

Discovering the Early Online Communities and Cultures with Jon Lebkowsky

As people ventured into cyberspace, they began building communities and connecting with others from distant lands, fostering various cultures that flourished in the online world. These communities, built on shared interests, goals, and visions, attracted sci-fi writers, technologists, journalists, hackers, artists, and poets from around the globe to discuss the future they envisioned.

Jon Lebkowsky's online journey was sparked by his deep passion for the *Whole Earth Catalog* and its publications. Eager to access The WELL, the online community associated with these publications, he purchased his first computer and modem. However, the high cost of long-distance connections initially held him back from joining The WELL. Instead, he turned to local BBS systems, particularly SMOF-BBS, a BBS for science fiction fans, where he met Bruce Sterling, Mike Godwin, Lewis Shiner, and Earl Cooley.



Jon Lebkowsky

In 1990, he eventually started dialing into The WELL. During this period, The WELL connected to the Internet, and the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) was forming, with early organization taking place on The WELL. Jon Lebkowsky engaged with a diverse network of like-minded individuals and actively contributed to the formation of the EFF. His efforts helped establish EFF-Austin, the first chapter of the organization.

On The WELL, he also met Mark Frauenfelder of the zine *bOING-bOING*, who introduced him to Paco Xander Nathan. Together, they founded FringeWare, a company aimed at helping individuals and small businesses market their products on the Internet. This venture soon led to the creation of *FringeWare Review*, a zine that became a notable cultural artifact of the early Internet era.

Today, we are delighted to welcome Mr. Jon Lebkowsky to our interview. In this interview, he reflects on his early experiences with computers, the online communities he joined, the profound influence The WELL had on him, and his exploration of various early online subcultures. Mr. Lebkowsky also shares the process and motivations behind founding Plutopia News Network, along with his views on the future development of online communities.

Venturing into the Digital Frontier

The Nexus: How did you come to own your very first computer, and what were your earliest online explorations?

Jon Lebkowsky: As a devoted reader and follower of the *Whole Earth Catalog*¹ and its publications, especially *CoEvolution Quarterly*², I was quickly

¹ The *Whole Earth Catalog* (WEC) is an American counterculture magazine and product catalog first published in 1968 by Stewart Brand. The catalog emphasized themes like self-sufficiency, ecological awareness, alternative education, and "do-it-yourself" (DIY) culture, with the slogan "access to tools." While the magazine included essays and articles, its primary focus was on product reviews, covering a wide range of items such as clothing, books, tools, machines, and seeds. The *Whole Earth Catalog* did not sell products directly but provided contact information for vendors, allowing readers to purchase items themselves. The magazine had a significant impact on the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s, as well as on modern environmentalism.

² *CoEvolution Quarterly* (1974–1985) was a journal founded by Stewart Brand, evolving from the original *Whole Earth Catalog*. It focused on themes related to ecology, alternative education,

aware when they set up a bulletin board system (BBS) called The WELL³ (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link). I had long wanted to meet the Whole Earth folks and hoped to write for them, so I decided I wanted a computer and a modem. I had discovered at work that I had an affinity for computers, and had done some work on emerging systems there, so I understood how to operate a PC, though I hadn't gone deep with technology before. I bought an early 8086 PC clone from PC's Limited⁴, which was an alias for what became Dell Computers. Along with the computer, I bought a 300 baud internal modem so that I could dial into other systems, like The WELL. I started teaching myself more about computers - I had a stack of manuals to read, so I did a deep dive into MS-DOS and software like WordStar⁵, an early word processor.

Dialing into The WELL was going to require an expensive long distance telephone connection via the modem. I had limited funds, so I didn't attempt that right away. Instead I joined local BBS systems, especially SMOF-BBS. SMOF⁶ stood for "Secret Masters of Fandom," a BBS for science fiction fans

sustainability, and counterculture, much like its predecessor. The publication was intended to explore the evolving relationship between humans and the environment, and it featured a wide range of articles, essays, and discussions on innovative ideas and practices.

³ The WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) is a virtual community that was founded in 1985, making it one of the oldest continuously operating online communities in the world. Known for its in-depth and diverse discussions, The WELL allows users to engage in conversations on a wide range of topics, from technology and art to social issues. A distinctive feature of The WELL is its real-name policy, which prohibits anonymity and fosters a sense of trust and responsibility among users. It was once called "the world's most influential online community" by *Wired* magazine in 1997.

⁴ Dell was originally founded as "PC's Limited" in 1984 by Michael Dell while he was a student at the University of Texas at Austin. The company began by selling customized personal computers directly to consumers. In 1988, PC's Limited was renamed Dell Computer Corporation, reflecting the company's growing presence in the PC market.

⁵ WordStar was a word processing software application that became highly popular in the early 1980s. It was originally developed for the CP/M-80 operating system by Rob Barnaby and published by MicroPro International. As one of the first word processors available for microcomputers, WordStar quickly gained a large user base due to its powerful features and flexibility.

⁶ SMOF stands for "Secret Master of Fandom." It refers to influential fans in science fiction and fantasy communities who play key roles in organizing and managing fan conventions. Although the term originally had a negative connotation related to the hidden control of fan activities, it has evolved to describe experienced and dedicated fans who handle behind-the-scenes tasks essential for running conventions. SMOFs are known for their significant contributions to the fandom, including event planning and coordination.

where I met Bruce Sterling⁷, Mike Godwin⁸, Lewis Shiner⁹, and Earl Cooley, aka Shiva, the system operator (sysop). I also joined Steve Jackson's¹⁰ "Illuminati Online," though spent less time there because it was dedicated to role-playing games, and that wasn't one of my fascinations.

Eventually I did start dialing into The WELL, in 1990. I looked for ways to do it more cheaply, and found a Sprint service called PC Pursuit, which allowed me to log in at a flat rate of \$30 per month. (The WELL also charged \$2 per hour at the time.) By then I was also into the BBS world, and had joined some others that were local, including Pair-O-Dice, operated by an art instructor from the University of Texas, Bob Anderson. Bob and I became good friends. I don't recall much about other systems I joined - much of my focus was on The WELL.

Around the time I joined The WELL, it connected to the Internet. And in the very early 1990s, the Electronic Frontier Foundation¹¹ launched - some or most of the initial organization of EFF had been on The WELL, and I was in those conversations. The Secret Service raided Steve Jackson Games in Austin in March 1990, about a month after I joined The WELL. I heard about

⁷ Bruce Sterling is an American science fiction author and futurist known for his influential work in the genre of cyberpunk. Born on April 14, 1954, Sterling is recognized for his novels such as *Schismatrix*, *Islands in the Net*, and *The Difference Engine* (co-written with William Gibson). Sterling is also a prominent speaker on futurism and design, and he has played a key role in shaping the discourse around technology and society.

⁸ Michael Wayne Godwin (born October 26, 1956) is an American attorney and author known for his contributions to Internet law and culture. He was the first staff counsel of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF). Godwin also served as general counsel for the Wikimedia Foundation and has been a contributing editor to *Reason* magazine. He has also worked with the Open Source Initiative and the Internet Society. He created the Internet adage Godwin's law and the notion of an Internet meme.

⁹ Lewis Shiner is an American science fiction author known for his works that often blend elements of cyberpunk, magical realism, and fantasy. He began his writing career with a focus on science fiction but later expanded into more mainstream fiction while retaining speculative elements. Shiner's works include "Glimpses" and "Outside the Gates of Eden".

¹⁰ Steve Jackson (born January 22, 1952) is an American game designer. He is the founder of Steve Jackson Games, a company renowned for its popular games such as *Munchkin*, *GURPS* (Generic Universal RolePlaying System), and *Car Wars*. Jackson is also known for his contributions to the development of game design and for his role in fostering the gaming community.

¹¹ The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) is a leading nonprofit organization founded in 1990 to defend civil liberties in the digital world. EFF advocates for privacy, free expression, and innovation through litigation, policy analysis, grassroots activism, and technology development. The organization was established in response to concerns about government overreach and the potential erosion of individual rights in the rapidly evolving digital landscape. EFF has been involved in numerous high-profile legal cases and initiatives aimed at protecting user rights on the Internet, including issues related to encryption, surveillance, and copyright law.

the raid via SMOF-BBS, where Steve showed up to talk about it - at the time he was unclear exactly why his business was raided and computers confiscated. The EFF was still coming together - it formally launched in July 1990. The Steve Jackson Games case was the perfect case for EFF, which was formed according to John Barlow¹² to "raise and disburse funds for education, lobbying, and litigation in the areas relating to digital speech and the extension of the Constitution into Cyberspace." This gets into a longer story than I can tell in this context, but suffice to say that the Steve Jackson Games raid and resulting lawsuit¹³ (Steve Jackson Games, Inc. v. United States Secret Service) was a perfect early focus for EFF.

EFF originally intended to be a chapters-based organization with a strong community aspect, and Steve convinced them that Austin, where he and I live, should have the first EFF chapter. We started EFF-Austin, and through that, I met John Quarterman¹⁴ and Smoot Carl-Mitchell of Texas Internet Consulting. They gave me an account on their server - my first opportunity to connect directly to the Internet via modem. This gave me a cheaper/easier way to access The WELL. Quarterman tutored me quite a bit on the Internet and the UNIX operating system.

¹² John Perry Barlow was an American poet, essayist, cattle rancher, and cyberlibertarian political activist. He was best known as a lyricist for the Grateful Dead and as a founding member of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and the Freedom of the Press Foundation. Barlow was a vocal advocate for Internet freedom and privacy rights, significantly influencing discussions on digital rights and the open Internet.

¹³ The Steve Jackson Games, Inc. v. United States Secret Service case was a landmark lawsuit that dealt with issues of privacy, freedom of speech, and government surveillance of the Internet. In 1990, the United States Secret Service raided Steve Jackson Games, Inc. and seized the company's computer equipment, alleging that one of its employees had illegally accessed sensitive information. The raid sparked public concern about government overreach into personal privacy and ignited a broader debate about Internet freedom. The court ultimately ruled that the Secret Service had acted unlawfully, and the lawsuit had a profound impact on protecting the privacy rights of Internet users.

¹⁴ John Quarterman is an American computer scientist known for his pioneering work in the development of the Internet. He first used the ARPANET in 1974 while attending Harvard University and later worked at BBN, where he contributed to UNIX ARPANET software development. Quarterman co-founded the first Internet consulting firm in Texas (TIC) in 1986. He is also recognized for his work in Internet mapping and demographics, publishing the first maps of the entire Internet and conducting the first Internet Demographic Survey. In 1998, he was named one of the "25 Unsung Heroes of the Internet" by Inter@ctive Week.



The cover of *FringeWare Review* #5 (This was Jon Lebkowsky's favorite issue; he was both the editor and publisher on this one.)

Also via The WELL, I connected with Mark Frauenfelder of the zine *boING-boING*¹⁵, and he introduced me to Paco Xander Nathan¹⁶, who also lived in Austin. Paco and I became friends and formed a company called

¹⁵ *Boing Boing* is a popular blog known for sharing interesting, quirky, and avant-garde content. It started as a print zine called *boING boING* in 1988, primarily covering science fiction, futurism, and technology. With the rise of the Internet, *Boing Boing* transitioned into an online blog and gradually became a highly influential platform for Internet culture.

¹⁶ Paco Nathan is an American computer scientist and early engineer of the World Wide Web. He has also established himself as an author and a producer of performance art shows. Much of his career was built in Austin, Texas, where he contributed to both the tech and creative communities.

FringeWare, originally intended to help individuals and small companies to bring products to market via the Internet. We started an email list, originally to find products, but the list became a digital cultural phenomenon. We found that banks wouldn't let us accept credit cards online, because we couldn't secure the transaction (there was no SSL that early in the development of the Internet). We decided to create a catalog, and then we decided we should start our own zine and put the catalog in the back pages. We started publishing *FringeWare Review*¹⁷, which was an interesting cultural artifact of that time.

The Nexus: For people who weren't very tech-savvy, was it difficult to access the online world at that time? What were the most common technical frustrations for them, and how were these typically resolved?

Jon Lebkowsky: Part of the issue was finding systems to access, but I was picking up on that via word of mouth, starting with the local science fiction community that I was somewhat acquainted with. Another issue I've already mentioned was dialing into remote systems. I had no Internet access, in fact, I didn't know what the Internet was, when I started. And the computers were primitive, command line systems, not particularly user-friendly. There was no such thing as a graphical user interface.

Computer modems were relatively slow and clunky, and at first there were no commercial mainstream Internet service providers. Those started to appear in the early 90s, though. Computers themselves were not exactly built for the masses - you had to have a comfort with the technology to use them effectively, and be okay spending time staring at text on a monochromatic visual display, usually green or amber. When I bought my first computer, I was a novice but I did have an affinity, and a strong desire to figure it out and make it work. I recall arriving home with the computer, monitor, and a stack of manuals about three feet high. The manuals were somewhat difficult to get into; it took a lot of time and effort just to grasp the technology and mind-set behind it, even given that I had some computer experience by then. It was definitely not mainstream.

¹⁷ *FringeWare Review* was a magazine established in 1994. It served as a platform for exploring the intersections of technology, counterculture, and the arts. The publication covered a wide range of topics, including cyberpunk literature, hacking, virtual reality, and other cutting-edge subjects. *FringeWare Review* was part of a broader effort by the FringeWare community to create a marketplace and a space for alternative ideas and products, particularly in the context of the early Internet.

The resolution came along with the mainstreaming of the Internet and the computer experience, which took years. The graphical interface, as with Microsoft Windows, was a big step, along with the creation of things like haptics (the computer mouse) and touch screens. And eventually a discipline of user experience evolved for technology systems, an increasing focus on usability.

The Nexus: You've been deeply involved with The WELL. Could you elaborate on your role within this platform and discuss some unique aspects of its culture and its broader impact?

Jon Lebkowsky: Of course, I was just one of the users at first, but I embraced the technology - a text-based command-line UNIX system running a conferencing system called Picospan, very much like the BBS systems I'd joined locally. I'm a pretty good writer and communicator, and after reading what people were posting for a time, I started responding more and more. Eventually I made friends on The WELL, became a conference host, and took on various volunteer roles besides that - like being part of the team that published tips, pointers to discussions on The WELL that users might otherwise miss.

The WELL developed an interesting culture, growing organically and initially attracting members of the Deadhead community (followers of the Grateful Dead) and readers of Whole Earth publications, especially *CoEvolution Quarterly* (which was later renamed *Whole Earth Review*). Because of its physical proximity to the Bay Area in Northern California, it picked up a lot from the counterculture that was so prevalent in the area - former hippies and political activists, musicians, writers, hackers, artists and poets. Before social media appeared, The WELL was a place where authors and journalists could find stimulating discussions and potential sources. In general, it had a creative combination of counterculture, political culture, digital culture, and journalists who were covering all the emerging cultures throughout the 90s and 2000s. There were also futurists and forward-looking business people - the Global Business Network used The WELL as a platform for ongoing discussion.

Many of the folks who were using The WELL in the 90s and early 2000s are no longer active, having shifted their attention to social media platforms. Currently the WELL includes many of its original adherents, though, and

they're aging together. Many of the people I know there are, like me, over 70 years old... but, like me, they're very young old people.

Because The WELL had so many authors, journalists and eventual bloggers, it influenced the perception and form of digital culture. When blogs first appeared, they were somewhat influenced by the way people had been posting on The WELL and other community systems, and I believe they were influenced by the format of reviews and articles in the *Whole Earth Catalog* and related publications. Many of the people I knew in the zine world and the early world-wide web had followed and been influenced by Whole Earth's publications.

***The Nexus:* What were some of the local online communities you were involved with? How did they complement or differ from broader online spaces? In addition, how important do you think these local communities were in fostering connections and engagement compared to the larger, more global platforms?**

Jon Lebkowsky: When you're local you have the advantage of physical proximity, so communities that formed of early Internet adopters here in Austin had both online and offline components. I already mentioned BBSes, but another form of online community interaction was via email lists. Community formed around several endeavors I was involved with: EFF-Austin, FringeWare, the Robot Group, the Interactive Media Lab (ACTLab) at the University of Texas, etc. The main difference from non-local online spaces was that we met and interacted with each other in physical space.

I would say that local communities had a different character from larger global platforms because of physical proximity - easier for people to meet in physical space and hang out, getting to know each other on a different level. In addition to the communities around EFF-Austin et al. mentioned above, I became part of local business networks (e.g. Bootstrap Austin) in the 2000s, and networks around clean energy and sustainability (Austin Clean Energy Initiative, Solar Austin, Bright Green Austin). All of these had both virtual and physical presence. I was also involved with Worldchanging, a blog about environmental issues, sustainability, climate change, etc. One of my roles at Worldchanging was creating a network of local/regional Worldchanging blogs, and communities formed around each of those.

There's an old saying from the 60s, "think globally, act locally." My version of that saying became "think and act globally and locally." Worldchanging was a good example once we had both global and local presences. I think the global platforms are most powerful as facilitators of local clusters, networks, and communities. And there are platforms that are built specifically for smaller clusters - thinking of Discord.

One thing we've seen in the last decade or more is a downside to online communities. The same tools that can be powerful in facilitating community for the good can be manipulated to create communities fueled by misinformation, conspiracy theories, grifting and scams, etc. We've seen some of the worst kinds of political movements - e.g. fascism - build large followings using the same online tools that we've used to build sane and healthy online communities. This is a wicked problem that we're still learning how to address.

The Nexus: What factors do you believe are essential for the sustainability and long-term success of online communities? Are there any common mistakes that new community builders should be aware of and avoid?

Jon Lebkowsky: Communities form where people have affinity and start to build a history with each other. To hold the communities together, it helps to have formal or informal leadership, people who take responsibility for managing conversations or interactions. Not controlling, but managing. On The WELL, conversations are organized as "conferences," which are broad subject areas, and "topics," which are ongoing conversations relevant to the subject. Each conference has hosts who are responsible for supporting conversations and managing conflicts. They provide that support with a light touch and few rules, mostly a rule against ad hominem attacks. Social guidance vs strong direction.

A Glimpse of Early Online Culture

The Nexus: Could you describe some of the most prominent subcultures that emerged in these early online communities? Do any of these early subcultures still exist today, or have they evolved into something else?

Jon Lebkowsky: Early on part of The WELL's evolution depended on Bay Area Deadheads (fans of the Grateful Dead¹⁸) joining and contributing. There were also writers and journalists, zine publishers, artists, hackers, poets... so it was a diverse community representing many existing cultures.

When Paco Nathan and I started FringeWare, we were both members of The WELL, had a presence there, and drew from that community. But we had international circulation and found followers all over, people who tended to be fringe thinkers, which was the point. Pretty much anywhere in the world that someone was thinking outside the box and feeling isolated because of their differences, with access to the Internet they had the opportunity to find others like them.

There were a lot of libertarians online early on. Since academics had Internet access early, there were many of them, and many researchers, online. There were communities of hackers, including the cypherpunks¹⁹, who were specifically focused on modes of encryption.

Obviously BBSes started connecting to the Internet early on, if only to swap email with other BBSes via UUCP. And there was of course Usenet with its many decentralized newsgroups, where much of early digital culture was evolving. Anyone with access to the Internet could read and contribute to the newsgroups. FringeWare had its own newsgroup, alt.fringeware, back in the day.

Various other systems for online interaction appeared, including Echo and MindVox²⁰ on the east coast of the US, and commercial services like Prodigy,

¹⁸ Grateful Dead was an American rock band formed in 1965 in Palo Alto, California. They were known for their unique and eclectic musical style, which blended elements of rock, blues, jazz, folk, country, bluegrass, and psychedelia. The band became famous for their improvisational live performances. They developed a devoted fan base known as "Deadheads." The Grateful Dead is celebrated for their innovative approach to live music and is often regarded as a pioneering force in the jam band genre.

¹⁹ Cypherpunks are advocates for the use of strong cryptography and privacy-enhancing technologies as a means to achieve social and political change. Emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the cypherpunk movement promotes the idea that privacy is essential for personal freedom and that cryptographic tools can protect individual rights in an increasingly digital world. Key figures in the movement include Timothy C. May, Eric Hughes, and John Gilmore. The cypherpunks have been instrumental in advancing technologies like encryption and secure communication.

²⁰ MindVox was an early Internet service provider based in New York City, founded in 1991 by Bruce Fancher and Patrick Kroupa. Known for its reputation as "the Hells Angels of Cyberspace," MindVox was one of the first ISPs in NYC and gained notoriety for its association with hacking and

CompuServe, America Online, and GENie²¹. (GENie was a platform where science fiction writers hung out, among others.)

underground culture. It launched in March 1992 as an invite-only service and became publicly available later that year. MindVox was notable for hosting influential figures in the early online community and for its role in the early days of Usenet.

²¹ GENie (General Electric Network for Information Exchange) was an early online service platform launched in 1985 by General Electric. It initially offered various online features such as email, chat rooms, file sharing, and online discussion areas. GENie was one of the significant online communities in the late 1980s and early 1990s, particularly popular among technology enthusiasts and science fiction fans.



Jon Lebkowsky at the *Wired* offices in 1994 or so (Photo by Monte McCarter)

***The Nexus:* Unlike traditional zines with printing costs and limited reach, online platforms made publishing accessible to anyone. This led to a surge in diverse voices and perspectives represented in online zine**

culture. What were some of the popular zines early on? What topics did these zines mainly cover? Did you participate in any of them?

Jon Lebkowsky: The zines and early websites I knew about were mostly covering digital (or cyber) and fringe culture. *bOING bOING* started as a paper zine but moved online as a blog when blog software first appeared, and *FringeWare Review* had an online presence, including a kind of online zine I edited called *TAZMedia*. Donald Melanson had a site called Mindjack where I contributed a few pieces.

Blogs started taking the place of zines in the late 90s. I was involved in a multi-contributor blog called Worldchanging²² in the early 2000s, and had my own blog, originally on The WELL, later at weblogsky.com.

The Nexus: Was the technology good enough to allow online zines to keep the rich mixture of text in many different fonts, images, and other graphical elements that were present in print zines at the time? What software was typically used?

Jon Lebkowsky: Not really - the websites and particularly blogs that emerged online were limited to layouts we could make with simple HTML. Web publishing sites in the mid-1990s started using content management systems that depended quite a bit on templates, and with templated content you were working within a somewhat invariable framework. The original CMS systems were for larger publishing projects, but small/personal content management systems appeared toward the end of the 1990s - the first I encountered was Blogger²³. Mark Frauenfelder started using it for the *bOING bOING* website - *bOING bOING* became a very popular blog site. Mark sent an email around, letting people know about Blogger, and I immediately signed up and figured out how to use it for the content I was writing. Other platforms appeared,

²² Worldchanging was a weblog launched in 2003 that focused on innovative solutions for building a sustainable future. It covered topics such as environmental sustainability, green technology, social entrepreneurship, and social change. The blog aimed to highlight and discuss new ideas and projects that could contribute to a more sustainable and equitable world. Worldchanging gained recognition for its forward-thinking approach and influence in the environmental and social justice communities.

²³ Blogger is an American online content management system (CMS) that was founded in 1999 by Pyra Labs. It allows users to create and manage blogs with time-stamped entries, making it one of the earliest blogging platforms. In 2003, Google acquired Blogger, which significantly expanded its reach and integration with other Google services.

specifically Moveable Type²⁴, which I started using in the 2000s, and WordPress²⁵s, where I eventually migrated. WordPress became the platform of choice for a huge number of blogs - and is still very popular, though now we also have hosted services like Medium and Substack.

The Nexus: How do you think these early online zines have shaped today's Internet culture?

Jon Lebkowsky: The organization of information as posts of variable content started with early BBSes and Usenet, and was represented in blogs, social media sites, and "microblogs" like Twitter. So there was that structural influence.

We were early on creating fairly accessible technologies for anybody and everybody to post any and all kinds of information, evolving from a top-down mass media structure to a many-to-many social media structure. At the time we thought that this was a democratic movement and very powerful, not realizing how the information ecosystem could be manipulated by bad actors.

The Nexus: What role did online communities play in the development of the Sci-fi subculture? Could you share some of your personal experiences or notable moments within the online Sci-fi subculture?

Jon Lebkowsky: Sci-fi authors who were members of SFWA (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association) had accounts on GENie and hung out together there. I wasn't really writing science fiction. I tried, and helped co-found a sci-fi writers' group called Slugtribe, but I leaned more into nonfiction and journalism.

²⁴ Movable Type is a weblog publishing system developed by Six Apart, first released in 2001. It became one of the early popular blogging platforms, known for its flexibility and ability to manage multiple blogs from a single installation.

²⁵ WordPress is an open-source content management system (CMS) that was first released in 2003 by Matt Mullenweg and Mike Little. It is one of the most popular platforms for building websites and blogs, which is highly flexible and can be used to create a wide range of websites, from simple blogs to complex e-commerce sites and portfolios.

One impact, though, was via the cyberpunk²⁶ subgenre of science fiction. Cyberpunk influenced how people experienced the Internet - e.g. the concept of cyberspace, which came from William Gibson's²⁷ imagination as he was writing the cyberpunk novel "Neuromancer." At the time Gibson was influenced by arcade games and hadn't really "jacked into the matrix" himself. But cyberspace was a compelling metaphor for the online experience, and caught on. In early Internet culture there was much about aesthetic and cultural extraction from sci-fi, in fact I knew people who referred to themselves as cyberpunks. I'm pretty clear that the experience of being online started influencing science fiction writers, and online networks gave them a way to form community, connect and collaborate.

***The Nexus:* What were some of the earliest examples of online businesses you encountered? Back then, did you foresee that business would play such a significant role in the development of the Internet?**

Jon Lebkowsky: When we created FringeWare, our idea was to sell products online. We were aware that there were people with products, or ideas for products, that they couldn't get distributed because the costs of bringing them to market were so high. Software, for instance, had to be packaged and delivered to bricks and mortar stores. Selling online and shipping could be much cheaper - we could start the ball rolling on an online marketplace. We started an email list to find potential sellers and source products, but that email list also turned into a gathering place for people who were into fringe cultures, so we were doing that, too.

When we formed a company and asked a bank to authorize us to accept credit cards, they initially refused. They told us in no uncertain terms that we couldn't accept credit cards online because credit card numbers could be compromised - you couldn't secure them. SSL²⁸ had not yet been developed.

²⁶ Cyberpunk is a science fiction genre that emerged in the 1980s, characterized by the juxtaposition of high technology and low life. Set in dystopian futures, cyberpunk worlds often feature advanced technology, artificial intelligence, cyberspace, and social inequality or corruption. Classic works like *Blade Runner* and *Neuromancer* explore the conflicts between individuals and powerful corporations or governments, as well as the profound impact of technology on human existence. The cyberpunk aesthetic and themes have influenced various media, including film, music, and video games.

²⁷ William Gibson is a Canadian-American author, widely regarded as one of the founding figures of the cyberpunk genre. His novel *Neuromancer* is a seminal work that introduced the concept of cyberspace and helped define the cyberpunk genre. Gibson's writing is known for its insightful exploration of the relationship between technology and society, and his work has had a significant impact on modern science fiction and popular culture.

²⁸ Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) protocol is an encryption protocol designed to ensure the security of network communications. It works by establishing an encrypted connection between the client (such

We had to create a bricks and mortar presence, which is why we started the FringeWare store. Meanwhile we realized we could have a mail order business, so we developed a catalog. We decided to create a zine, and put the catalog in the back pages, which worked pretty well.

Eventually I left FringeWare. Whole Food Market hired me around 1997 to help them establish more of an Internet presence and create an online store. Things had changed - you could encrypt credit card numbers with SSL at point of sale, so e-commerce was becoming a thing. We built an online store and added a community platform using the same software that had been developed for The WELL. We also hired editors to add significant content.

Ecommerce became a significant part of the Internet in the years we were developing WholeFoods.com - at the same time, Amazon.com had launched and was growing. There were interesting problems unrelated to the technology (fulfillment logistics and potentially high costs of last mile delivery), and I also worked on those sorts of things.

With the "dotcom crash" in 2000 Whole Foods lost confidence in the online operation and sold it. Some thought that the Internet was over as a platform to support publishing and larger scale business. Of course, they were wrong.

A Personal Journey

The Nexus: What inspired you to start Plutopia News Network, and what goals were you hoping to achieve with it?

Jon Lebkowsky: From our website: "The word 'Plutopia' is a portmanteau combining two terms: 'pluralist utopia,' a concept that envisions an ideal society where diverse beliefs and identities coexist in harmony, actively promoting mutual respect and minimizing conflict. While idealistic, the term represents a vision of a more inclusive and harmonious world, acknowledging the complexities of achieving such a perfect society."

as a web browser) and the server, ensuring that the data transmitted between them cannot be intercepted or tampered with by third parties. Although SSL has been largely replaced by the more secure Transport Layer Security (TLS) protocol, it remains one of the foundational technologies in modern network security.

In 2005 I was working with the South Texas Digital Convergence Initiative on an idea for a large installation at the South by Southwest conference²⁹ that was going to demonstrate a future in which all media has become digital, and much of our lives are data-driven. We were right about that possible future, but as we worked on putting the event together, we realized that we didn't have time to make it happen as we envisioned it - we threw a big party instead.

However, that gave me an idea: I realized you could create a think tank that, instead of publishing white papers and research, could stage events of the kind we'd been considering. I joined forces with Derek Woodgate, a strategic foresight professional working from Austin at the time, and we started a business development process to create a smart events production company. Our first project was an installation called "The DIY House of the Future" at the first Austin Maker Faire. It went well, and in debriefing with some of our volunteers, including neuroscientist and designer David DeMaris, we came up with the name Plutopia. We called the company "Plutopia Productions," and we produced a series of large events during the SXSW conference, from 2008 through 2011. Today's Plutopia podcast was created by Scoop Sweeney and I as an adjunct to that event. Eventually I left Plutopia Productions, and before long after that the company went away. We stopped doing the podcast, but revived it a few years ago as the Plutopia News Network.

So my original goal was to create a unique, futuristic think tank engaged in event production, and that ultimately didn't work out. When we restarted the podcast, our goal was just to create a series of interesting and compelling interviews, and I think we've succeeded at that.

The Nexus: What were other early online communities that influenced your personal and professional life? Were there any significant turning points or realizations that came from these experiences?

Jon Lebkowsky: The biggest influence was definitely The WELL, where I've been a member now for almost 35 years. I made a substantial number of professional connections there, and engaged with various publications and projects including *Factsheet Five*, *bOING bOING*, the *Whole Earth Review*, *Wired Magazine*, *Mondo 2000*, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, etc. It

²⁹ South by Southwest (SXSW) is an annual conglomeration of film, interactive media, and music festivals and conferences held in mid-March in Austin, Texas. It started in 1987 and has grown significantly in scope and size over the years. SXSW features a range of activities including film screenings, interactive media exhibits, and music performances, usually spanning 10 days. The event draws a global audience of creative professionals and industry leaders.

completely changed my life. One friendship I formed there was with Howard Rheingold³⁰, who was the editor of *Whole Earth Review* and later started a for-profit online community called Electric Minds. I worked for Electric Minds, which had a relatively short life before funding lapsed and it had to be sold. Durand Communications bought it, and we moved the whole community onto their servers, continuing to operate on a platform similar to the one used by The WELL. The experience of moving Electric Minds and trying to set up governance for that community was another major influence on my life and my thinking about community platforms. Among other things, I realized how difficult governance could be. Through The WELL and Electric Minds both, I've learned that online communities of any scale will inevitably have smaller clusters of communities within them, and that the best way to run those is with hosts who manage conversations with a light touch and few hard and fast rules (the main rule being "no personal attacks").

The Nexus: What do you see as the future of online communities, based on your extensive experience and observations?

Jon Lebkowsky: From observation and not from participation, I've come to believe that online games have become some of the best platforms for online communities - along with associated platforms for conversation like Discord³¹ and Twitch.

I should mention here that social media platforms like Facebook, X, Mastodon, Bluesky, etc. are not great for community formation. Real community forms when people gather daily in the same online environments and have ongoing discussions, building history together - something that doesn't happen very well on social media platforms, where conversations when they occur are discontinuous. One of the most promising platforms I've seen for community development is Discord, where anyone can set up an instance that can support ongoing conversations among a reasonably limited set of participants.

³⁰ Howard Rheingold is a renowned American writer and critic. He is known for his in-depth studies on digital culture, online communities, and social media, and has authored books such as *The Virtual Community* and *Smart Mobs*. Rheingold's work extensively explores the social impact of digital media and the Internet era.

³¹ Discord is a popular communication and social platform founded in 2015 by Jason Citron and Stanislav Vishnevskiy. Originally designed for gamers, it offers voice and text chat services and has since expanded to various interest groups. Users can create or join servers to discuss shared interests or collaborate with teams, supporting text, voice, and video communication.

Community doesn't scale to large size without breaking into clusters, as I mentioned, and if you want to have any kind of scale, you should look for a way to network those clusters.

Right now I think we're in a transitional phase - people are still learning to live together in virtual space as well as physical space. I think we'll see both social and political evolution that are driven by how we live our lives online as well as offline, with more emphasis on online social connection as we've seen over the last three decades. I hope we'll learn to live and work together peacefully.

和Jon Lebkowsky一起探索早期在线社区和网络文化

随着人们开始探索网络世界，他们逐渐建立起各种在线社区，与身在远方，未曾谋面的网友进行交流。这些社区以共同的兴趣、目标和愿景为纽带，吸引了来自世界各地的科幻作家、技术专家、记者、黑客、艺术家和诗人，共同探讨他们对未来的憧憬。

Jon Lebkowsky对网络世界的探索源自他对*Whole Earth Catalog*及其出版物的热爱。为了加入这些出版物的在线社区The WELL，他购买了人生中的第一台电脑和调制解调器。然而，昂贵的长途连接费用让他一度望而却步。于是，他将目光转向了当地的BBS系统，尤其是面向科幻迷的SMOF-BBS。在那里，他结识了Bruce Sterling、Mike Godwin、Lewis Shiner和Earl Cooley等人。



Jon Lebkowsky

1990年，Jon Lebkowsky终于成功加入The WELL。此时正值The WELL刚刚连接上互联网，电子前沿基金会(EFF)也开始在The WELL上萌芽。Jon Lebkowsky在这里结识了一批志同道合的朋友，并积极参与了EFF的筹建工作。在他的帮助下，EFF的第一个分会——EFF-Austin也随之成立。

在The WELL上, 他还结识了**bOING-bOING**的编辑Mark Frauenfelder, 后者又将他引荐给了Paco Xander Nathan。他和Paco Xander Nathan共同创立了FringeWare, 这是一家旨在帮助个人和小企业进行互联网推广的公司。随后, *FringeWare Review*也应运而生, 迅速成为早期互联网时代的一本标志性刊物, 对互联网文化产生了深远影响。

今天, 我们非常高兴邀请到Jon Lebkowsky先生, 与我们一起回顾他的网络生涯。Lebkowsky先生将带我们重返早期的网络世界, 深入探讨他在The WELL等在线社区的亲身经历, 以及对各种早期网络文化的探索。此外, 他还将分享创立Plutopia News Network的过程和初衷, 以及他对在线社区未来发展的看法。

探索数字前沿

The Nexus: 您的第一台电脑是如何获得的? 您的首次上网经历是怎样的?

Jon Lebkowsky: 作为*Whole Earth Catalog*¹及其出版物(尤其是季刊*CoEvolution Quarterly*²)的忠实读者, 我第一时间就得知他们创建了一个名为The WELL³的BBS(电子公告板系统)。我一直想结识Whole Earth Catalog团队并为其撰稿。因此, 我决定购买一台电脑和一个调制解调器。我在工作中接触过操作系统, 并对计算机产生了浓厚的兴趣。虽然我对技术并不精通, 但对于个人电脑的操作已经颇为熟悉。我从PC's Limited⁴(后来的戴尔公司)购买了一台早期的8086 PC克隆机, 并搭配了一个300波特的内置调制解调器。这样, 我就可以通过拨号上网连接到像The WELL这样的在线社区。为了更好地掌握计算机, 我阅读了大量的技术手册, 并深入学习了MS-DOS操作系统以及WordStar⁵等早期的文字处理软件。

拨号连接到WELL需要支付昂贵的长途电话费, 由于我的资金有限, 所以我并没有立即尝试。我转而加入了当地的几个BBS系统, 其中最吸引的我是SMOF-BBS。SMOF⁶全称“Secret Masters of Fandom”, 是一个科幻迷的聚集地。在那里, 我有幸结识了Bruce Sterling⁷、Mike Godwin⁸、Lewis Shiner⁹等人, 以及系统管理员Shiva(也就是Earl Cooley)。我也试着加入了Steve Jackson¹⁰的“Illuminati Online”, 但它主要面向角色扮演游戏玩家, 而我对这方面兴趣不大, 所以并没有花太多时间在上面。

最终, 在1990年, 我终于通过调制解调器拨号连接到了The WELL。为了降低成本, 我找到了一种更划算的方式: Sprint的PC Pursuit服务。这个服务每月只需支付30美元的固定费用。(当时, WELL每小时还另外收取2美元。)那个时候, 我也开始沉迷于BBS世界, 加入了一些本地系统, 其中就包括由德克萨斯大学艺术老师Bob Anderson运营的

Pair-O-Dice。我和Bob成为了好朋友。至于当时加入的其他系统，我已经记不太清了，因为我大部分的时间都花在了The WELL上。

我加入The WELL的时候，它已经开始接入互联网了。20世纪90年代初期，电子前沿基金会¹¹(EFF)成立——EFF的很多组织工作都在The WELL上进行，我也参与了他们早期的讨论。1990年3月，也就是我加入The WELL大约一个月后，美国特勤局突袭了奥斯汀的Steve Jackson Games(史蒂夫·杰克逊游戏公司)。我在SMOF-BBS上得知了这一消息，Steve本人也在BBS上谈到此事，但他当时并不知道特勤局为什么会突袭他的公司并没收了公司电脑。那时，EFF仍在筹备阶段。1990年7月，EFF正式成立。而Steve Jackson Games遇袭案便成为EFF成立后第一个“完美案件”。根据创始人John Barlow¹²的说法，EFF成立的目的是为了“保护数字言论自由，将宪法赋予的权利延伸到网络空间，并在这些领域提供教育、游说和诉讼等方面的资金支持”。这个故事很长，在此我就不展开了。但可以肯定的是，Steve Jackson Games遇袭事件以及随后的诉讼，即史蒂夫·杰克逊游戏公司起诉美国特勤局案¹³(The Steve Jackson Games, Inc. v. United States Secret Service case)，成为了EFF早期最关注的重点之一。

最初，EFF打算建立一个具有浓厚社区氛围的分会组织。Steve成功说服他们，在我们居住的城市奥斯汀成立了第一个EFF分会。于是，我们创立了EFF-Austin。正是在这个契机下，我结识了德克萨斯互联网咨询公司(Texas Internet Consulting, TIC)的John Quarterman¹⁴和Smoot Carl-Mitchell。他们慷慨地赠送给我一个他们服务器上的账号——这是我第一次通过调制解调器直接接入互联网。有了这个账号，我就能够更方便地访问The WELL。Quarterman还耐心地教了我许多关于互联网和UNIX操作系统的知识。



FringeWare Review 第 5 期的封面 (这是 Jon Lebkowsky 最喜欢的一期; 他既是这期的编辑, 又是出版人。)

通过 The WELL 社区, 我结识了 *bOING-bOING*¹⁵ 杂志的编辑 Mark Frauenfelder。他向我介绍了同样住在奥斯汀的 Paco Xander Nathan¹⁶。Paco 和我一见如故, 共同创办了一家名为 FringeWare 的公司。我们的初衷是帮助个人和小型企业通过互联网将产品推向市场。我们创建了一个邮件列表, 用于搜集产品信息。没想到, 这个列表迅速发展成为一个具有广泛影响力的数字文化现象。然而, 我们很快就遇到了一个难题: 由于我们无法为交易提供保障 (互联网发展早期还没有 SSL 协议), 银行不允许我们在线上接受信用卡。我们决定制作一份产品目录。随后, 我们又萌生了一个想法: 创办一本自己的杂志, 将产品目录放在杂志的后几页。于是, *FringeWare Review*¹⁷ 诞生了。这本杂志成为了那个时代颇具特色的文化产物。

The Nexus:对于那些不太懂技术的人来说, 当时上网是否很困难? 他们最常遇到哪些技术问题? 又是如何解决的呢?

Jon Lebkowsky:寻找可访问的系统本身就是个难题。我当时主要依靠口口相传, 从我所在的本地科幻圈子开始打听。另外, 拨号连接远程系统也让我很头疼。我刚开始接触电脑的时候, 根本不知道互联网是什么, 自然也就谈不上上网了。那时候的电脑也非常原始, 全靠敲命令来操作, 非常不方便。那时候根本没有图形界面。

当时的计算机调制解调器又慢又笨重, 而且那个时候还没有商业化的主流互联网服务提供商(这类服务直到90年代初才开始出现)。计算机本身也并不是为大众设计的——要有效使用它, 你需要对技术有一定的了解, 还要习惯长时间盯着绿色或琥珀色的单色显示器。我第一次购买电脑时还是个新手, 但我对它很有兴趣, 而且非常渴望弄明白计算机的工作原理并让它运行起来。我记得带着电脑、显示器和一堆大约三英尺高的手册回到家。这些手册并不容易理解, 即使我当时已经有了一些计算机使用经验, 还是花了很多时间和精力才掌握背后的技术和思维方式。显然, 当时计算机还没有真正进入主流。

随着互联网的普及和计算机技术的不断发展, 多年后, 这些问题逐渐得到了解决。图形用户界面的出现(比如微软的 Windows 系统)以及触觉反馈(计算机鼠标)和触摸屏等技术的发明是一个重要的里程碑。最终, 技术系统逐渐形成了用户体验这一学科, 越来越注重可用性。

The Nexus:您曾深度参与The WELL社区。能否分享一下您在社区中的经历, 以及您眼中的 The WELL 独特的文化和它所产生更广泛的影响?

Jon Lebkowsky:当然可以。一开始, 我只是The WELL上的一名普通用户。但很快, 我被这个基于文本命令行的UNIX系统所吸引, 它上面运行着一个名为Picospan的会议系统, 很像我之前用过的本地BBS。由于我擅长写作和与人沟通, 在阅读了一段时间其他人的帖子后, 我开始越来越频繁地参与讨论并回复他人。渐渐地, 我在The WELL上交到了很多朋友, 还成为了一个会议主持人, 并自愿承担了一些其他任务, 比如发布提示信息、引导用户参与The WELL上的讨论, 帮助他们发现可能错过的内容。

The WELL 形成出了一种独特的、自发而起的文化氛围。最初, 它吸引了 Grateful Dead 乐队的粉丝(Deadhead)和 Whole Earth 相关出版物的读者, 尤其是CoEvolution Quarterly(后更名为Whole Earth Review)的读者。由于地处旧金山湾区附近, The WELL 深受当地盛行的反文化运动的影响, 吸引了众多前嬉皮士、政治活动家、音乐家、作家、黑客、艺术家和诗人。在社交媒体尚未普及的年代, The WELL 是作家和记者们进行深入交流和寻找灵感的重要平台。总之, The WELL 将反文化、政治、数字技术和新闻报道巧妙地融合在一起。在上世纪 90 年代和 21世纪初, 它成为了报道各种新兴

文化的中心。此外，许多未来学家和具有前瞻眼光的商界人士也在这里交流思想。比如，全球商业网络(Global Business Network)就将 The WELL 作为其持续讨论的平台。

很多在那个时候使用The WELL的用户已经不再活跃，而是投入到了社交媒体的怀抱。如今，The WELL 虽已风光不再，但它依然保留着很多当年的拥护者，他们正在一同老去。我认识的很多用户，包括我自己，都已经超过 70 岁了……但我们依然保持着年轻的心态，充满活力。

由于 The WELL 汇聚了众多作家、记者和后来的博主，它对数字文化的认知和形式产生了深远影响。早期的博客在很大程度上受到人们在 The WELL 和其他社区平台上发帖方式的影响，同时，我相信它们也深受*Whole Earth Catalog*以及相关出版物的评论和文章格式的影响。我在杂志界和早期互联网上认识的许多人，都曾是*Whole Earth Catalog*的忠实读者，并深受它的影响。

The Nexus: 您曾参与过哪些本地在线社区？这些社区与更广泛的在线空间相比，有何互补或不同之处？此外，与更大的全球平台相比，您如何看待这些本地社区在促进交流和参与方面的价值？

Jon Lebkowsky: 由于我们身处本地，大家彼此相距不远，所以奥斯汀早期互联网用户所形成的社区既包含线上，也包含线下。我之前提到过BBS，除此之外，电子邮件列表也是当时流行的在线社区互动方式。我曾参与的在线社区包括EFF-Austin、FringeWare、机器人小组(Robot Group)和德克萨斯大学的互动媒体实验室(ACTLab)等。和那些非本地的线上社区不同，我们会经常线下见面，一起讨论、交流。

The Nexus: 您认为在线社区的持续发展和长期成功需要具备哪些关键因素？新手社区建设者应该注意并避免哪些常见的错误？

Jon Lebkowsky: 社区的诞生，源于人们在思想上的共鸣，并逐渐建立起彼此的联系。为了更好地维系社区，正式或非正式的领导角色至关重要，这些人承担起管理对话或互动的责任，强调管理而非控制。在The WELL平台上，讨论以“会议”(conference)形式组织，这些会议涵盖广泛的主题领域，而具体的讨论则称为“话题”(topic)，即围绕主题展开的持续对话。每个会议都有主持人，负责推动讨论并处理冲突。他们以一种宽松的管理方式提供支持，制定的规则也很少，主要用于禁止人身攻击。这里更强调社交引导，而非强制性指示。

我认为，由于地理位置的接近，本地社区与大型的全球性平台相比，具有独特的特征。人们更容易在现实生活中见面、交流，从而建立起更深层次的关系。除了上述的EFF-Austin等组织之外，我还在21世纪初加入了本地的商业网络(如Bootstrap Austin)，以及与清洁能源和可持续发展相关的网络组织(Austin Clean Energy Initiative、Solar

Austin、Bright Green Austin)。这些组织既有线上也有线下的活动。同时，我还加入了 Worldchanging 博客，该博客聚焦于环境问题、可持续发展和气候变化等议题。我在 Worldchanging 的工作之一是创建一个由本地和区域 Worldchanging 博客组成的网络，并围绕每个博客组建相应的社区。

上世纪60年代有这样一种说法：“全球思考，本地行动 (think globally, act locally)。”我的版本是“同时从全球和本地两个层面进行思考和行动 (think and act globally and locally)”。一旦 Worldchanging 同时具备全球和本地影响力，那么它就会成为一个很好的例证。我认为，全球性平台最强大的功能在于促进本地社区、网络和群体的形成与发展。此外，还有一些平台是专门为较小的群体设计的，比如Discord。

近十年来，我们看见在线社区也存在着一些弊端。那些原本可以有效促进社区建设的工具，却被别有用心的人利用，用来创建传播虚假信息、阴谋论、诈骗等信息的社区。令人担忧的是，一些极端的政治运动，比如法西斯主义，也利用这些我们曾用来构建理性和健康在线社区的工具，迅速聚集了大量支持者。这无疑是一个棘手的问题，我们仍在不断探索解决之道。

早期在线文化一瞥

The Nexus: 您能描述一下在这些早期在线社区中出现的一些最具代表性的亚文化吗？这些早期的亚文化今天是否仍然存在，或者它们已经演变成其他形式？

Jon Lebkowsky: The WELL的早期发展离不开Grateful Dead乐队¹⁸粉丝 (Bay Area Deadheads) 的加入与贡献。此外，作家、记者、自办刊物的人、艺术家、黑客、诗人等各行各业的人才也纷纷汇聚于此。可以说，The WELL是一个多元化的社区，涵盖了许多不同的文化群体。

当我和Paco Nathan创立 FringeWare时，我们都是 The WELL 社区的成员，并且在社区中有一定的影响力，同时也从中汲取了很多灵感。FringeWare 的追随者遍布全球，他们往往是一些边缘思想者。这正是 FringeWare 的意义所在：在世界的任何角落，只要有人跳出常规思维框架，因与众不同而感到孤立，借助互联网，他们就能找到志同道合的伙伴。

早期的互联网吸引了许多自由意志主义者。由于学术界较早接入互联网，许多学者和研究人员也开始活跃在网络上。同时，还有一些黑客群体，其中包括专注于加密技术的密码朋克¹⁹ (cypherpunks)。

另外, BBS 很早就开始连接到互联网 —— 哪怕只是通过 UUCP 与其他 BBS 交换电子邮件。当然, 还有 Usenet, 它拥有众多去中心化的新闻组, 早期的数字文化正是在这些新闻组中逐步发展。任何能够访问互联网的人都可以阅读并参与这些新闻组的讨论。当时, FringeWare 也拥有自己的新闻组, 名为 alt.fringeware。

其他各种在线互动系统也相继出现, 包括位于美国东海岸的 Echo 和 MindVox²⁰, 以及一些商业服务平台, 如 Prodigy、CompuServe、America Online 和 GENie²¹。(GENie 是一个科幻作家聚集的交流平台。)



1994 年左右, Jon Lebkowsky在《连线》杂志办公室 (Photo by Monte McCarter)

The Nexus: 与传统印刷杂志相比, 在线平台的出现大大降低了出版的门槛, 让每个人都有机会成为出版人。这也催生了丰富多彩的在线自出版文化, 各种各样的声音和观点

得以自由表达。在早期的互联网上, 有哪些受欢迎的自出版杂志呢? 这些杂志主要关注哪些领域? 你有没有参与过其中任何一本?

Jon Lebkowsky: 我所了解的那些自出版刊物和早期网站主要集中于数字(或网络)文化和边缘文化。*bOING bOING* 起初是一本纸质的自出版杂志, 但随着博客软件的出现, 它转型为一个在线博客。*FringeWare Review* 也有在线平台, 其中就包括我编辑的名为 *TAZMedia* 的在线杂志。当时, Donald Melanson 有一个叫 *Mindjack* 的网站, 我也在上面贡献过一些文章。

20 世纪 90 年代末, 博客逐渐取代了自出版杂志的地位。21 世纪初, 我加入了一个由多个作者共同撰写和维护的博客 *Worldchanging*²², 同时我也开设了自己的个人博客。最初, 我的博客在 *The WELL* 平台上, 后来搬到了 *weblogsky.com*。

The Nexus: 当时的技术水平是否足以让这些在线杂志保留印刷杂志中丰富多样的字体、图片和其他图形元素? 当时通常会使用哪些软件?

Jon Lebkowsky: 其实不然。我们使用的是简单的 HTML, 所以当时的网站, 特别是在线博客在版面设计上颇为局限。20 世纪 90 年代中期, 随着内容管理系统的兴起, 网络出版进入了新的阶段。然而, 这些系统高度依赖模板, 使得内容的呈现形式变得相对固定。当时的内容管理系统主要应用于大型出版项目。直到 90 年代末, 一些面向个人和小型网站的内容管理系统才逐渐涌现, 其中 *Blogger* 就是我最早接触到的之一。Mark Frauenfelder 率先在 *bOING bOING* 网站上使用了 *Blogger*²³, 使得 *bOING bOING* 迅速成为一个广受欢迎的博客平台。Mark 通过邮件向大家分享了 *Blogger* 的信息, 我立刻注册并掌握了它的使用方法, 开始用它来管理自己的内容。随后, *Moveable Type*²⁴ 等其他平台相继出现, 我在 21 世纪初开始使用 *Moveable Type*, 并最终迁移到了 *WordPress*²⁵。*WordPress* 很快成为了众多博客的首选平台, 并且至今仍然非常受欢迎(尽管现在我们也有像 *Medium* 和 *Substack* 这样的托管服务)。

The Nexus: 在您看来, 这些早期的在线自出版杂志对今天的互联网文化产生了什么样的影响?

Jon Lebkowski: 信息以动态内容的帖子形式进行组织的方式最早出现在早期的BBS和Usenet中。这种方式不仅在博客、社交媒体网站上得以延续,而且在推特(现更名为X)的这样的“微博”平台上也得到了广泛应用。因此,这种结构上的影响是显而易见的。

我们很早就创建了相当容易使用的技术,让任何人都能发布各种信息。这种技术推动了信息传播方式从传统媒体的“自上而下”模式向“人人互动”的社交媒体模式转变。当时,我们认为这是一种民主化的变革,充满了力量,却忽视了信息生态系统可能被恶意利用的风险。

The Nexus: 在线社区在科幻文化的形成和发展中发挥了怎样的作用?您能分享一些您在在线科幻圈的个人经历或难忘时刻吗?

Jon Lebkowski: 科幻作家,尤其是科幻与奇幻作家协会(SFWA, Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association)的成员,在 GEnie 上开设了账号,经常互相交流。当时我并没有真正涉足科幻小说创作,虽然也曾尝试过,甚至还和朋友一起创办了一个名为 Slugtribe 的科幻作家小组,但我更感兴趣的是非虚构写作和新闻报道。

说到影响,在线社区对赛博朋克²⁶(科幻小说的一个流派)产生了重要影响。赛博朋克塑造了我们对互联网的认知,比如“赛博空间”这个概念,就源自 William Gibson²⁷的科幻小说《神经漫游者》(Neuromancer)。虽然 Gibson 创作时受到了街机游戏的启发,并没有真正体验过虚拟网络,但“赛博空间”这个迷人的隐喻却生动地描绘了我们的在线体验,并迅速流行起来。在早期的互联网文化中,科幻小说为我们提供了许多审美和文化的灵感。事实上,我身边就有不少自称“赛博朋克”的人。我很清楚,这种影响是双向的:在线体验也反过来影响了科幻作家,互联网为他们提供了建立社区、沟通交流和合作共创的平台。

The Nexus: 您最早接触到的一些在线商业是什么样子的?当时您能预见到商业会对互联网的发展起到如此重要的作用吗?

Jon Lebkowsky: 我们创立 FringeWare 的初衷是打造一个在线销售平台。我们发现, 许多人有独特的产品或创意, 但由于市场推广成本高昂, 一直无法将它们推向市场。比如, 软件产品以往需要包装后才能在实体店销售。而我们的在线平台可以大大降低销售和配送成本, 为这些产品提供一个全新的销售渠道。起初, 我们建立了一个电子邮件列表, 希望能找到有潜力的卖家和产品。没想到, 这个邮件列表逐渐发展成了一个边缘文化爱好者的聚集地。因此, 我们顺势而为, 将 FringeWare 打造成一个兼具商业和社区属性的平台。

我们刚开始创业时, 想在网接受信用卡付款, 但银行却拒绝了我们的申请。他们担心信用卡号码泄露, 因为当时还没有安全的SSL加密技术²⁸。无奈之下, 我们决定先开一家实体店, 这就是FringeWare商店的由来。与此同时, 我们意识到可以尝试邮购业务, 于是制作了一份产品目录。后来, 我们决定创办杂志, 并将产品目录放在杂志的最后几页, 配合杂志发行, 这种销售方式效果还不错。

后来, 我离开了 FringeWare。1997年左右, 全食超市邀请我加入, 希望我能帮助他们在互联网上扩大影响力, 并创建一个在线商店。那个时候, 随着SSL加密技术的普及, 在线支付变得更加安全可靠, 电子商务也开始蓬勃发展。我们为全食超市搭建了一个在线商店, 并利用为The WELL社区开发的软件, 为用户打造了一个线上交流平台。此外, 我们还聘请了编辑, 为网站注入大量优质内容。

在我们开发WholeFoods.com的那些年里, 电子商务飞速发展, 在互联网上逐渐占据重要地位。与此同时, 亚马逊(Amazon.com)也迅速崛起, 不断扩张。除了技术方面的挑战, 我们还遇到了一些有趣的非技术难题, 比如如何高效地处理订单履行和降低高昂的最后一公里配送成本。我也参与了这些问题的解决。

2000 年, 随着互联网泡沫的破裂, 全食超市对在线业务失去了信心, 最终决定将其出售。当时, 不少人悲观地认为, 互联网作为支持出版和大规模业务的平台已经走到了尽头。但显然, 他们错了。

个人探索之旅

The Nexus: 您创立 Plutopia 新闻网(Plutopia News Network)的初衷是什么? 您对它寄予了怎样的期望?

Jon Lebkowsky:正如我们的网站所述:“Plutopia”一词是“多元乌托邦”(pluralist utopia)的合成词。它描绘了一个理想社会的愿景,在这个社会中,不同信仰和身份的人们和谐共存,积极促进相互尊重,尽量减少冲突。虽然理想化,但它代表了一个更加包容和谐世界的愿景,同时也认识到实现这样一个完美社会所面临的复杂挑战。”

2005年,我与南德克萨斯数字融合倡议(South Texas Digital Convergence Initiative)合作,为 SXSW(South by Southwest)大会²⁹策划一个大型装置,旨在展示一个未来的情景:所有媒体都已数字化,我们的生活也大多由数据驱动。我们当时准确地预测了那个可能实现的未来,但随着活动的筹备,我们发现无法按原计划完成这个大型装置,于是决定改办一场盛大的派对。

不过,受到这件事的启发,我想到可以成立一个智库——不是发布白皮书和研究报告,而是举办我们一直设想的活动。我与当时在奥斯汀工作的战略前瞻专家 Derek Woodgate 一起,开始筹划创办一家专注于智能活动的公司。我们的第一个项目就是在首届奥斯汀创客展(Austin Maker Faire)上推出的“未来的DIY之家”装置展示。

活动进展得很顺利。在与包括神经科学家和设计师David DeMaris在内的志愿者们进行总结讨论时,我们想到了“Plutopia”这个名字。于是,我们成立了Plutopia Productions制作公司。2008年到2011年期间,我们连续在SXSW大会上举办了一系列大型活动。现在的“Plutopia播客”是由Scoop Sweeney和我共同创办的,算是对那些活动的延续。后来,我离开了公司,不久后,公司也解散了。播客也一度停播,但几年前,我们又重新启动了它,并更名为“Plutopia 新闻网”。

所以,我最初的设想是打造一个独一无二、面向未来的智库,专注于活动制作。然而,这个计划最终未能实现。当我们重启播客时,我们的目标变得更加单纯:制作一系列有趣、引人入胜的访谈节目。我认为,就这一点而言,我们已经取得了成功。

The Nexus:还有哪些早期在线社区对您的个人和职业生涯产生了影响?在这些经历中,您是否曾有过什么重要的顿悟或转折点?

Jon Lebkowsky:对我影响最大的肯定是 The WELL。近35年来,我一直是The WELL的会员。通过它,我结识了许多业内人士,参与了多个具有影响力的出版物和项目,比如 *Factsheet Five*、*bOING bOING*、*Whole Earth Review*、《连线》杂志、*Mondo 2000*

以及电子前沿基金会。The WELL 完全改变了我的生活。在那里，我与 Howard Rheingold³⁰成为了朋友，他曾担任 *Whole Earth Review* 的编辑，后来创立了营利性在线社区 Electric Minds。我曾在 Electric Minds 工作过。很可惜，由于资金问题，Electric Minds 的运营时间并不长，最后被杜兰德通信公司 (Durand Communications) 收购。我们把整个社区迁移到了他们的服务器上，继续在类似于The WELL 使用的平台上运营。将 Electric Minds 迁移并尝试建立社区治理的这段经历，深刻影响了我的 人生以及我对社区平台的理解。除此之外，我还深刻体会到治理的难度。通过 The WELL 和 Electric Minds 的经历，我发现，无论规模多大的在线社区，都会不可避免地形成一些较小的社区群体。而管理这些群体的最佳方式，是让主持人以宽松的方式引导对话，同时制定几条严格的规则，其中最主要的一条就是“不得进行人身攻击”。

The Nexus: 根据您对在线社区的深入了解和观察，您觉得未来在线社区会变成什么样？

Jon Lebkowsky: 通过观察而非直接的参与，我发现网络游戏已经成为构建在线社区最出色的平台之一，而 这样的交流平台还有Discord³¹ 和 Twitch。

我需要指出，像 Facebook、X(推特)、Mastodon、Bluesky 这样的社交媒体平台，其实不太适合构建真正的社区。一个真正的社区需要大家每天都相聚在一个固定的线上空间，不断交流，共同创造历史。而社交媒体平台上的对话往往是碎片化的，很难形成这种持续的互动。相比之下，我目前看到的最有潜力的社区发展平台是 Discord，任何人都可以在上面创建一个服务器实例，支持一批固定参与者之间的持续对话。

社区规模扩大时，往往会自然分化成多个小群体。要想让社区继续发展壮大，就需要找到一种方法将这些小群体连接起来。

我认为我们正处于一个过渡阶段，人们仍在学习如何在虚拟空间(以及现实世界)中共同生活。我相信，无论社会还是政治领域的发展，都会受到我们线上和线下生活方式的影响。正如过去三十年所见，人们对线上社交的重视程度将会不断提升。我希望我们将能够学会和谐共处，共同合作。

注释：

1. *Whole Earth Catalog*, 简称 WEC, 是一本创刊于1968年的美国反文化杂志和产品目录, 由Stewart Brand创办并编辑。该杂志强调自给自足、生态意识、替代教育和“自己动手”(DIY)的理念, 并以“获取工具”为口号。尽管杂志中包含了大量的文章和随笔, 但其主要内容是针对各种产品的评测, 包括服装、书籍、工具、机器和种子等。*Whole Earth Catalog*并不直接销售产品, 而是提供供应商的联系方式, 读者可以自行购买。该杂志20世纪60年代和70年代的反文化运动和现代环保主义产生了深远的影响。
2. *CoEvolution Quarterly*(1974–1985)是由Stewart Brand创办的杂志, 起源于*Whole Earth Catalog*。它的主题围绕生态学、替代教育、可持续发展和反主流文化等内容, 延续了*Whole Earth Catalog*的精神。该刊物旨在探索人与环境之间不断发展的关系, 并刊登了许多关于创新思想和实践的文章、随笔和讨论。
3. The WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link)是一个成立于1985年的虚拟社区, 是全球最早的持续运营的在线社区之一。The WELL以其深入和多样化的讨论著称, 用户可以参与各种主题的对话, 从科技、艺术到社会议题等。此外, 实名制也是这个社区的一大特色。The WELL曾在1997年被《连线》杂志誉为“世界上最具影响力的在线社区”。
4. Dell公司最初的名字是PC's Limited。1984年, Michael Dell在德克萨斯大学创立了这家公司, 专注于通过直接销售的方式提供定制化的个人电脑。后来, 随着公司业务的扩大和品牌的发展, PC's Limited更名为Dell, 成为全球知名的计算机制造商。
5. WordStar 是一款文字处理软件, 在20世纪 80 年代初期非常流行。该软件最初由 Rob Barnaby 为 CP/M-80 操作系统开发, 并由 MicroPro International 发布。作为最早面向微型计算机的文字处理软件之一, WordStar 因其强大的功能和灵活性迅速赢得了大量用户。
6. SMOF 是“Secret Masters of Fandom”的缩写。它指的是在科幻和奇幻社区中扮演关键角色的有影响力的粉丝, 他们负责组织和管理粉丝大会。尽管这个术语最初有负面含义, 指的是隐秘控制粉丝活动的人, 但它已经演变为描述那些在幕

后处理大会筹办和协调工作的经验丰富的粉丝。SMOF 以他们在粉丝社区中的重要贡献而著称, 包括活动策划和组织。

7. Bruce Sterling是美国科幻作家和未来学家, 以对赛博朋克(Cyberpunk)流派的贡献而闻名。他于1954年4月14日出生, 创作了诸如*Schismatrix*、*Islands in the Net* 和*The Difference Engine*(与William Gibson合著)等小说。他的作品常常探讨技术、社会和未来相关的主题。除了小说, Sterling还是技术与文化相关话题的知名演讲者, 他在数字技术和科技进步对社会影响的讨论中扮演了重要角色。
8. Michael Wayne Godwin, 1956年10月26日出生, 是一位美国律师和作家, 以对互联网法律和文化的贡献而闻名。他曾担任电子前沿基金会(EFF)的首任法律顾问, 还曾担任维基媒体基金会(Wikimedia Foundation)的总法律顾问, 并长期担任*Reason*杂志的贡献编辑。他曾与开源倡议组织和互联网协会合作, 并提出了“Godwin's law”和“Internet meme”的概念。
9. Lewis Shiner是一位美国科幻作家, 以融合赛博朋克、魔幻现实主义和奇幻元素的作品而闻名。他起初专注于科幻小说创作, 但后来拓展到更主流的小说类型, 同时保留了其作品中的思辨元素。他的作品包括 *Glimpses* 和*Outside the Gates of Eden*。
10. Steve Jackson, 出生于1952年1月22日, 是一位美国游戏设计师。Jackson创办了史蒂夫·杰克逊游戏公司(Steve Jackson Games), 该公司因其受欢迎的游戏如*Munchkin*、*GURPS*和*Car Wars*而闻名。此外, 他还因在游戏设计领域的贡献以及对游戏社区的支持而备受赞誉。
11. 电子前沿基金会 (Electronic Frontier Foundation, EFF) 是一家成立于1990年的非营利组织, 致力于捍卫数字世界中的公民自由。EFF 通过诉讼、政策分析、草根运动和技术开发, 倡导隐私、言论自由和创新。该组织的成立是为了应对政府过度干预和在迅速发展的数字环境中可能侵蚀个人权利的担忧。EFF 参与了许多备受瞩目的法律案件和倡议, 旨在保护互联网用户的权益, 包括加密、监控和版权法等相关问题。
12. John Perry Barlow是美国诗人、散文家、牧场主和网络自由主义政治活动家。他最为人知的是担任摇滚乐队Grateful Dead的作词人, 同时也是电子前沿基金

会(EFF)和新闻自由基金会的创始成员。Barlow热衷于倡导互联网自由和隐私权,在数字权利和开放互联网的讨论中发挥了重要作用。

13. 史蒂夫·杰克逊游戏公司诉美国特勤局案(The Steve Jackson Games, Inc. v. United States Secret Service case)是一起具有里程碑意义的案件,它涉及到个人隐私、言论自由以及政府对互联网的监管。1990年,美国特勤局突袭了史蒂夫·杰克逊游戏公司,并扣押了公司的计算机设备,理由是他们怀疑公司的一名员工非法获取了敏感信息。这场突袭引发了公众对政府过度干涉个人隐私的担忧,并引发了关于互联网自由的广泛讨论。最终,法院裁定特勤局的行为违法,这场诉讼对保护互联网用户的隐私权产生了深远的影响。
14. John Quarterman一位美国计算机科学家,以其在互联网发展中的开创性工作而闻名。他于1974年在哈佛大学首次使用ARPANET,后来在BBN工作期间参与了UNIX ARPANET软件的开发。Quarterman于1986年联合创立了德克萨斯州首家互联网咨询公司(TIC)。他还因其在互联网地图绘制和人口统计方面的工作而广受认可,发布了首份涵盖整个互联网的地图,并进行了首次互联网人口普查。1998年,他被*Inter@ctive Week*评为“互联网的25位无名英雄”之一。
15. *Boing Boing* 是一个以分享有趣、奇特、前卫的内容而闻名的博客平台。它最初是作为一本纸质杂志*Boing Boing*起家,主要报道科幻、漫画、科技等主题。随着互联网的发展,*Boing Boing*转型为一个在线博客,并逐渐成为一个具有广泛影响力的网络文化平台。
16. Paco Nathan 是一位美国计算机科学家和万维网的早期工程师。他同时也是一位作家和表演艺术作品的制作人。他的职业生涯主要在德克萨斯州的奥斯汀发展,他对当地的科技和创意社区都做出了贡献。
17. *FringeWare Review* 是一本创刊于1994年的杂志,致力于探索科技、反文化和艺术之间的交融。杂志内容广泛,涵盖赛博朋克文学、黑客文化、虚拟现实等前沿领域。*FringeWare Review* 是FringeWare社区的一项重要举措,旨在打造一个开放平台,为那些在早期互联网时代涌现的另类思想和产品提供展示和交流的空间。

18. Grateful Dead是一支成立于1965年, 位于加利福尼亚州Palo Alto的美国摇滚乐队。他们以独特且多样化的音乐风格著称, 融合了摇滚、布鲁斯、爵士、民谣、乡村、蓝草音乐和迷幻摇滚的元素。Grateful Dead因其即兴的现场表演而著称, 吸引了大量忠实粉丝, 称为“Deadheads”。该乐队因其对现场音乐的创新性处理而受到赞誉, 常被视为即兴乐队领域的先驱。
19. 密码朋克是一群倡导使用强大加密技术和隐私保护技术以实现社会和政治变革的倡导者。密码朋克运动兴起于 20 世纪 80 年代末和 90 年代初, 提倡隐私对于个人自由至关重要, 加密工具可以在日益数字化的世界中保护个人权利。该运动的关键人物包括Timothy C. May、Eric Hughes和John Gilmore。密码朋克在推进加密和安全通信等技术方面发挥了重要作用。
20. MindVox 是一家早期的互联网服务提供商, 总部位于纽约市, 由Bruce Fancher 和Patrick Kroupa于1991年创立。它以“网络空间的地狱天使”而闻名, 是纽约市最早的互联网服务提供商之一。MindVox 于1992年3月作为仅限邀请的服务推出, 并在同年晚些时候向公众开放。该服务因与黑客和地下文化的关联而为人所知, 并在早期的 Usenet 社区中扮演了重要角色。
21. GEnie(General Electric Network for Information Exchange)是一个早期的在线服务平台, 推出于1985年, 由通用电气公司创建。它最初提供了各种在线功能, 如电子邮件、聊天室、文件共享和在线讨论区。GEnie 是20世纪80年代和90年代初期重要的在线社区之一, 尤其受到技术爱好者和科幻迷的欢迎。
22. Worldchanging 是一个于2003年创办的博客, 专注于寻找建设可持续未来的创新解决方案。博客内容涵盖环境可持续性、绿色技术、社会企业家精神以及社会变革等主题。Worldchanging 旨在突出和讨论能够促进更可持续、更公平世界的新思想和项目。该博客因其前瞻性的观点和在环境及社会公正领域的影响力而受到认可。
23. Blogger 是一个美国的在线内容管理系统(CMS), 由 Pyra Labs 于1999年创建, 允许用户编写带有时间戳的博客条目, 是最早的博客平台之一。2003年, Blogger 被 Google 收购, 这大大扩大了其影响力, 并与其他 Google 服务实现了紧密集成。
24. Movable Type 是由 Six Apart 开发的一款博客发布系统, 首次发布于2001年。它是早期流行的博客平台之一, 以其灵活性和能够通过单次安装管理多个博客的能力著称。

25. WordPress 是一个开源的内容管理系统(CMS), 由 Matt Mullenweg 和 Mike Little 于2003年首次发布。它是最受欢迎的网站和博客建设平台之一。WordPress 具有高度的灵活性, 可用于创建各种网站, 从简单的博客到复杂的电子商务网站和作品集。
26. 赛博朋克(Cyberpunk)是20世纪80年代兴起的科幻文学与艺术流派, 融合了高科技与低生活质量的对比。赛博朋克的世界通常充满了先进的技术、人工智能、网络空间以及社会的不平等和腐败。经典的赛博朋克作品如《银翼杀手》和《神经漫游者》描绘了未来社会中个人与强大企业或政府之间的冲突, 以及技术对人类生存方式的深远影响。赛博朋克文化还影响了电影、音乐、游戏等多个领域。
27. William Gibson是加拿大裔美国作家, 被誉为赛博朋克文学的奠基人之一。他的小说《神经漫游者》(*Neuromancer*)开创了赛博朋克这一科幻流派, 描绘了一个由技术驱动、充满网络空间和虚拟现实的未来世界。Gibson的作品以其对未来社会、技术与人类关系的深刻洞察而闻名, 并对现代科幻文学和文化产生了深远影响。
28. Secure Sockets Layer 协议(SSL)是一种加密协议, 旨在保护网络通信的安全。它通过在客户端(如浏览器)和服务器之间建立加密连接, 确保数据在传输过程中不会被第三方窃取或篡改。尽管SSL协议现在已经被更安全的传输层安全协议(Transport Layer Security, TLS)所取代, 但它仍然是现代网络安全的基础技术之一。
29. South by Southwest (SXSW) 是一个年度综合性的节庆活动, 涵盖了电影、互动媒体和音乐领域。该活动每年在3月中旬于德克萨斯州的奥斯汀举行, 自1987年开始举办, 已发展成为全球著名的创意产业盛会。SXSW包含了电影节、互动媒体展览和音乐会, 通常为期10天, 吸引了来自世界各地的创意工作者和业界人士。
30. Howard Rheingold 是美国著名的作家和评论家。他以其对数字文化、网络社区和社会媒体的深入研究而闻名, 著有*Virtual Community*和*Smart Mobs*等书籍。他在数字媒体和网络时代的社会影响方面有着广泛的研究和评论。

31. Discord 是一个流行的即时通讯和社交平台，成立于 2015 年，由 Jason Citron 和 Stanislav Vishnevskiy 创立。最初，它主要为游戏玩家提供语音和文本聊天服务，但现在已经扩展到各种兴趣群体，支持文本、语音和视频交流，用户可以创建或加入服务器来讨论共同兴趣或进行团队协作。