Guide to Online Information Services and Electronic Bulletin Boards

BBS
First Product Support
BBS On ISDN

December 1991
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Qview

AGINED. It really should allow young school children access to all knowledge and publication collected over the past centuries in our Library of Congress, Smithsonian Institution, and other publicly held repositories of information. We need a leader with the veracity, credibility, and persuasiveness of a John F. Kennedy to launch it. And if we don't have such a leader, we need to create one. We need to rather grandly expand our vision of what connecting computers means. If we are to maintain our current standard of living, it must be so.

I'm most pleased to announce the birth of Marion Jack Rickard III on April 18, 1992 at 06:24 AM. His mother survived the introduction in marvelous spirits. I'm going to use what influence I may have with the young Mr. Rickard to persuade him to forego the joys of axle manufacture. It is my fondest wish that I have an alternative course of action to suggest. At whatever cost, at whatever effort, let us build a highway of the mind....

Jack Rickard
Editor Rotundus

LETTERS

Dear Editor;

Get out of the Wesson, Jack! I could not help but blush at your girlish gushing in the May issue over the online hocus-pocus promised by H. Ross Perot and other secular political prophets, sooth-sayers of virtual-reality, and cyberpunk rabble rousers who promote the balm of "electronic democracy" and "more technology" as credible answers to this nation's political ills.

Make-believe solutions including on-line democracy, independent candidates, and term limitations becomes just so much more technological foreplay with the electoral process. In the absence of functional government, sound institutions and healthy communities, we are left with a cynical betrayal of the cry for responsibility and justice.

Does anyone seriously believe that democracy alone - either digital or analog - will somehow automatically produce human happiness? Hope for real change is possible, but only after detailed, fundamental and expansive argument has been carried forward in public debate from all corners (even electronic) with regard to issues ranging from religious freedom to economic development and international society.

Until then, the electronic community - even those not in debt to the gubbermint for their jobs and/or internet access - despite all the DOS shells, effete freedom fighters and good intentions, is just one more block of votes that has vicariously assumed the position, ready for violation by the power organizations that control the electoral process whose only purpose is to win elections.

Remember, V.I. Lenin once said:

"Do it now."

Bill Gram-Reefer
Sysop

Dear Bill:

I'm going to guess I feel your professed cynicism doesn't even touch what is happening in this country. My feeling is that a large percentage of the population, inundated with news of society-wide drug abuse, schools that don't school, a loss of 3.5 million jobs among the Fortune 500 in 10 years, a national debt of more than $4 trillion growing by over $400 billion annually, a cynically corrupt Washington elite, and literally cities in flames nationwide, is no longer particularly interested in issues. At this point, the "position" or platform of conventional candidates such as Bill Clinton and George Bush won't even be heard for the nonsense they are. They are irrelevant. A good part of the populace feel the PROCESS has broken down - not because of the lack of solutions, but because of a growing distrust of the political machinery and individuals themselves.

This is a fundamentally different situation from any previously - at least in scale. Americans are feeling they don't HAVE a democracy, that they aren't part of the system, and that those who ARE

don't have their interests at heart. They distrust the political machinery of America. This is a little grim.

The solutions you decry as non-workable are aimed at the process itself. A simple attack on the process is to elect someone outside of it. Ross Perot has much to recommend him as an "outsider" with the tools to implement change to the process itself. Perot's theme, and the theme of term limitations etc. is to remove power from the trusted elite that failed, and return it to the people directly. That's been an impossibility in the past, and may not work too well now. Proponents of electronic democracy hold that we now have the rudimentary technological tools to accomplish a more participative direct democracy. I agree this could be either bad or good - but it would be different.

And whether such solutions are for good or ill isn't really the point. The fundamental shift from dealing with problems to dealing with the solution mechanism itself is historic and in some sense frightening. And we do know from the 70 years of recent Russian history, that we can safely ignore whatever Lenin said as a possible solution.

I differ sharply with Perot on issues such as abortion and trade protectionism. But those differences are moot in the current situation. He's different, he's strong, he's been effective in his own field, and he advocates some constructive changes in the process - implemented in a peaceful democratic fashion. I find that superior to burning the place to the ground and starting over by pawing through the ruins for something to eat. Enough so to "gush girlishly."

Jack Rickard

Dear Jack:

I pick up your magazine whenever I spot a copy at the newsstand. I enjoy reading about the BBS community. I have a small PCBoard 14.5 BBS in the cellar for support of my shareware. I have on 2400 line, 100 meg and 100 or so files. I average 3 calls a day (but I think it's the same guy).

Imagine my amazement when I turn to the Boardwatch national list, skim down to the 914 area codes and find my board listed right above Andy Keeve's fabulous Executive Network. I'm showing everyone I know the listing and I keep a copy in my wallet.

Now, I'm not complaining, but I feel a little out of place on this list. My BBS generates no direct revenues. It's a free board with no registration required. Its just a convenience for myself and my users. There are hundreds of people who are actually trying to make money using BBS's and all of them would kill their mother for a chance to be on your list. By BBS and Andy Keeve's Executive Network are just not in the same class. I spend more time on Executive than I do my own BBS by an order of magnitude.

You might be interested to know that since appearing in Boardwatch my BBS has increased in activity by about 33%. (The guy started calling four times a day.)

Regards;

Keith P. Graham

Dear Keith:

Your modesty is touching - and characteristic. For those who don't know him, Mr. Graham has probably written over a hundred shareware utilities, in most languages, including a couple of programs that caught my eye and are available on his admittedly unassuming BBS. A startlingly quick little menu program (G-Menu?), a screen blanker called LAVA LAMP that is captivating, and some graphic utilities (Optiks?), and as I recall, a little program to convert text files into .COM programs that self display (TEXT2COM?) that have all been around for some time now.

Basically, if you're complaining that the Boardwatch Select List of National Bulletin Boards has virtually no structure, selection criteria, rationale, or reason, and takes eclectic to the ridiculous, I plead guilty on all counts. There are stodgy product support bulletin boards, government systems, sex chat lines, religious BBSs, political systems, shareware home systems, mega-BBSs, special topic systems, etc. scattered

through it in a most haphazard fashion. They share one thing in common, I think they're interesting in some way or other and I want to be able to have the telephone number at hand to call them whenever I care to. It doesn't mean they are the best. It doesn't mean they are the biggest. They basically comprise a lone fat editor's dialing directory and some of the numbers, frankly, I don't recall precisely what it was that got them there. But I felt pretty strongly that they should be there when I put them on it.

I wish I could list EVERY deserving BBS in the world on that list. And if there were a way to do it, I would. But I can't. And there is no "fair" way to select systems for that particular list. If I came up with one, I would probably simply run it as a separate list because whatever rules anyone could come up with, would cause me to NOT list some system that I need or want to know the telephone number for. In fact, we've done so. The LIST OF LIST KEEPERS is a separate list of BBS that themselves maintain lists of BBS systems. The urge to list BBSs back to the days when there were only a dozen in operation. We also pick lists of different cities, different countries, or different topical lists to run in each issue of Boardwatch - this month a list of product support BBSs - some of which are in the regular list as well.

I confess some angst over the process. So we've put it off on the readers largely by sponsoring a Boardwatch Magazine Reader's Choice 100 BBS contest. This is a simple popularity contest. The system with the most votes is number 1, the second most votes is number 2, etc. Readers and callers from all over the country began sending in "ballots" the first of the year. We'll run this contest until July 1, and announce the winners at ONE BBSCON in August. So far, we have about 6,000 votes received and at the rate they're coming in, probably twice that number by the close of the contest. And it will result in yet ANOTHER list - the Boardwatch 100 which we'll publish at least once, and maybe make IT a standing list. The contest has been popular enough that we'll undoubtedly run it annually from now on. Next year, we may have some sort of judged contest as well if I can figure out how to do it.

You may think your BBS doesn't belong on the list. And if you compile and verify a list, please feel free to omit it on yours if you must. But this particular list is mine, and for now - you're on it. I'm going to guess that if I limited it to only the large money-making boards like Andy Keeves Executive Network - the list might be more statistically valid and we would probably be more profitably "magazine like" in many ways.

But something would also be lost in the remarkable diversity and variation that I personally find so engaging about the online world. Consider, if you will, that specifically that variety and the ability for someone to run a BBS with very limited resources and for very limited purposes MIGHT actually, in my mind, be the whole point of existence of electronic bulletin boards. In general, large systems tend to serve what they've got. Small systems tend to innovate to get it.

No matter how small or unimportant a BBS is in the overall scheme of things by any normal criteria of line count, disk size, or monthly income, if you accidentally do something interesting, creative, or usefully different with a single line system in the boonies on a 1200 bps modem that works about every third call - and I find out about it - unless you quickly disconnect your line and hide under the bed - you're mine. And I've got 30,000 readers hoping I'll catch you in the act.

Those interested in a simple to use, elegant, and startlingly fast little menu program titled G-Menus can pick it up from the author himself at (914)623-0039 at no charge at all (if the other caller has completed his four calls for the day). I'm guessing you can also find it on Andy Keeves Executive Network system - which is indeed a more impressive BBS system in all respects.

Keep innovating Keith. Leave the apologies to the elected officials who are profoundly better at making them.

Jack Rickard