CYBER LIBERATION

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me see it for what it really was. Without that, I would probably still be in that relationship, and I would still be miserable." (By the way, that friend in Kentucky has since become Stinson's significant other.)

Up in Greenville, N.H., where Phil Sorensen and his lover live, literally, on Main Street and have a social network that consists almost entirely of straight people, Phil goes on line sometimes three or four times a day.

"It's a release. It really is. I go on line and relate what is happening in my life, and other people can relate what is going on in theirs," says Sorensen, 38. "They've become like a family, almost."

Ron, a 30-year-old graduate student, moved back to Helena, Mont., last year after living in larger, gayer cities. Though he has met a few gay people in his town, he subscribed to an on-line service last October primarily to talk to gay men and lesbians around the country.

"It's sort of been the beginning of an adventure to see who's out there," he says. "I've met a number of pleasant and interesting writers. I've met men who only wanted to have sex, now. I've also run into a number of painfully closeted people—so painfully closeted that they won't give me their real name."

Ron sometimes finds the desperation of the latter group so unnerving "that I'm not quite sure how to handle it." But he consoles himself with the knowledge that at least they have connected to the community in some fashion.

Or, as Ron puts it, "taken baby steps."

In the past, one of the greatest obstacles to organizing gay men and lesbians, politically and otherwise, was reaching populations that were isolated, by the closet or geography or both. The religious right wing could organize its opposition to gay liberation under the tax-exempt steeples of its churches. The closest thing that lesbians and gay men had to match was the bar, an imperfect vehicle that left out large segments of the community.

The Internet phenomenon, then, would seem to cure what has ailed us.

"The Internet can increase the number of people you can reach exponentially compared to the amount of resources you have to put into it," says Phil Attey, electronic media manager for the Human Rights Campaign, which launched a site on the World Wide Web last October that, just two months later, was attracting 2,000 to 4,000 visitors a day. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is also in cyberspace, with a folder on America Online's gay and lesbian forum.

But the Web is so flexible that political organizing doesn't have to be formal, or even involve a permanent organization. In 1993, when a lesbian retreat in Ovett, Miss., Camp Sister Spirit, was being harassed by its neighbors, an on-line campaign was begun to flood U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno's office with e-mail messages asking for her to send in mediators. She did.

And in May, when county commissioners in Spartanburg County, S.C., passed an anti-gay resolution, cyberspace was used to organize a backlash that flooded commission offices with phone calls and letters. The resolution was rescinded.

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At the HRC's Web site (the address is http://www.hrcusa.org), people can punch in their ZIP Code, and the computer will tell them who their congressional representatives are. They can find out how those representatives have voted on gay and lesbian issues, and they can send them scripted e-mail messages.

"Every time the political climate changes, we can change the home page," says Attey, who believes members of Congress are especially responsive to e-mail because "they associate e-mail messages with more politically active, better-connected constituents."

A recent survey by Nielsen Media Research bears out Attey's hypothesis. The survey found that users of the Internet were much wealthier and better educated than the population as a whole. Eight out of 10 had attended college.

However, Internet users were also found to be about two-thirds male, and other surveys have shown that African Americans and other marginalized communities are underrepresented in the cyber universe. Given those demographics, could using the Internet to organize the gay and lesbian community exacerbate the race, gender and class divisions that many in the community complain about already?

"It's a concern, but I don't know how much we can do to control that," says Attey. He likens the technology to the use of VCRs in 1978. Back then, they were expensive and rare and found mostly in the homes of the upwardly mobile.

"Today, almost every American household will have a VCR," he says. "I think you're going to see a lot of these demographics expand."

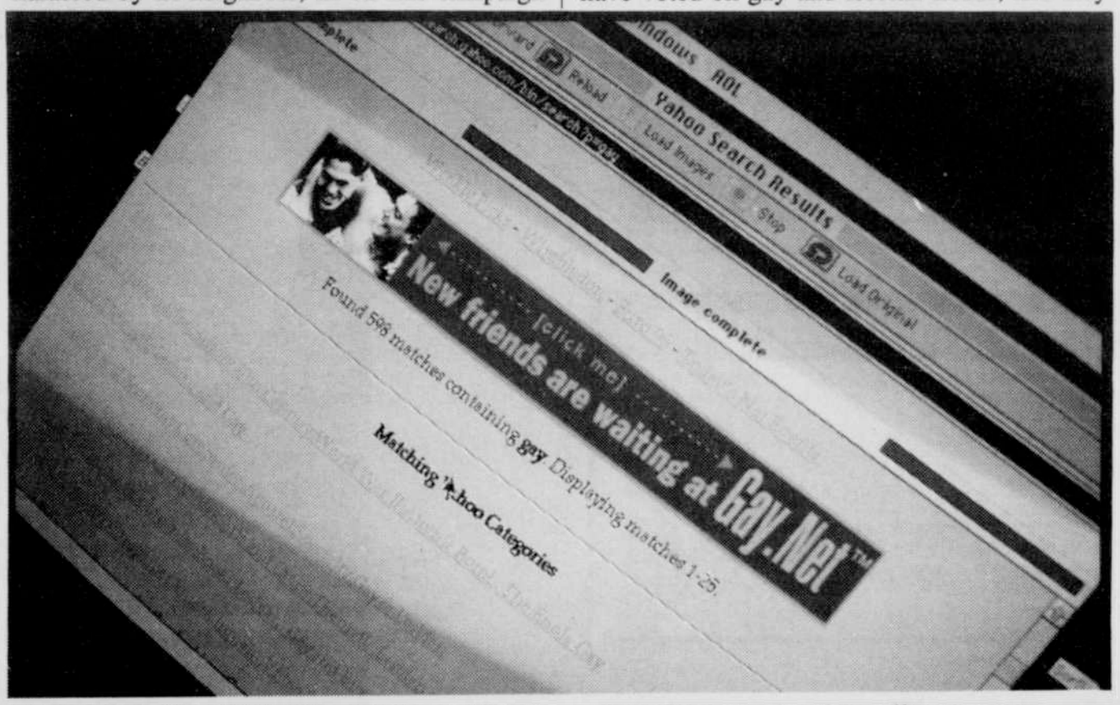
"I think computer literacy might be more of a problem than computer availability," says Boone. "I think that eventually, Internet access will be as ubiquitous in American homes as television and the telephone are today."

But until that era arrives, cyberspace is still there to be a transforming tool for the Kenny Brialsfords of the world.

He's now out to his family and has hooked up with two small gay organizations in Provo. He's dating, has had a few relationships, and occasionally drives an hour north to Salt Lake City to visit the bars. He believes that he would have gotten to this point without the computer. It just might have taken two or three more years.

And even though cyberspace is not his only outlet for community anymore, he still chats.

"Every time I go on, I know I can find a friend or someone to talk to," he says. "We all have something in common."



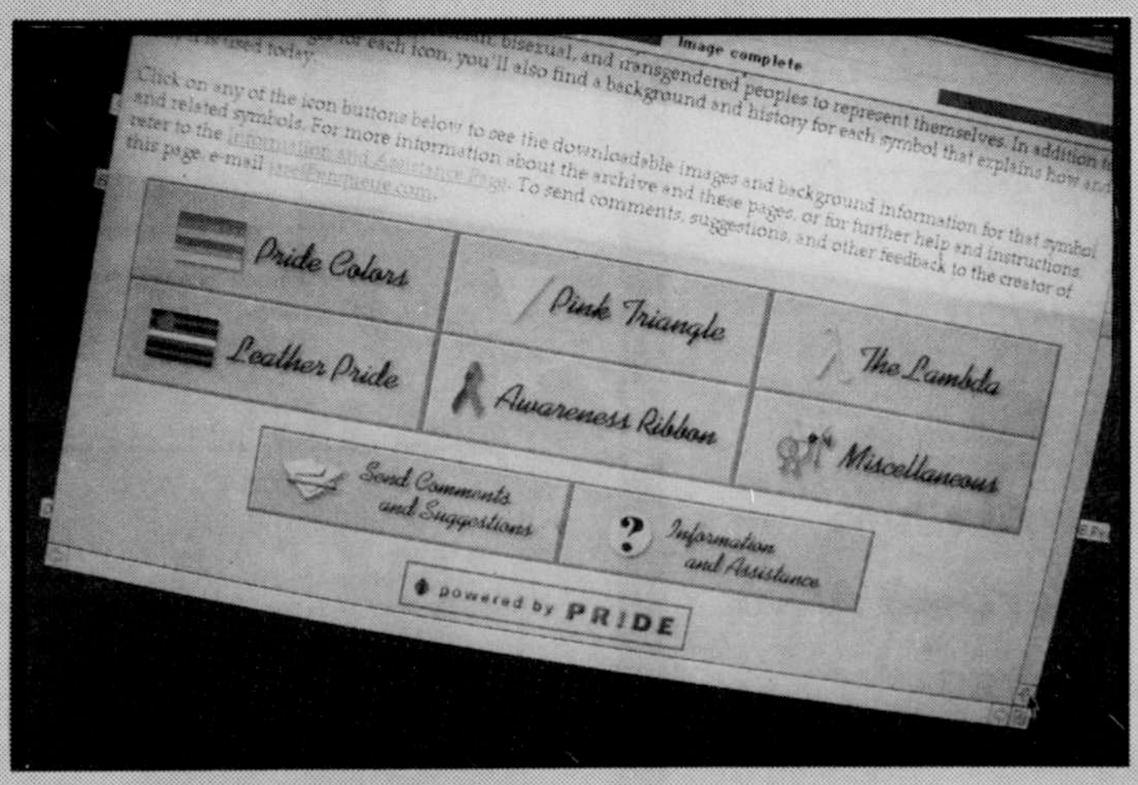
INTERNET CENSORSHIP ● *Freedom appears to have limits—but who will set them?*

Because the Internet is worldwide and offers access to anyone with a computer and modem, it would seem to be the ultimate fulfillment of the dream of a truly global village, a place where previously disenfranchised populations, including gay men and lesbians, can communicate at will.

But that dream is under fire.

When Congress passed a telecommunications reform bill in February, it contained a provision that makes transmission of indecent material to minors a federal offense. It also extended federal rules banning the use of indecent language over broadcast airwaves to the Internet, which some civil libertarians believe could even make sending sexually explicit private e-mail a crime.

Sponsors insist that what they are going after is pornography, which is now readily available on the Net to all users, adults and children alike. But if past attempts to define the word "indecent" are any guide, gay and lesbian content that isn't pornographic could be targeted as well.



For example, last December, CompuServe—which provides on-line services and Internet access in the United States, Germany and nearly 140 other countries—was ordered by the German government to block access to certain Internet newsgroups or face prosecution for violating German law. CompuServe agreed, and, because the company says it doesn't have the ability to make geographic distinctions in its service, the ban went beyond Germany to all the countries CompuServe serves.

But this sweep, targeted at newsgroups that are sexually explicit, also ended up cutting off access to non-explicit newsgroups used by lesbian and gay teens, bisexuals and even lesbian and gay religious organizations. (CompuServe and the German government blame each other for the unintended removal of these newsgroups.)

Perhaps the strangest example of how far afield this process of policing cyberspace can go happened late last year, when America Online banned use of the word "breast." The company relented after angry customers pointed out that the ban would make it impossible to, among other things, discuss or provide information concerning women's health issues.

A number of software companies have also started marketing "browser" programs—programs used to navigate the Internet—that automatically block out offensive material by making it impossible to call up Internet addresses with certain key words. In at least two cases, companies initially included "gay" as a restrictive key word, although they backed down after objections from the gay community.

However, some of these programs allow parents to select their own key words. So parents using these browsers could, if they chose, block their children from obtaining any information about gay men and lesbians.

In an effort to standardize such browser programs, a consortium of leading software companies and Internet access providers have launched what they are calling the Platform for Internet Content Selection, or PICS. The idea is to develop a system that would either let parents restrict access to Internet sites on their own or adopt lists supplied by outside groups. Sexually explicit material would still be available for adults.

Experts on cyberspace insist that the new law regulating Internet content will be nearly impossible to enforce, given the international nature of the medium and its millions of access points. People who put explicit material on line will be required to take steps to ensure that minors can't get access, although Internet service providers won't be held liable if minors obtain the material.

The American Civil Liberties Union and other groups have challenged the new regulations as violations of the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech.