

## Commonspace - Chapter Seven (Reputation as Reward)

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*Success is nothing but being a quote.*

--Andy Partridge, XTC

The Internet allows anyone to become a communicator of unprecedented power... or at least a communicator who gets some heartwarming recognition. Take your pick: you can be a USENET guru with answers for everything, a day-trader with 'badges of Foolish Achievement' from the Motley Fool for your consistently hot stock tips, an IRC celebrity with the gift of the gab, a DJ on Scour with your own netradio station, an ace Noder on Everything<sub>2</sub>, the most trusted person on ePinions or eBay, a master hacker in the open source community, or a high-ranked ladder player on Battle.net or Kali. All you have to do is find your niche or niches, and work like a crazy person to add the most interesting and innovative ideas you have to the group mind. Sounds like a lot of work? It is. But it's the kind of work that can also be an incredible amount of fun.

Moreover, if enough people pick up on your post/signal/Web site and tell their friends and colleagues about it, the result is a geometric cascade effect that far exceeds the range and speed of traditional media. Intriguing ideas and cool links spread like wildfire across e-mail and ICQ networks. There are 'weblog' sites like the Haddock Directory <[www.haddock.org](http://www.haddock.org)> and Memepool <[www.memepool.com](http://www.memepool.com)> that do nothing but post links to the most engaging websites they can find. These sites are part of commonspace too, assembled by groups with similar interests working together to create knowledge pools for, well, whoever chooses to use them. And many people do on a daily basis (especially to Memepool, which syndicates its headlines to other sites using RSS), including both print and digital journalists. Where did you *think* the writers on HotWired found their stories, anyway?

### 15 Minutes of Fame

Attention is a powerful drug. People crave it, sometimes for the wrong reasons. And sometimes they bestow it on things that are frivolous or silly as well as those that have integrity and style. Increasingly prevalent are the people and Web sites we might call Net celebrities, who are just as famous - or more famous - than the geeks who actually accomplish real tasks. But only for their 15 minutes. Then, before you can say 'Spice Girls,' they're gone.

Mahir 'I Kiss You!' Cagri, the Turkish Forrest Gump of the Internet, is (or was) a Net celebrity. After Mahir's quaintly antiquated personal Web site <[members.nbci.com/primall/mahir](http://members.nbci.com/primall/mahir)> went up in 1999, featuring snapshots of the mustachioed Turk sporting a red Speedo, playing the accordion and describing his hobbies in broken English - 'I like to take foto-camera (animals, towns, nice nude models and peoples),' the site received millions of hits simply as people circulated his URL through their e-mail, USENET and weblogs. Mahir fan clubs appeared all over the world (we've seen more than a few snapshots of groups of smiling office workers holding hand-made 'We Love You Mahir' banners above the walls of their cubicles), as did a number of parody sites, including the Bill Clinton 'I Kiss You' page (Slick Willie and Mahir have a lot in common. See for yourself at <[www.geocities.com/Athens/lthaca/4637/kissy.html](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/lthaca/4637/kissy.html)>.) A year after all the fuss, Mahir started the official 'Mahir tour of Turkey,' which allowed those willing to fork over the cash to see the sights and even have dinner with Mahir himself. ('Istanbul was okay, but man, you should see Mahir play 'In a Gadda da Vida' on the accordion! He's a party animal!')

Even the most banal sites can capture the collective imagination - and someone will eventually figure out how to make money from that attention. The potential for this kind of instant, concentrated attention is a powerful motivator for participation in commonspace.

### Credibility and Ego

In the world of serious Internet users, Mahir Cagri and others like him are like the cartoon section of the newspaper. But the headlines and front page always go to the geeks and netheads - people whose posts have an extremely high *signal:noise ratio*. Long-time netheads whose posts are consistently interesting and useful have credibility. And on the Internet, that means more than anything.

Take Bruce Sterling as an example. The noted science fiction writer and journalist (author of *The Hacker Crackdown*, *Globalhead*, *Islands in the Net*, *Holy Fire* and other fine books, 'Chairman' of the cyberpunk SF movement in the '80s, and regular feature writer for *Wired* and other magazines) is a nethead from way back. He has been a tireless propagandist for the potential of the Internet for the last decade. The transcripts of many of his speeches and articles are available online. In fact, the text from his book *The Hacker Crackdown* was posted to the Net in its entirety, for free, shortly after its publication, a good seven years before the current brouhaha over 'electronic books'. The Mirrorshades List <[www.well.com/conf/mirrorshades/](http://www.well.com/conf/mirrorshades/)>, Sterling's forum on The Well, has spun out a plethora of Web sites based on the writer's ideas (including cyberpunk science fiction; the Dead Media Project- an attempt to list as many of the various types of media used throughout history as possible, and the Viridian movement - a radically pragmatic strain of environmentalism.) Sterling's good reputation among Net users is based on his consistently interesting and useful hypotheses about the effects of technology on culture.

In *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*, Eric Raymond states that the open source movement has rechanneled the selfishness of individual hackers to focus on difficult goals that can only be achieved by sustained cooperation.<sup>[i]</sup> The fuel behind this rechanneling is 'egoboo' - the satisfaction and ego boost gained from doing something well and knowing that others know that you did it well.

Egoboo is a suprisingly powerful motivator. Skeptics would expect a culture like the open source community to be fragmented, territorial, wasteful, secretive, and hostile. But it's not. Open source hackers, for example, produce copious amounts of documentation for Linux - even though it's well-known that programmers hate documenting. In contrast, the carrot-on-a-stick motivation practices of corporate documentation sweatshops produce the barest minimum of documentation. And most of it is lousy.

On the Internet, reputation is a worthy goal. For some people, it's the only goal. They want it for three compelling reasons:

- Good reputation among one's peers is a reward in itself, period.
- Prestige not only attracts attention, it helps to assure the cooperation of others.
- Reputation in a gift economy may carry over into the off-line world and earn you higher status.

John Seely Brown, the former director of Xerox PARC, argues that it's even an indirect part of 'community hygiene', because gaining reputation, say, in the open source community, involves writing code that others have to be able to read and want to use.<sup>[ii]</sup> This means that the product of one's work is circulated, talked about, and used as a springboard for all sorts of unexpected ideas. The community grows, and you get a little credit for playing a part in it. However, establishing a good rep isn't always a straightforward process.

### **The Signal: Noise Ratio**

Back in 1993, journalist and culture jamming commentator Mark Dery was receiving a cranky, flame-ridden reception on The Well. One of us (Darren) took pains to explain to him why this was happening. He was making the kinds of mistakes any newbie makes when they post without doing their research first: asking questions that were answered in FAQs, writing long, off-topic posts, misinterpreting in-jokes and the particular conventions of local conversations.

Anyone who plans to spend time online has to grow a few psychic calluses. Dery listened and persisted in his explorations in online culture long enough to make a career out of it. (Dery went on to edit *Flame Wars* and to author *Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century*, both of which drew heavily on information he gleaned from The WELL.) But even then, there were guidelines available that would have eased his entry into the online community, if he'd bothered to look.

Everyone thinks their ideas are interesting, even when there's ample evidence that they're not. Some people are unfortunately aggressive with boring, irrelevant and often offensive assertions, sometimes at the expense of the participation of other users. The term for such individuals is

*floodgaters*, because of their tendency to flood lists and forums with irrelevant posts and other crap. There are also *flamers*, who rant and rage about the posts of others, and *trolls*, who write incendiary and insulting posts calculated to rouse the ire of other users so that they can respond with their own flames (posting barbecue recipes to a USENET newsgroup frequented by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals is a classic troll). *Flame wars* are a frequent occurrence in online forums and are always a huge waste of time, energy and emotion for everyone involved, and even for those who have to watch from the sidelines.

The set of rules called 'netiquette' evolved in the early 1990s as a response to flaming, floodgating and other forms of online noise. Netiquette specifies the minutiae of good online conversational style and indicates that the brief post, preferably with hyperlinks to a longer text located elsewhere, is the ideal communicate. There are some variations to this rule, because every community has its own netiquette standards, but in general it holds true everywhere. Some good general examples of netiquette FAQs can be found at <[www.faqs.org/faqs/usenet/emily-postnews/part1/](http://www.faqs.org/faqs/usenet/emily-postnews/part1/)> (the Emily Postnews newsgroup netiquette FAQ) and <<http://www.faqs.org/faqs/net-abuse-faq/>> (FAQs of online Thou-Shalt-Nots and how to respond when others do them anyway).

In general, the goal of the discussion facilitator is to maintain a high *signal: noise ratio*. This means ensuring that as much of the material as possible will be as relevant to as many of users as possible, regardless of the technology involved.

It's important to realize that there's no such thing as a noise-free channel, due to the nature of information itself. Data only becomes information when someone singles it out for attention from the flow of background noise. What's relevant to one person may not be relevant to another person, despite their similar interests. But it's possible to tip the balance in favour of greater relevance through the use of various aggregation and filtering methods.

One important activity in commonspace is that of devising filters to ensure the bulk of the content is relevant to users. There are various sorting mechanisms that can be used to help maintain a high signal: noise ratio. Here are the most effective ones:

## FAQs

FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) are usually available in both HTML and textfile versions and accessible from the front-page of a Web site or at the beginning of a discussion thread. Reading the FAQ before leaping into a discussion is the best way to avoid being flamed and bombarded with RTFM (Read the Fucking Manual) messages from other users.

## Moderation/Gated Systems

The most powerful tool for ensuring high-quality content (but also the most expensive) is the moderator. This person (or persons) examines posts for messages that violate the community's rules, removes out-of-date postings, and watches for bugs and crashes. Moderators can be visible to varying degrees, from lurking demigods to participants on a first-name basis with users, and they can range from full-time paid employees to full-time unpaid volunteers.

It surprising, really, how long it's possible to run a very large system on largely unpaid moderators. AOL got away with paying over 14,000 volunteer 'community leaders' nothing more than the cost of their monthly account (\$21.95 US) for most of its history. It wasn't until 1999 that the volunteers started to get testy about it and launched a class-action suit against AOL <[www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.10/volunteers.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.10/volunteers.html)>. Moral of the story: if you treat your gatekeepers like dogs who'll be satisfied with the odd bone, they may well turn and bite you in the ass.

Observant readers of this book will have noted a certain lack of enthusiasm on our part regarding AOL's merits as commonspace. Why ignore the largest commonspace the world has ever seen? Six or seven years ago, it could be argued that along with Prodigy, CompuServe and like companies, AOL was a laudable service, linking people together in commonspace at a time when Internet technology wasn't widely available and was difficult to use when you could get it at all. And some good things came out of AOL, including profitable commonspace businesses like the Motley Fool financial advice site <[www.fool.com](http://www.fool.com)>, which began as a newsletter in 1994 and rode to fame on the strength of its AOL presence. But AOL was always the equivalent of a tidepool in a sea of information, shallow and walled off from the deep water where the big people swim. The perennial problem with

AOL is that the people who run it would like their tidepool to replace the deep water.

### *Forum Seeding*

In order to start a good discussion, you need intelligent people who like to talk. Because there are so many venues for online discussion including good old-fashioned e-mail, there's no reason for people to use your forum rather than anyone else's - unless you give them one. Many fledgling discussion groups 'seed' their forum with authorities in the field in question, preferably voluble ones. If your moderators post to the groups, encourage them to ask questions of your seeded authorities to help fuel discussions. Seeding is an ongoing process; people inevitably get tired of posting and slow down or quit, and you have to keep adding new ones into the mix to ensure lively ongoing discussion.

### *Membership Requirements*

This strategy can cut either way. The rationale behind limiting membership (through invitations, user fees, or professional qualifications) is that you're more likely to attract users with a strong incentive to be there, and you'll eventually arrive at a more balanced mix of posters, lurkers, and moderators than you would with, say, a USENET newsgroup. However, membership requirements that are too stringent or involve cash usually fail to generate a healthy constituency. When faced with subscription costs or membership fees, many Internet users will simply go elsewhere. Often it's not possible to limit access to a forum at all unless there's an existing high demand for it. The WELL is one example of a service that's successfully managed to charge for membership, even after its migration to the Web. But it's the only reason they can do so is because - that's right - they have a good reputation.

### *Reward Systems*

Remember those gold foil stars that teachers used to put on your homework (or your forehead) if you got all your answers correct? Darren's Grade 3 teacher actually made a wall chart with every student's name in the class on it, and put a sticker beside their name for every completed assignment. The stickers varied in colour depending on how well you did on each test. The point was that every student knew how every other student was doing, and it was a remarkably effective motivation strategy for the most part. (This explains a lot about Darren, actually.)

This system is alive and well on many commonspace sites on the Internet today. It's the opposite of membership restriction and can be used either on its own or in combination with restrictions. For a reward system to work, frequent posting of high-signal material should produce be recognized in a way that's noticeable both by the person being rewarded and other users. Some sort of visual marker on the user's identification is frequently the only reward that sites give, but rewards for participation can also include extra service privileges, cash or exchange value on goods.

### **Instant Karma: Respect as Reward**

Everyone wants to be liked, but it's most gratifying to be liked for making some positive contribution to a group rather than for your hairstyle, your clothes, or your collection of original Star Wars action figures. Many parts of commonspace have developed systems that provide user incentives for contributing to and improving commonspace. .

The Slashdot karma system is a great example of egoboo in action. Karma points are a reflection of each Slashdot user's contribution to overall discussion onsite - *registered* users, that is: people who post without registering are identified by the epithet 'Anonymous Coward', a little bit of negative incentive that pushes some people into active membership more quickly. (Evidently, when the Internet powers-that-be grabbed the Grade 3 sticker-based motivational strategy, peer pressure and name-calling came along for the ride.)

Users receive karma points based on how their comments to news stories on Slashdot are received by the site's administrators, who review every submission before allowing it to be posted onsite. For each comment that users attach to a given news story, moderators select an adjective like 'Flamebait' (negative) or 'Informative' (positive) from a drop-down list that appears next to the comments in their special moderating windows. A negative rating reduces the comment's score by a single point, and a positive rating increases the comment's score by a single point. All comments are scored on an absolute scale from -1 to 5. Logged-in users start at 1 (although this can vary from 0 to 2 based on their karma) and anonymous users start at 0. Each user's Info page lists their current karma rating, and the number of comments they've posted in the past few weeks (including those that have been rejected).

When a user's comment is adjusted positively by a moderator, their karma will rise by one point. If it is moderated down, they lose a point. In addition, users can gain karma by submitting a news story that the moderators decide to post. Also, users can gain and lose karma through metamoderation, a system that allows any logged in Slashdot user to 'rate the rating' of ten randomly selected posts for fairness. Metamoderation encourages good moderating practices and helps to ensure that moderator access isn't granted to poor moderators on a repeated basis.

Slashdot has also developed checks and balances on moderators to ensure that they do not become all-powerful demigods who crush other users according to their whims. When users gain access to the moderator window, they are given a number of 'points of influence' to apply to comments. Each comment they moderate deducts a point from their total, and when they run out of points, they are done serving until their turn comes up again. Moreover, moderators cannot participate in discussions that they are moderating, and moderation points expire after three days if they are left unused.

So what do karma points do, really, other than make you look good? Answer: (this is the nifty part) karma points determine which users are selected to be moderators, so the maintenance of the system closes in on itself in a beautiful little loop. There are also other selection criteria in the Slashdot moderator selection system, including the following, which could well serve as guides for anyone choosing moderators:

- **User must be logged in to the system.**
- **User must be a regular reader.** The scripts which select moderators track the average number of accesses by each logged-in user, then choose from eligible users who read the site a set number of times. Simply accessing the homepage doesn't count; the user must be actively burrowing down through the site to follow particular stories. The scripts also pick users from the middle of the pack to avoid obsessive-compulsive people hitting the Reload button or people who've only read one article.
- **User must be a long-time reader.** The system throws out the newest few thousand accounts before beginning its moderator selection process. This prevents people from creating new accounts simply to gain moderator access. But more importantly, it ensures that new users understand the community before they gain access to the controls.
- **User must be willing to serve as a moderator.** Each user's preference page contains a button that allows them to designate themselves as 'Unwilling.' It's that simple.
- **User must be a positive contributor to the site.** A user with positive karma has posted more good comments than bad ones, and is therefore eligible to moderate. This weeds out spam accounts.

The end result is a pool of eligible users that represent average, positive Slashdot contributors. Every 30 minutes, the system checks the number of comments that have been posted, and gives a proportionate number of eligible users 'tokens.' When any user acquires a certain number of tokens, he or she becomes a moderator.

Slashdot is also a working example of a community where lurking actually makes sense. Most often when we're online, we're part of a community of readers more than we are a community of talkers. A quarter to a third of any forum's users are active in discussion at any given time; everybody else is lurking, watching for a moment when they're compelled to participate. Lurking allows users to learn how the site functions and helps ensure that when users decide to participate, their first efforts are smooth and successful. For the user, a lurking period also builds anticipation about participating more actively in the life of Slashdot - sort of like waiting for dessert.

## If At First You Don't Succeed: The Value of Persistence

Off the Net, most people have never heard of James 'Kibo' Parry. But among long-time Internet users, he's a minor legend. In his own words, Kibo is to the Internet what Charles Nelson Reilly was to Match Game '77. Kibo's realm is USENET, where for over a decade he's held forth on all manner of topics in all manner of groups (especially those named after him, such as alt.religion.kibology). Kibo's homepage on the web <www.kibo.com> isn't much to look at; but as Kibo writes, 'This page has a philosophy. That makes it better than yours.' The Kibo philosophy is odd but interesting: that everything online should be legible (i.e. text-based), even if it's dadaesque nonsense. What the site does offer for the pragmatic surfer who's willing to sift through the sacred mountain of Kibological documents is some solid advice about how to configure a USENET newsreader for maximum efficiency. (If you're going to try to stay on top of even a fraction of the 35,000+ newsgroups currently in existence, some of which get thousands of posts a day, you'd better be pretty proficient at writing kill files and bozo filters.) For everyone else, Kibo's site carries a powerful message: if you stick around for long enough and keep writing, people will eventually listen, even if they haven't the slightest idea what you're trying to tell them.

Kibo is on a grand scale what many users of the Internet's 'free advice' community aspire to be (whether they realize it or not). While most of the users of Epinions <www.epinions.com>, iVillage <www.ivillage.com>, AskMe <www.askme.com>, Abuzz <www.abuzz.com> and similar sites don't have religions or even newsgroups named after them, many of them display a Kibo-like determination to hold forth on, well, *whatever*. (Sometimes, the reviews are even produced in streaming video, which can produce unintentionally bizarre results. Check out Epinions user Jen's review video of an electric breast pump at < www.adcritic.com/content/epinions.com-breast-pump.html>. Watch the cat lick the leaky pump! Watch the pizza guy's reaction! Reality TV has nothing on this stuff.) What's more, the free advice users long desperately for someone - anyone - to approve of their epistles.

On a free advice site, the Grade 3 sticker chart is hauled out once again, but this time with a vengeance. Any posting on Epinions can be rated by any user as as Highly Recommended, Recommended, Somewhat Recommended, or Not Recommended. In addition, on your Epinions home page, there's a sidebar listing other users that you trust - and those that you mistrust. In other words, on many free advice sites, it's possible to punish people as well as to reward them for their opinions, justly or unjustly.

The majority of advice site participants are well-meaning and sincere, striving to communicate with each other and solve problems for no more reward than the satisfaction of a thank-you. (Oh, and a 'Highly Recommended' rating while you're at it. Calculated altruism is the flipside of mutual self-interest.) However, there are also always a percentage of 'trolls' - people who lurk in commonspace looking for easy targets for flaming. This exchange on iVillage - which allows users to post follow ups to expert answers - is instructive:

Cooking on the Grill

"Help! My husband just bought a gas grill. We love cooking on it, but my kids are picky. They won't eat anything but hot dogs and hamburgers. Any suggestions? I'm desperate." --iVillager Chapmanville

What would you do?

EXPERT SAYS :

Maybe your kids would like these!

Grilled Parmesan Turkey Burgers

- \* 1 pound ground turkey
- \* 1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- \* 1 tablespoon chopped fresh chives
- \* 1/4 teaspoon pepper

- \* 1/8 teaspoon salt
- \* 4 hamburger buns, split

Mix all ingredients except buns and onions. Shape mixture into 4 patties, about 1/2" thick. Cover and grill patties 4 to 6 inches from medium heat for 12 to 15 minutes, turning once, until no longer pink in the center. Add buns to grill, cut side down, for last 4 minutes of grilling. Serve on buns with grilled or raw onions.

--cl-cathy

How would you satisfy a picky child? Share your recipe suggestions with us.

Two waldorf salads with fries to go. I'm going down the sidewalk to the mall where I can buy some sneakers and pants.

10:47AM EDT 06/28/00

---Posted by American twat

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Can you help. Dooncan would love to meet your kids so long as they are over 16....

10:47AM EDT 06/28/00

---Posted by Ivor Bigun

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I would very much like to clarify the behaviour of my Uncle Thomas after his retirement from front bench politics. He was actually appointed Keeper of the King's Dew Flaps by George V a position entitling him to all the stout he could drink and an annual pension of four bob.

10:47AM EDT 06/28/00

---Posted by Colonel Henry Ramsbottom

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They could always eat my shorts.

10:45AM EDT 06/28/00

---Posted by The Boxmaster

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I am dismayed at the self indulgence rearing it's pathetic head on this page. Why don't you all think about something that is more important than your pathetic little spoiled children who only eat burgers or who can or can't drink alcohol. How about something more important like - paint drying

10:51AM EDT 06/28/00

---Posted by Tony

---

Webmaster! Please do something! I can't find my pants!

10:51AM EDT 06/28/00

---Posted by Robert Pritchard

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I AM STUPID AND HAVE NO FRIENDS! I LIVE ON SPAM! MAYBE THIS WILL HELP ANSWER THE ORIGINAL QUESTION! FEED YOUR KIDS SPAM! IT IS GOOD

10:51AM EDT 06/28/00

---Posted by ROBERT PRITCHARD

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Why dont you just feed them hagendaz and pancakes with syrup. Kill the buggers off before they are 30 and we wont have to put up with them coming over here wearing white socks and sandals, talking loudly and having cameras that just ask to be mugged !!!!

10:48AM EDT 06/28/00

---Posted by Ivor Bigun

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This is so much fun! You have succeeded in driving traffic to your site, now show the traffic stats to you AD companies and tell them to pay more!

10:53AM EDT 06/28/00

---Posted by cricket

...and so on. This last post, from 'cricket' is perhaps the most interesting: it demonstrates a technical understanding of the business side of free advice sites that's far more sophisticated than the level of discourse itself. The bread and butter of free-advice commonspace is controversy, because controversy creates mountains of free content and does in fact drive traffic to the site, creating an attractive venue for advertisers. Clearly, beyond a certain bare minimum level of decorum, it's not in the best business interests of such a site's administrators to moderate too closely.

This exchange also demonstrates the type of obstacles faced by those who aspire to online fame. Many people simply don't have the filtering skills that allow Net-demigods like Kibo to tolerate the online torrents of crap and abuse. (The full extent of the iVillage flamefest cited above went on for over 65 pages of text when we found it, and may still be going on, for all we know.) But as we all get better at learning what we want and where to find it and stop tripping over each other in the process, the overall amount of noise in the channel will drop. And for the most part, we'll be a happier species as a result.

### **Your Last 15 Minutes**

So what happens when the flames get too hot, or people find other corners of commonspace that they'd rather spend more time in than your site?  
Answer: your site dies.

All online communities, not just the business ones, are transaction-based, whether the transactions are of a restricted-economy nature (financial) or a gift-economy nature (egoboo, conversations, free advice). And communities last only as long as the transactions conducted by their members. Though it might take a long time, even the busiest communities will eventually cease to exist.

Online communities also have a finite size limit and a lifespan that's directly related to the exceeding of that size limit. What we used to call the 'I was a punk before you were a punk' syndrome is important in determining that limit. People want the feeling of having been there first and will often leave when they lose that feeling, or they will form new communities to regain that lost sense of control or innovation.

Even when the founders leave, many communities continue to live on and to evolve. The WELL is a good example. It isn't the lively home of nethead impresarios that it once was. While some of the original community leaders still keep an affiliation, they don't spend the hours everyday sitting around the WELL's virtual coffee table that they once did. They have moved on, but the community still thrives. There are new members, new owners (Salon) and new energy. It is still the WELL.

On the other hand, some communities just fade away and die when the founders leave. The Internet is filled with the dusty skeletons of newsgroups, mailing lists, discussion forums and Web sites long since abandoned by the people who once inhabited them. But unlike ghost towns, these dead communities still provide value to commonspace. They serve as a collective memory. In writing this book, we often found the most useful information was in dusty old mailing list archives, information long forgotten by everyone but the search engines.

It's essential that we view this cycle of commonspace - with some communities growing, morphing and others fading away - as a healthy one. It helps us grow and learn. It helps us sort through what is still useful, and what is still not. It allows us to move in and out of leadership roles as we need to. And, unlike the firmly entrenched world of old media, this cycle allows new ideas and institutions to grow quickly as they are needed and old ones to fade away gracefully when they are not. Let's hope the cycle continues.

And the people who've used those communities to vault into the public view? Many of them, like Rheingold and Sterling, have gone on to even more impressive feats, and we probably haven't heard the last of them. Even Mahir is trying to do his bit for world hunger with his second homepage, 'I hug u then I kiss u anytime!!!' Like Smilin' Stan Lee, the author of *Spiderman* used to write, with great power comes great responsibility.

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[i] <[www.tuxedo.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/cathedral-bazaar/x305.html](http://www.tuxedo.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/cathedral-bazaar/x305.html)>

[ii] <[www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.08/brown.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.08/brown.html)>

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Author: Mark Surman

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