

High-tech hellos connect Bay Area cafe-goers

By Deborah Halberg
Tribune staff writer

They go by names like Flash Back, Exploding Boy, Daredevil and Warped Drive. They sit in cafes and talk, sometimes for hours, in giant bull sessions that can involve up to 30 people at a time. They speak in a jargon all their own, and send messages to each other using private signals.

But, though they may be embroiled in fevered discussions of Kierkegaard or Kafka, they can't see or hear each other.

Welcome to the high-tech cafe scene. Scattered in some 20 cafes around the Bay Area, a group of intellectuals, nonconformists and rebels is chatting via SF Net, the world's first cafe computer network.

Launched by Wayne Gregori, a 35-year-old former computer consultant from San Francisco who is sometimes called the "network deity," the network is a kind of open forum, where participants can debate, discuss, or just babble to their hearts' content about anything and everything.

"It's like being in a room with 30 people," said Gena Dahlquist, a 24-year-old student who goes by the code name, or "handle," of Suzi Q. "We're all either responding to each other or just to specific people."

Gregori and his wife designed the network and convinced cafe owners to place the flat-top computer tables in their cafes.

Users insert two quarters into a computer table to "log on," the network and to chat for eight minutes. Every additional four minutes costs 25 cents.

SF Net has been called the largest ongoing party in the Bay Area, he said. "There are people on this thing 24 hours a day."

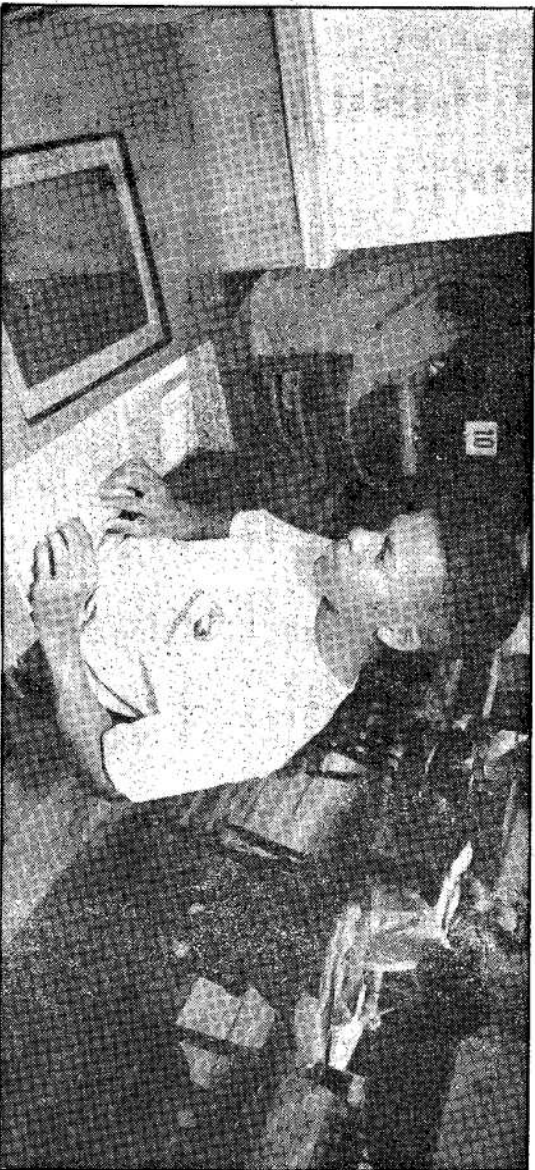


Photo by Wendy Lamm/Oakland Tribune

Nick Strane, U.C. Berkeley student, tries out sending a message via computer for the first time.

In devising the world's first cafe network, Gregori was gambling that the people who frequent cafes would be fascinated by the idea of communicating with other Bay Area residents on any number of subjects.

"You don't get shrinking violets," Gregori said. "You get people who are willing to take a risk, to look foolish in front of their friends. It can be a little frightening for a lot of people, but you get a lot of interesting, eclectic people."

The anonymity of the computer terminal makes the conversation safe, but it also gives it an air of excitement, he said.

The network started in San Francisco a year ago and made its East Bay debut earlier this year at Cafe Milano and Espresso Roma in Berkeley. Since then, Gregori has added three other Berkeley cafes — the French Hotel Cafe, Caffee Mediterraneo and the Coffee Source — and one Oakland cafe, the Royal Grounds Cafe.

In addition to the cafe participants, there are 350 subscribers who pay \$7 a month to log on at home, using a modem.

Gregori said the network brings people together. "Everybody in the U.S. is asking where are the communities? These

electronic (networks) represent more of a community than I've ever seen in my life," he said.

Becoming addicted to the network is one potential hazard of the network. Netters say they can spend \$5 or more a day on the system, and that they find themselves thinking about it all day long.

"It's a horrible habit — I hate it," said Ann Fine, breaking into a huge grin.

Using the "handle" of Karen Ski (a subtle allusion to Aleksandr Kerensky, the premier of Russia just prior to the 1917 Bolshevik revolution), Fine has become a network addict. Although she's

only been netting for four months, she's on the system five days out of seven.

Fine, a graduate student in civil engineering at the University of California at Berkeley, said she has plenty of friends, so her social life can't be called meager or nonexistent. Still, she sometimes finds she would rather schmooze with her on-line friends — faceless though they may be — than sit around and chat with in-the-flesh friends.

It makes her feel a little guilty — embarrassed, even — at the idea of spending so many hours behind a computer terminal, talking to people she doesn't know.

"It's the excitement of anonymity," she said. "You can ask people about things you'd never ask in person."

Gregori said that "computer sex" — that is, sexually graphic talk — is only a small part of SF Net.

"It does happen," he said, "but it's usually in private conferences. These people ultimately get together. If the computer sex is good."

But several participants said that a great many people use computer sex frequently, to try to link up romantically with other participants.

One netter, who called himself Mass Appeal, said he has met "two lovers and one girlfriend" through the network.

"Computer sex can often be a very erotic thing," he said in an on-line computer interview. "It's just like phone sex, except with typed words. . . . Personally, it can get pretty graphic, but it all depends on how wild you want to be. Most of the time it is done very erotically and stylish, so to speak."

Mass Appeal added that he'd had one computer network relationship — a "computer affair," as it were — with a woman who had a boyfriend.