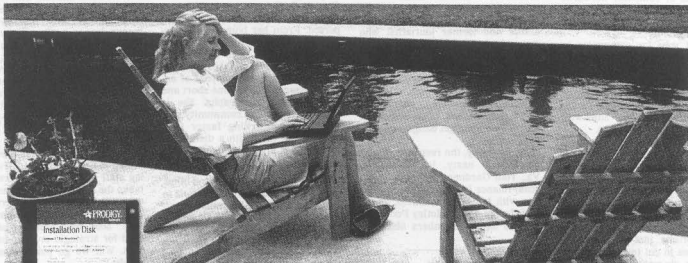


The New York Times

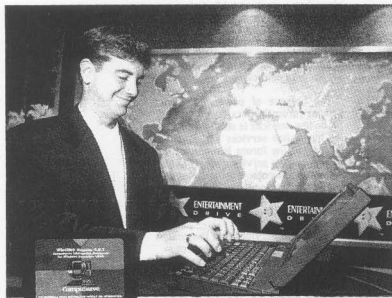
They Let Their Fingers Do the Talking Keyboards Blazing, Net Queens and Kings Rule the On-Line Forums



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Lynne Bundesen

An author and former war correspondent, she hosts a news bulletin board on Prodigy. She often posts questions on various topics intended to stir discussion and debate.



Don Hagan Charles/The New York Times

Michael Bolanos

His entertainment forum on CompuServe has grown rapidly, with 30 full-time employees in a Manhattan loft. Still he works 16 hours a day, seven days a week.

By STEVE LOHR

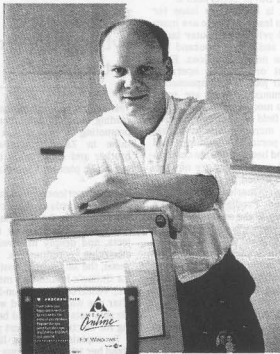
Little more than a year ago, Michael Bolanos, an independent concert producer, decided to get into the computer on-line business in a modest way. On CompuServe, a major on-line service whose subscribers can dial in for access to everything from out-of-town newspapers to stock quotations to conversation, he started an entertainment forum. It would be a little alcove in cyberspace, where, he figured, people could meet to discuss movies and television shows. Mr. Bolanos began his venture with a

friend, one personal computer, scant hope of riches and no intention of abandoning his work as a producer.

The leisurely game plan has long since been scrapped. His business, Entertainment Drive, now has a full-time staff of 30 people, and it occupies a spacious loft in lower Manhattan, brimming with computer firepower. Mr. Bolanos, who is 30, finds himself working 16 hours a day, seven days a week. People tap into Entertainment Drive's seven on-line forums — intended for groups ranging from soap opera fans to teen-agers — at the rate of nearly half a million times a month.

People like Mr. Bolanos are increasingly the franchise players of cyberspace. Known as forum leaders, moderators, hosts or system operators, they manage the special-interest areas — entertainment, politics, health, personal finance and hundreds of others — that keep people on line, and keep the meter running, for commercial services like CompuServe, a unit of H & R Block Inc., America Online, and Prodigy, a unit of Sears, Roebuck & Company.

The forum leader labors at the intersection of the new information technology and the timeless rhythms of human nature, good and bad. The job, veterans



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

Tom Gardner

He received death threats after reporting an investment scam on his personal-finance forum.

say, defies easy description — a combination of radio talk-show host, impresario, policeman and janitor.

The best practitioners of this new profession, they agree, have an avid interest in the subject area, deep reservoirs of patience, and the on-line finesse to move a discussion along without dominating it. They must also serve as watchdogs who monitor the on-line discussions and chat boards for profanity, obscenity and harassment.

The role of these on-line forum leaders is expected to grow in importance as

These Hosts Let Their Fingers Do the Talking

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companies seek opportunities on the wider arena of computer networks — the Internet and its World Wide Web, where graphics, audio and text can be presented.

The best way for companies to make money on the Net, technology experts predict, will be to become part of the special-interest communities on line, through sponsorship or advertising. The most skillful forum leaders will run the "hot" sites with the biggest on-line audiences.

"Businesses on the Net are going to be based on these electronic communities, and the forum moderators are absolutely crucial to building them," said Esther Dyson, editor of Release 1.0, a newsletter.

Someday, analysts say, the brand names in cyberspace may be the popular forums just as television viewers tune in not to networks but to favorite shows like "Seinfeld," "E.R." and David Letterman's.

Stardom is not yet an issue for most forum leaders. There are more than 65,000 private computer bulletin boards and a few thousand forums on the on-line services. Each has a host or systems operator, though their jobs and compensation vary enormously. Many are part-timers who moonlight on line.

But the field is changing fast as more and more American households buy personal computers and modems and become on-line customers. Skilled moderators are now recruited and wooed by the three major services: America Online, CompuServe and Prodigy. Microsoft's coming entry in the on-line business, Microsoft Network, scheduled for August, has upped the ante.

The forum leaders are hired by the major on-line services as independent contractors, and they sign nondisclosure agreements. But industry executives say the forum leaders are typically paid a share — usually about 10 percent — of the fees collected by the on-line service for time spent by members in their forum. A handful of the most popular forums are multimillion-dollar businesses.

As the on-line medium has grown, the issue that has recently received the most attention, and concern from Congress, is obscenity on the Net. But most on-line moderators say that only a handful of messages from members, far less than 1 percent, raise such questions. Still, they do evict people for misbehavior.

And the emotional pitch of debate on line can become quite heated, with the forum moderator often the

target. Veteran forum leaders say they have been accused of just about everything from dishonesty to being C.I.A. agents, and they have absorbed all manner of insult.

Lynne Bundesen, the 50-ish head of the news forum for Prodigy, is an author and former journalist who covered wars and political unrest in Southeast Asia during the 1970's. But nothing, it seems, quite prepared her for being at the receiving end of the personal attacks on line. "You're amazingly vulnerable — people just come right at you," Ms. Bundesen says. "We should get dangerous duty pay."

"Occasionally, the response can be particularly nasty. In Alexandria, Va., Tom Gardner, 27, heads a personal-finance forum on America Online with his brother, David, 29. In their forum, called Motley Fool, they warned on-line members about in-

of repartee, argument and encouragement, much like radio talk-show hosts.

Often, people excel on line in a way they might not in another medium. Georgia Griffith, a 63-year-old forum leader for CompuServe, is one such person. From her home in Lancaster, Ohio, Ms. Griffith now runs six forums including ones on political debate, the White House and religion. She composes hundreds of on-line messages a day, some short and some several paragraphs. She is known in the on-line community as a "Net Queen," writing faster than most people talk, with a distinctive voice that is at turns witty, forceful and self-deprecating.

Ms. Griffith is both deaf and blind. Before she became an on-line host in 1982, she was a Braille music proof-reader for the Library of Congress. The only way to interview her is on line. Asked how she did her job being blind, Ms. Griffith said she used a Braille screen reader, which translated what appeared on her screen into Braille.

Then, she added, with a characteristic flourish that her many on-line fans appreciate: "I am not sensitive about being deaf and blind. I was born blind; a few years later they said I was visually handicapped; then I became visually impaired; now I'm visually challenged and I can't see a bit better! I'm blind and I am not very politically correct about it."

The balance of power between popular forum leaders and the major on-line services is shifting. Once, the big on-line services had all the power and the forum leaders were beholden to the services, poorly paid with little influence. But the terms of trade in cyberspace are changing, as the Internet develops and new on-line services increase competition for popular hosts.

The on-line services find they can no longer enforce exclusive contracts with hosts. For example, Ms. Bundesen, the news forum leader for Prodigy, is also signed up to run the Religion forum for Microsoft Network.

The forum leaders still need the on-line services to reach an audience, but they increasingly talk and act like stand-alone businesses, which provide information and entertainment as well as discussion areas. In his fourth-floor loft in Manhattan, Mr. Bundesen described Entertainment Drive as a "small, aggressive growth company" striving to develop a "real mainstream product."

Others apparently share his assessment. These days, venture capi-

talists and investment bankers often come by, offering money.

To broaden its distribution, Entertainment Drive plans to set up its own Web site this fall, with technical assistance from CompuServe. Wider distribution, Mr. Bolanos said, means larger audiences, which is how he attracts stars. Two weeks ago, the star of "Apollo 13," Tom Hanks, and the movie's producer, Ron Howard, dropped by Entertainment Drive's office for what has increasingly become the obligatory on-line interview in movie-promotion tours.

So far, Mr. Bolanos said, all the money he has made has been reinvested in Entertainment Drive, adding staff and tweaking software to make the forum faster and easier to use. "We're building a structure, building a business here now," he said. "Soon, we'll probably have the need for strategic investment partners. Will we go public someday? Maybe."

Is the David Letterman of cyberspace lurking in the ether?

vestment scams on the Internet, including one last year from Canada promoting a nonexistent diamond mine in Zaire. "Afterward, my brother and I got death threats on our home phones," Mr. Gardner recalled.

Yet experienced forum leaders say the rewards of their craft more than outweigh the drawbacks. They are deeply absorbed by their subjects, and deeply involved in their electronic communities. Elin Silveous, the 38-year-old host of America Online's health and medical forum, ventured into the on-line world after she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1992 and began looking for electronic support groups.

To explain what she liked most about her job, Ms. Silveous pointed to a posting from an America Online member suffering from a chronic health problem. For learning to cope with a disease, the dialogue on the forum was "better than any medicine or any advice from a doctor," wrote Lynne451, the member's screen name.

To attract a crowd, the forum leader strives to keep the on-line discussion animated, intelligent, off-beat and fun. Contributing to the appeal of popular forums is the on-line persona of the moderator. Each has a distinctive cadence and style

