

Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

Response to "Can We Make A Computer Community?"

by Richard Beam, 10/1/94

Richard Beam is certainly right about the great potential of computer networks; they can obviously increase our interactions with colleagues and students and increase the access we have to information. As I offer this demurrer, I do not want to be overly negative or discourage anyone from becoming "connected" because I have personally benefited from these resources. However, I do want to suggest some cautions relevant to our concepts of "community" and "scholarship."

1. I have been struck by the degree of thoughtlessness frequently displayed on computer networks. The ease of participating in network discussions by using the "reply" option is two-edged. Yes, we are more likely to "reply" than to send a letter or even make a phone call. But, as a result of this ease, I find people are all too willing to respond without too much thought. I am not referring only to "flames" but also to reflexive speculation, passing on of unedited thoughts, and even the passing on of rumors or urban/rural myths.
2. A related concern is that the network community tends to deal mainly with simple things and to simplify very complex issues. Some discussions on the net are stimulating and informative. Yet I receive a very high proportion of trivia. More important, I have found that people on the net are no more likely than before to take the time to read and process complex contributions or to take care that their responses are "scholarly." To me, the power of the concept of a community of scholarship as opposed to a community of scholars is the notion that all we do should be characterized by high standards of thoughtfulness, evidence, and reason. Much of what I see on networks has none of these characteristics. Truly conceptual contributions are often responded to with simple dismissals and even derision.
3. Something about the nature of discussions on the nets seems to lead to a rapid application of the law of diminishing returns. A few useful interactions appears to me to run quickly to frivolous responses and the wasting of time, perhaps due to what I have suggested above. Information in itself is not an unqualified good. We can be overwhelmed by information and lose the ability to discriminate between dimensions of quality. For example, on one extremely active network I subscribe to, I find myself deleting 95% of the contributions without a pang of remorse.
4. Most of the discussions on the net are missing something that is important in my own sense of "community." I cannot easily pinpoint what is missing, but it has something to do with the richness of truly "human" interaction. Perhaps it is the affective or nonverbal side of communication or the lack of context in most discussions. This may be especially important when we start thinking about teaching courses on the computer.

I am delighted that we have this new resource. We can all gain from it, and I do believe that it has features that will make it a more useful innovation than many of our past educational "reforms." But as we move in this direction, I hope we can keep a critical eye on the effects of the computer network and on what it adds or subtracts from what we understand as a "community of scholarship."

Bruce Henderson, Psychology