

# Chapter 15

## Exploring New York City's Online Community: a Snapshot of Nyc.general

by Michael Hauben

Something new is gradually sneaking into every part of our world. The agent of change is the global computer communications network, "the full map of [which] no one knows; it changes every day"<sup>1</sup>. Not only is the change on a world scale, the Net is having local effects as well. Local social communities are being redefined more and more by the global online community. This is happening in New York City.

The topic of community is one of the themes which Sally Banes explores in her book, *Greenwich Village 1963*. Banes' study of this bohemian community at the beginning of the 1960s presents an interesting model with which to compare today's growing online community in the Big Apple. Community has traditionally been understood to mean a body of people who affiliate with one another based on family ties, location, shared religious practices and common work places.<sup>2</sup> There are, of course other definitions, such as that of historian Thomas Bender, who Banes says "prefers to reconceptualize community, suggesting that it is not a static social form that is disappearing, but rather that new, dynamic, overlapping forms of small-scale networks have arisen..."<sup>3</sup>

Bender proposes that it is important to examine the technological structure behind a community. The technological structure upon which today's online communities exist is that of the Internet. The Internet is the interconnection of smaller networks. As such, the Internet provides the glue which connects other networks together. This means by being on the New York State Education and Research Network (NYSERNET), I can send email from New York City to someone on a different network, for example Michnet in Michigan, because the networks automatically route my message from my network to the intended recipient's network through intermediate networks. As such, the global computer communications network consists of small-scale networks of computers (and in turn of people) connected to each other.

Banes' initial definition of community translates into saying people living in New York City are part of the community of New York City. As everyone knows, New York City is a large place. Yet people are proud to say they are from New York City and relate to things New York. New York can also be an isolated and alienating place, however. Thanks to developing technology, the contemporary concept of community in New York is evolving in ways similar to Bender's model leading to less isolation.

The '60s had the soapbox, the '90s have computer networks. People are communicating with other people both locally and globally in public discussion forums such as Usenet newsgroups and mailing lists and through private e-mail, forming in the process new communities of common interests. Before these communities became a reality, their possible benefits were envisioned by J.

C. R. Licklider, along with Robert Taylor, in their paper, “The Computer as a Communications Device.”<sup>4</sup> Bender’s idea of ever-changing, overlapping communities is similar to what Licklider foresaw for social communities as a result of developments in computer communications. Already today, computer assisted networking allows groups to form to discuss an idea, focus in or broaden out and reform to fit the new ideas that have resulted from the process.

In the new forms of communication technologies, the distinction between a stranger and a friend is becoming blurred. Strangers are no longer strange; rather they are people who might prove to be a valuable resource. One example of the public discussion areas is a Usenet newsgroup called New York City General or nyc.general (see the appendix for a partial listing of other New York City-related online resources). Following is only a little of what I found in one day’s browsing, which represents about a week of discussion in this public space. Just a warning – you are about to witness a little of the composite of life in New York City.

“My boss is going to fire me,” begins the first of the discussions I decided to read. The subject line read “Getting Unemployment,” but the message left that as a last recourse. The person continued in the request for help, “What can I do? I’m not a minority or member of a protected group so that rules out the labor board, EEOC, etc..... Could I find a lawyer to take the case on contingency? Else, how easy is it to get unemployment after being fired. No questions asked or do they give you the third degree? Thanks in advance!”<sup>5</sup>

A genuine problem was posted. As such, responses were likely to be sent by others, and indeed they were. The first public response went: “If you’re being fired by your boss, and you’ve been on the job for a certain period of time (6 months possibly?), and you were being paid legally on the books, unemployment compensation is guaranteed. Just go to the unemployment office and do the bureaucracy dance.”<sup>6</sup>

Conceivably neither the original poster nor the person who responded knew the other. The fact that these two are probably strangers and, before this point, totally unconnected could be why the response was posted publicly. The time and effort the person put into publicly responding potentially could be helpful to yet another person reading this discussion.

The next public response in sequence provided some clarification which could or could not be seen as being unfriendly. This man added that unemployment insurance could not be collected if that person was “fired for cause, such as stealing.”<sup>7</sup>

The last public response this discussion I saved brought up the right of the boss to contest the granting of unemployment insurance. The response ends with some support: “It is just another long, tedious hassle to get you to give up and forget about it. But if you feel you deserve the unemployment benefits because he/she did not fire you with just cause, fight till the very end.... Good luck.”<sup>8</sup>

All in all, these three public responses helped to define the previously tenuous concept of

unemployment compensation held by the original poster. However, the picture is not complete. I am sure the person with the question, who could be reached via an e-mail through the Delphi online service, probably received private email with suggestions and comments which are not available as part of the public record of nyc.general.

What other things are discussed? Concerns about public living conditions – such as discussions about the past, present, and future of the subway system – happen on a regular basis. Even an employee of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, who claimed to be acting in an unofficial capacity replied to questions and concerns about the subway. Nyc.general presents an open public forum where this person could talk about his job in a way he felt was helpful to many people. Such is not yet apparently true for any New York politicians entrusted to represent their constituency. However, such attempts are happening. Former Governor Cuomo ran a gopher information server in his campaign for re-election, and New York State law and pending State Assembly bills will be online in the next few months. The currently proposed method is via telnet at [assembly.state.ny.us](mailto:assembly.state.ny.us).

Some examples of questions by people on how to survive in Manhattan include where to get cheap checking accounts (Amalgamated Bank of New York with true no-fee checking), what dentist or doctor to visit for particular problems, what rights tenants have, how and when to approach the Department of Motor Vehicles, and what's the best slice of pizza in town (one person voted for Koronet, while another voted for Famous Famiglia).

Other issues raised were not so cut and dried. The pros and cons of rent control were discussed in the following exchange: “Well, having just moved from the West Coast, I can tell you this about New York in general: there is no such thing as a nice place for a reasonable rent. This place is absurdly expensive – God only knows how rents can be so high in a place where roughly 10 million people live.”<sup>9</sup> The first response was not much of a discussion, but would definitely start one. The person wrote in answer: “Two words: Rent control.”<sup>10</sup> A second answer about rent control went like this: “Your solutions might be okay for the burbs, but this is New York you're talking about. These regulations were not the \*cause\* of high rents, they were enacted \*because\* of high rents. Removing them will harm the city in the short term and cause unpredictable results in the long term, as deregulation always does.”<sup>11</sup>

In these and other cases, the open quality of debate and discussion on nyc.general make it not only a helpful neighborhood, but a living newspaper which both criticizes current newspapers and provides features. My next brief example is a post about the quality of the New York Times. The Subject of the message was “New York Times technology coverage.” the poster argued: “No one should expect the NY Times...to cover underlying technology well – that's not their specialty. The Times is a general-interest paper.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the responses was, “Sorry, they should do a better job. That they don't is an indication of the generally low level of scientific literacy in the U.S. Cutting them slack over stuff like this just reinforces this tendency.”<sup>13</sup>

From this criticism of the New York Times, we go to an unusual experience that I could call a feature. The person wrote: “Reminds me when I was homeless and still had a valid VISA card which was maxed out. Apparently, between approximately 2:50AM and 4:25AM at night, Safeway stores would not check the validity of the transaction, and would just put it through. All the charges would show up on my VISA bill (which I never paid), and I would eat that day. It’s funny because the bank decided that I needed a higher limit, and raised the limit twice, even after seven months of delinquency! My card wasn’t canceled until one day I called and asked what the balance was – and a letter was promptly sent saying there was suspicious activity, and the card was thus canceled. Thank god I’ve since filled in the missing links between me and a job, and may even start making enough to pay past debts. Depends on a few factors....”<sup>14</sup>

These examples paint a picture of people today with a common interest, and only secondarily of a common location, making themselves available to be helpful to others with that interest. The obvious interest is life in New York City. These exchanges appear similar to both the Village Community presented in Greenwich Village 1963 and to Licklider’s observations on on-line communities in the 1960s. Greenwich Village in 1963 was made up partially of a community of artists and intellectuals who “formed a constructed network, based on work, school, and other interests”<sup>15</sup>. Licklider asked the question, “What will on-line interactive communities be like?”<sup>16</sup>. He answers by writing, “They will be communities not of common location, but of common interest.”<sup>17</sup>

The community life made available in Greenwich Village gave residents “the warmth of face-to-face, ‘authentic’ experience in the midst of escalating metropolitan anonymity”<sup>18</sup>.

Villagers also felt a part of the community because people were active politically to protect their community from large structural changes which other organizations wanted to make happen<sup>19</sup>. The online examples both demonstrate a friendliness of a good neighborhood in the midst of an ever growing city, along with showing the active character. To be part of the online community one must become a part of the discussion, otherwise that which is discussed will be less helpful, and the online lurker will not be in touch with anyone else.

The examples of online activities are not provided to say there are no problems online, and I will not go into the whole phenomenon of flaming, but I feel the advantages are more important and overwhelm the disadvantages. I have presented a snapshot of a fairly new entity which is both making New York a much more friendly place and providing a forum for people of disparate beliefs to meet on equal grounds. In the end, online communications can help to enrich local community and community relations rather than diminish that ability. Taking a serious look at the actual dynamic of the communication displays the community of online New York City.

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#### Notes for Chapter 15

1. Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies Without Boundaries: On Telecommunications in a Global Age*, edited by Eli Noam, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, p. 56.

2. Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*, Durham, North Carolina,

1993, p. 37.

3. Ibid.

4. J. C. R. Licklider and Robert W. Taylor, "The Computer as a Communication Device," from In Memoriam: J. C. R. Licklider 1915-1990, Digital Research Center, Palo Alto, California, August 7, 1990. (Originally published in Science and Technology, April, 1968).

5. nyc.general, Message-ID: <B6009I1.sorter@delphi.com>

6. nyc.general, Message-ID: <mbayerCzvypp.187@netcom.com>

7. nyc.general, Message-ID: <3bg5nb\$bbu@titan.imsi.com>

8. nyc.general, Message-ID: <3beb21\$461@dockmaster.phantom.com>

9. nyc.market.housing, Message-ID: <3bdker\$fn5@syko.cosmic.com>

10. nyc.market.housing, Message-ID: <3be4jp\$8eo@apakabar.cc.columbia.edu>

11. nyc.general, Message-ID: <39jbfr\$3bo@cmcl2.NYU.EDU>

12. nyc.general, Message-ID: <D07EM1.3H3@world.std.com>

13. nyc.general, Message-ID: <3bq5hp\$s0a@nntp.Stanford.EDU>

14. nyc.general, Message-ID: <3bjcvl\$i9l@panix3.panix.com>

15. Greenwich Village 1963, p. 78.

16. "The Computer as a Communication Device," p. 37.

17. Ibid., p. 38.

18. Greenwich Village 1963, p. 15.

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## Appendix of New York City Online Resources

Addresses for most sites listed available at: <http://www.columbia.edu/~hauben/nyc-guides.html>.

### I. PUBLIC DECENTRALIZED NEWSGROUPS

- \* nyc.\* hierarchy – general, food, market.housing, jobs.\*, politics, announce, seminars, singles, personals, transit, etc.
- \* ny.\* hierarchy for State wide issues – general, for sale, wanted, seminars, etc.
- \* alt.sports.\* – such as baseball.ny-mets, football.pro.ny-giants, etc.
- \* Moderated Newsfeed – clari.local.nyc, etc clari.\* groups

### II. PUBLIC LISTSERV'S AND MAILING LISTS

- \* ebikes – Metro NYC bicycle discussion list
- \* NYCOMNET – NY Community Networks lists

- \* NE-RAVES – electronic watercooler for Ravers
- \* Etc.

### III. LOCAL NEWSGROUP HIERARCHIES

- \* panix.\*
- \* dorsai.\*
- \* mindvox.\*
- \* Local hierarchies – serving other communities such as universities, etc.
- \* Etc. – All local and serving the community on the associated Internet providers. Usually only available on the particular system with which it is associated.

### IV. INFORMATION SERVERS

- \* Gopher
    - + Rutger’s Net Person’s Guide to NYC
    - + CUNY graduate Center’s Guide to NYC
    - + NYU’s New York City and Greenwich Village Communities
    - + New York Book, Bike, and Art...from Panix
    - + Echo’s Cool Stuff in NYC contributed by members of ECHO
    - + Weather forecasts
  - \* FTP
    - + Lists of NYC Bookstores
    - + Lists of NYC Record Stores
    - + NYC Beer Guide
  - \* WWW
    - + Lists of WWW web sites in NYC
    - + Theater on Broadway – listings
    - + Dining Information and menus
    - + Web sites for performance spaces (Kitchen, Knitting Factory)
    - + Mediabridge.com’s NYC “Tourist” Info (previously Columbia CS Department)
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