

Social Networks – Connect Everyone With Everyone

It was the dawn of a new era: in 1985, Californian hippies programmed one of the world's first social networks -The Well. The beauty and horror of digital communication were already evident in the pioneering community. This is how it started:

The doctor Larry Brilliant:

At the beginning of April 1985, Matthew McClure was sitting in his office at the harbor in Sausalito, California, where the rain sometimes dripped through the roof. Little does he know that a historical experiment is about to begin. He boots up his computer amid cables and coffee mugs. Letters flicker across the screen, sometimes he hears the screeching and screeching of a modem in the background, which signals to him that others are now dialing into one of the first and one of the most influential online communities in the world. This community is called The Well. The abbreviation stands for Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link and is about a longing: the whole world electronically connected, united in a single, pulsating network of information.

Matthew McClure, Stanford graduate, geek and a master of soft communication, checks on the latest postings from morning until night. He settles disputes and cautiously warns if someone writes texts that are too long or the debaters get stuck. He lived in The Farm Commune, Tennessee, for twelve years. And he, like many who gather in the new online community, has taken peyote, mushrooms, or LSD. In the intoxication, he says, he made the experience that there is a kind of supra-personal consciousness that connects everything with everything. He rediscovered this bond in April 1985 -using software that catapults people out of their bodies into a new, mysteriously shimmering sphere: cyberspace. Together with other hippies and hackers, Matthew McClure invents the utopia of a virtual community, a new world -which, however, will never be as beautiful as expected.

The opportunities and horrors of networking are already evident in the digital pioneering community of The Well, this original model of all social networks that still exists today. Because even here, in the midst of hippies, civil rights activists and opponents of war, there is hatred and agitation, bullying and dirt attacks. But also a lot of solidarity and willingness to help, fundraising campaigns for members who are sick or in need. Anyone who wants to understand the underlying causes of communicative climate change in social networks should therefore not dismiss their prehistoric times as a mere nerd story. What did you do differently back then? What right and wrong path choices have been made? What can we learn from the past of internet culture for today?

Larry Brilliant, an American doctor and epidemiologist, initiated The Well. Brilliant lived for several years in the ashram of guru Neem Karoli Babain northern India and founded the Seva Foundation with other seekers of meaning, which raised money to fight blindness in the poorer

areas of the world with inexpensive operations. Steve Jobs, whom he had met on his pilgrimage, gave him an Apple II computer for this work, which Brilliant soon provided valuable services: When a Seva helicopter broke down in a remote valley in Nepal, he used the device to Organize spare parts using innovative digital conference systems. This was Brilliant's key experience. He was fascinated by the effectiveness of the new tool and, a philanthropist and entrepreneur, took a stake in NETI (Network Technologies International), which had developed an early system for computer conferencing.

One day he asked his friend Stewart Brand to meet. Brand had traveled around in a brightly painted school bus with the Merry Pranksters, a California hippie artist group. He had organized the Trips Festival in San Francisco in 1966 with thousands of participants (LSD was still legal at the time), and he invented the Whole Earth Catalog, half magazine, half product catalog, which became the central organ of American counterculture, a do-it-yourself bible -yourself communards. How about, suggested Brilliant, if Brand let his readers discuss the new conference tool with one another? He offered him seed capital, software, and a VAX minicomputer the size of a refrigerator.

Brand agreed. And soon gave everything its own stamp. The result was The Well.

Brand defined the premises of the project as liberally as possible and set up the entire company as a kind of late romantic communal experiment under digital conditions. At the same time, he insisted that anonymity should be impossible and that the online service -despite the lack of advertising -should be cheap. Only then, according to his idea, would ethical responsibility and playful improvisation come together. The Well subscription initially cost eight dollars a month; You paid two dollars for every hour you used the bulletin board.

Before you could log in, you got to read a motto, the exact meaning of which the members argued for years: "You own your own words!" Was that Stewart Brand and Larry Brilliant's attempt to decline all liability? Probably. Was this about intellectual copyright? Conceivable. Was it a call for personal responsibility? Certainly.

Whoever registered the dunning mantra was inside. And came across texts. And lyrics again. An endless discourse ping-pong in a large conversation held day and night. No pictures, no videos, no bling-bling -that wasn't technically possible yet -but a widespread system of discussion threads structured along main topics. It was about everything that interested the participants: about LSD experiences and raising children, the illness of a friend, the subtleties of Unix programming, concerts in the Bay Area, basic spiritual works, the band The Grateful Dead or even the sex life the tarantula.

The debates were not always harmonious right from the start. Some provocateurs enjoyed stirring up the left-liberal, peace-loving Well people with targeted malice. And sometimes there were verbal brawls that were called flame wars, flame wars. Ultimately, however, the in-depth conversation succeeded, the invention of a digital salon culture. The Well was everything at the same time, especially in the early days: shared kitchen, ideas laboratory, contact center and

career springboard. The founders of AOL (Steve Case) and Craigslist (Craig Newmark) hung around here. Future internet billionaires encountered hackers.

Since 1985, the service, which was connected to the Internet in 1992, has changed hands several times. In 1994 the alternative entrepreneur Bruce Katz bought all rights. He was soon faced with bitter resistance from the community, which rejected any profit thinking, and gave up. In 1999, Salon magazine acquired the community. Finally, since 2012, the community has been owned by some of its members. Through all the changes, however, an elementary sense of community has been preserved until today. Why is that?

There are five features of The Well that stand out:

First, the community was never very large; at no point did it become unmanageable. It all started in 1985 with a few hundred members; At the best of times it was a maximum of 11,000, says long-time presenter Gail Williams. Initially, men dominated, and in the mid-1990s the gender ratio more or less evened out. Pseudonyms were always allowed, but anyone could see the real names. There was no anonymity, rather there were numerous fleshmeets, personal get-togethers, private picnics and parties in the Bay Area soon after the company was founded.

Second, the moderation used a deliberately reserved style. Like Matthew McClure, all the moderators in the early years had lived in The Farm commune. Your moderation rules -"Use a light touch", "Don't be authoritarian" -read like the maxims from the self-awareness groups of the 1970s. And the software itself (the program was called PicoSpan) had an anti-authoritarian bias. The programmer Marcus Watts, an avowed libertarian, had specified that the texts deleted by moderators were automatically marked as "censored" -which put the inhibition threshold for deletion extremely high. Here a basic insight of the American network expert Lawrence Lessig becomes tangible: "Code is law." The laws of communication are inscribed in the program itself.

Thirdly, the pure laissez-faire has been curbed by the "communicative siege" of the mobsters and provocateurs. Whoever abused freedom was confronted. On some days the former The Farm communitard John Coate, also a moderator in the early years, telephoned for hours with behavioral Well members.

Fourth, the subscription model and the lack of advertisements have enabled a completely different information economy than the social networks of today. Unlike in the case of Facebook, the members of The Well only found what they were looking for with their own hands. There was and is no data mining, no specially optimized algorithms that pass advertisements to members without being asked. And there were and are no cleverly orchestrated incentives that favor hypes, superlatives and extremes.

Fifth, those who met in The Well were similar in many ways -a rather depressing finding when measured against the goal of connecting everyone with everyone and overcoming the boundaries of the real world. Wellians were shaped by a mixture of alternative philosophy of life, cybernetic thinking and spiritual longing, as the communication scientist Fred Turner has shown in his brilliant book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*. And they had a common goal, as it was important to try out and understand the new medium.

This interest in knowledge was soon reflected in numerous book publications by Well members and in 1993 led to the founding of the technology magazine Wired, which is still published today. The new online community studied itself. And, paradoxically enough, analyzed the emerging screen world in the old leading media of written culture. What emerged here was an ecstatic cybersociology that transformed some computer hippies into hip consultants overnight, who from then on reported with grand gestures about how things are going on the Internet between Davos and Dubai.

The computer appeared to these digital bohemians of the eighties and nineties as a useful tool, a philosophical model and an instrument of individual liberation. Based on their experiences in a small, anything but representative community, they formulated images of the future that were discussed worldwide.

The journalist Howard Rheingold, Well member since 1985, coined the term "virtual community" (1993) and designed her model using The Well as an example. He did not pay much attention to the fact that the Well members often met face to face and knew each other personally from the past. The technology philosopher Kevin Kelly, who was also there from the start, raved about the decentralized ownership structure and the swarm intelligence of the future of the network. His 1998 book *New Rules for the New Economy* became a key text in the Silicon Valley boom. And the former rancher and Grateful Dead lyricist John Perry Barlow conjured up in his essays the glory of disembodied existence in cyberspace like a reborn Marshall McLuhan. Together with software inventor, Wellian and former meditation teacher Mitch Kapor, he founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation in 1990, an influential NGO for fundamental rights in the digital age.

They all invented a new sound, a new language, even their own network theology, in which they combined the terms of information theory with the metaphors of mysticism and vigorously imagined the flower power ideas of the past with libertarian enthusiasm and the technically cool aura of one Future.

This vocabulary is now used for other purposes: You can find it, for example, in the postings of Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg. Building a Global Community is the name of an endlessly long essay that Zuckerberg published on February 16, 2017, just under a month after Donald Trump was inaugurated, who also used Facebook to bully himself into power.

It's the year that the company makes nearly \$16 billion in net income. At the same time, the first QAnon groups are forming on Facebook, and unfortunately there is hardly any time to do anything against all the hate reports calling for the expulsion and murder of the Rohingya Muslim minority. "Online communities" -a term that Well moderator John Coate first used publicly in 1986 -are something like "a ray of hope" in our time, writes Zuckerberg. They could strengthen "real relationships" and the "social infrastructure", give people with serious illnesses new strength, promote solidarity and give everyone a voice. "Facebook is not just a technology or an advertising medium, it is a community of people." Zuckerberg speaks the language of the computer hippies of yesteryear to give his billion dollar business a visionary aura.

What does Matthew McClure, the gentle community manager from the very beginning, say?

McClure is now a man of 74 years. His long hair is sparse and his beard is almost white. He lives in Petaluma, a small town in California half an hour's drive from Sausalito, where it all began. He still meditates daily, sometimes with his friends from the commune of yore. He sighs. Speaks in hints, metaphors. At one point there is talk of "perversion". Then he stops. He doesn't want to say anything ugly, he says; that is still important to him.

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