

## Computer bulletin boards are red hot

### Once a haven for hackers, high-tech forums have gone mainstream

By Kay Davidson  
 Examiner Staff Writer

Want to discuss "Star Trek" socialism or sadomasochism? Or obtain stock advice, movie reviews and sports scores? Or perhaps just have a serious "conversation" unhindered by sexual stereotypes and body language?

Once the preserve of hackers and electronics buffs, computer bulletin boards have gone mainstream, attracting users from everywhere to several outlets.

The number of bulletin board systems (BBS) in the United States has skyrocketed to 60,000 from roughly 40,000 just last year, experts say. And they're transforming American life, uniting — via electrons — individuals with

like interests and concerns.

Some boards are run out of homes, oriented to a particular subject for little or no fee; others are giant information highways, operated by corporations for a profit.

At least 300 BBS thrive in the Bay Area, on topics from mysticism to sadomasochism and everything in between. "They're inexpensive to create, often less than \$1,000.

To millions of computer users, the electronic connection "is like being able to go to a gigantic building with hundreds of rooms where thousands of conversations are taking place. . . . people talking about Elvis Costello here and people talking about Celtic folk music there. . . . and you can participate in them," said BBS user Mark Thodoropoulos of Berkeley.

Successful operators of small bulletin boards called systems — tend to be mid-50s male computer buffs who are very dissatisfied with their current career prospects [See **BOARDS**, B-3]

### High-tech talk is gaining popularity

In corporate America, said Jack Richard, editor and publisher of *BusinessWeek* Magazine, "But we've also got grandmothers running BBSs and 8-year-old girls."

### Commercial behemoths prevail

The best-known BBS are commercial behemoths such as the New York-based Prodigy, which claims a million users and is owned by Sears and IBM. These are as different from grass-roots BBS as apples are from oranges — and are more expensive. Prodigy and other large boards — such as CompuServe, America Online, Celine and Delphi — offer everything for service from movie reviews, sports analysis and electronic forums for "Star Trek" buffs to investment counseling and news reports.

Because of the anonymity of boards, users can overcome barriers to social acceptance.

"Surveys show that 13 percent of spouses are female but only 5 percent of on-line users identify themselves as females," Rickard says, joking that "there's an awful lot of men on-line who are women."

Patricia DiMarchio signed onto a BBS with a man's name and happily received "fascinating" letters in the personalized code. "Later she encountered a man, a real one — while on-line and 'we fell in love.' We ended up living together for a year," said DiMarchio, 41, a registered nurse at Children's Hospital in Oakland.

New BBS are listed at the rate of 500 to 700 a month in *BoardWatch*, published in Lakeswood, Colo.

One of the most liberate is *The Well* in Sausalito, which has 8,000 regular users, many of them writers. The Well maintains hundreds of different "topics," among them *Writers 736* titled "My First Book" and *Just Came Out* and *I Feel Terrible* in Oakland.

Anyone can sign onto a BBS just sit in front of your computer, dial it to call a BBS number anywhere in the world, and within seconds your computer screen displays something like, "Welcome to the Mick Frenk Center for Distraction . . ." — a South San Francisco board, "dedicated to providing information that is bypassed or mis-represented by our government and our society." Once connected to a typical board, you can read messages from other users, download information, or play games for an hour or so. To use the board for a longer period, or to access special files, you may have to pay a fee.

### 5,000 calls a day

One of the larger and well-established boards is *Excess PC BBS* in Elm Grove, Wis. It gets more than 5,000 calls a day, over 200 phone lines.

"Our gross revenues approach \$1 million a year," or about twice his annual investment, says founder Bob Maloney, who runs it with his wife, Tracy, and two employees.

But few BBS are cash cows. In San Francisco, SP Net BBS makes just enough money for its operators. Wayne Cronin, its wife and their two kids, "squeaked" by every month, he says. SP Net established to encourage conversation on a wide range of interests, in-

cludes 19 terminals in coffeehouses, which users can connect to for 25 cents for four minutes.

A decade ago, when personal computers still reigned new and exotic, most BBS users were tech types comfortable with jargon. But now, as BBS have proliferated, they increasingly mirror society's diversities and controversies. As a result, some of society's outcasts, eccentrics or mischief-makers haven't a certain percentage of BBS — especially the grass-roots membership fees.

An East Bay board poses a long list of ways to obtain dubious goods including coats and rattlesnake venoms "ampro-operating" amputations, paraplegia and a device that describes "plans to play on the curtain, mail returns, 101 ways to kill your parents with an ax and more."

BBS have also been used to transmit images of nude children to pedophiles. In early March, U.S. Customs Service agents raided 40 locations around the country, including San Francisco, and seized phone and computer hardware allegedly used in the porn ring.

"Basically, what we have here is a bunch of computer perverts," a Customs official said.

The sizable bulletin boards, such as Prodigy and CompuServe, handle unruly users in different ways. CompuServe relies on the systems to decide what is and isn't objectionable noise. But Prodigy's computers are programmed to reject messages with obscenities or slurs against a race, ethnicity, sex or sexual orientation.

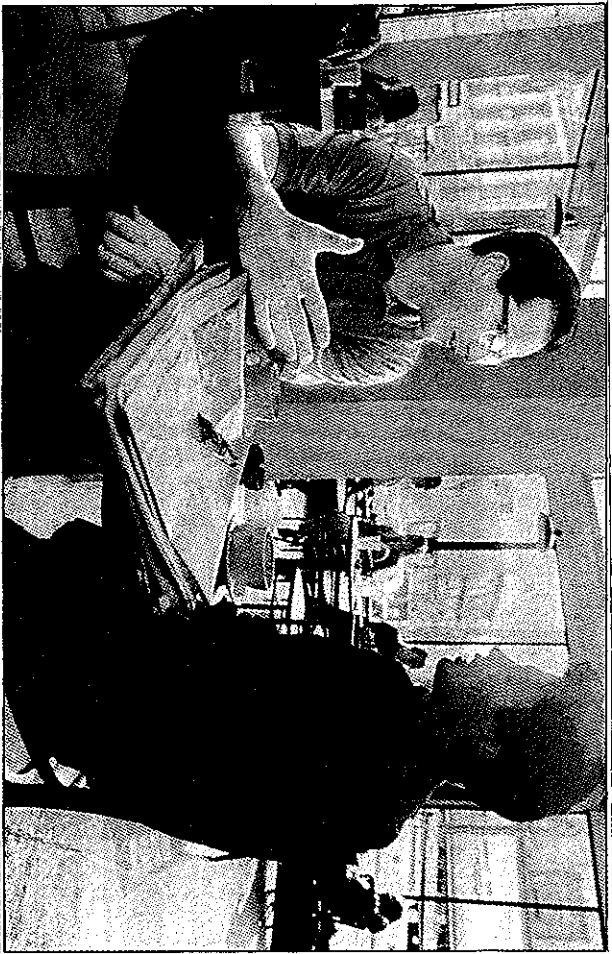
**Warning to strippers**  
 Dethridge, a Bay Area BBS called Tiger Team threatens legal action against strippers who try to snop through its electrons. It warns: "While the (Gulco) agency you work for might pay your legal fees and judgments against you, why take chances?"

The intimate messages on some boards offer a unique glimpse into the psychology and sociology of pop culture.

A prominent local eatery board includes conversations that reveal the sinister side of the quest for alternative foods.

"The occult used to be a lot of fun, before it blossomed into a fad . . . especially with the Bay Area attracting people who couldn't make it in their home towns," one user complained.

Another described dressing in a wolf skin at Christmastime for a native ritual, only to encounter



SP NET owner Wayne Cronin, left, popularized the use of computer bulletin boards in Bay Area coffeehouses. Cronin is talking with Michael Stark.

### BULLETIN BOARDS

#### In Northern California

One of the most popular Northern California bulletin boards is *The Well* in Sausalito, which has about 8,000 members and more than 200 ongoing "conversations" on topics from art and philosophy to "Star Trek" and the Galileo spacecraft. It's a non-commercial venture. For details, call (415) 352-6553 (voice) or (415) 352-5102 (computer link).

#### Nation's top five

The following are widely considered the nation's top five bulletin boards; their names, telephone lines and the estimated number of users:

Product	Where	Phone	No. users
CompuServe Inc.	White Plains, N.Y.	(914) 693-0000	2 million
America Online	Rockville, Md.	(800) 639-9636	350,000
Prodigy	Fredonia, Va.	(703) 448-9700	219,000
Delphi	Westlake Village, Calif.	(800) 985-4005	Less than 100,000

#### Bay Area computer lines

Below are computer lines (not voice lines) for a sampling of special interest boards, most in the Bay Area. To contact them it takes a telephone line hooked to a computer with a modem.

- ▶ **SP NET:** (415) 925-9192. Linked to computers used by customers of 19 coffeehouses in the San Francisco area; plus a few hundred home subscribers.
- ▶ **NETWAVE:** (610) 694-2223. A forum where "hackers and other progressive people can debate questions of concern."
- ▶ **SNEETS'S BOARD:** (415) 572-6553. Aheads those who are "operated" but skeptical about "pseudoscientific ideas such as PFCs, astrology, or alchemy and pantheism."
- ▶ **FOXTAIL INN:** (408) 776-5889. For those lovers of "vibrations and paranoias."
- ▶ **SALT AND LIGHT:** (415) 598-0792. For those who seek "optical understandings for vibrations and paranoias."
- ▶ **ERING STORM:** (408) 728-9693. A fairly board for those interested in "emergency preparations, firearms politics and more."
- ▶ **HISPANIC ONLINE ACCESS:** (415) 282-2025. Hispanic issues and Latin American news.
- ▶ **FRANCOFILLES:** (510) 551-3192. For fans of France and the French language.
- ▶ **BOUNDARY WATERS INFORMATION SERVICE:** (219) 385-6807. The Minnesota-based board lists information through much of the Bay Area. Computerer Curran and McOrinn, *Boundaries Magazine*, with 55,000 readers, claims to be the largest and oldest of the BBS journals. A subscription to this monthly costs \$36. Phone: (800) 893-6036 or write Boundaries Magazine, 7395 West Lowell Ave., Suite 220, Lakeswood, Colo. 80222.

#### How to find out more

Handbooks of bulletin board files are carried in two free publications available at newsstands and computer stores throughout much of the Bay Area. *Computerer Curran and McOrinn's Boundaries Magazine*, with 55,000 readers, claims to be the largest and oldest of the BBS journals. A subscription to this monthly costs \$36. Phone: (800) 893-6036 or write Boundaries Magazine, 7395 West Lowell Ave., Suite 220, Lakeswood, Colo. 80222.

## California puts brakes on sales of pepper-based spray to public

By Scott Peters

THOUSAND OAKS, Ventura County — The state is cracking down on sales to the public of a pepper-based spray that is authorized for police use only.

The spray, a less gas made from cayenne pepper and alcohol, causes nausea and a burning sensation on contact with the eyes and skin. Police agencies use it as an alternative to lethal force against violent criminals.

The spray is available to the public through catalogs and at gun sporting shops and bicycle stores in Agoura Hills, Thousand Oaks and Simi Valley, authorities say.

## He lives to pass on art of self-defense

by Michael Stark

One recent afternoon, the Precita gym was alive with the consistent motion of 30 to 40 boxers. But when Vidal gave advice to a boxer in the ring, the little world stopped.

"You listen to every word because that's right," said Felix Garcia, 39, who comes twice a week from Napa with his son, Gabriel, to be coached by Vidal.

"By experience, that's all that counts. That's what learning is and Johnny knows what he's talking about," said Gabriel Garcia, 19.

Vidal would never give himself the kind of accolades the Garcia and others freely offer. He just wants to talk about his boxers.

"Don't write about me, I'm old 'I tell my boys: 'The good Lord said it's better to give than to receive. Don't take a punch you don't have to.'"

—John Vidal

staff," he said. "Write about the kids."

With a little prodding, Vidal talks passionately about the boxer boxers he coaches and about such Golden Glove legends as Jesse Pleinagan, Pat Lawler and Danny McCortie. He can tell you their every move and then reminisce further about boxing when he first started out.

"In our days, anyone who took up boxing loved to box — because there wasn't the money," Vidal said.

His passion for the sport began when he was a boy going to St. Vincent's School in San Rafael. Longing to be in the ring himself, he would read about greats like Jim Jeffries and Willie Fitzsimmons. In 1919, at age 14, Vidal would sneak out of the house to go box.

**Boxing with the heathens**  
 Because there were no amateur leagues, Vidal fought professionally at 111 pounds. And since there were no other 111-pounders, he would fight guys as big as 124

pounds for the \$10 prize. Losers got \$5. "I had a mean left," Vidal recalled. "Although I couldn't box my way out of a paper bag with my right."

Vidal gave his earnings to his unexpecting mother, telling her it was extra pay from his job making silver cups and saucers for Shreve & Co. in downtown San Francisco. "You could buy a lot of groceries with that kind of money. Bread was only eight cents a loaf," Vidal said.

However, his career ended with a 2-3 record after one of his sisters told his mother how Vidal received what he remembers as a "very little meat" under the right eye. He refused to operate on how expensive it would be to get the eye fixed, shuffling and saying, "Oh well."

"He wasn't ready to get up the sport, however, from 1924 to 1931, he coached at the Young Men's Institute, where poor kids boxed while the rich kids trained at the Olympic Club. In 1931, Vidal began coaching at Newman's Gym, where he was a fixture until last year when he came to Precita to help gym manager and longtime friend Sonny Masson.

**Coaching keeps him alive**  
 "He's the best," Masson said. "He's really like a father to me." His verbal abuse retirement because he says coaching is why he's still alive.

"I'm worrying about (the boxer) and forgetting my aches and pains," Vidal said, slapping the hand left knee that requires him to use a cane.

However, neighborhood officials in the Precita gym are looking to shut down the Masson gym to create recreational programs for younger children. Como June, Vidal might have to move on to some other gym.

"Who have to find someone," he said. "My wife doesn't want me to quit. How can I, after all these years?"

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