

The Silicon Valley Well and Me

Louis Jaffe, my partner in Old Colorado City Communications knew many of the Californians that were involved with Silicon Valley such as Art Kleiner who was the Editor of the Whole Earth Review supported by Stewart Brand.

As I noted before Brand was engaged is setting up a pretty powerful 'computer conferencing' system (BBS on Steroids) that could serve the Bay Area. Louis, having seen how powerful, and standard, our AT&T Unix Miniframe was, urged Brand NOT to buy Digital VAX's which he was looking at. VAX's were powerful machines with their own operating systems but Unix was a far wider deployed standard, which also could be adapted to support a wide variety of functions.

But Stewart went ahead and bought two VAX machines and called the System and Service "The Well." (several years later he scrapped them and bought Unix machines which are far better for what he and we wanted primarily Computer Conferencing systems - which does what BBSs do, except fully multi-user and with many more features)

Louis and I were among the first half dozen names in the Well service. I was and still am dave@well.com We were given complimentary accounts for the advice and help we got those first Wellites as their service got underway.

Since it was a 'Conferencing System' we could choose to hang out in a 'home' conference, but join any of the other 'public' ones - like the Media conference where mainly reporters hung out. Or like most BBS's scores of other 'local or special interest' conferences - sports, apple computers, politics. I selected the 'Telecom' conference. And later I joined the 'Rocky Mountain' conference, and even created the unique NAPLPS conference.

I was welcomed on there, though the overwhelming number of subscribers were Bay Area and Silicon Valley people. I was about the only person on the Well who had any substantial Military experience or background, while I was in the midst of large numbers of anti-Vietnam War, anti-everything-not-California, I was not online that much. But soon the Well got connected by UUCP and then later full bore TCPIP - two way Internet.

One Well user, Mary Eisenhart, was the editor of a popular and widely distributed California publication - "Microtimes". She - a Grateful Dead devotee - followed my wanderings out in electronic space and reported on me a number of times. She even physically visited my 'Electronic Cottage' and Roger Bar in Old Colorado City. And she first published my Big Sky Telegraph work with Frank Odasz as we taught Indian Artists how to create 'share art' from Indian reservations online and get paid for their works. For two or three years Mary Eisenhart listed me as "One of the 100 most influential technology persons the US."

UUCP -or 'store and forward' communications

Now there always had been (at least since large computer systems appeared in Tech Companies like Hewlett Packard, and Universities in the 60s) a way to send and receive 'email'

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and even read and post to conference-like 'Newsgroups' using something all Unix system had built in - and VAX's could so with add-on software.

It was called UUCP or Unix-to-Unix-Copy. It still exists on all unix systems, but has been totally superceded by TCPIP Internet Protocols. UUCP was a one-way-at-a-time hop-hop software system. Technically, so long as every computer had a unique ID and name within the network, a user on any of them could address an email to any other user on any other system that had an ID. And if there were data connections between all the computers on the Net, this was good enough to send/receive email, newsgroup postings, or files, on a Hop-hop-hop basis. This was developed first by Computer Engineers in large companies which had at least one Mainframe Unix or Vax system with data connections to others.

Now UUCP supporting what are called 'Newsgroups' originally were heavily used by techs and engineers to share technical information with other engineers who did not have to be in the same Company - or even use the same (Unix) operating systems. But they were computer programming - usually technically educated - colleages.

But as networks became more accessed from personal computers, something emerged well beyond technical chit chat. A whole series of less technical-discussion Newsgroups also developed - such as ones called 'soc.culture.irish' or 'soc.culture.welsh' - meaning social discussions online about Welsh culture, or Ireland. (I used soc.culture.welsh newsgroups to plan out a trip to my ancestral home of Wales with my daughter Rebecca in 1998) I was able to get Welsh maps, advice on where to stay and how to get around from those who lived in Wales and accessed newsgroups. In fact that set of contacts led to really amazing series of events, two trips, one paid for by the Welsh government, and finally contact with two distant relatives I would never had found without those first news-group, UUCP contacts before 1998)

Not only was I able to go, over our Unix system in Old Colorado City, hopping by UUCP to local Hewlett Packard plant's main frames, but also to HP California, and from there through many other world networks to (1) the Well, and (2) Welsh Universities.

That was, before TCPIP and full Internet was installed on the Well, and on our Old Colo City Comm system. UUCP offered an unusal way for me to connect up 116 One Room School Houses in Montana. Because one of the Hackers, Tom Jennings, not only created Fidonet - which any Fido BBS could talk to hop hop hop to any other Fido BBS, but with a clever piece of code Jennings wrote called 'UFGate' permitted a Fido BBS across the room from a Unix system to be physically connected by a cable, and UFGate software would take an Addressed Fido BBS message that came in, to hop over to the Unix machine which would UUCP travel over the big university or company networks. And then hop out to a local Fidonet BBS system.

So UUCP was able to move message traffic by telephone lines even before Internet cables were laid between cities or instituions.And THAT became the basis for Big Sky Telegraph, which I will tell about in another section here.

Naplps In the Old Soviet Union

For a while I was working on adapting a Graphic/Telecom method to add graphics and even foreign language fonts - North American Presentation Protocol - to create my own product that would add an entirely new dimension to the online culture. Just then Russian Peristroika burst forth as the Cold War diminished. Naplps was used as the technical basis for Canadian Telidon, and in France because it could support primitive color graphics. It dawned on me I would be able to 'hire' Russian Programmers for a lot less money than it would cost to contract for the same work in Silicon Valley, California.

So with a few introductions via Gordon Cook who knew some key people in Moscow since his doctorate was on Soviet Society, I flew there, stayed at least 10 days with one of his English speaking friends. After we found a number of young programmers I laid out what I wanted done, and struck a deal with programmers who had less 'government' work now, and could sure use some dollars.

Below are some photos I took while there.

Russian Soldiers on guard at the Kremlin, off Red Square

Me in my Stetson Cowboy hat in Red Square

I returned later to review the work, and then approved their programs, paid them, brought the programs home, and produced a program called TROIKA. Which, while it did not burn up the sales charts, had ONE major feature - Foreign Fonts could be used to both create and edit text in foreign languages, and deliver over modems to anyone who had loaded Troika into their computer as a terminal program.

I was able to type in Russian Language lines in Cyrillic fonts. Which I did copying down one of the most famous Russian Poems all Russian School Children learn - The Sail - and send it, with accompanying art graphic of water and a sailing ship, to people with the Troika program as their

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Terminal program.

That program became the basis of one of my deepest convictions about how the human eye and brain can work to create or copy foreign texts as diverse as American English, Mexican Spanish, Cyrillic Russian, Japanese, and - reading right to left - Arabic.

I called Troika capable of "Word Dance" in which the reader, rather than read a textual page (or screen) by moving the eye over each line, from left to right and then down one line at a time, one could compose with Troika a text in which the eye of the reader stayed focused on one place on the screen, while the text moved at the reader in a digital stream.

And instead of inserting punctuation marks, like commas, periods, the text would pause, or halt temporarily, and expand in size. It was "Visual Speech" which incorporated the rhythms of oral speech, yet as NAPLPS based text.

One shot Television advertising segments do that in so many seconds of words enlarging and/or shrinking, together with images after costly one-time studio programming. But with Troika, any individual could engage in a two way Word Dance dialogue with another distant partner. Word Dance as Visual Speech was very much a door to opening up new forms of one to one, or many. New forms of Poetry could develop. I wrote some.

But soon commercial online dialogue and graphics took over with the World Wide Web, while alas! users continued to write and read online in the same old top down fashion that merely replicated the printed page, which scrolled top to bottom, like any printed page. Hardly, in my view an advance in the language arts.

Troika sales went nowhere. And with it the potential new forms of Literary Online Art disappeared.

Space Foundation

Then in 1988 the US Space Foundation in Colorado Springs, retained me to set up a Space Educational Server for access by students studying Space. By the time of the 4th National Space Symposium held in Colorado Springs at the Broadmoor complex, I teamed up with Astronaut 'Ox' Van Houten to demonstrate, real time with students in Nebraska the 'Space Net' system I designed.

UNITED STATES SPACE FOUNDATION

SPACEWATCH

VOLUME 5 — NUMBER 5

MAY 1988

Van Hoften Opens "SPACE NET" At Fourth National Space Symposium

Nebraska Businessman Sets Pace To Reach America's Youth



Astronaut James "Ox" van Hoften and David Hughes initiate Nebraska-U.S. Space Foundation SPACE NET.
Photo — Nancy MacGregor Photography

"What our youth cannot understand, they cannot value; what they cannot value, they will not defend; what they will not defend, they will lose."

— Jack Anderson, syndicated columnist,
speaking to attendees at the Third National Space
Symposium, January 1987.

This was the message that sparked Nebraska businessman, John Egging, with a burning desire to stir America's youth toward an understanding and excitement for education, values and principles of the American System. The avenue for this vision was Space Technology in the classroom which has evolved into a concept for a national pilot project — SPACE NET, a program focused on motivating students in space science.

On April 13, 4:40 p.m., SPACE NET was initiated featuring Astronaut James "Ox" van Hoften and Dave Hughes who provided on-line

training to the Foundation's assistant director of education, Mary Ellen Dube. Together with Sidney, Nebraska coordinators Marge Curtis and Joydene McCarville, 129 fifth and sixth grade students located in the southwest corner of the Nebraska panhandle, began computer access by phone to the U.S. Space Foundation's Space and Aviation Education Resource Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

This program took hold from John Egging's idea, which was supported by community leaders John Mason and Dave McCarville, and a dynamic catalyst organization, High Plains



THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON
March 22, 1988

Warmest greetings to everyone attending the Fourth National Space Symposium hosted by the United States Space Foundation.

The high standard of living we enjoy as Americans can be attributed in large measure to our success in applying the technological gains from basic research, including our space program, to mankind's eternal and everyday challenge to obtain food, energy, clothing, and shelter. Through our commitment to exploring and exploiting the richness of space, we are demonstrating our determination to build an even better future and to help improve living conditions for all mankind.

I commend the United States Space Foundation for its pioneering efforts to galvanize public support, motivate our youth, and promote better technical skills through sound education. Your efforts to bring together civil, military, commercial, and international organizations reflect the principles of cooperation that guided our new National Space Policy and that are, I believe, the keys to accelerated progress in the space sciences. It's no wonder that your inspired and untiring work has succeeded in drawing together our Nation's foremost leaders for this symposium.

I salute the United States Space Foundation and its many supporters for the remarkable way in which you are helping the United States resolve the key issues on the agenda at "Space Challenge '88." You have my best wishes for an interesting and productive meeting. God bless you.

Ronald Reagan

Development Group made up of private and public sectors from Sidney and Cheyenne County, Nebraska industries and financial institutions.

Through coordination efforts of the Group's Educational Service Unit Administrator, Bill Kelley, seven area teachers were sent to the U.S. Space Foundation's 1987 workshop, "Getting Comfortable Teaching With Space." They returned home not only excited and motivated by space education tools, but by the U.S. Space Program itself.

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