

# Online Tribes

**In 1973 the BBC launched** a radio programme called *Does He Take Sugar?* This gave disabled people a voice in the media, a chance to shout 'I am more than my disability' to anyone who was listening. Fast-forward to my dingy council flat on the warden-controlled sheltered-accommodation estate, and you would have found that nothing had actually changed in the 17 years since. I was, in real life, victim to the 'does he take sugar' syndrome every day of my life. Most people would speak to anyone who happened to be with me, as if I wasn't there at all. Anything than risk patronisingly fleeting eye contact, shrouded in a cloak of caring concern, with the obviously retarded man in the huge electric wheelchair. Not that they could see my eyes behind the dark glasses I was forced to wear for fear of the light that would burn into them like red-hot needles of fire.

I guess I cannot blame them, I was hard to look at: imagine Hell's Angel crossed with Vietnam War veteran. The long beard, the hand strapped into a splint to prevent it from forming the claw it tried so hard to be, the permanently angry expression and ill-mannered demeanour. No wonder most people did not try to speak directly to me, no wonder they opted for the safety of speaking to someone else or walking on by.

Yet online there was no escape option. There was no carer standing by to deflect attention away from the highly vocal individual who had a habit of saying the most

inappropriate things at the most inappropriate of times. Call it disability-induced Tourette's syndrome if you like. Heck, call it anything you want, but when you are constantly being ignored you will try anything to grab a small piece of attention.

Any parent will recognise this pattern of behaviour. In fact there is no doubt that those who encountered me in my first few months online would have assumed I was a kid, that the bulletin board systems of cyberspace were my playground. With my tendency to be overdramatic, bawdy and unpredictable that was not an altogether erroneous assumption.

As far as my identity and personality were concerned I **was** immature. The fact that this was a 25-year-old man who had been working his way up the management ladder just a couple of years before was neither here nor there: that person was gone, that personality had been retired to the deepest, darkest corners of my cerebral cortex.

That personality was **not** coming back; my inner child would not allow it.

Yes, I was a developing child and cyberspace was my playground. A very public playground as it happens: a very public place to make one's mistakes, to bare one's self emotionally and to discover who you really are.

## FidoNet

A network of bulletin board systems, primarily using the same 'Fido' software, that was hugely popular in the early 1990s, before the World Wide Web came along. FidoNet ([www.fidonet.org](http://www.fidonet.org)) still exists today but is a mere shadow of its former self.

My first taste of online life was on one of the many FidoNet bulletin board systems that had sprung up across Europe and North America at the very end of the 1980s.

## Bulletin Board System

A Bulletin Board System (BBS) was simply a computer running software that allowed people to connect to it via the telephone and a modem. Hugely popular throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, BBSs were a social phenomenon where people met to exchange software and ideas alike.

These hobbyist systems allowed anyone with a modem and telephone to connect, but only one at a time, because the BBS itself was contained within a computer hanging off a single telephone line, more often than not in the owner's bedroom. Once connected you could read messages within subject-specific categories, and reply in a linear fashion. Thus online conversations were constructed, and friendships made. It was possible to use software to download all the messages in a couple of minutes, and then hang up the line. Not only did this free up the BBS so that more people could participate, but it kept the costs down. Once you had replied to postings, the off-line reader would reconnect and post them for you, downloading the next set of unread messages at the same time allowing the communication cycle to continue.

I journeyed through other systems, very primitive virtual worlds where the landscape was created by nothing more than text on a screen yet where I felt accepted more than in any wretched concrete habitat populated by total strangers. Already

I felt like I had found a new place to live, but I had yet to find a new home or my new identity. That would have to wait for another death, the demise of a popular online bulletin board called Micronet800.

I had stumbled across this British Telecom-owned service, part of the Post Office Prestel system which is best described as TeleText over the telephone. As bizarre as the concept sounds today, back in the late 1980s the idea of a non-scrolling, blocky 40 × 24 text character window with the most primitive 'graphics' imaginable was actually quite revolutionary stuff. If you want to know what it looks like, pop into a high street travel agent, as many still use a very similar Viewdata system for making bookings to this day.

Even the price wasn't enough to put people off, which was in itself quite an achievement when you consider you had to pay for the cost of the telephone call by the minute, a monthly subscription fee for Prestel access and then anything up to 99p for every single screen of information you looked at. Micronet800 was the killer application for me though, so called because it was accessed via page \*800# on Prestel. This online magazine not only provided its readers with computer related articles and gossip, but also access to many pioneering services that are now taken for granted by users of the Internet, such as online games (StarNet was a kind of text-driven online chess game that got updated once every day as combatants attempted to rule the universe) and chat rooms.

Unsurprisingly, I found myself strangely drawn to the latter.

Nothing like the chat rooms of today, these were limited by the frame-based operation at Prestel, which meant that messages scrolled off the screen never to appear again if you did not read them quickly enough. This made conversation a difficult process on occasion, and led to many a surreal exchange of words. Conversation was also limited by moderation, with Micronet staff ensuring obscene and libellous messages were deleted as quickly as possible. Perhaps the most

obvious limitation was that you could only chat between the hours of 8 and 10 p.m.!

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But none of this mattered because it was here that I encountered the notion of online tribalism for the first time. Micronetters were very different people from FidoNetters in their outlook, their conversations and their online personalities. How strange considering, as I came to realise soon enough, lots of people used both systems. Yet there was no denying that they exhibited wildly different online personas.

This was my introduction to the possibility of identity play, although for me it was no game. I was still a child exploring the possibilities of my persona, pushing the boundaries of the medium as well as the patience of the people who lived within it.

I had hardly had a chance to start this process of personal development when my participation at Micronet was cut short, courtesy of the system being closed down in 1991. It turned out to be a blessing in disguise, like finding your house has been demolished but the council have built you a bigger, better one in an even friendlier neighbourhood. That neighbourhood was a newly emerging online system that had agreed to take on the exiting Micronet users.

That system was called CIX, and it became both my online home and the birthplace of 'dwindera'.

## CIX

CIX (<http://conferencing.cixonline.com>) started life as a FidoNet Bulletin Board but went on to become the biggest online conferencing system in Europe, and the first company to provide commercial Internet email access in 1988. It remains a popular virtual community to this day.

CIX, or the Compulink Information eXchange to be formal about things, had evolved from a fairly typical back bedroom FidoNet Bulletin Board System started in 1983 by Frank and Sylvia Thornley. They turned this into a commercial business venture just 4 years later, pioneering the concept of conferencing systems in the UK. The Thornleys were ahead of their time, forward thinkers who had created a place where members could not only communicate across a broad spectrum of forums (or conferences in CIX-speak) covering every topic imaginable, but where they could actually create those conferences themselves and control who had right of access.

This ability to communicate, participate and moderate opened up new doors through which my over eager personality could, and indeed did, charge like a bull in a china shop. On CIX I was, and remain to this very day, known as dwindera. There was no clever attempt at cryptic wordplay going on, nothing clever at all. In fact, quite the opposite. I had tried to open an account using the default suggestion of dwinder, managed to do something wrong which caused that account to fail, so the system came back with its very logical appending of 'a' to my name. The next 'dwinder' would have been 'dwinderb', so I guess I got off lucky, unlike the membership of CIX who soon discovered that, depending largely on the time of day and amount of alcohol and cannabis in my system, dwindera could be either polite and

witty or anarchic and pitiless. I spent, on average, 18 hours a day connected to CIX. This may sound like obsessive behaviour, and there is no doubting that finding a sense of belonging can be a powerful drug, but my reasons were a lot more pragmatic than mere addiction.

This virtual environment was not just somewhere I came to play, not just a place I could chat to people without the wheelchair grabbing their attention first and dominating the conversation thereafter, not just an opportunity to meet people from outside of my own restrictive demographic. This was the **only** place I could truly experience life, freed from the physical and cultural bondage of my disability. This was where I would start to create a new virtual identity in parallel with discovering who I had become, or perhaps more accurately was becoming, in real life.

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I quickly discovered I was not alone in searching for some meaning to my life, entering into this online voyage of discovery. Not having a job to go to, and being blessed by the curse of insomnia ever since my illness struck, I would often find myself roaming cyberspace in the wee small hours. CIX, being an almost exclusively British residency at the time, was deserted at 3 a.m. Apart from one chap called Kevin Hall. It turned out that he worked a night shift as a computer programmer and IT support guy, and we would often chat to waste away the hours.

## CIXen

CIXen is the collective noun for members of CIX, and yet more evidence of the tribalism that exists online.

During one of these conversations Kevin invited me to join a very small group of CIXen in a conference called Herestoby. When you create a conference on CIX you can make it open to any member, or closed so that people have to apply for membership. Herestoby, so called after the founding member, a chap by the name of Toby, was closed **and** confidential, so only the invited few even knew it existed.

It quickly became apparent that all of the half a dozen members were damaged goods in one way or another. We all had problems in our lives, and now we had somewhere private to talk about them without fear of ridicule or judgement. It acted not only as a form of group therapy, but created a real feeling of community that just didn't seem to exist outside of this little online world we had ended up in, victims of our circumstances.

Toby was devastated when his girlfriend ran off with his best friend, yet instead of sinking into the kind of self-destructive behaviour one might expect, he was able to talk through his innermost feelings within the Herestoby group. My suicidal tendencies were worked through in a similar manner, and slowly over the course of 6 months we became the closest of friends – yet the seven of us had never met face to face, never spoken on the telephone, never broken out from the safety of an exclusively online members-only club.

That all changed when everyone agreed to meet up at my place, chosen because I had the most problems with travel for obvious reasons. Nobody knew what to

expect, least of all me. Everyone was scared that meeting in person would somehow be a destructive exercise. Nothing could be further from the truth, the online relationship was so strong, we knew each other so intimately already, that it was more like a family reunion than anything.

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A short-lived one as it turned out, because later that year, on New Year's Eve, Kevin died in the most horrific motorcycle accident.

This served not only to bring us closer as a group of friends, but also acted as a rite of passage for the whole of CIX. It was the catalyst that turned CIX from being just a really cool place to chat and that forced us into becoming something much more. A memorial conference was established and people started leaving tributes to Kevin, to this man who, with very few exceptions, nobody had actually met. Yet these tributes were as heartfelt as any left by a grieving family, and that is what was being revealed: Kevin was family, part of the CIX family. With his death CIX the virtual community was born. . . .

