



Photograph: IRA AW ASTHI Digital Imaging: G. V. SRE EKUMAR

## Even as the Sun sets and it is time to hit the bed, many people are glued to their computers building cyber neighbourhoods

**A**arti lives in Bangalore, India. Sarah lives in San Francisco, USA. They consider each other to be next-door neighbours, thanks to the Internet. But how does the Internet enable a high-school student in Bangalore to be friends with a software programmer in California?

A contact can be initiated in several ways. In Aarti's case, she signed up for a free personal home page with Geocities, which is one of the many free Web page providers on the Internet. Geocities has divided its site into virtual 'Neighbourhoods', which are further sub-divided into Avenues and Door Numbers. Based on the theme of your page, you can choose a neighbourhood and search for a vacant 'house' to move into.

Some free Web space providers like

Tripod and TalkCity provide chat facilities in addition to free home pages (in fact, both these sites started out as chat providers). The idea is that while home pages help people to get to know each other better, chatting provides the feeling of being part of a community.

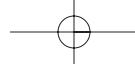
You can also look up others with similar interests and hobbies and become part of a Web ring, which is a collection of pages with related content. Each page carries links to other pages in the list. Web ring members usually have a private mailing list and form a close-knit community. To join an existing Web ring or to create one, visit [www.webring.org](http://www.webring.org).

### The first contact

Personal homepages on the Internet are not the only way to form online commu-

nities. In fact, the first online groups were formed even before the Internet took shape. To see how people formed online communities in those days, let us take a short trip back in time.

It is 1980. The home PC is yet to be born. The Apple II has been around for a few years, but it is the Amiga that is hot. The Internet is unheard of outside military organisations and educational institutions. Yet, people around the world manage to keep in touch using what is now known as Usenet, a network of computers that served to exchange information. This network (or collection of networks) comprised computers that also served as standalone information exchange systems. These individual computers were called Bulletin Board Services (BBS) because of their resemblance to bulletin boards where



one can put up notices or messages for others to read and respond to.

The electronic bulletin boards were independent of one another until the late seventies when the Unix to Unix Connection Protocol (UUCP) was invented and the BBSes started forming networks where they could exchange messages. One of the first such networks was FIDO ([www.fidonet.org](http://www.fidonet.org)). FIDO's modus operandi is simple: each member bulletin board or node in the FIDO network calls its parent node once a day at a specific time (usually just after midnight) and exchanges mail.

Although, on the FIDO network, the messages took days to travel from source to destination and back, the network, since it was cheap, was quite popular before e-mail and the Internet.

Usenet spread to the Internet in the early eighties when the latter started to become popular (the World Wide Web and the Internet, as we know them today, did not exist before the mid-nineties). Usenet on the Internet is better known as 'newsgroups' and is accessed using a newsreader like Message Center for Netscape Navigator or Outlook Express for Microsoft Internet Explorer.

### Post at random

Getting on to a BBS is a little different from connecting to the Internet. You have to use a terminal emulation application (Hyperterminal, for example) to dial up and connect to the BBS. Most BBSes have only one phone line, so only one person can call at a time.

This also means that it is not possible for people to chat, you can only leave messages for other callers. However, it is possible to hold an intelligent discussion by posting messages back and forth. A chain of such related messages, each composed in reply to the preceding one, form what is called a thread. When a reply changes the topic, the thread is said to be broken.

A bulletin board is divided into sections called conferences or forums. Each conference deals with a specific topic. Moderators appointed by the SysOp (system operator) ensure that the users post messages to the relevant conferences. Most bulletin boards are limited to plain text. But this does not mean that BBSes are boring.

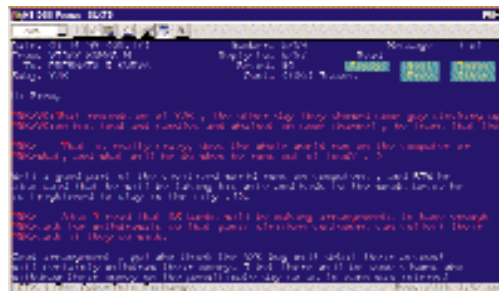
Plenty of jokes circulate on BBSes. Taglines, also called the bumper stickers of BBSes, are definitely worth a mention. These are generally humorous one-liners suffixed to the messages. Rarely seen outside Usenet (though some people add taglines to their e-mail these days) these can contain just about anything and rarely have any relation to the message itself. Consider the example:

"Batman Returns? I didn't know he was out of town!"

This tagline was picked up from CyberInfo Exchange (CiX), one of the oldest bulletin boards in India based in Bangalore, a few days after the movie *Batman Returns* was released.

### Part of a list

A BBS is only one of the many forums for public discussions. They are still very much around but the Internet has made



A conversation on a BBS

other options available. The oldest and most popular of the Internet-based discussion groups is a mailing list. This is a list of people to be mailed and comes with its own e-mail address. Any mail sent to this address is redirected to all the members of the mailing list. Since a mailing list requires only your standard e-mail client, it is a simple and efficient way to communicate. Some mailing lists are controlled by a moderator who checks messages before they are sent out to the list.

Just about anything goes into making a mailing list, from the latest jokes to programming under Linux. You could even have an exclusive mailing list. A good place to learn more about mailing lists is [www.egroups.com](http://www.egroups.com).

Mailing lists have one major drawback: they are not real-time. In other words, a message posted to a mailing list will not be seen by the others on the list till they check their mail. As a result, a

discussion on a mailing list (which would have taken an hour or so in real life) can stretch across many days.

### Ready for a chat

One solution to this problem is Internet Relay Chat or IRC. Any comment you make on IRC is immediately visible to everyone else on the Chat and you do not have to wait for hours or days to get a response from your friends. Though you can chat with a Java-enabled Web browser, it is preferable to use something called an IRC client. Some popular IRC clients are mIRC, Pirch and Visual IRC. All are free, but ViRC stands out as the most user-friendly.

Getting on to IRC is fairly simple. You just tell the IRC client what server to use. Most of India chats on TalkCity, so it makes sense to go there. In your IRC client's setup, specify [chat.talkcity.com](http://chat.talkcity.com) as the IRC server. If asked for the server port, type 6667 (default).

Because there can be thousands of people chatting at any given time, IRC is divided into various channels (rooms), each with a different topic. TalkCity even has channels for some Indian cities, such as #India-Bangalore and #India-Bombay (the # identifies a channel). Of course, you will soon discover that the nature of conversation in a room often has no connection to the stated topic.

(See 'Look Who's Chatting', *CHIP* October 1998, page 160, for more information on IRC)

As far as chatting and exchanging files go, IRC is much like ICQ—currently the hottest communication system on the Net. Although designed primarily as an Internet pager, ICQ serves a variety of purposes including chat. Some of the things that ICQ can do are: alert you when someone is online, exchange messages and files, hold a one-to-one or group chat, and find a random chat partner. One could also try searching for long-lost friends who may be using ICQ. You can conceal personal details while chatting on ICQ, but that does not mean much if you don't know how to be careful about what you say about yourself. To download ICQ, visit [www.mirabilis.com](http://www.mirabilis.com).

(See 'Seek and You Shall Find', *CHIP* February 1999, page 148, for more on ICQ and other such services)

## Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy

Studying online psychology can be an interesting pastime. All kinds of people get together on the Internet, making excellent subjects for observation and study. Here are some types that you are likely to find:

### THE NERD

The Nerd is usually (but not always) earnest, bespectacled and undernourished. He is an excellent source for computing knowledge but knows little about anything else. He has no life beyond computers and makes that as obvious as possible. He hits the sack when the rest of us greet the day.



### THE KID GENIUS

A nerd in the making, he is barely out of high school but knows more about computers than you do. He behaves as if he knows everything the world has to offer, but ask him who the President of the country is and his ignorance will show through. He is a whiz at offering advice, requested or unsolicited.



### THE LURKER

Lurkers are a silent majority and are hard to spot. Research has shown that this species is the most observant of all the people online but stays silent out of fear of flaming. If a lurker has something to say, he or she will usually say it in private, even if it was a public posting that sponsored it.



### THE MANIAC UPLOADER

He specialises in doing one thing and does that exceedingly well: upload files like there is no tomorrow. But the catch is that he sources his files from magazine cover CDs, which others have access to anyway. He is normally found in a place that permits file uploads, like a BBS.



### THE CHAT FREAK

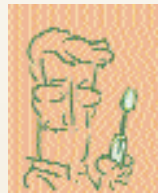
He chats as if he is being paid by the word. Nice at first, he can get on one's nerves after a while.

The /ignore option on IRC or the twit list in your BBS mail reader comes in handy when dealing with him.



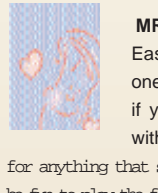
### THE SAGE

The most respected type online, usually middle-aged, has a very clear opinion on everything but will never force it on somebody. When a sage speaks, everyone listens; few argue.



### THE HACKER

A real hacker is hard to spot because he is very modest about his capabilities. A hacker is perfectly normal online, but do not bug him unless you want your hard disk trashed. Like the sage, he shows maturity in his messaging and is usually difficult to spot.



### MR LONELY HEART

Easy to spot because he does only one thing: ask if you're female and if yes, whether you want to chat with him in private. He is a sucker for anything that sounds vaguely feminine and can be fun to play the fool with.

## Minding Your P's and Q's

Just as in real life, people are expected to behave themselves when online. Some people take advantage of the relative anonymity of the Internet and act with little concern for the feelings of others. Such

behaviour often leads to 'flaming', or abusing someone just because you do not agree with them. A flame war is when such a fight grows to involve many people. Nobody is the better after a flame war, so avoid one in the first place.

Good behaviour, on the other hand, can do wonderful things to your status. Even regular flamers will be respectful when communicating with you.

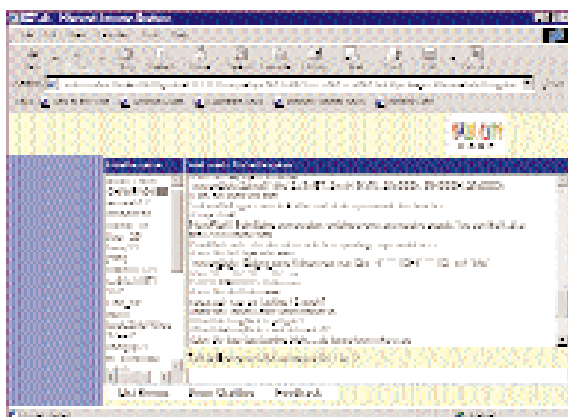
But there is more to online etiquette than saying 'thank you' and 'please'. An important point is good messaging. Some newsgroups and mailing lists get hundreds of posts in a single day and most of them are requests for help. Experienced people are usually ready to help with problems

but can get really annoyed if a newcomer posts the same question that someone asked a couple of days back. It therefore helps if you adopt a wait-and-watch policy for about a week after joining a high-volume newsgroup or mailing list to understand the messaging spirit before plunging into the thick of things.

### /EXIT

New developments in technology make video conferencing possible even on IRC. While this takes away the anonymity the Net currently provides, there is no doubt that the relevance of online communities will only increase in future. Although online contacts can be great source of help and intellectual stimulation, it is wise to remember that they only complement your circle of acquaintances, and cannot be a substitute for them.

KIRAN JONNALAGADDA



A visit to TalkCity's #India-Bangalore