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NEW KIDS ON THE NET

Deutschsprachige Philosophie elektronisch

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> *The old, albeit hackneyed, computer expression 'GIGO' - Garbage In, Garbage Out - has been removed from vocabulary and rhetoric at a time when it seems most needed. The hype about the Internet has in fact created a new enchantment in Western societies. Dealing with the realities of virtual reality, however, will be a process of progressive disenchantment wherein the limits of communication and information as the essence of emancipation become clear. The Net, then, has attained a status much like God … before rationalization.*
>
> Interrogate the Internet

The Internet protocols offer several modes of global, digital data- transfer by procedures like telnet, ftp (File Transfer Protocol) or SMTP (Simple Mail Transfer Protocol).[1] Some modes are designed to enable exchange of information between single users or to allow access to remote operating systems. There are, on the other hand, a number of techniques specifically developed to support social interaction: "Chats" (Internet Relay Channels) or "MUDs" (Multi-User Dimensions). Mailing lists fall somewhere in between those two categories, basically building on the person-to-person SMTP, but enhancing it (often by extensive use of mail aliases) to establish electronic discussion groups. Discourse on such lists is generally more civil and substantive than on Usenet, but still considerably more chaotic than any traditional form of written public exchange. While chatters may open or close new "channels" at will and participants in Usenet's alt-hierarchy indulge in their freedom to create and discard any number of quixotic newsgroups, list-owners need some administrative support to install and configure the necessary software which makes for a comparatively stable, restrained communicative environment.

[1] For technical information see Tanenbaum (1996). The motto is taken from Shields (1996, p.131).

Mailing lists tend to be shaped by core groups of dedicated participants, developing their interests and opinions in front of a predominantly receptive audience of subscribers. A new kind of communicative praxis is established on top of some guidelines on how computers should exchange data: participation in quasi-instantaneous, globally distributed, non-hierarchical discursive interchange. Computer networks, as is well known, are not confined by any historical or geographical borders. As a consequence, the cultural impact of the technical devices seems to affect arbitrary collections of users availing themselves of the necessary equipment and know-how. One of the most dazzling experiences of communication on the net, it has correctly been pointed out, is its global egalitarianism. While it is true that large parts of the planet are still excluded and the predominance of the English language imposes important constraints on the participants, it is difficult to avoid an initial euphoria, a cosmopolitan state of mind, as one becomes familiar with a machinery that can support spatially unlimited cooperation between equals with a minimum of administrative overhead.

The rules of TCP/IP have been laid down in one country, at a particular time, under particular circumstances, but the scope of their application is universal. Their inherent capacity to transform information-exchange all over the world seems much more powerful than any special pleading in favour of local sensitivities. This way of looking at the Internet is, obviously, reminiscent of well-known philosophical debates centring on the universality of Eurocentric Reason. There is a tension, if not a paradox, in one country determining the address space for all of the world. Hegemonical attitudes are very much in evidence as the participants - government, big business and trans-national agencies - struggle for authority and their share of bandwidth. Appeals to "international standards" are often quite partial. But it is equally important to realize that nobody *forced* the Internet on the non-US part of the globe. The universalised rules of TCP/IP are acknowledged and, indeed, put to use, by numerous local communities drawing profit from international standards they have not, admittedly, been asked about.

My topic will be quite specific, namely an overview of German-language mailing lists in philosophy. The purpose of the discussion is, however, a more general one: to explore the tension inherent in implementing a tool for global communication in a very particular geographical and professional context. *give-l*, which ran from December 1994 to September 1996,[2] was the first attempt to establish an electronic discussion forum for German-speaking philosophers on the Internet and it exhibits much of the - slightly half-baked - enthusiasm I just alluded to. Eventually *give-l* could not contain the contradictions between its naive universalism and its *de facto* clientele. A more discriminating approach

[2] The list is archived at http://hhobel.phl.univie.ac.at/gl.

seemed to be called for. My second focus will be the story of *real*, an e-mail forum intended to support lecture courses I gave at the Department of Philosophy at Vienna University starting in fall 1996.[3]

Methodological reflection had by this time set in and I shall report the consequences of a more sober approach to the technological challenge. *give-l* was a success while it lasted, *real* was sometimes lively, but very often sluggish and in constant need of prompting. These difficulties encountered with *real* will lead to a discussion of the inevitable disenchantment with de-contextualized, but necessarily local implementations of global communication software. A more pragmatic approach suggests itself. My third example will be *philweb*, a Hamburg-based list that has been very active recently.[4] The vast majority of its members are students of philosophy at various German universities. *Philweb* is a second-generation mailing list, sometimes containing echoes of foundational moments, but more often busy to explore the newly discovered opportunities. This talk will be a small-scale *Bildungsroman* starting with the blissful coincidence of the general and the particular and eventually leading to a more detached assessment of the prospects of an initial synthesis of technology and culture.

1. *give-l*

The designation "*give-l*" and the original purpose of the list are in themselves indications of the tension I have indicated. The acronym was supposed to stand for "Globally Integrated Village Environment", referring to a local Viennese research project trying to put Marshall McLuhan's ideas to the test. The list was established to support the activities of the research team and I spent some of my seminars discussing their agenda. The result was a strange mix between universal reach and local circumstances.[5]

Several scholars, searching the net for keywords like "global" and "village" were in due course directed to *give-l* -- only to be disappointed when they discovered that German was the dominant language on the list. English was also acceptable and was indeed used by some participants feeling more comfortable in their native language. Reading German was, however, a prerequisite of actively participating, a fact that had simply been overlooked when the acronym was chosen to attract an international audience.

It took list members several month to become aware of this dilemma and some more time until a new reading of give was proposed: "Gehirne in vollem

[3] Cf. http://hhobel.phl.univie.ac.at/real/realarch.
[4] For information see http://www.sozialwiss.uni- hamburg.de/phil/ag/philweb.html.
[5] Mitchell (1995) includes a fine phenomenological description of this feature of electronic agoras: pp.6-24.

Einsatz" (roughly "Brains giving their best"). This playful echo of the original meaning of the list's name did not, however, remove a more fundamental ambivalence acutely felt at the time. Viennese students were all of a sudden exchanging their opinions and pursuing their academic curriculum in front of a word-wide audience. Describing the situation in these terms might sound unduly pathetic. Still, I want to argue that the description is -- up to a certain degree -- legitimate. Compare the thrill of suddenly talking to 10,000 people over a microphone. An individual voice is suddenly broadcast by an enormously powerful medium. To disregard the fantasies such scenarios evoke makes for a severely restricted philosophy.

Foundational experiences are not for keeping, but neither are they just discardable by-products as history unfolds. Starting January 1995 a lot of traffic on *give-l* was concerned with administrative troubles as well as with several papers written on the occasion of a symposium sponsored by the City of Vienna. But there was a less pragmatic undercurrent: No one had done this kind of thing before.[6]

Some (largely implicit) account of what the activity amounted to was presupposed in our practice. In the background of computer-mediated transactions a proto-theory of mailing lists was taking shape.

I was, as it happened, at that time commuting between Essen, Germany and Vienna, using the list for some tele-teaching. The list itself eventually included about 150 persons of which approximately 50 were based in Vienna, often knowing themselves personally, e.g. from taking part in my seminars. Under these circumstances a certain technologically induced euphoria took hold of several contributors. It has often been remarked that e-mail combines features of writing and conversation, producing "texts" that carry some of the immediacy of face-to-face encounters. This feature was certainly appreciated, but another, more conceptual peculiarity of e-mail discourse impressed itself even more deeply on the group. Texts (or tele-events), when broadcast all over the world, often produce an inherently passive audience that has no choice but to accept whatever the distributors make available. Local meetings, seminars for example, provide opportunities to shape events in person. Technically speaking mailing lists are trivial extensions of SMTP, but they offer entirely new social dynamics.

The notion of a "global audience" has in the past, somewhat metaphorically, been applied to people reading their daily paper or sitting in front of television sets. With the invention of mailing lists the term can be given a much more literal meaning. Real-life audiences are distinguished from "audiences" in a derived sense by their member's actual awareness of each other. Public events in their most basic form demand bodily presence and enable people to react to each other's interventions spontaneously, whereas a media event synthesises

[6] For an overview of the general principles of digital socialisation see N. K. Baym (1995).

numerous single addressees into a more abstract social gathering. The mechanism of mailing lists, as it turns out, goes a long way to combine the requirements of global reach and local awareness. One might be able to watch one's neighbours watching TV, or notice the book one's friend just bought, but there is no way to know in general who, at a given moment, is watching a particular program or what persons are reading one's favourite book.

In contrast to this, every mailing list has a simple "review" command, enabling each member to automatically retrieve the names of all fellow-participants. This is, admittedly, not the bodily co-presence characteristic of on-location meetings, but it is one of its closest approximations by means of media-technology yet. Participants in mailing lists de facto know precisely whom they are addressing themselves to and they know that those addressed know that they are noticed in this way. Furthermore, if the system works, electronic mail is practically simultaneous on a global scale, so that responses to a message can in principle be given in real time. A group of people might be dispersed all over the planet and still each of its members can know of each other, address the group at any time and receive instant feedback, which is itself subject to quasi-immediate comment. As these possibilities dawned on some of the members of *give-l* exchanges on the list acquired an importance far exceeding the issues at hand.

For a time it seemed that one could have the best of two worlds: instantaneous social interaction without bodily presence.[7] Key members knew each other and physically met; still they were thrilled by the opportunity to communicate via e-mail messages, sometimes sitting next to each other in the computer lab. Their real-life existence had somehow acquired an electronic supplement as their identity as participants on *give-l* exerted increasing influence on their actual life. I had loosely associated *give-l* with a seminar I held at the Department of Philosophy expecting it to enhance traditional forms of learning/teaching. But the list quickly developed into a melange of discussions only temporarily focused on single topics. High-quality contributions were running side by side with beginners' questions and silly comments, mirroring a student's checkered experience at an academic institution in a way conventional media are unable to match.

Inevitably, as a group identity was forged, a social hierarchy imposed itself on the participants.[8] This lead to predictable tensions on-line and in real life. One list member, to mention the most controversial case, intermittently attacked his fellows quite rudely, even though he could be seen a reasonably well-mannered, if idiosyncratic, student in the context of the seminar meetings.

[7] Chris Chesher writes convincingly on *The Ontology of Digital Domains* involved in this experience (Holmes, 1997, pp.79ff)

[8] Robert Hanke uses categories proposed by Pierre Bourdieu to give an account of these developments: http://hhobel.phl.univie.ac.at/gl/gl9506/msg00062.html.

Knowing this person's peculiarities a majority was prepared to tolerate his transgressions on the list. But when newcomers from outside the local circle were also fiercely attacked the affair threatened to get out of hand and, after several warnings, I removed the offender from the list.

The consequences of this removal were dramatic and served as a first reminder of the more problematic aspects of on-line meetings. Two weeks after the event a member, resenting my decision, asked "whether all *give-l* members are fascists?" This provocative question shattered the (up-to-now) largely innocent preconception of a more productive, civil life in cyberspace, leading to a bitter flame war among several proponents. On reflection the reasons for this nasty confrontation turn out to be closely connected to the possibilities praised in my previous remarks. The questioner, actually a rather withdrawn, courteous person, was simply unaware of the impact a single word could have in an environment that carries no collateral information on the personal bearing and attitude of the speaker/writer. This sort of disembodiment is quite possibly a remedy against stifling prejudice, but it can also severely disturb social interaction.[9]

One ambivalent phrase, not embedded within the usual context of situated know-how, dropped into a digitally enhanced community, can trigger a completely unforeseen chain of reactions, possibly leading to the self-destruction of the group. Electronic communities are (somewhat miraculously) built upon transmission-techniques and words alone, and can just as easily be destroyed by hardware-failure or a single inappropriate utterance. Luckily, *give-l* survived this crisis and continued to provide a learning environment for many of its participants. When, for example, teachers and students at the University of Vienna went on strike against severe budget cuts proposed by the Austrian government in spring 1997 *give-l* featured some excellent conceptual and economic background-information as well as extensive discussion of the options facing the academic community.[10] Yet, after having run for over three semesters, the list showed distinct signs of wear.

2. *real*

At the establishment of *give-l* all its members had shared a certain amount of curiosity and a fair measure of ignorance regarding the whole enterprise. As the

[9] On the issue of disembodiment compare Paul James and Freya Carkeek, *This Abstract Body: From Embodiment Symbolism to Techno-Disembodiment*, as well as Michelle Willson, *Community in the Abstract: A Political and Ethical Dilemma*? (Holmes, 1997). See also Featherstone and Barrows (1995)

[10] A chronicle of events and several political assessments can be found at http://www.univie.ac.at/philosophie/facts/sparfl/sparfl.html.

list developed this background obviously changed. At the beginning the very fact of "being connected" was felt to be of overwhelming importance and mutual encouragement was as welcome as carefully prepared arguments. But the pursuit of academic learning and indulgence in the unconstrained voicing of opinions do not easily fit together. There were some attempts to impose a more conventional structure onto the discussion, all of which failed. Mailing lists, rather like lively meetings of friends, do not easily allow for this kind of administrative regulation. As a consequence contributors who had spent considerable energy in setting up a philosophical discourse gradually grew disenchanted, unwilling to deal with the concurrent "gossip" on a daily basis. With the original excitement subsiding a different arrangement was decided between the Viennese proponents of *give-l*.

The list was to be split in two, one part retaining the "brand name", offering a club-like atmosphere for students at the department, whereas the other part was meant to supplement my Viennese teaching, carrying theoretical discussions exclusively. The new list give, I am sorry to report, proved an instant failure. The special mix of personalities and mechanical gadgets that had produced and supported *give-l* could not be duplicated in this quickly changing area. The second list, *real*, proved more enduring. It took its name from the lecture course it was to support – "Wirklich, möglich, virtuell" – but there was also a hint at the list being more realistic regarding the possible functions of electronic discourse. Still, with a lot of interest in tele-teaching and experimental use of the new media, expectations were high.

"Virtuality" is an intriguing concept and *real* started with a prolonged discussion of how digitalised representation should be distinguished from "reality" and "possibility". The spectrum of contributions was fairly broad, ranging from physics to postmodern theory and self-referential comments on the "virtual" nature of the list itself. Cooperative philosophical explorations seemed to be possible within this framework. But when the topic of "virtuality", after two month' time, had lost its attraction, the list could not maintain its initial momentum. It did never, in particular, produce the kind of group-consciousness that had been a hall-mark of *give-l*.

The highlights of *real* occurred when, for some largely unpredictable reason, an issue or an event caught the imagination of some participants, leading to a short, intensive exchange which usually broke off as abruptly as it had begun. And when I tried to repeat my attempts at tele-teaching, arranging for two groups of students from Vienna and Weimar to share the list for mutual comments on lectures I had given in both cities, the proposal did not meet with any significant interest. Mailing lists are, according to this experience, of only limited use in supporting comparatively high-focused academic cooperation. This seems to be the opposite side to their very informality. It is precisely because they enable people to react to other people's interventions quickly and

spontaneously that they do not easily provide an environment conducive to doing "serious" philosophy.

My notions of seriousness can, of course, be challenged at this point. A certain species of "media philosophy" is intent on explicitly rejecting the traditional professional standards that I am implicitly invoking here.[11]

According to their pronouncements future philosophical efforts should make the most of multi-media, hypertextualized technology, breaking free from the confines of one-step-after-the-other linear argument. I do not deny the attractions of those manifestos and tend to follow their advice, once in a while. But I am not prepared to overlook the severe limitations imposed on academic endeavours by technologically mediated unconstrained exchange of opinions.

Mailing lists are a valuable tool as long as having an equal voice and communicating with a minimum of administrative hassle are the most important requirements. It is not impossible to employ them for bona fide educational purposes like tutorial guidance or careful slow readings of classical texts. Yet, the inherent egalitarianism of the procedural substratum of mail aliasing seems to be somewhat at cross-purposes with attempts to build the stable, mildly hierarchical structures known from ordinary teaching. Precisely because the usual framework of time and space is drastically altered and physical presence replaced by written communication the metaphor of an "electronic classroom" is of limited use. The hesitant conclusion from running *real* is, therefore, that it is probably a mistake to expect much philosophical content even from special-purpose mailing lists. Since this is a somewhat negative result the question of its relevance to the vision of a global, unrestricted, well-informed exchange of ideas naturally arises.

Questioning students about their reluctance to involve themselves with *real* produced some straightforward pragmatic reasons for the partially disappointing developments. In 1994/95 the World Wide Web had not yet achieved the overwhelming importance it was to reach by the second part of 1996 when *real* was started. To students fascinated by links, graphics and animation simple e-mail seemed somewhat austere and could not capture the imagination to the extent necessary to engage in prolonged philosophical dialogue. Confronted with a seemingly unbounded supply of intellectual free-ware most users found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on complicated issues when on-line. The omnipresence of web-browsers, most of them including e- mail functionality, overshadowed the notion of a mailing list which does not, after all, offer anonymous surfing to the general public. Putting *real* on the Web did not, incidentally, help. Hyper-mail is helpful in making technical support accessible or in simply sharing some information with a broad audience. It is not, for this very reason, well-suited to the purposes I tried to put it to.[12] Such are the risks

[11] Mark Dery (1996) has written lucidly on the post-modern rhetorics of Cyberspace.
[12] For multi-media experiences cf. Chapter 7 in Jones (1997) and Barrett (1995).

one has to reckon with when entering unexplored territory. But there is a more substantial philosophical lesson to be drawn from reflecting on the development of *give-l* and *real*.

In comparing the two lists some of the enthusiasm surrounding *give-l* can be seen from a different perspective. I have hinted at the ambivalent nature of exempting the body from what is otherwise a characteristically communicative setting. This holds for mailing lists (or chats and MUDs) in general. There is, however, an additional aspect unique to foundational moments in global electronic communication. When first confronted with a technical tool like the Listserv software an almost automatic reaction is to run together two different projections, namely the procedural advantages of the technology and its perceived usefulness to the particular situation one finds oneself in. Such technologies, at first encounter, present themselves as a hybrid between context-independent promises and very specific expectations. Typing at her keyboard a person can reach a global audience. I am not denigrating this hybrid form. It seems to me that, on the contrary, its power has to be acknowledged and its presuppositions have to be scrutinized.

One might say, tentatively, that an imaginary cross-fertilisation is at issue here. The rules of SMTP contain nothing to inspire widespread fantasies, whereas the fantasy of all the inhabitants of the planet communicating unrestrictedly has probably been around for as long as humanity itself. Inconspicuous moments like making an appointment at the computer lab, determining the parameters of a mailing list's configuration files, can, surprisingly, acquire pivotal importance by short-circuiting technological capacity and an external content that is imaginatively superimposed upon the working of the machinery. This is not, to repeat my point, meant to be a deconstruction of such incidents. Examining their inherent structure we learn about the force and the limits of attempts to install a computer-mediated space of Reason.

It is tempting to put the point in Hegelian terms: mailing lists exhibit the principle of widely-distributed, democratic, simultaneous discourse *an sich*, i.e. formally, by virtue of their technical definition. The corresponding philosophical notions remain, on the other hand, *für sich*, confined within the realm of theoretical design. In order for the promise to work itself out both sides would have to be mediated, exploring the power of operational, but abstract procedures to shape and transform imagination via actual discourse. This, of course, is where the hybrid construction is put to a test it cannot possibly pass. Philosophical talk of rationality, generality and social symmetry is not meant to be taken in the literal sense a mailing list exemplifies. Some enthusiasts, it is true, start off with a simplistic understanding of terms like "universality" and "immaterial" -- their punishment consisting in having to deliver papers tracing their disenchantment. Yet, as Wolf Biermann, a German song-writer, put it in a

different context: “Wer sich nicht in Gefahr begibt, kommt darin um.” Not taking risks is living dangerously.

To mention a similar dilemma, it is, at a first glance, a very plausible proposition that Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida (among others) are prophets of digitalised hypertext which neatly materialises their conceptual design. (Landow, 1994) But, taking a closer look, it becomes obvious that the architecture of a book like Roland Barthes’ *S/Z* is completely foreign to the current realities of hypertext. Writing about “nodes” and “networks” in a traditional context is importantly different from designing HTML-pages and similarities between these two activities are extremely superficial. The meanings of the term “global” in the parlance of media theorists and philosophers are, likewise, related by family resemblance, at best. The general topic of this conference is the impact of globally distributed technologies on local communities shaped by history and custom. Some suggestions emerge from the preceding discussion.

With the benefit of hindsight it is comparatively easy to find a familiar pattern in my account of *give-l* and *real*. Life is not more enlightened since electricity is generally available and foreign countries are not necessarily better known to us since we can get there by plane. Continental philosophers have warned us all along against being fooled by formalisms devoid of content and even software designers are beginning to inquire after the needs of particular users before implementing their programs (Winograd, 1996). It seems to follow that the entire procedure – establish a mailing list, ask questions later – was misguided, a typical example of falling prey to mere appearances. I do not want to dismiss the charge out of hand and I certainly concede that I’d do things differently the second time. Yet, such more cautious approaches are themselves built on presuppositions that are at least as dubious as the myth of empowerment by mere technology.

Conventional wisdom has it that there is a realm of Science and Technology which holds great promise for mankind, even though it is simultaneously perceived to be a dangerous force, quite likely to trigger enormous devastation. In order to check the techno-experts we need prudence, the power of good judgement, the Humanities. This is because history and the Social Sciences teach us about the constraints every society and every cultural environment imposes on the machinery it needs for its survival. But notice the dualism deeply entrenched in this point of view.

The strategic recourse to the powers of the mind is, it seems to me, just as problematic as unguarded technophilia. In preserving a domain of detached reflection it simultaneously renders technology immune against any direct intervention. “Humanists” are not supposed to meddle with the formalism, their area of competence being the scholarly assessment of it’s possible consequences. This attitude, I suggest, does not do justice to the way

technological achievements capture our imagination and tempt us to explore their potential. It is impossible to discuss the problems that are obviously at issue here, so I will conclude this section with a one-sentence indication of my personal position: Philosophy disposes of an enormous amount of knowledge, some of which can well be put to unauthorised use by newcomers and even dilettantes as they take up a challenge previously unknown.

3. philweb

What I've been saying amounts to an extended answer to the following question that was put on several mailing lists dealing with philosophical topics on February 14, 1998:

> I wonder what are the main email lists for philosophical discussions. I am not looking for a specific topic, but philosophy in general. By *main* lists I mean lists where the discussion includes all kind of philosophies, as well as reference to what is going on today in the area.

As Jim Morrisson was singing in the late sixties: "We want the world and we want it now." This is not going to work, but it is not completely crazy either. I was surprised at the courtesy with which this inquiry was met, the sender simply being referred to some of the well-known listings of philosophical resources. On closer inspection, though, simple-minded interventions like the question quoted above raise more interesting issues. What are we to expect from the ubiquity of such naive enquiries? Can mailing lists overcome the constant danger of being deflated? Can philosophical activity be adjusted to profit from potential of permanent ad hoc disturbance?

One possible reaction is to settle for administrative information. *Philos-L* offers professional services to English-language philosophers and I have established a similar list (*register*) to serve the academic community in German-speaking countries.[13] But such undertakings, while clearly being useful, provide a very limited answer to the general worry. Electronically addressing the members of the profession is highly convenient and will undoubtedly become even more widespread in the future, but what about content? Will it be affected by its means of proliferation? It should, by now, be obvious that putting the issue in such general terms will only provide utopian (or dystopian) guesswork. The question's scope has to be restricted and I will base a tentative answer on my familiarity with the current employment of the Internet for philosophical purposes in Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

An increasing number of German-language universities is present on the Web, offering the usual set of information, including brief overviews of their

[13] http://hhobel.phl.univie.ac.at/register.html.

departments of philosophy. There are approximately 70 home pages of philosophy professors, most of them embedded within the general presentation of their institution. Less than 20 of those home- pages contain more than a CV, a list of publications and a description of past and current interests. Some philosophical associations like the "Ludwig Wittgenstein Gesellschaft" or the "Austrian Society for Philosophy" are on-line and a number of publishing houses as well as academic journals supply electronic catalogues and indices. All of this pretty much mirrors the US-American situation, albeit on a smaller scale. But, turning the attention to cooperative projects, there are interesting differences.

Excepting Vienna University there have up to now been next to no attempts to take up the challenge of computer-mediated philosophy in an institution-alised, academic context. German philosophy departments tend to be quite hierarchically organised, unwilling and unable to quickly adapt to outside pressures and public expectation. On a more conceptual level, most of the established theories profess a distance towards mass media and the marketplace of ideas. Experimental electronic philosophy is, consequently, done by a small group of graduate students and people on the fringe of the educational system. The authoritative collection of digital resources in German-language philosophy is maintained by Dieter Köhler, a graduate student from Heidelberg, in his spare time[14] and one of the most charming sites, "Annette's Philosophenstbchen" is an open attempt to challenge the kind of philosophy usually done in academia.[15] Probably Germany's most noteworthy contributions to on-line life in philosophy have been provided by *Phil-Net*, a small group of students very loosely affiliated with Hamburg university.

I'll restrict myself to the mailing list initiated by the Hamburg group in May 1996, incidentally on the very same day that I launched *register*. After some initial confusions the list-owners reached an agreement concerning the respective profiles of their lists. *Philweb* was to cater for net-users and web-designers interested in applying new information technology to the field of philosophy. These aims were in line with several other *Philnet* activities like building a philosophical search engine and a text repository. The project had difficulties in developing, there were few responses and traffic on *philweb* had virtually stopped when (in September 1997) all of a sudden the list exploded.

Two or three philosophy professors, several (graduate) students and some extra-academic participants had locked into intensive discussions and were producing considerable output on issues as diverse as "Realism and Anti-realism", "Consciousness", "Colours and Sounds", "Goethe" and "Bombing Iraq". This was not, I hasten to add, Usenet stuff, but more often than not carefully developed arguments taking note of other people's view, civil and

[14] http://www.rzuser.uni-heidelberg.de/ dkoehler/VirtualLibrary/14.de.htm.
[15] http://www.thur.de/home/annette.

enterprising at the same time. The spirit of the list can probably be best compared to that of "Philosophy and Literature", a list run at the University of Texas. But *philweb* had negligible institutional support and no pre-set agenda to begin with.

There is a certain irony in the fact that Georg Sommer, the spokesman of *philweb*, had not envisaged this type of philosophical discussion and had, in fact, withdrawn from the list at the time it was more or less re-invented in a new format. It took some administrative lacunae for the participants to realize that the list's owner was not even a member of the list any more. He had to be re-invited to give his opinion on recent developments. An understanding was quickly reached: list ownership passed to two of the participants and it was generally agreed to continue the list as a forum of prolonged philosophical brainstorming.

Free electronic discourse follows its own somewhat unpredictable laws and my guess is that *philweb* will not be able to maintain the impressive quality it had reached at the beginning of 1998. In this instance, as in the case of *give-l*, a surprising amount of cognitive energy was in evidence, strangely fused with excitement concerning technologies conveniently supplied by a computer lab. For an initial stretch of time philosophical activity, generously shared among the group, is oblivious to doctrines, curricula and grades. *Philweb*'s success will quite possibly be short-lived, but what kind of attitude is at work in such predictions? Mailing lists are, after all, neither hard-cover publications nor traditional social structures. The new kids articulating themselves on *philweb* should not be submitted to a set of criteria taken from quite different institutionalised settings. They will probably fail to get credits for their efforts, but their experiments in establishing a transitory, digitally distributed verbal agora cannot fail to affect the future of philosophical scholarship.

The feasibility of quasi-instantaneous, two-way global data-transfer in a public medium evokes, as all of you know, hopes of increasing democratic participation among citizens and within various organisations.[16] As this miniature *Bildungsroman* draws to a close, one of its lessons is that, unfortunately, at this level of generality the desirable effects of each participant having an equal voice and basically similar chances to contribute to a common goal can not be separated from the nightmare of computer-mediated witch-hunts. Involvement in mailing lists similarly suggests that their procedural advantages, compared to traditional communication, can be a dubious blessing, provoking exalted expectations and impeding a sober analysis of how the new media might affect the Humanities. I have specified a more restricted terrain to

[16] Recent contributions to this topic can be found in Holmes (1997). Cf http://www.lcl.cmu.edu/CAAE/Home/Forum/report.html. See also http://www.univie.ac.at/philosophie/bureau/democracy.htm and my paper "Could Democracy be a Unicorn?" in Monist (1997), available on-line at http://hhobel.phl.univie.ac.at/mii.

begin to answer the question of the Internet's implications for philosophy. Scholarly work is, on the other hand, fairly rigidly determined by professional standards while, on the other hand, often characterised by a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect. Even though both *give-l* and *philweb* shared some of these qualities this was not their most important contribution to the issue at hand.

By shifting the ground from the classical manipulation of texts towards instantaneous textual publicity people writing on these lists changed some basic rules of literacy. Rather than being presented in curricular modules philosophy could be seen as a continuous group- activity, permeating the week in between classes, blending local settings and external interventions. Rather than following given institutional patterns such activities could arise (and disappear) spontaneously, un-coerced by efficiency testing and financial constraints. Such lists, to summarise, produce a new genre: semi- scholarly on-the-spot writing, transmissible across the planet. I did not, in this talk, present examples of how serious (or how annoying) electronic philosophical discussion can get at close view. Suffice it to say that the list's archives have been indexed by the big search engines and that the log-files show considerable interest in many of the issues discussed over the years. This is another prospect of things to come: continuous digital availability of day-to-day discourse. (I'll pass judgement of whether this is a good thing or a nuisance.)

None of this will change the merits of a single philosophical argument, but it might well contribute to shift the ground on which traditional philosophy itself rests. General principles and universal rules have always been prominent concerns for philosophers, even while their means of communication were quite specific: books, papers, lectures. This discursive frame has not been seriously challenged by the advent of mass media and one-way broadcasting. Neither the telephone nor TV has had any tangible impact on the way philosophy is done. There is a chance that the constitution of a permanent, communicative, electronic space and the development of virtual philosophical communities within this space will be of greater importance. Exchanging texts and arguments on an equal footing is, after all, an elementary philosophical gesture which will be heavily affected by the possibilities opened up by the Internet.

I have not hidden my ambivalence concerning promises of a digital wonderland and reviewing the dynamics of the mailing lists I have been talking about the reasons for a skeptical attitude emerge more clearly. Some features of the new discursive forms are incompatible with the current educational system. Expecting strictly focused discussion within a 24-hours show is bound to prove disappointing. There is, on the other hand, no way to beat mailing lists when it comes to address a world-wide audience and (albeit in a rather specific sense) implement the principles of universality often discussed in philosophical treatises. Theoretical activities have, all of a sudden, become available within the framework of a mass medium and it is far from clear how this encounter is

going to work out. The net is not the most natural habitat for German-language philosophers. It is, in fact, yet undecided who its typical inhabitants will turn out to be. In the meantime most are new kids, sporadically at unease and frequently sounding strange.

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