areas."

"What digital technology—connected computing—allows us to do," says Jeffrey Eisenach, the foundation's president, "is give the worker all the information and all the knowledge that the manager would have had and eliminate the knowledge priesthood, the bureaucracy."

I spend a morning in the Montgomery-Floyd Regional Library, a ten-minute drive from Bogen's, where four terminals sit on a round table under a vine-covered canopy marked BLACKSBURG ELECTRONIC VILLAGE. A steady stream of men and women, most of them firmly middle-aged, enter, tap their way onto the BEV, knock about, sign off, and leave. Walter Zicko, the library's technology adviser, tells me that most people come in to send E-mail to friends, to post résumés, or just to surf for pleasure.

A weathered-looking older gentleman with dark, sparkling eyes and a thick black mustache seems so determined in his actions that I am moved to ask him what he is up to. I am surprised to get in response not a Virginia drawl but a dense New York accent. "I'm in a multiple-sclerosis newsgroup," says the man, Phil Kastin, a printing-plant superintendent who retired here from Manhattan. "I live on the outskirts of Blacksburg. I don't have a computer at home, so I come here. One of my daughters has MS. So I find information that people are putting up about injections, other treatments, reactions to medication. Some people post about medications they've been able to get in England and France that they can't get here. I E-mail this to my daughter in St. Louis so she can ask her doctor about it.

"In fact," says Phil, warming to the subject, "*I* found her doctor for her. My daughter liked her neurologist, but he wasn't an MS specialist. This other doctor in St. Louis was posting information about drugs that he was doing research on. I sent the information to her, and she switched.

"This," he adds, "has opened up a whole new world for me."

By rights, I should be with Phil Kastin and his fellow Wired Ones. Like many whose childhoods coincided with Telstar and the Salk vaccine, I was raised to believe that science and technology were my friends and our nation's salvation. I can still remember my father rousing me and my siblings to watch John Glenn blast into orbit, and even during the antitechnological fervor that emerged during Vietnam, I never could accept the counterculture's disdain for space flight, biotechnology, and the other wonders of this half century of achievement.

Naturally, when personal computers became available, I went into hock to buy one as quickly as I could. My Osborne I, at twenty-three pounds and 64 kilobytes of random-access memory the first "portable" computer, still sits in my brother's attic. I graduated to an Apple IIe (with twice the memory!), on which I ran an early, crude electronic bulletin board from my Hoboken, New Jersey, basement.

As a writer, I saw early the benefits that the Wired Ones today call "decentralizing" and "empowering." I dismissed a broker because I was able to download better information from the Dow Jones News Service. Hours spent at the library hunched over the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* were reduced to minutes on Knowledge Index and Lexis/Nexis. When an illness kept me confined for two months, I telecommuted—editing stories at home and modeming them to the newspaper for which I worked. Now, the days begin with a review of E-mail on my Macintosh and a scan of my schedule on a Sharp Wizard and continue with shifts from Mac to PC to Thinkpad, from XyWrite to Word to Netscape, from New York's ECHO on-line conferencing service to New York University's on-line library catalog. I am wired.

Wired and worried. For, more and more, I find myself communing with people I do not know, speaking in a language that has no sound, writing on pages that have no texture, engaging in chats that are deracinated versions of the physical and verbal interplay that, in the time before modems, made up my day. I wonder whether technology, while extending the reach of our words, is diminishing our opportunities for real, honest contact.

These concerns about technology are far from new. Philosopher John Dewey, writing decades before the Internet, prefigured its deleterious effect on human intercourse and democracy, positing that "ideas which are not communicated, shared, and reborn in expression are but soliloquy, and soliloquy is but broken and imperfect thought."

The Wired Ones deny that the new technologies have the power to atomize the public so completely. "I think that's a fantasy. It goes against everything we know about human nature," Eisenach says. "Will face-to-face communication always be important? Yes. Will telecommunications try to replace it? Yes.

But this notion of an end point where the only way we interact is on a computer bulletin board is surreal and impossible."

Technology, though, does change culture, largely by altering the physical and social structures that support it. As Columbia University media scholar James W. Carey notes, the telegraph transformed finance, social relations, language, and thought by separating communication from transportation for the first time. It stamped out the florid writing that prevailed throughout the nineteenth century and replaced it with a lean style that took root in wire services and newspapers and blossomed on radio, on television, and, with writers like Hemingway, in literature. By giving buyers and sellers simultaneous access to commodity prices in different places, the telegraph created national markets and a national middle class. It even gave us time zones.

As much as the telegraph and successor technologies seemed to unite us, they have also served to separate us. Markets once were actual, central locations where merchants and townsfolk assembled to trade in food and notions. Today, they are psychographic constructs with no position in place or time. That the Internet will divide us even further, into small groups as disconnected from the common culture as a schizophrenic is from the world outside his head, seems indisputable. The very point of networking, as J. C. R. Licklider, one of the fathers of the Net, asserted a quarter century ago, is to isolate us from those who uncomfortably surround us. "Life will be happier for the on-line individual," he wrote, "because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity."

For MS sufferers and kids in rural communities—not to mention stamp collectors and Pink Floyd fans—this is certainly a salutary development. But is it good for a society to be ripped into tens of thousands of little groups, each with its own agenda, its own mythology, and its own Web page? Before dismissing my concern as paranoia, just consider how computer bulletin boards, with their tales of black helicopters from the United Nations, have elevated the militia movement from a bunch of isolated kooks into a national force.

Indeed, networked communications, existing in a screen-based parallel universe devoid of reality checks, are prone to the strident outbursts, abhorrent insults, and nervous fantasies that cause these little groups to form and thrive outside the mainstream. Blacksburg recently had its first experience with a political flame war when a Virginia Tech student posted four photos of nude women on a Web site for gay and bisexual men, Out and Proud (http://catalog.com/outproud), along with a message calling for homosexuals to "die a slow death." The student, whose name was withheld, was disciplined under a university statute that prohibits using the Internet to "harass, intimidate, or otherwise annoy another person."

Many Wired Ones are escaping the flame wars—and such attendant cyberspace ordeals as adolescent sex talk and marketing scams—by opting out of America Online, the Usenet, and other mass-market networks in favor of closed, monitored conferencing systems like ECHO and the WELL. Soon, such recourse may be unnecessary. "Bozo filters"—software, like the antipornography program SurfWatch, that can sift through the Internet and discard unwanted information before it hits your eyes—are rapidly coming to market. "Within two years, we'll have very sophisticated news readers that will filter out all that dreck," says BEV mayor Cohill. "It'll search for words like 'great deal' and 'make money fast' and toss it in the trash."

In other words, our choice will be to live in the electronic equivalent of gated communities—restricted to those who can pay and are willing to follow the rules—or to self-censor our world of offense. So much for the democratizing, empowering force of cyberspace.

None of this would be worth a worry if we didn't have a tendency in this country to embrace what a University of Maine historian, Howard P. Segal, calls "technological utopianism." We not only grasp at every new technology as the nation's savior but conform ourselves socially and politically around its presumed power.

In the fifty years following the 1880s, a time when the United States was undergoing the wrenching transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy, bookstores filled with idealistic paeans to electricity that extolled the same themes embedded in today's technomania. If the Internet can create what Eisenach calls a "much more pastoral environment than we have today," so an earlier utopian, William Dean Howells, believed electricity would get "the good of the city and the country out of the one and into the other."

There are differences between past generations' utopians and our own, to be sure. They saw the machine, its components acting in concert according to the will of a centralized authority, as a metaphor for society. That gave us planned communities, the Tennessee Valley Authority, even Marxism and the Great Society, under which social programs were, as one bureaucrat wrote at the time, "a machine to transform" a "raw material" called "people." The Wired Ones' preferred metaphor is the Internet, its parts somehow self-organizing for the common good. Hence their desire to create a world without bosses or leaders, without cities or governments, and ultimately without moral or temporal authority beyond that of the financially—dare we use the word?—"empowered."

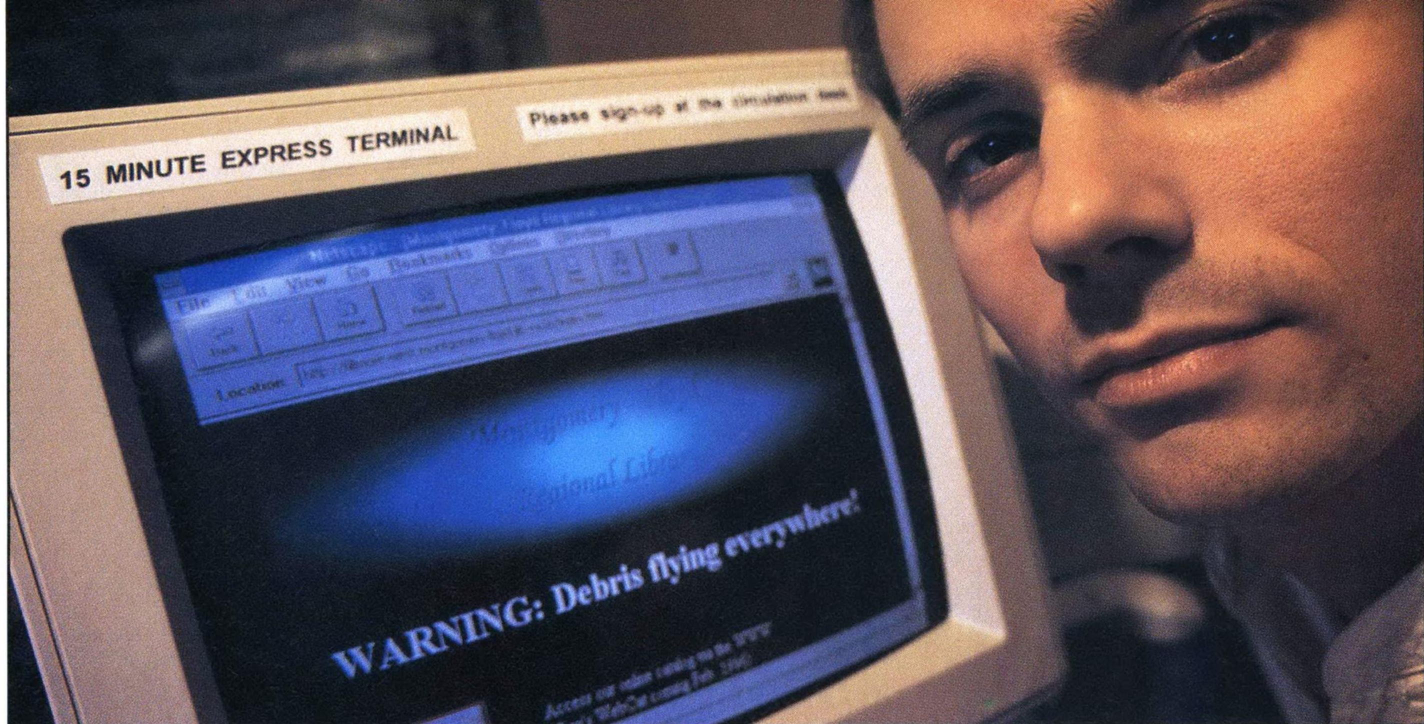
"Some who offer simplistic formulas that government's no longer necessary in the age of information really have a different agenda in mind," Vice-President Al Gore, certainly one of the more wired public officials in America, says. "For some, it's survival of the fittest in drag, and any excuse will do."

I asked Jeff Eisenach how, in a world divided by technology, one goes about affirming and inculcating core values. His answer gave little solace. "It's an issue of faith," he said. "I don't think it's resolvable by empiricism or analysis."

In Blacksburg, thankfully if a little naïvely, they do believe this is a real dilemma, but one that can be solved. "That's the real can-of-worms question: Is technology a force for good or a force for evil?" says Cohill. "For me, the issue is this: Computers are here; how are we going to make them humane? My job is to make us masters of our destiny, not slaves."

t the Blacksburg Community Center, twenty senior citizens gather for yet another pitch. This time, though, the authorities are preaching to the partially converted. All of these seniors are wired.

Bob Radspinner upgraded from a Commodore 64 and now spends time trading E-mail with family in California and West Virginia. Nadine Newcomb, who works at Tech, is on a League of Women Voters Listserv—a closed, national discussion group. Earl Craven has his own home page (http://www.bev.net/users/



Delivering the mail:
Walter Zicko, the county library's technology adviser, helps residents keep up their correspondence.

homepages/ecraven), which features a current weather map of the U. S. and links to the 1996 Olympics site, the Social Security Administration, *The Roanoke Times,* and Babes on the Web. Not surprisingly, for a time it racked up more hits than any other home page on the BEV.

This group had its origins last December, after a BEV administrator established a Listserv for senior citizens and started recruiting participants. Dennis Gentry signed up. He ran into Nadine on the tennis court and signed her up. Pretty soon, the kinds of technical questions you're likely to have if you've never used a computer moved them to organize once-a-month meetings. For most, it was the first time they'd laid eyes on one another.

"They say one of the worst things about growing old is getting lonesome," Dennis, a thin, good-natured sixty-nine-year-old with a hearing aid, tells me. "You get on our Listserv, you'll never be lonesome."

Today, in fact, that is the subject of the gathering. After the sales talk from a fellow selling an on-line service, Dennis introduces the issue to the group assembled in the game room. Something, he says, must be done to encourage people to use the group's Listserv.

"Frequently, questions are posted and I never see an answer," agrees Harry Groot Jr., a Ross Perot look-alike who is running the meeting. "I wonder, are people going straight to the questioner on E-mail?"

"That does happen," answers Dennis. "It happens a lot."

So Harry provides a solution: Use the BEV's seniors' forum to get discussions going. Don't fall off into private dialogue unless the subject is truly personal. "When you post an answer to a question, post it to the entire Listserv," he tells his friends. "I'm still gonna put chitchat up there. I run every day, and sometimes when I get back, I just wanna let people know what a beautiful day it is."

That leads Dorothy Bodell, a grandmotherly woman of sixty-four who works part-time at the Tech library, to raise an issue that has been troubling her. "You know, that's something I want to know." She pauses, a bit uncomfortably. "I was having—I was having an eye problem the other day, and I wanted some support. Is that proper to put up?"

"Of course!" says Dennis. "Put it up!"

I am struck by a counterintuitive thought. This discussion has nothing at all to do with technology. These senior citizens are debating a different subject of crucial importance to America, for which technology is only an excuse: how to revive the public square in a nation that's forgotten where it is. For them—for all of Blacksburg, in fact—the Internet is merely an excuse to bring people together, in real time, and in very real places, so that speech can flourish, hands can wave, and a wink can mean more than a ;-).

Far from diminishing the need for central institutions, the BEV is creating new ones, like the seniors' group, and strengthening old ones, like the public library.

I mention this to Cohill over cappuccino at Mill Mountain, a coffee joint across the street from Bogen's cyberbar. The BEV's mayor surprises me by referring to Ernest Hemingway's classic memoir of Paris cafés in the 1920s. "I have a first edition of *A Moveable Feast,* and I've read it four or five times," Cohill tells me. "That's why I wanted you to meet me here. A café is a sensual experience. Being on the Net is a cerebral experience. Anyone who would substitute one for the other is either very wrong or very dysfunctional."

On my last night in Blacksburg, I wander over to Bogen's for a final Pete's Wicked Ale and a grilled-chicken sandwich. I am startled to see Lion Matt, the program chairman of the Lions Club, sucking on an Amstel and surfing the Net. Somehow, he's managed to find his way onto the Web's Shakespeare Insult Server (http://www.cic.net/~mhyslop/Insult.html).

More than anything, he wants to be wired. "I figure about mid-November," Lion Matt tells me, "I'm gonna have my own home page." ■

MARK PETERSON

LIFE IN CYBURBIA

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