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TRANSFORMING DIALOGUE: WEB LAB'S EXPLORATIONS AT THE FRONTIERS OF ONLINE COMMUNITY

AN EVALUATION REPORT FOR WEB LAB
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
EVALUATION OVERVIEW	3
CYBER-SPACE AS CONTEXT	5
OVERVIEW: REALITY CHECK AND AMERICAN LOVE STORIES	7
How the Small Group Dialogue Model Works	7
Steps to Participation	7
Other Elements of Web Lab's Technique	8
Monitors (8); Newsletters (8); Featured Posts (8); Stories (8); Soapbox (9); Help (9); Messages from Web Lab (9)	
Web Lab's Dialogue Group Philosophy	10
Multiple Small Groups	10
Passive Monitoring	13
Portrait of a Dialogue	13
Many Reasons to Talk (14); Choosing Identities (14); Testing the Boundaries (15); Apparent and Political Identities (17); The Core Group Forms (18); A Bone to Pick (20); Support and Sharing (21)	
Comparing Reality Check and American Love Stories	22
Levels of Active Participation	23
Narrow Topic (23); Table One: Comparison of Participation in Reality Check and American Love Stories (24); TV Series Linkage (25); Technical Issues (26)	
Gender	28
Race and Ethnicity	29
Age, Education, Income, and Geography	30
Age (30); Education (31); Income (32); Geography (33)	
HOW PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED THE DIALOGUES	33

HOW PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED THE DIALOGUES	33
Participants' Evaluation of the Projects	33
How and How Much Did Participants Engage with the Dialogues?	33
Reading (34); Posting (35)	
How Did Participation Affect Thinking?	37
Did Participants Find the Dialogues Satisfying?	38
Dialogue Framework and Parameters	40
Group Size	40
Group Moderation or Facilitation	41
Length of Dialogue	45
 WHAT CAN THE WEB LAB EXPERIMENTS TELL US ABOUT THE FUTURE OF ONLINE DIALOGUE? ..	 47
The Need for Common Ground in Cyber-space	47
The Online Equivalent of Deep Space Nine	48
The Right Metaphor	49
Building the Future of Online Dialogue	51
The Need for a Center	52
E-commerce and E-culture	53

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is huge, amorphous, expanding, yet embryonic, like a newborn giant whose character is not yet evident. The sheer volume of information overwhelms human capabilities. No individual can grasp all the Internet encompasses: its diversity beggars imagination, incorporating practically every known language and code, along with a vast, constantly proliferating, perpetually mutating universe of sound, gesture, and image. Any prognostication about cyber-space necessarily relies on partial data; most predictions extrapolate from very little evidence indeed.

This report is based on evaluations of two experiments in online dialogue conducted by Web Lab, a nonprofit organization dedicated to innovative uses of the World Wide Web to serve the public interest. "Reality Check" was a Web-based, computer-mediated asynchronous dialogue forum held from November 1998 to March 1999, focused on the impeachment controversy surrounding President Clinton. "American Love Stories" was a further iteration stimulated by the PBS documentary series "An American Love Story," a ten-hour portrait of an interracial family. The forum was conducted in September and October of 1999, around the time the series was broadcast.

While these two experiments in dialogue constitute only a tiny fraction of the Web's aggregate activity, they are suggestive of certain larger potentials outlined in this report: the Internet as a training-ground for civil discourse and a much-needed forum for discussion of public issues. Merely staking out a space for online dialogue does no more to ensure the quality of participant experience or output than building a town square does to guarantee it will be used for convivial pursuits rather than riots. To function like a civil society, the virtual frontier requires a social compact. Web Lab's core innovation — they call their model the "Small Group Dialogue" — has been to identify the weaknesses of the Internet as a site for substantive civil discourse, then use software design and social imagination to correct them. In place of the characteristic nameless bedlam of the wide-open Web, Web Lab has sought to create human-scale conversations with the potential to equal or surpass face-to-face dialogue.

Half a millennium ago, Shakespeare wrote that "The Devil can cite scripture to his purpose," expressing the timeless truth that impressive evidence may be mustered for almost any proposition. The jury is still out on online dialogue — using the Internet as a means of collegial communication and community-building — but there is already ample evidence to justify almost any verdict. Whether crafting a paean (the liberating power of cyber-space, enabling true world citizenship in a borderless republic of ideas, *etc.*) or composing a screed (Internet culture propagates powerlessness, tethering citizens to computers to consummate unneeded purchases and imaginary sex, *etc.*), it is easy to locate volumes of supporting testimony.

Will the baby take after its utopian forebears? John Perry Barlow's famous "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" of 1996 found the family resemblance unmistakable: "We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force or station of birth... We will create a civilization of Mind in Cyberspace."

Or will the baby favor its mercantile relations? When we entered the key words "Internet profits" into Alta Vista (an Internet search engine) specifying materials from the last year only, 2,582 documents came up. Paging through the first fifty induced a sensation of *deja vu*, as virtually all were indistinguishable from number thirteen <<http://www.largeincome.com>>, touting a video series with testimonials from satisfied customers: "I just completed watching your recently produced Internet tape series 'Jealously Guarded Secrets To Internet Profits' and all I can say is: this has to be the most comprehensive collection of useful Internet marketing

information available today at any price!" The exceptions were feature stories from *USA Today* and other publications highlighting the mass quantities of wealth to be made selling sex on the Web.

Though Internet commerce peppers cyberspace with the detritus of appetite for easy money, it is inarguably commercial interests that have been driving innovation in new media. The Internet which has thus been produced embodies the reconciliation of opposites: venal hucksterism coexists with high-minded altruism, separated only by the click of a computer mouse. It enables people whose material lives would otherwise never intersect to come together, as the Web Lab dialogues have demonstrated; and it serves just as often to scoop up people of common (often arcane) interests from every corner of the globe, piling them into a single virtual conversation-pit. The Internet has already played a role in maintaining a sense of community in diaspora, as demonstrated, for example, in Daniel Miller's and Don Slater's treatment of the Internet in sustaining Trinidadian cultural identities in *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach* (published July 2000 in London by Berg). The flow of information via state and corporate mass media is from the center — official sources, broadcast central, authoritative voices — to the margins. The Internet, with its multidirectional conversations and contested truths, stands in marked contrast.

As a medium of communication, the Internet holds tremendous democratic potential. It has already provided a form of world citizenship (in the currency of attention, respect, and support) to people who have been stripped of civil power in their real-world homes. Insurgent groups such as Chinese dissidents and the Zapatistas have made extremely sophisticated use of the World Wide Web to tell the world their story. To pick one example from dozens of Zapatista sites (accessible in Spanish, English, and more rarely, French) the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* Web site <<http://www.ezln.org>> had been accessed more than 800,000 times as of May 2000.

The Web Lab dialogues point to yet another sort of citizenship: uncoerced political and social discourse taking place in protected public cyber-space can fill the void left by the decline of the commons — the town hall, the corner store, the public square — in the material world. What Web Lab's experiments suggest must be further refined, developed, and attempted on a larger scale in order to pass from promising hypothesis to practical reality.

Political scientist Robert Putnam, best-known for his critique of declining civic engagement and its social consequences (*Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), is one of legions of social scientists and critics wondering whether the Internet can succeed where other social structures have been eroded. He has adopted a posture of uneasy optimism: "I am worried that I will end up in the long sweep of history having written a book about disconnection at the very moment that technology was changing the equation."¹

The salient question is whether the Web's commercial potential — symbolized by persistent reports of mammoth financial losses cheerfully borne by retailers such as Amazon.com in the interests of even larger profits to come — will push democratic dialogue out of the picture, following the model of commercial broadcasting. Once asked, it gives rise to an even more urgent question: what can be done to prevent this?

1 "Lonely Bowlers, Unite: Mend the Social Fabric," *The New York Times*, 6 May 2000, page A16.

EVALUATION OVERVIEW

This report is based on two experiences in online dialogue, successive iterations of a model developed by Web Lab:

REALITY CHECK (RC). The RC experiment involved fifteen online discussion groups focused on the controversy surrounding the impeachment of President Clinton. On average, fifty-one individuals were assigned to each group, with a mean of thirty-three posting messages to their groups' dialogues. In total, 765 people registered for the dialogues, of whom 504 posted, contributing 12,685 different messages in all. Each dialogue group lasted at least four weeks, averaging forty-three days of active posting and nineteen messages a day; the longest continued for a total of fourteen weeks. The first group was launched in November 1998; the last concluded in March 1999.

AMERICAN LOVE STORIES DIALOGUES (ALS). The ALS experiment featured twenty-four online dialogue groups focusing primarily on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television series "An American Love Story" and on the topics it treated, mainly cross-cultural relationships, racism, and ethnic identity. On average, fifty-eight individuals were assigned to each group, twenty-eight of these posting messages to their groups' dialogues. In total, 1,557 people registered (due to a software problem, only 1,387 were actually assigned to dialogue groups), of whom 676 posted 5,012 messages in all. Each dialogue group lasted three weeks (averaging ten messages per day), launching in mid-September and concluding in early October 1999.

Evaluative information on RC and ALS was collected in several ways:

- The written record of the development of Web Lab's dialogue model was reviewed, including reports on earlier experiments, plans and proposals for RC and ALS, Web site archives, press clips, and correspondence among Web Lab's staff, collaborators, monitors, and dialogue participants. This was supplemented by extensive discussion with Marc Weiss, Web Lab's founder and Executive Producer, and with Supervising Producer Barry Joseph.
- Each individual registering for a dialogue group completed an online questionnaire including demographic information as well as optional questions on Internet use and on the individual's relationship to the issues under discussion via each experiment.
- Following the end of each dialogue experiment, participants were asked to complete an online survey providing evaluative responses and offering ideas for future improvements to Web Lab's dialogue model. Just under one-quarter — 176 of the 765 group members — completed RC surveys; 438 of the 1,387 ALS group members (31.6%) completed surveys.
- Digests of each small group's messages were reviewed, with several groups selected by the evaluators for deeper review.
- Reports by Web Lab staff members and monitors engaged for each dialogue experiment were reviewed. Web Lab staff members and ALS monitors were also asked to complete questionnaires and engage in confidential telephone interviews, and most complied.
- Confidential telephone interviews were also conducted with a selection of dialogue participants and several Internet communications experts.

An evaluation of RC was conducted by Steven M. Schneider (Professor of Political Science, SUNY Institute of Technology, Utica/Rome, New York). *Changing the Nature of Online Communication: An Evaluation of RealityCheck.com* was published in December 1999. Professor Schneider's report stresses content analysis of the dialogues as well as analysis of

participants' political behavior and consumption of political news, subjects specific to the RC dialogue project. He also designed the surveys used to gather evaluative information from RC participants; the survey used with ALS participants was a slightly modified version of the RC survey. All RC data cited in the present report was derived from Professor Schneider's study.

Otherwise unattributed quotations throughout this document are taken from confidential interviews and written communications with dialogue participants, Web Lab monitors and staff, and other participants in this evaluation. Quotations are used verbatim, with one exception: we have removed names and other identifiers to protect participants' anonymity. Spelling has been corrected wherever mistakes could lead to misinterpretation.

We are grateful to Web Lab staff, monitors, and dialogue participants for their assistance, and to Rob Reuss and Elena Larsen, who assisted in the collation and analysis of data on the dialogues.

CYBER-SPACE AS CONTEXT

Any evaluation worth its salt situates its object within a context: the context for this evaluation is change. Although people tend to think of cyber-space as a place, it actually comprises a vast number of communicating electronic pathways and thoroughfares, enabling constant movement without leading to a central destination. The information superhighway is always under construction, rendering road-maps almost instantly obsolescent.

According to a report released in May 2000 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, "on an average day, 55 million Americans are online."² Ninety million are capable of going online; this amounts to one-third of the total U.S. population, up from 23% in 1996. Studies of information on the World Wide Web by the NEC Research Institute reveal that as of February 1999, "the publicly indexable Web contains an estimated 800 million pages"³; the same researchers' December 1997 study had estimated 320 million pages. They also estimated that these Web sites are supported by 2.8 million servers (many of which host multiple sites). Eighty-three percent of these servers (about 2.3 million) contain commercial content; by comparison, pornography is available on fewer than 2% of servers, and religious material on fewer than 1%.

As late as 1994, the Internet retained an ardently anti-commercial stance, reflecting its roots in military, scientific and academic communities; but this emphasis was swiftly reversed in the following year. In today's overwhelmingly commercial cyber-universe, public-interest activity has a foothold, but not much more than that. Protected public space is roughly equivalent to the incidence of public service announcements on commercial television, or the square footage designated for religious and advocacy groups in major airports and shopping malls. But the desire to expand this territory is passionate. Indeed, having observed the extreme minority position to which the public interest has been relegated in other environments, advocates of civil discourse on the Internet are determined to avoid the same fate. Some, like this director of another online dialogue site, see signs of hope:

As soon as this became an environment of interest to commercial interests, community became ghettoized.... The medium was born as a community act — to share interests and ideas where time, geography, the lack of resources prevented other ways of meeting. But the Web just became a lot of downloading. It's been only in the last year that the momentum of the Web as being a place for community has begun to reemerge. Those who believe in pure community saw it as being hijacked by market forces; but as the Web becomes a more populated space, as it becomes more ubiquitous, as it becomes a presence in people's lives that they can use as they will.... You can be a consumer as well as a contributor, a member, not just a viewer.

Web Lab was founded in 1997 by Marc Weiss, creator of the public television independent documentary series "P.O.V." Beginning in 1994, Weiss had devised experimental online dialogues for viewers of the series. One project in particular — the Web site *Regarding Vietnam: Stories Since the War* <www.pbs.org/pov/stories> — suggested the potential of this new medium to engage ordinary citizens in surprisingly intimate and urgent conversation at a

² *The Internet Life Report*, <www.pewinternet.org>, The Pew Internet & American Life Project, Washington, DC.

³ Steve Lawrence and C. Lee Giles, "Accessibility of Information on the Web," *Nature*, Vol. 400, 8 July 1999, pp. 107-109.

distance, in this case helping participants come to terms with the impact of the war years and enter into virtual communication toward healing and reconciliation. In founding Web Lab, he set his sights on several ambitious aims, among them:

- To nurture and build a “community of practice” for people committed to the social uses of the Web; to take a leadership role in sharing ideas and creating ways to develop a body of exemplary work; and to establish a presence for this kind of work and this kind of thinking;
- To develop ways of evaluating and learning from the most innovative work being done, and to ensure that that information is widely disseminated through the Internet and by other means;
- To build support among opinion leaders, industry leaders and the general public for the notion that our society needs a vigorous “public sector” on the Web which should be nurtured, supported, and protected...⁴

Building on experience from the early online discussions stimulated by “P.O.V.” broadcasts, Web Lab has conducted a series of online group dialogues designed to avoid the pitfalls and weaknesses of typical computer bulletin-boards: the “drive-by” postings encouraged by the Internet’s easy anonymity and fluid boundaries; the assertion of polarized positions where the give-and-take of civil discourse would have more social value; and the pandering to appetites for quick sensation rather than the creation of a real forum.

Web Lab’s first experiment in restructuring online dialogue was “P.O.V. Salon,” a series of small group dialogues launched at the end of May 1998, shortly before the “P.O.V.” series’ 1998 broadcast premiere; they ended in mid-October of that year, four weeks after the final broadcast of the season. By this time, there had been a great many attempts at online conversation, but very few bulletin boards could claim to be real dialogues, let alone sustained, substantive discussions. Web Lab’s nascent approach suggested a replicable model that could support an evolving exchange, one more likely to probe the issues and to satisfy the participants: the nine dialogue groups (then called “salons”) comprised a total of 253 members and focused on the challenging topics raised by that season’s broadcasts — from the politics of tobacco farming to murderers who target gay men, from the movement for disability rights to the sex industry of Southeast Asia. The basic parameters and approach of Web Lab’s small group dialogue model was set in place through the “P.O.V. Salon” experience.

“Reality Check” and “ALS Dialogues,” the subjects of this report, were the second and third iterations of the model and are the two largest dialogue experiments Web Lab has undertaken to date.

⁴ From the “Web Lab Three Year Plan,” June 1998.

OVERVIEW: REALITY CHECK AND AMERICAN LOVE STORIES

HOW THE SMALL GROUP DIALOGUE MODEL WORKS

This section walks the reader through the process of taking part in a small group dialogue, as a way to ground subsequent discussions of Web Lab's model in its two most recent iterations. Although RC and ALS each contained certain unique features, the underlying process was similar, as outlined below. Each element of the process has been guided by Web Lab's "Dialogue Philosophy," summarized in the following section.

STEPS TO PARTICIPATION

Both Reality Check (RC) and American Love Stories (ALS) used the same basic model of online dialogue introduced with "P.O.V. Salon." Participants went through the following steps:

- (1) **Potential participants learned about the dialogue opportunity** in a variety of ways: through an announcement on public television, through a Web Lab newsletter, by browsing PBS's Web site or Web Lab's own site, through news coverage, or through friends. Nearly 73% of ALS participants reporting how they heard about the site said it was through watching a broadcast of "An American Love Story."
- (2) **In the dialogue area of each site, potential participants found** information on the goals and methods of the dialogues and encouragement to register.
- (3) **Each participant completed at least the required parts of an online registration form**, providing contact information and specifying gender. Participants were also required to specify a screen name and password, and to write a short descriptive biography that would be sent to others assigned to the same dialogue group, and would also be linked to messages they posted to their groups. Additional optional questions included age, race/ethnicity, marital status, household income, educational level, sexual orientation, Internet usage, how participants heard of the site, and questions specific to each dialogue (*i.e.*, about cross-cultural relationships for ALS, about patterns of news consumption for RC).
- (4) **Registrations were compiled until there were enough on hand to fill one or more groups, when Web Lab's software assigned registrants to groups, maximizing geographic and gender diversity.** In RC, there was only one type of group. In ALS, registrants were able to choose among three types of discussion groups: (1) there were three groups for those 25 years of age and under ("25 and Under Groups"); (2) ten groups were created for those who wished to discuss bridging differences in relationships ("Relationship Groups"); and (3) eleven groups were created for those who wished to discuss the broadcast of "An American Love Story" ("TV Series Groups").
- (5) **Registrants were sent group assignments and welcome messages** headlined "Your new Dialogue Group has officially opened!" Welcome messages suggested icebreaker questions, provided group bios, and offered information on where to go for help should questions arise, making it clear that group participants were responsible for defining their own discussions.
- (6) **As soon as anyone posted a message to the group, the group's discussion became available for public reading.** From the group's opening until the end of the dialogue, **registrants could visit their groups at any hour of the day or night** by logging onto a direct private entrance, entering a screen name and password, and proceeding to read or post, as they wished.

- (7) A few days before the scheduled closing date of each dialogue, **registrants were sent a reminder message** thanking them for their participation, suggesting closing topics, alerting them to forthcoming requests for evaluative feedback, and inviting them to stay in touch with Web Lab.
- (8) On the appointed day for each group, **the dialogue was closed**, but archived for public reading. Depending on the level of interest in going forward, registrants were provided various forms of assistance and encouragement in continuing their discussions. RC group members were given an opportunity to vote to extend the duration of their groups in the Web Lab environment; when a sufficient number of members concurred, their dialogue group was extended, mostly for another 30 days. The members of some ALS groups exchanged e-mail addresses and formed their own listserv groups (email-based discussions) on the OneList hosting service. For the scattered members of ALS groups who wished to remain in communication, Web Lab set up an omnibus listserv to which any ALS registrant could subscribe.

OTHER ELEMENTS OF WEB LAB'S TECHNIQUE

During their dialogue experience, participants also received other forms of communication, encouragement, and support from Web Lab.

Monitors. Monitors were the men and women "behind the curtain" in these dialogues. Dialogue participants knew they were being monitored, but generally not by whom. Invisible to dialogue participants, monitors were relied upon by Web Lab staff for reports on group activity, alerts about problems developing in groups, and "featured posts" (see below). For RC, one monitor was retained for the entire experiment, his efforts supplemented by a half-dozen volunteers who monitored and reported on their own groups. For ALS, six monitors were used, each one tracking and reporting on several dialogue groups. Reports (due "every four or five days") included summaries of active threads, new threads, and new posts, highlighting the tone of each dialogue and describing any notable exchanges (such as problematic messages handled by group members).

Newsletters. Weekly e-mail newsletters were a feature of both RC and ALS. A typical edition included helpful hints about how to focus the discussion, suggested topics gleaned from active discussions, a list of "featured posts" (see next paragraph), and statistics on the active dialogue groups to date (*e.g.*, how many members, how many threads and messages, *etc.*).

Featured Posts. Especially interesting or stimulating exchanges from dialogue groups were posted in a prominent public area of the Web site. Monitors reviewed messages posted by their assigned groups, forwarding recommendations of interesting exchanges to a "featured posts editor," in each case noting the number of the group, the threads, and the posts themselves. From this assortment, the editor made a choice, selecting messages perceived as humorous, inspiring, or models for effective dialogue. Web Lab's welcome message to ALS participants included this idea:

[Y]ou might want to visit the Featured Posts section, to learn what other groups are discussing.

In RC, featured posts ranged from "How can a feminist support Bill Clinton?" to "Does God exist?"; in ALS, from "Nourishing your children's interracial identity" to "Who made me spokeswoman for my race?"

Stories. Before the ALS site launched, Web Lab enlisted dozens of other organizations and Web sites — from "About.com. Gay & Lesbian Issues" to "Quiet Mountain-Tibetan Buddhist

Resource” — in soliciting love stories from couples who’d crossed boundaries in coming together. The ALS site featured eighty such stories, dealing with race, disability, age, national origin, religion, gender, and other differences. In addition to making a large statement about the complexity and challenges of cross-cultural relationships, it was hoped the stories would help to stimulate the dialogues. Registrants’ welcome message from Web Lab featured this suggestion:

You might want to read a few stories in the Stories section of the site, to get some ideas for issues you might want to discuss.

RC did not feature stories, but offered site visitors the opportunity to contribute “Open Letters” to political figures, commentators, or the American public, 53 of which were highlighted at the site.

Soapbox. Another aspect of the ALS site was the Soapbox, a place to post quick comments for anyone to read and reply. Nearly 200 separate Soapbox topics were opened, some with only one post (*e.g.*, “Ignore #93 (Basic Racebaiting 101”) and others with dozens (*e.g.*, “Left-wing PBS”).

The Soapbox attracted some ALS group participants who were impatient with their groups’ measured debate, along with others who were not part of any group, many of whom used the opportunity to post messages on their favorite hobby-horses. For example, there were tremendously heated political exchanges on Cuba that had no particular tie to “An American Love Story” or the ALS Dialogues. Because messages to the Soapbox were posted instantly, groups of people sometimes used it as a social chat room: there are sequences of no-content chat (“I’m going to sleep now”) interspersed with comments on the ALS Web site throughout the latter half of the 377 posts to the first Soapbox topic, “Comments on this site.”

The Soapbox had some small effect on dialogues, when participants in small group dialogues read vituperative postings and reported on them within their own groups, often as a means of commending and reinforcing their groups’ civility in contrast to the Soapbox. When contributing members of dialogue groups were surveyed at the close of ALS, 139 of them (20.5%) said that they had posted a message to the Soapbox at least once; 43 said they had done so more than once.

When the Soapbox was ended in late November, more than a month after the close of dialogue groups, Web Lab set up an alternative Soapbox on OneList: fewer than a hundred messages were posted before it petered out in February 2000.

RC had no Soapbox.

Help. Participants were given a direct e-mail address to reach Barry Joseph and Laura Kertz, Web Lab staffers listed as dialogue “facilitators.” People wrote in with comments on the site, concerns about the Soapbox, technical glitches they’d encountered in registering or attempting to enter their groups, responses to the newsletter — a full range of topics. There was also a FAQ page for each dialogue, answering commonly asked questions.

Messages from Web Lab. Finally, participants received occasional encouraging messages from Web Lab staff. Some were follow-ups to earlier messages that may have gone astray (*e.g.*, a message to dialogue groups noting “occasional difficulties with our email system,” and attempting “to make sure you received the email earlier in the day notifying you that your group has opened”). Other messages attempted to jump-start inactive groups (*e.g.*, a message sent a week or so into several groups whose posting had been especially light, expressing concern “that there’s been very little activity over the last few days and we’d like to find out if there’s anything we can do to get people re-engaged”).

WEB LAB'S DIALOGUE GROUP PHILOSOPHY

Each element in the dialogue process is grounded in Web Lab's stated philosophy, which asserts an idealistic stance rooted in commitment to democratic discourse. This is from the "Dialogue Group Philosophy" posted at the ALS site:

We believe that people with divergent backgrounds and beliefs — given the time and space to connect in a safe environment — will find ways to explore their differences and learn from each other, emerging with a deeper understanding of themselves and the world.

Web Lab has always been interested in generating dialogues across differences and equally concerned about the scarcity of effective models for enabling such dialogues. Although we've had some success in the past, we've never been able to develop a model which was clearly reproducible.

So a year ago we analyzed what we saw occurring on the Web and decided to try experimenting against the grain.

When looking at the standard practices in online asynchronous dialogue (often called "bulletin boards"), we noticed that although Web-based discussions offer participants the ability to connect with each other — one of the most powerful things any technology can do — they often create a collection of people with no sense of accountability who leave a series of drive-by postings, rather than contribute to a dialogue or a community. Rather than expecting and planning for the best from participants, most approaches seem more concerned about preventing the worst and, as a result, end up reproducing the very problems they aim to avoid.

MULTIPLE SMALL GROUPS

Anyone with a computer capable of Web-browsing can join any of thousands of online discussions at any time. While sustained discussion can sometimes be achieved in these fluid environments, their half-life tends to be very brief. With the constant entrance and exit of members, and hundreds (or even thousands) of people posting messages, it is difficult to establish any sense of belonging to counterbalance the essential anonymity of the Internet. In such environments, people tend to post one or two messages and never return, or treat the space more like a bulletin board — a place to make statements and take positions — rather than engage in give-and-take.

To counter these effects, Web Lab conceived a means of creating small dialogue groups. People who want to participate are asked to register, creating a "screen name" and password, providing an email address, some basic information about themselves, and a short self-description. Web Lab's custom-written software then assigns a relatively small number of people to a newly created dialogue group. All members of each new group are sent two email messages, the first telling them that their group has been formed and providing them with a URL where the discussion will take place, the second listing all the members of the group along with their bios.

Although any group's dialogues can be read by anyone, only the members of a group can post messages or create new topics. Once a group is formed, no new participants can join. Instead, new registrants enter a queue or assignment pool and then are assigned to new groups. In this way,

thousands of people can participate, but each person belongs a group of manageable size where it is possible to get to know other members quickly and where participants are encouraged to feel a much greater sense of responsibility for the success or failure of their groups.

From the ALS "Dialogue Group Philosophy" page:

- Instead of a dialogue which is so large members can't keep track of each other and know who's there, the Web Lab Dialogues organize groups that are small enough that members can actually tell who isn't there.

RC groups averaged fifty-one registrants, thirty-three (65%) of whom contributed messages. ALS groups averaged fifty-eight members, twenty-eight (48%) of whom contributed messages.

REDUCED ANONYMITY

For many people, one of the attractions of cyber-space is the fluidity of identity, which allows one to go online in multiple personae. Though masquerade can be fun-and-games, the implications are sinister enough to have already spawned a sometimes comical, often disturbing fictional sub-genre: typical plotlines feature a man who infiltrates a women-only discussion in female cyber-disguise; or a con-artist who steals identities for profit. Potential consequences may not be so dire in the context of an online issue dialogue as in a social chat-room, but as the following passage from the ALS "Dialogue Group Philosophy" explains, for Web Lab, reducing anonymity is critical to effective discussion:

- Instead of a dialogue in which anonymity is treated as if it were as sacred as the First Amendment, the Web Lab Dialogues lower the level of anonymity to raise the level of accountability, while still preserving a level of safety and trust that online anonymity can generate.

Web Lab's solution is to allow dialogue group members to use any screen name they wish, but to require them to post a short biography that is shared with fellow group members. ALS's "Dialogue Group Philosophy" exhorted participants to be frank, rather than constructing a false identity:

A member can decide how anonymous he or she wants to be, choosing whether to use his/her real name or a screen name, and how much to disclose when writing a short bio and participating in the discussions. But, on the theory that our perspectives are shaped by our backgrounds, participants are encouraged to ground their discussion in what they've learned through personal experience.

Often, responding to Web Lab's encouragement, group members posted even more information about themselves once their groups were launched. ALS participants' welcome message included this text:

We've found that self-introductions are *critical* in getting a group off to a good start. Otherwise you're talking to a bunch of strangers! Please create a topic called Introduction (or add to it if someone else in your group has already created it). Introduce yourself: what kinds of experiences have shaped who you are today? And write a little about what you hope will happen in the dialogue.

Many group members responded by expanding upon their biographic information in the "Introduction" thread. For instance, here is a typical group member's bio entered upon registration:

30something, educated, biracial female, born and reared the USA. Lived in different parts of the country.

... and as amplified in her introduction:

I am a 30something American, born and reared in the USA. My parents come from two different cultures. Dad is from the deep South, he's white. Mom is Japanese born, but moved here in the 60's and is very much bicultural (American and Japanese.) (They divorced when I was little.)

Mom was our primary influence and always told me to accept who I was. I faced racism from white kids and black kids when I lived in the South. People called me the usual slurs for Asians. Mom would always tell us those were ignorant people and not to lower ourselves by calling them names back, or getting into fights. Of course I was the only one of the three girls in my family who couldn't take that and would get into a scuffle now and then. Funny enough, after a while, we kids would get past that and play kickball together like racism didn't exist.

PREDETERMINED, FIXED ENDING DATE

Most online discussion groups have no fixed end-point. Cyber-space is littered with moribund listservs. Even four discussion groups created by enthusiastic veterans of the ALS dialogues ran out of steam before long. We visited the former OneList Web site (now subsumed by eGroups) and found their status as of May 2000 was as follows:

- a group extending the Soapbox (the most recent message posted was in February 2000);
- a group started by members of an ALS small group dialogue (ten messages were posted in May 2000, down from a high of 474 in October 1999, and up from a total of two messages posted from February through April 2000);
- a group created by Web Lab to provide a discussion space for ALS Dialogues veterans (a single message was posted in April 2000, down from a high of 755 in October 1999, when it was created); and
- a continuation of one ALS Relationship Group (eight messages were posted in May 2000, down from a high of 177 in October 1999).

Only the Soapbox group's archives are public, so we cannot know whether recent messages in other groups have been of the "where is everybody?" variety or if a discussion is resuming in any of the groups with lingering activity.

In recognition of this problem, Web Lab participants were explicitly invited to join in a limited-term discussion with a fixed end-point. From the "Dialogue Group Philosophy" page of the ALS site:

- Instead of a dialogue in which participants experience different start and end points, so people are constantly arriving and leaving as if through a revolving door, participants in a Web Lab Dialogue Group start together and come to closure together.

RC groups were planned to last four weeks, but groups were given the option of extending their duration if interest was high enough; the longest-lived group lasted fourteen weeks, from 12 November 1998 to 18 February 1999. ALS groups all lasted three weeks, although as noted earlier, some transferred their dialogue for an additional time to another online environment.

PASSIVE MONITORING

Web Lab's approach to group moderation distinguishes its projects from most online dialogues, which are typically either moderated (all messages require a designated moderator's approval) or unmoderated (participants create and enforce any structure or limitations themselves).

Here's how Web Lab describes its middle-way position on group moderation on the "Dialogue Group Philosophy" page of the ALS site:

- Instead of dialogues with moderators or facilitators driving the dialogue and defining what's appropriate for discussion, the Web Lab Dialogues take the administrators out of the dialogue and let each group take ownership over their own conversation, allowing group dynamics to let natural leaders emerge and encouraging self-moderated groups.

In both RC and ALS, registrants were informed that their groups were being observed, but that they should not expect intervention. From ALS registrants' welcome message:

Your dialogue group will have a monitor — a [*sic*] observer — who will help watch for technical glitches, spot interesting dialogues to highlight in the Featured Posts section, or bring important issues you ask us to address to our attention. Under no circumstances will a monitor "police" a dialogue or become involved in the discussion.

...From time to time we might create private threads that only members in your group can read if we want to ask your advice about something. Also remember that we reserve the option to remove anyone from their group if they repeatedly refuse to follow the broad guidelines they agreed to while registering.

PORTRAIT OF A DIALOGUE

Each small group dialogue is unique, its character determined by the participants, making it impossible to portray a "typical" group. But it is feasible to illustrate salient features of the model — such as the intricate group dynamics that develop within most dialogues — by examining almost any group.

We have chosen ALS's Relationship Group 3 as the subject of this portrait. With sixty-three members assigned — five more than the overall ALS average — RG 3 was the most active dialogue group: a total of 522 messages were posted by group members between 14 September and 5 October 1999. Thirty of the sixty-three members actually posted messages, right in line with the overall average of 49%. Posters contributed an average of 17.4 messages each, making them, at more than twice the overall average, the most prolific contributors in ALS. RG 3's top three posters contributed 40.4% of its total messages, and its top ten posters contributed 77.4% of the total.

In many respects, RG 3's demographics were similar to ALS's as a whole (see Table One on page 24): for example, 74.6% were women; 53.5% had household incomes of \$35,-75,000. Race diverged slightly more from the average: 29.6% were African-American (compared to 31.7% overall); and 51.9% were white (46.7% for ALS overall). Educational attainment was higher than average: 70% had at least a college degree (as opposed to 60% of ALS participants overall). And members of RG 3 were both younger and older than average: 27% were under 30;

54% in the 30-50 group; and 18%, over 50 (in contrast with 23%, 62%, and 15% for ALS as a whole).

MANY REASONS TO TALK

RG 3 started off with a lot of energy. Ten members posted the first day to a thread entitled “Let's start with who we are and why we're here...” Two group members — Crystal (“*I am a woman who loves life and I cherish friends, family, people, and my spirituality... My 3 precious children are now grown and away from home...*”) and Sebastian (“*I am a 29 year-old single African-American male from Birmingham, Alabama. I am college educated working on a masters degree.*”) — quickly distinguished themselves by posting multiple messages to this thread. Crystal’s long message included this tidy summary of her own wishes for the group:

- 1. To share information and feelings, gain insight and understanding, and develop discernment about differences within relationships - when and how they work well and why they don't.*
- 2. To get to know others who are interested in the same.*
- 3. To expand the bridge between people outside my immediate surroundings and experience.*
- 4. To come away from the group after 3 weeks able to offer others positive perceptions and ways of thinking and making choices.*
- 5. To find positive ways of meeting the needs of my own inter-racial & cultural relationship.*

She also shared feelings of caution about revealing her interracial relationship to family:

...My close friends are very accepting and open.... My father is 97,... can't see or hear well, and is set in his ways. He is unaware we are engaged - he would not understand, probably be extremely disapproving, and it might cause him too much distress in his frail condition. He means a lot to me and I am an only child, so I've decided to keep this from him right now.

Sebastian stepped in to reassure Crystal:

I think you are doing the right thing by taking it slow with those around you that might not be so understanding at first. Some people require time to digest what they take in before they decide if it was good or not. I, myself, believe in honestly up front regarding anything and my past relationships...

The diversity of experience revealed in these early postings led to the creation of a new thread “How does your geographical location effect racial/religious/cultural issues that you face?” This gave members an opportunity to compare experiences — North and South, urban and rural, California and the Midwest — coming to agreement on the importance of raising the children of bicultural relationships in diverse communities.

CHOOSING IDENTITIES

An early active thread for RG 3 was sparked by the way the biracial daughters portrayed in “An American Love Story” were pressured to declare allegiance to a racial identity, black or white. “Have you ever had to choose?” evoked a complex discussion of dual identity.

Smoothtap (*"a black male married to a white female... for 17 years. I am an engineer and I tap for a hobby. We have two children boy and a girl..."*) wrote six of the two dozen messages posted to this thread in a single day, 16 September, day two of RG 3:

Being black I have to choose all the time. In high school I chose between hangin out with my dawgs or being in the band. In college I had to choose between Engineering students and my boys. On the job I have to choose the way I talked around white people and black people....Is it right? no I don't think so but if you ask most blacks in corporate America they do the same thing if they want to work in America and still hold on to some of their black heritage....

The first reply came from Robbie, *"a 29-year old black woman of West Indian and American ancestry. I am currently working on my Ph.D. I love classical music, opera, rap, top 40 and r&b. I have been in a relationship with an Indian guy for three years."* Robbie posted nine of the twenty-four messages contributed to this thread on 16 September.

But what about those of us who prefer not to code-switch? ... What about those of us who are uncomfortable with speaking grammatically incorrect English and the thought that some outward action is necessary to indicate to others that we have not "sold out"? Can I not hold onto my heritage (all of it) without trotting out this behavior? And if I refuse to do these things, are you saying that I am not properly embracing my black culture?

After several exchanges in which Robbie introduced a distinction between "SES" (socio-economic status), class, and race, Ethie'sgirl (*"I'm 37, African American, and a teacher. I live in Brooklyn and work in Manhattan. My brother has been married for nearly eight years to an Irish woman and they have a son and daughter who are very light skinned."*) joined the discussion with an account of racial categorizing she found absurd:

*I, too, am often told that I speak "white English," whatever *that* is. More bizarrely, however, I have even been told that I eat "white" food! I brought some vegetarian casserole in to class one night and one of my students asked what it was. When I told her, she shook her head, "You even eat like a white person," she said. How crazy is this?*

Robbie concurred:

Do you guys (blacks, whites, men and women) sometimes get the feeling that there was a document circulated that detailed how we are all supposed to act based on skin color. . . Except you missed school that day? Because, I have a list too long to write here of things that I do and say that make me "white". . . None of which help me when I am driving on the NJ Turnpike. :)

TESTING THE BOUNDARIES

From this first foray into touchy subjects, the discussion split into several threads — notably one on anti-gay and lesbian discrimination and another on Crystal's earlier question, coping with family narrow-mindedness. As conflicting views emerged, the TV series thrust another topic to the forefront: Bill Sims' statement that if his son Alton was going to be a drug dealer, he should be the best drug dealer possible. The confused outrage this evoked seemed to strengthen group feeling, leading to further examination of Bill Sims' remarks, this time his assertion that "A white woman is seen as a kind of status symbol," the title of Thread 13.

From Bethanie (“a married mother, living in Seattle, staying to raise our now two year old daughter. I’m an avid reader, and also love to write. My husband is black, I am white...we get by”), the group’s most prolific poster, authoring 102 messages in all.

...I would be lying to say I had not somewhere along the way heard or believed this. The town I graduated high school in, I’d say I very much felt like a black man trying to date a white woman was for status. I think this comes from a mixture of the things I learned from parents and adults, and the things I saw...

I have had this discussion with my MIL, who had to come to terms with her son marrying outside his race. ...She talked about how after the civil rights movement there was a mass exodus of black men from the community in order to start families with white women. I think this issue is wrapped up with the skin color issue as well, which makes it all the more difficult to talk about....

Sebastian weighs in “From a male prospective...”

Well, that is something I personally have been told before. In the past, I think the deal was that a black man hadn’t really “made it” until he had a white woman on his side....

I think things have changed a lot and interracial dating can’t be summed up so simple. I disagree with the idea that white men think of women as property. I think it is just that old school symbolism that only rich, successful black men could ever attract a white woman.... What do you think?

In two successive posts, Robbie examines this dynamic, not sparing herself:

I do believe that a number of black men perceive white women as the ultimate prize, [which] makes me take a second look at a couple comprised of a black man and white woman. However, I do think that this attitude (my attitude--let me not try and get away from the fact that I am talking about my own ignorance and stereotypes) is borne of hurt, ignorance and a tendency to generalize. By contrast, don’t look at me with my boyfriend and dare say that I chose him because he is a step up the ladder. Because I would be so pissed off. Funny how that works, huh....

(from her second message) ...I have seen professional black men date white women who were not in the same position (referring to professional/educational attainments). By contrast,... [a] black woman would have to have three academic degrees (from Ivy League schools), three generations of doctors in her family and \$753,000 in her trust. Essentially, I think that black men are entirely willing to cross SES lines if this action nets them a white woman.

Whew. Now that’s an ugly thing to say. Sorry but I think that I really do believe this. ...It]his feeling of not being good enough is why so many black women roll their eyes at these couples....

...I am trying to get past my own failings and I think that the way to do so is to “hear” about all of these wonderful couples. And see that these unions are not wholly based on status attainment....

Sebastian resonates strongly with her message...

I like this woman! Thanks for telling it like it is... It is sad but some black males do see the white woman as a trophy, even if she has no ambition, morals, character, or a plan for the future. I have heard that the white community

does not care if a WF dates a BM if she is a "nobody", but she is "somebody", then there is were the problems comes in...

...which also leads Ethie'sgirl to share a revealing and painful story about her brother:

My brother is an extremely good-looking, intelligent man. ...In his entire life, my brother has only dated one black woman -- and she was light enough to "pass." He has often said -- to me, my sister, my mother ... -- that black women are "disgusting and lazy," or that we "smell strange." ...My brother's issues about black women and his own self hatred make me wonder what my nephew will grow up to be like...

Melissa, one of RG 3's top ten posters, is "a white female, 29 married to a black man, 34. We've been together for eight years. We live in a large urban area and being an interracial couple has pretty much been a non-issue so far." She stakes out a position that earns applause from Robbie, Ethie'sgirl, Bethanie, and others:

*...I have to say that when I was dating I avoided men like ethie'sgirl's brother like the plague. Black men with major issues about black women have *way* more issues about themselves.*

APPARENT AND POLITICAL IDENTITIES

Out of the accord emerging from Relationship Group 3's discussions thus far, a group member who has been posting occasionally begins a new thread on multiple identities as experienced by the two daughters chronicled in the TV series. Thread 13, "Cicily and her 'political identity'" is opened by Jacqueline, another top-ten poster, who describes herself as a "black female, married interracially, no children, 2 border collies, UCLA grad, los angeles resident (SF Valley)":

...Cicily's apparent identity crisis stems from the fact that she is uncomfortable with the "double consciousness" common in many people who are seen one way by the world but feel different way (or a more complex way). Lisa Jones, a columnist... for the Village Voice, developed what she calls a "political identity" to deal with similar experiences as a bi-racial person.

Jones was raised by her Jewish mother and had primary contact with her mother's family during her formative years. The fact that her father is black [LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka]...caused her to think very carefully about what it meant to her to be part black in this culture.

Like Cicily, she was uncomfortable denying... family members whom she loved dearly by exclusively acknowledging herself as "black woman." At the same time, she accepted that, because of her appearance, our culture, is likely to identify her exclusively as black.

...[B]ecause she experiences the same trials, discrimination,...as a woman with two black parents, she identifies politically with and as a black woman. Non-politically she identifies with and as everything that she is ...despite our culture's general inability to deal with that level of complexity....

THE CORE GROUP FORMS

By a combination of attrition and assertion, certain people become group fixtures, posting in many threads, while others fade into the background or disappear.

Early in the online dialogue, Robbie, who has posted twenty messages that day, raises the question of staying in contact after Web Lab's closing date for ALS:

Guys, I know that it has only been three days but I am already addicted to the candor, honesty and frank conversations. Does anyone have a suggestion on how we can keep our little group intact?

Other group members respond with ideas. Robbie posts a couple of messages on the fourth day, then comes back two days later to say:

...while I was gone, I missed these conversations. But I will be checking in a bit less this week. My boyfriend tells me that I am going to fail out of school if I don't get off this site. He says that I am obsessed. I guess I have to agree.... :) "Talk" to you soon.

But she never posts again.

Kusuf is another short-term member who makes his presence felt: *"I come from a bi-racial family, Arab and French-American. I am the only one of four brothers who has taken the Arab part of my heritage seriously and... the only one... who has been exposed to racism."* On 16 September, the third day of RG 3, Kusuf contributes a provocative two-part message to Thread 11, on "Narrowmindedness within your family":

I have read through the above entries and I find a lot of tolerance for the narrowmindedness in mixed families expressed, and I do not share this....I no longer speak to my father or my mother, or any of my brothers because there is no way, any longer, that I will share in any sort of collusion with the mindset which engenders murder and dispossession.... I gave my family members many opportunities...to amend their views but when...they ... did not renounce harsh views of minorities and the underprivileged..., I wrote them off as a great danger to themselves and others....

The hard edge in Kusuf's message alarms several female members of the group. This response comes from Bethanie:

This is mostly for kusuf. I don't know what to say, except that you took my breath away. I'm sorry that you think I express tolerance for the racist people in my family. I think I stated that...they are no longer a part of my life, partially because they choose not to be, and partially because(and this is most important to me) I will not allow my daughter to be threatened by their views or the dangers which knowing them my present to her or her sense of self....
...I choose not to live my life in anger....

This evokes an even tougher response from Kusuf:

I didn't really think that this forum would be a celebration of our gifts for the obvious. I wanted, or hoped, to get close to the heart of the matter I am not at all concerned with coded language of black youth, native american, etc.... It reminds me very much of the common white youth trip here in Seattle: colored hair, begging on the street as a sign of coolness, platform shoes. They are, as do most minorities, stereotyping themselves and...doing EXACTLY what the

powerful and bigoted want, i.e., wasting their time on the petty things while others make, and keep, the rules...

He never posts to the group again, but other members make frequent use of him as symbol.

A white man, Steven, (*"Married 8 yrs, no children yet. Baha'i for 12 yrs. Born in Philippines, raised in Spain and Wi, US, lived in NC, US 10 yrs. Been to many Conferences on Racism. BS Phys/Philo(Math/Psych), MS Phys."*), who has not contributed many messages beforehand, now comes to the fore. By RG 3's end, he will become the second most prolific poster, contributing a total of fifty-nine messages. With a characteristic mixture of grand abstraction and personal address, he positions himself in opposition to Kusuf:

Kusuf is acting as judge and jury and he isn't so far from executioner?

Kusuf - by ignoring the progress in dealing with racism this country has had you run many risks... Look at the progression - revolutions of confederated states... civil war... ending slavery and suffrage movement... civil rights.... Have any of these been enough? No. But do they build on each other? Absolutely! Certainly we need to bring this transformation home. But home cannot be a place of war and violence. Purity of heart, chastity of soul and freedom of spirit i think are the things we have to learn in this age...

By 19 September, five days into RG3, the group is posting thirty messages (down from a high of seventy-nine on the second day), and its top posters — especially Bethanie, Steven, Ethie'sgirl, Sebastian, Gwendolyn, and Smoothtap — shape much of the continuing conversation. Three of the top five (60%) are male, in contrast to RG 3 overall, which is 25% male. (Considering the top ten posters, the gender balance more closely reflects the group as a whole: seven of them are female.)

Jacqueline, whose twenty-two messages put her in tenth position, cements group feeling with this contribution, which is reinforced by other group members:

I was just browsing the dialogue directory where you can read the posts from other groups. There I found that our group has almost twice as many posting as the next most active group. Also, while browsing the soapbox area, i found that there are more than a few who are extremely dissatisfied with the impatience and intolerance that they are finding in their assigned groups. Thank you so much for being the great group that we are....

Later, she posts again to say that

Excerpts from our group's topics 11 and 15 are highlighted in the featured posts section. Way to go y'all.

This satisfaction is reinforced by Ethie'sgirl, who recounts an incident when face-to-face dialogue failed to attain the level of RG 3:

Last night I had a party.... The subject of the ALS series came up..., so I mentioned being in this group and how wonderful it is to have a chance to talk so openly about sensitive issues. Everyone agreed that they'd love to have that chance, and someone asked for an example of the kinds of things we've discussed. So I brought up our longest thread -- the white-woman-as-status thread. ...We managed maybe five minutes of heated denial and then were saved by the arrival of a late guest.

A side-discussion on continuing the group after ALS ends carries on until its last days, when Melissa, Bethanie, Sebastian, Steven, Jacqueline, Ethie'sgirl, Susanv, Antoinette, and Dory (who has been reading but not posting much) all vow to transfer to a continuation at OneList.

A BONE TO PICK

A single group member riding a hobby-horse can alter the dynamic of the entire group. This happened in RG 3.

In a thread on "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender mixed race relationships," Bethanie has raised the question of Christianity and homophobia, noting that "*My mother and MIL have actually prayed over my MIL's kitchen table that the stray son would be brought back into the fold.*"

Gwendolyn adds her own analysis:

I think a lot, of the homophobia, which comes from the Black/African American community, comes from our (slave past). All the slaves had, was the bible passed down to them from the slave master...[I]ts still the same thing being preached in the churches, it's a sin to be Gay and it's an even bigger sin if you are in a relationship with someone of the same sex.

Steven responds with a "correction":

I just want to correct what i think is a mis-information. The Bible did not spread from the masters to the slaves. In fact the masters very much fought it - they passed laws against teaching slaves to read, and if slaves were baptised they had to sign(or x) pledges that this didn't change their slave status.

...All that taken into account the Message of Christ is not a white man's message. Any who really understood it struck out against the system of oppression and misery because it was the kind of thing Jesus himself suffered. Alas alas they were so rare....

Bethanie and Ethie'sgirl disagree, the latter asserting that

...While it's true that slave owners fought slave literacy, it's also true that Christianity was used by the masters to justify slavery (to themselves and to their slaves) and that religion sometimes created divisions between slaves -- those who converted and those who refused to convert.

Steven evidently feels they have misunderstood him, and endeavors to explain:

...For a very long time Christianity was a source of healing for entire civilizations and brought peoples together that had fought each other before. Now it is hopelessly divided from itself....

Bethanie tries again...

Christianity as a source of 'healing' for entire civilizations????????? Think ...of the Roman Catholic Church..the "Crusades" ...the Spanish Inquisition? ... The witch hunts ...all done in the name of 'The Lord.' And the conquering of the "New World" ...If you just look at the Mission system in California, and it's appalling history of working the Native American people to death, you ... wouldn't say this way of life was a 'healing' experience for all people...

...and so does Steven:

...Please note that the discussion about Christianity began with a comment about Christianity spreading among the slaves because of the masters. It has now spread to trying to understand the Crusades, conquering the New World, and the pain Christianity has caused.... Please re-read my posts and stop hearing every other conversation about Christianity you have ever had.

On the 19th, five days into RG 3, he posts a Ba'hai "prayer for unity." As Steven's messages get closer to advertisements for his Ba'hai faith, Crystal asks him for specific information, Web sites, and so on. Late on the 20th — day seven of RG 3 — he posts a slew of Web sites and a long account of Ba'hai values. On 25 September, he again expresses dissatisfaction with the way his messages have been received:

I'm sorry speaking about Christianity in the black community has been such a big problem... Division and strife ... weren't my goals. I much prefer truth....

Bethanie, at this point the only member who will engage Steven, tries to defuse things:

We have moved beyond this topic in our discussion of gay issues. There are some points that some of us are just going to disagree on... That's okay.

But Steven rejects her message:

Lot's of words about warm exchanges, or agreeing to disagree. But understanding seems to have reached it's limit, even though i am pretty sure i wasn't understood....

She responds again:

I'm really sorry... I think you are misunderstanding that there is a difference between being heard and having someone agree with your opinion...

So does he:

I haven't looked for total agreement and am quite comfortable with the idea of diverse opinions. But there hasn't been any investigation of facts to speak of...

On 28 September, when RG 3 is winding down (only twelve messages were posted to the group that day), Susanv, a "42 year young married" white woman who works "full time as a software engineer," contributes a message headed "Steven - just start a new topic!":

I have been trying to read the postings on gay/ biracial relationships etc. What is all this ... about christianity ...? How did this... get so off the subject?

After a puzzled message from Ethie'sgirl on the 29th, Steven recommends Web sites he believes will provide definitive information on Christianity. By the 30th, seven of the fifteen messages contributed to RG 3 are exchanges with Steven. Although it cannot be known for certain how much he affected the group, his relentless posting of similar messages in multiple threads did coincide with attrition in those threads, which came to a close with his messages.

SUPPORT AND SHARING

When the entirety of RG 3 is taken into consideration, it is clear that the main purpose to which members put the group was creating an arena of commonality and support for those involved with cross-cultural relationships. Eight of the top ten posters had been involved in such relationships; six of these were current involvements. In sharing personal experiences, observations of racial and sexual dynamics — even reading lists — group members actively worked toward shared understandings of their commonalities.

Discussion threads were treated by group members as elastic, stretching to suit their needs. Thread 10, “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender mixed race relationships,” expanded into a discussion of race as a concept and its social impact, with Bethanie and Gwendolyn taking the lead. Thread 11, “Narrowmindedness within your family” remained one of the most active throughout RG 3, expanding to encompass the sharing of personal stories of discrimination.

For example, “ecklee@aol.c” (“in my mid-30s, former teacher, mother of two. I’m very actively involved with my kids. I’m white, my husband is Asian”) participates in a discussion on this thread concerning racism and police:

Bethanie, I want to tell you that I totally sympathize with what you and your husband went through when he was detained by the police. Through my husband, I’ve learned how racist many police forces are and how at risk most non-white Americans feel around them....

...[T]his is something that I never knew. I think that people like Kusuf get out there and agitate to bring this sort of thing to people’s consciousness...

Melissa cautions against over-generalization...

...Sure there are racist cops out there, most definitely. There are also racist dentists, accountants, gas station attendants, corporate executives, factory workers, etc. I don’t think that cops are “more” racist than anyone else. They just have the power to express it in a way that’s different from most others....

... and several group members agree. But by this time — 21 September, day eight of RG 3 — the discussion is used mostly to share experiences that can be validated by other group members, as is done by Ethie’sgirl:

*I agree that it isn’t fair to categorize all cops based on the behavior of some. It’s hard *not* to, sometimes, however.... When my family moved to Connecticut, my feelings about police officers changed almost completely. I was often stopped on the street and asked to show ID or explain what I was doing...*

By the end of the active dialogue — very few messages were posted to RG 3 after 30 September — Thread 10, “Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender mixed race relationships,” the longest-lived thread with eighty-one messages in all, had returned to questions of sexual orientation, then branched out again to religion for the exchanges with Steven described above.

Several days before RG 3’s announced ending on 5 October, RG 3 had dwindled to its last few hopeful messages, like this one from Dory:

Well, I guess it’s time for us to say goodbye to our group in this ALS discussion. Iam looking forward to seeing everyone on the Onelist though...

Thanks to all of you for sharing your stories with me! I feel like I have learned so much from all of you. I really do seem to look at the world much differently now. It seems so much brighter and happier to me.

COMPARING REALITY CHECK AND AMERICAN LOVE STORIES

Although the frameworks for both dialogue experiments were virtually identical, the results of Reality Check and American Love Stories differed significantly in several particulars, as indicated in Table One (see next page) and discussed in greater detail below.

LEVELS OF ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Overall, RC was quite active, with many contributors eager to share their views on the impeachment controversy and to engage with others' views. Most participants' comments were enthusiastic:

First of all, the interface itself was awesome; that counted a lot on keeping me coming back to the site. Next were the people who were in the group. I was constantly surprised at the quality of the discussions we had during our time together. Very rarely, if ever did it get boring.

I liked the opportunity to blow off steam about political events, particularly the impeachment issue.

It was the most positive experience I have ever had with a message board. I came to grow rather close to several people that I had not previously known.

This enthusiasm was demonstrated by the high volume of messages contributed.

Although ALS attracted twice as many registrants overall as RC, it generated a significantly lower level of participation. There were several reasons why: its narrow topic, the TV-series linkage, and technical issues.

NARROW TOPIC. RC focused on a topic that gave wide scope for comment: there was ample room under the impeachment-controversy umbrella for electoral politics, ethics, sex, the media and other encompassing, controversial subjects, as this RC participant described:

Reality Check was a wonderful experience compared with chat rooms, newsgroups, or any other type of discussion forum I can think of. One of the main things I liked about it was the fact that the group transcended the subject matter that we had been assigned. We were supposed to talk about impeachment, but dozens of other topics sprouted up spontaneously to the point where I never discussed impeachment at all, but instead focused on all of the other topics of conversation that were taking place.

In contrast, most of the reasons cited by ALS participants for not posting more messages had to do with the nature of the discussion, which focused much more narrowly on race than they (or Web Lab's planners) had expected. This is from the second ALS newsletter:

If you've read some of the stories on the site — or one of the articles that have been written about it — you'll know that the idea behind it is to engage as diverse a group of people as possible in talking not just about bridging racial differences, but about crossing other boundaries like religion, national origin, age, or economic background. To our surprise, race has been the dominant topic in most of the discussions, in many cases the only topic. We have no problem with that, but we suspect that some of you were hoping or expecting there would be discussion about other topics.

In retrospect, Web Lab's expectations were skewed by hopes and assumptions. Organizers were concerned from the outset that interracial relationships were too narrow and specific a hook on which to hang a dialogue experiment they hoped would be larger than RC. Their proposed solution was to broaden the topic to relationships that "bridge differences." ***

**TABLE ONE: COMPARISON OF PARTICIPATION
IN REALITY CHECK AND AMERICAN LOVE STORIES**

	<i>REALITY CHECK</i>	<i>AMERICAN LOVE STORIES</i>
Participants overall	765	1,387
Number of groups	15	24
Number/Percentage posting	504/66%	676/49%
Total messages	12,685	5,012
Average group size	51	58
Gender:		
Men	70%	26.0%
Women	30%	74.0%
Race/ethnicity ⁵ :		
White	89%	46.7%
African American		31.7%
Multiracial/biracial		10.4%
Other		6.6%
Latino/Hispanic		2.3%
Asian		1.8%
Native American		0.5%
Non-white ⁶	11%	53.3%
Age ⁶		
Under 30	24%	23.2%
30-50	51%	61.8%
Over 50	25%	15.0%
Education ⁶		
H.S. Grad or less	7%	6.6%
Some college	29%	33.0%
College Grad +	64%	60.4%
Household Income ⁶		
Under \$35,000	25%	27.7%
\$35-75,000	47%	50.0%
\$75,000 +	28%	22.3%
Geographic diversity	50 states + DC/Puerto Rico	49 states + DC

⁵ These questions were optional; the percentage indicates the proportion of those who responded to the question, rather than the overall sample. For example, 88 of the 1,387 individuals assigned to ALS dialogue groups did not indicate their race/ethnicity. The percentages indicated for categories of race/ethnicity were calculated on the basis of the 1,299 who did respond.

⁶ If we don't get a race/ethnicity breakdown from RC, we'll just have to run a footnote explaining that all they produced was "white/non-white." We must use the category breakdown for ALS in any case.

A few weeks before the ALS dialogues were launched, a ten-day test dialogue was conducted with the aims of giving staff, monitors and software a trial run, as well as gleaning material for the first few Featured Posts. The test dialogues ranged far and wide (race, religion, nationality, disability, *etc.*), seeming to fulfill organizers' expectations. But they did not prove a reliable guide to the ALS Dialogues experience that followed, for several reasons: test group members were drawn from previous Web Lab small group dialogue projects, creating a testing sample weighted toward enthusiasts of online dialogue; none of them had seen the TV series, which had not yet been broadcast; but they had been able to explore the developing ALS Web site and thus had taken their cues from it.

As noted earlier, nearly three-quarters of ALS participants were led to the dialogues by the PBS broadcast of "An American Love Story," so their expectations were shaped more by the series' subject matter than by the Web site. Registrants who shared Web Lab's broad interest in "bridging differences" were very often disappointed by their dialogue groups. These are fairly typical topic-oriented responses to Web Lab's "why haven't you posted?" message:

I will probably go back and read some more, but I'm not sure that I'll post again. The group seems more interested in sharing personal stories of how they've dealt with discrimination, bias, and racism, how they deal with issues of biraciality, and I don't feel I have a lot to contribute to such discussions.

For the most part, the only people who are posting are folks who are themselves involved in interracial relationships. I was looking forward to being able to look at societal issues rather than individual ones.

I received an email that my group was starting, and, as a result, I looked into the group and the general responses before posting. I found that the subjects seemed to be solely on black and white relationships. While I wanted to explore more about what makes people tick, i.e. how races regard each other, I also wanted more discussion of other relationship issues. The fact that I perceived the subjects to be only on race made me hesitate. I could understand the initial posters wanting to focus on this subject because of the timeliness of the show, but I thought it would branch out more. As a white woman married to a white man, I just felt that I couldn't offer anything that would have any meaning.

TV SERIES LINKAGE. RC focused on a long-running, media-driven national controversy — one that could feel like a perpetual TV series, without reruns or hiatus. "Public opinion" played a starring role, and RC provided participants a place to express their own opinions, whether they concerned the impeachment controversy *per se*, or the many other political and social topics it evoked (including "Monicagate" fatigue).

I'm glad you're trying to keep it [the small group dialogue] going. It has potential for taking thinking about government and politics beyond the dumbed-down level of current media.

Direct personal involvement had next-to-nothing to do with people's reasons for entering the RC discussions, so the net could be cast much more widely.

In contrast, the ALS Dialogues were shaped more by a limited-term TV series than by any other influence — so markedly that the bulk of the discussion groups dropped off shortly after the broadcasts ended, as a number of ALS participants noted:

I do plan to post more, but as you have observed the group has slowed down to a crawl. I think this may be due to the fact that the documentary has finished airing.

By the time I posted my first message, the dialogues had trailed off. At some point shortly after the end of An American Love Story most people stopped posting messages.

During the first week of the ALS Dialogues, when the series was broadcast in many markets, small-group dialogue participants on average contributed 62% of their groups' total messages (an average of 130 messages). In the second week, postings declined to just 25% (averaging fifty-two messages); in the concluding week of ALS, only 13% of participants' messages (on average, twenty-seven) were posted. In contrast, RC postings were more evenly spread over the life of the groups (which lasted longer than ALS's). RC groups' posting pattern in their first three weeks reveals a shallower decline than ALS's: 46% of the first three weeks' total messages (on average, 275 messages) were posted in the first week; 31% in the second (averaging 185 messages); and 21% in the third (on average, 125 messages).

PBS elected to broadcast "An American Love Story" as a compressed miniseries, in two-hour program blocks on five consecutive nights. This unusual timing made online discussion uniquely problematic, as this monitor explained:

The real problem [with ALS] was it was shown in installments, all in one week. That meant only one night for talking about that episode. In P.O.V. Salon, we had a whole week, which gave time to branch out. Here, there were only twenty-four hours.

Despite ALS's time-based character and RC's relationship to an attenuated controversy, a significant number of Reality Check participants tired of their discussions early as well. Almost 18% of RC registrants posted messages in four or more weeks of their dialogue groups. But by the end of the first week of the RC groups, nearly 60% of those who had previously posted became non-contributors, citing busyness (84% sometimes or often experienced this obstacle), a feeling of having had their say (83%), or boredom with the topic (71%). But while they were active, they were much more active than their ALS counterparts, as reflected in overall levels of posting (see Table One).

TECHNICAL ISSUES. ALS had a significant number of technical problems in comparison with the RC experience. For ALS, the Small Group Dialogue software was rewritten to accommodate a larger number of participants with updated software, then to run on PBS Online with older software. Web Lab's software technicians were not permitted direct access to the codes installed on PBS's server which were causing problems with software performance. PBS Online's overburdened technical staff could not respond in a timely way to the programmers' need for assistance, meaning that few programming changes could be made in the short time between ALS's test phase and the national telecast of "An American Love Story."

Few of these software problems affected group members' level of activity, though some registrants' participation was thwarted by technical problems. Due to a programming problem, 170 of the 1,557 people registered for ALS Dialogues but were never assigned to groups. At the end of the dialogues, Web Lab sent an email message seeking information from people who (according to its tracking system) had been assigned to groups but had not been active there:

We're writing to you because you registered to participate in one of the dialogue groups on the PBS Online site tied into "An American Love Story," and we need your help.

While there will always be a number of people who register and end up not participating, in this case we had an unusually high proportion of people who registered but never posted a message in their group.

We know there were problems with the email messages that were supposed to notify you that your group was starting, but we don't know how widespread they were. Also, because there was a "Soapbox" where people could post messages, some folks ended up posting there instead of in a dialogue group.

The only way we can find out what really happened is by asking you directly. Could you possibly take just a couple of minutes to fill out a very brief online questionnaire.

Two-hundred forty-five people responded to the brief survey. Fifty-five of them (55/22.4%) "got the e-mail but...had problems getting into my group." Another thirty-six (36/14.7%) agreed with the following statement: "I never posted a message in my ALS dialogue group because I got the e-mail message but had other technical problems." Another twenty-nine (29/11.8%) never received their e-mail messages. In the aggregate, about half of the non-posters who responded to this survey were prevented from participating by technical problems; altogether, they represent 8.6% of the 1,387 people assigned to ALS groups.

Web Lab had also e-mailed members of some ALS groups earlier — about a week into the dialogues — expressing concern "that there's been very little activity over the last few days and we'd like to find out if there's anything we can do to get people re-engaged.... If you did post messages last week, we'd love to know why we haven't seen you back in the last few days and, if you don't plan to return, why not?" Responses to these two Web Lab e-mailings also turned up a significant number of group members who had indeed posted, and should not have received the "What's going on?" message:

I posted several messages both last week and this week. My screen name is "...". Please recheck the dialogues for TV Series Group 6. You should see several recent postings. I even created a new topic earlier today.

But such responses pointed to Web Lab difficulties in tracking participants — an internal problem, not a glitch that would have directly affected participants' rate of posting. The group member who wrote the preceding message was correct: his postings did indeed appear in his dialogue group, and he went right on posting for most of the ten days his group remained actively engaged.

By the time ALS ended and contributors to dialogue groups were asked to complete evaluation surveys, very few of them noted technical problems: 6.4% of the posters completing surveys cited their user name or password not working as a reason for not posting more, including this writer:

The last two days, I have not been able to get into the website. I get a message that my user has been found, but my password is incorrect. I'm certain I'm entering my password correctly. I've double checked it numerous times with the email I received welcoming me to the group.

The bulk of problems had to do with entry into the dialogues. Most of the remaining difficulties, those that turned up while the dialogues were actually in train, could be traced to participants' own problems, often resolved with a little Web Lab technical help.

GENDER

Gender-wise, ALS turned RC on its head. While 70% of RC participants were male, only 26% of ALS group members were men. When only those who actually contributed messages to their dialogue groups are considered, the proportion of male ALS participants descends: 80% of those who posted messages were women.

According to the 1998 Technology Survey by the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press,⁷ 52% of Americans who went online were male. (Census Bureau projections for March 2000 indicate that 49% of the U.S. population is male.) The May 2000 *Pew Internet Life Report* notes that “More than 9 million women have gone online for the first time in the last six months and this surge has led to gender parity in the Internet population.”⁸ According to the report, women comprise 57% of the segment of Internet users who go online every day, even though they are only 46% of the population with Internet access.

Why were men so disproportionately drawn to RC, and women to ALS? When we asked our interviewees to explain the high proportion of women in ALS, a few went straight to stereotypes which were not necessarily corroborated by the facts of ALS participation. This example is from a member of a TV Series Group in which thirty-nine (39/66%) of the fifty-nine (59) members were women:

Online discussions tend to be controlled by whoever has the time to do the writing. Retired people. That's why so many women posted — they tend to be underemployed, stay-at-home mothers.

(N.B.: Only five of fifty-five members in this person's group were over 60 years of age.) But most comments on gender-balance in ALS focused on the subject matter, for example, these two:

I'm not really surprised, because it's about relationships. I have to go with the stereotype: women are generally ready to talk about relationships.

Expressing a lot of emotional things and talking about relationships is what women do. I don't think a lot of men watched the series. Most of the ones I know hadn't.

This gibes with a larger trend noted in the Pew study: 71% of women feel that the Internet, specifically e-mail, has improved their connection to friends, a feeling shared by 61% of men.

My husband doesn't use the computer like I do. He has no desire to correspond. Women are more open to Internet friendship. We talk on the phone a lot more. My female friends have a lot more willingness to form friendships online.

Contrasting interests help to explain RC's gender balance: going online for news is something that two out of every three male computer users have done, in contrast to only half of their female counterparts. “High” or “very high” news consumption was characteristic of 48.6% of RC participants — indeed, RC's subject was the news of the day. Nearly 60% of RC registrants reported going online daily to get news and information on current events, public issues or politics, compared to only 27% of ALS participants, 25% of Internet users nationwide in the 1998 Pew study, and 35% in Pew's 2000 study.

7 “The Internet News Audience Goes Ordinary,” <www.people-press.org/tech98mor.htm>, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, Washington, DC.

8 *Internet Life Report*, <www.pewinternet.org>, p. 7.

The relative under-representation of men in ALS was offset slightly by their higher rates of posting. Women contributed 3,816 messages (76.1% of total messages), while they comprised 79.7% of those who contributed at least one message. Women averaged 7.1 messages each. Men contributed 1,196 messages (23.9% of the total), while they comprised 20.3% of those who contributed at least one message, averaging 8.7 messages apiece. This gender discrepancy becomes more pronounced when only the most active ALS posters are considered: in the aggregate, the three most active members from each of the ALS dialogue groups comprise 75.3% women and 24.7% men.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Subject matter almost certainly explains the contrasting ethnic make-up of the two dialogue experiments. RC participants were mostly white (89%), while more than half (53.3%) of ALS Dialogue participants responding at registration to the question about race and ethnicity were people of color. Whites posted in slightly higher proportions, though at 48.3%, they still account for fewer than half of the posters. According to Census Bureau estimates, whites make up 82.3% of the total population. Pew's *Internet Life Report 2000* puts them at about 88% of the total online population, making RC's racial make-up similar to the Internet's at this point.

The Census Bureau estimates that African Americans comprise 12.8% of the total U.S. population. According to Pew's report (2000), 35% of African Americans have Internet access, amounting to about 8% of the online population (indicating that the African American population is under-represented in Internet access by about 38%). At 31.7% of the whole, African American participation in ALS was therefore about four times larger than if it had been proportional to the online population. An additional 17% of ALS participants identified themselves as "multiracial/biracial" or "other," categories likely to include even more people with African American heritage.

In contrast, the Latino/Hispanic national population is almost as large (11.7% of total U.S. population), and 46% of Hispanics have Internet access, comprising 9% of the online population. But Latino participants made up only 2.3% of the ALS dialogue groups — under-representing this segment of the population by a factor of four.

The cast of Monicagate was predominantly white, while the main characters in "An American Love Story" were an African American man, a white woman, and their two biracial daughters. Nearly half (47.9%) of the ninety percent of ALS participants who responded to this question on their registration forms said they were currently involved in a cross-cultural relationship; an additional 33.5% said they had been in the past. Like these two from a TV Series Group, many, many ALS group members posted messages indicating they had come to the dialogues because they hoped their own experiences and identities would be reflected there:

The Wilson-Sims family bears an uncanny resemblance to my own. Although I readily concede that ours aren't typical Multi-racial families, I can think of three other families I personally know of that are composed of a Black male musician, a White Professional or Clerical Female and two children. We're not as rare as I'd imagined we are. Feeling less unique is both gratifying and humbling.

Quite frankly, I signed up for this as a support group. When we do find a mixed couple in this city, they're usually not a good social or intellectual match for us (i.e., wrong hobbies, wrong age, etc.). We have friends, but I was sure there were peculiarities about our situation that were unique. Also, we're at

the do or die stage for offspring, and I was a little uncertain. Friends have advised us not to have any, and one local example seemed to prove their point. Seeing what Cicily and Chaney faced 10 years ago, knowing things like this project are helping to adjust public thinking (if only a little — ants, dragon, etc.), realising the difference between what Karen went through when she fell in love with Bill and my life now--hey. I think we're going to be just fine.

In contrast, this RC participant made the only mention of ethnicity appearing in the RC evaluator's compilation of narrative responses from post-dialogue surveys:

This was one of my first experiences and I hate to say this though I did say it there, I felt more at home in other more shall we say ethnically friendly places on the web than I did at Reality Check. In my group few people responded...

AGE, EDUCATION, INCOME, AND GEOGRAPHY

Both the RC and ALS small group dialogue experiments attracted highly educated, mostly middle-class participants in their middle years.

AGE. In terms of age, both RC and ALS skew somewhat older than the national online population. According to the *Internet Life Report 2000*, 66% of Americans under thirty have Internet access, comprising around 30% of the online population. Under-thirty participants in RC and ALS made up 24% and 23% of the whole, respectively. ALS had fewer fifty-plus participants (15%) than the Internet as a whole (19%); while RC had more (25%). The most significant difference was in the thirty-to-fifty group, which made up 51% of RC and 61% of ALS participants. (When only those who posted messages are considered, 63.3% of ALS posters belonged to the thirty-to-fifty category.) ALS's strong focus on relationships is suggestive here: a great deal of the discussion focused on thirty-something dilemmas, such as the wisdom of bringing multiracial children into the world, or uneasy anticipation of first contact between one's romantic partner and biological family. These are from two Relationship Group members:

Slowly we are revealing our relationship to our children. My 21-year-old son has met my fiancée, likes him, and says he's okay with "us", but doesn't know yet we're engaged. His twin brother lives in an area where racial judgements are rampant, so he doesn't yet know. I haven't had the opportunity to tell my 26-year-old daughter, who is 500 miles away with her boyfriend in a life of her own and doesn't yet know, but she's like me, so I believe she'll be happy if I'm happy. My desire is to create such pleasant interaction that we all love to be together. I just keep trusting that positive thinking and actions will allow this to occur. I believe that keeping out negative fear and worry is important to creating what we do want instead of what we don't want.

Hello everyone my name is I am a 37-year-old African American male. I have been married to a lovely 33-year-old white woman and this Friday is our 16th anniversary. We have two children a boy 11 and a girl 3. We live in ... Ohio and have seen our fair share of racism. I'm hoping to learn from others about their experiences and how they dealt with it. Being in a bi-racial relationship you don't have many good friends. Blacks think your selling out and whites are afraid of the influence you may have on their children. I would like to know how other interracial couples mingled with common race couples.

Since two principal characters in “An American Love Story,” were young, and identity issues have special immediacy for young people, Web Lab created three dialogue groups open only to participants twenty-five years of age and under, for peer-to-peer discussion. But no increase in young people’s participation resulted; in fact, RC attracted slightly more under-thirty participants than ALS. ALS’s 25 and Under Groups were among the least active and animated, with an average) among the three groups of 144 messages by twenty-four posters out of fifty-two group members (46%). These groups declined from an average of twenty-four members contributing 64% of their aggregate messages in the first week of their dialogue groups to just six members contributing only 10% of all posts in the third week.

Reading though the 25 and Under Group dialogue digests, one forms the impression of participants pulling back from controversy, allowing threads to die after a few messages are exchanged. There is a great deal of placatory language, such as:

First let me say that I’m happy you’ve found love, and that I don’t wish anyone to be without it. And I don’t feel any ill feelings toward you personally. These are just things that I think about...being a psych major, I analyze just about everything...=-)

And while a general willingness to engage was expressed, it seemed to lack content. The following message was posted on September 30th in one 25 and Under Group:

1) *Is our discussion group DEAD or WHAT?*

It’s sad to see that we as a group started out so well, but now it’s so dead. What would you guys like to talk about? Any thoughts or questions about anything? You name the topic and I’ll write something about it if I can. Something exciting or controversial. hehe.

Two days later, this response appeared:

2) *I agree*

We only have until Tuesday to be on here. We should make our last set of posts a pretty good one. :) Seems that just between [the previous poster] and I we could get a controversy going if someone has any ideas...lol.

In narrative responses to the 25 and Under Groups’ evaluation surveys, the most frequent complaint was being stuck in a single-age group:

I didn’t like being locked in a specific group. On some of the other pages, I found people with more in common who submitted some very good posts. I didn’t have anything in common with the people who ‘participated’ in my group.

I felt that my group wasn’t going where I wanted it to and I didn’t like that I was stuck in it, no matter what.

The people in my group were too young.

EDUCATION. Internet users as a class have greater educational attainments than the general population. According to the *Internet Life Report 2000*, more than three times as many Internet users (37%) have graduated from college as have non-users (12%).

RC and ALS almost double that disparity, with 64% and 60.4% respectively having graduated college. (Considering only those who posted messages to ALS group, the figure rises even further: participants with at least a college degree made up 63.5% of the ALS posters.) Those who never attended college comprise 70% of the population of non-Internet users and 30%

of Internet users, but only 7% of RC and ALS participants (and only 4.7% of posters to ALS groups).

Examining the characteristics of these two small group dialogue experiments (with their extreme differences in terms of gender and ethnicity), educational attainment appears the most reliable common indicator of participation, the one thing dialogue participants are most likely to share.

Online communication is facilitated by skills many people acquire in school: easy, reasonably accurate typing and the ability to express oneself through the written word. One of the questions posed in post-dialogue surveys was, "In what ways do you think your participation in the dialogues improved your communications skills?" We were impressed with the number of responses that focused on the craft of writing, and also with the degree of self-criticism. Take these ALS participants, for instance:

Continued to help me refine my writing skills when talking about emotional subjects.

It helped me tremendously with both online and face to face communication. I tend to be a bit wordy in my face to face communication. This exercise helped me get to the point quicker.

It kind of forced me to be more concise with my thoughts and words. (I tend to ramble.)

...and these RC participants:

Actually, I think my participation in the group improved my face-to-face and written communications tremendously, and for that I thank Reality Check. In many instances, I communicate like I think — in incomplete sentences. Because I was constantly writing my thoughts and feelings down in a forum that many people would read, I was forced to actually work through the mental inconsistencies and, in some instances, rethink how I felt about things.

I think it made me more mindful of the need to be as clear as possible in one's language in order to be persuasive with people who hold different views.

It reminded me of college. It helped me to hone my communication skills. I knew that what I wrote would be read and dissected by many people from all walks of life and various levels of intelligence; therefore, I wanted to make sure that I said what I meant, and meant what I said.

Such responses indicate that participants may regard the dialogue experience as a form of continuing education, a leisure-time activity that also leads to self-improvement.

INCOME. As a group, Internet users are far better-off than their non-user counterparts, according to the latest *Pew Internet Life Report*. In terms of income, ALS group members match the overall Internet population pretty closely, diverging only at the bottom of the ladder, with a few percent more in the "under \$35,000" category. RC participants were wealthier: 28% earned household incomes over \$75,000, as opposed to 23% of the aggregate online population. But by and large, Web Lab dialogues fit the economic pattern of Internet users, with participants possessing the wherewithal to purchase the equipment and software required.

GEOGRAPHY. RC participants were based in all fifty states of the union, as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, and twenty-two participants came from outside the United States. ALS drew participants from all the states except Wyoming and the District of Columbia; in addition, thirty-seven registrants lived outside the U.S.

HOW PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED THE DIALOGUES

What can Web Lab's small group dialogue model accomplish? Here's what Web Lab told American Love Stories registrants on its "Dialogue Group Philosophy" Web page about the results of Reality Check:

- Members with conflicting opinions communicated across their differences and often came to respect those with whom they disagreed.
- Personal attacks were rare, constructive criticism and appreciation abounded, and members generally treated each other exceptionally well and with a thoughtful frankness. When conflicts did erupt, the group dynamics were usually strong enough that protagonists not only accepted responsibility and apologized, but learned something in the process, without Web Lab's intervention.
- Some members reported the experience changed the way they communicated both on and off line, whether developing improved listening skills or strengthening their ability to speak their mind and defend their beliefs.
- Active members grew remarkably loyal and the site became, as they say in marketing, very "sticky."
- Members developed enough trust to share deeply personal aspects of their lives and looked to one another for advice and support.
- As members grew to know each other, each group identified topics of common interest and took their dialogue in directions different from the other groups.

Many of these statements can also be made about ALS. The following sections summarize RC and ALS participants' own accounts of their experience, as conveyed through surveys and interviews.

PARTICIPANTS' EVALUATION OF THE PROJECTS

HOW AND HOW MUCH DID PARTICIPANTS ENGAGE WITH THE DIALOGUES?

The *Pew Internet Life Report* published in May indicates that 34% of American Internet users go online several times a day; 28% participate in online discussions. Web Lab dialogue participants were much greater Internet enthusiasts: in RC, 68% went online several times a day; in ALS, the comparable figure was 50%. More than a third of RC group members (34.1%) and 31% of ALS participants went online once a day or more to take part in online forums or chat groups.

Participants in online dialogues may read messages, contribute their own messages, or simply “lurk” (read without posting). Here’s what RC and ALS participants did.

READING. There is no way to track participants’ reading behavior other than by their own accounts. Of the RC registrants who completed evaluation forms, 51% reported they read more than three-quarters of the messages posted to their groups during an average week; the comparable figure for ALS was 45%. For RC, 31% reported spending more than two hours per week reading messages, and an equal proportion spent one-to-two hours reading in their groups; for ALS, the comparable figures were 27.2% (more than two hours) and 28.3% (one-to-two hours). Considering that over 60% of Internet users spend an hour or less online in a typical day (according to the *Internet Life Report*) — and that this includes time sending and reading e-mail, surfing the Web, shopping, and all other activities — these figures suggest a notable loyalty to the dialogue sites while they lasted. The first two quotes below are from RC participants, the next two from ALS group members:

This was fascinating. I was reading and contributing in an atmosphere that was like a salon.

Many of the writers in my group offered thoughtful, considered and oftentimes humorous thoughts on subjects. That made it a pleasure to read.

It was good listening and reading other stories. Tolerance is not just about race, but about gender and sexual orientation. It was good to see other non-traditional couples discussing their issues in an intelligent manner.

I would read everything, but I didn’t want to post unless I had something to say.

In both dialogue experiments, the most powerful incentives to reading were internal to the dialogues: 83.5% of RC participants and 79.6% of ALS participants completing evaluation surveys indicated that “wanting to know if someone responded” to their posts had led them to read messages “frequently” or “very frequently.” Nearly as many (81.2% for RC, and 77.3% for ALS) were led to read when they wanted to know if there was anything new in their groups. This dynamic was less strongly personal than instrumental: far fewer group members (47.2% of RC and 39.7% of ALS) were led frequently or very frequently to read out of a “feeling of responsibility” to group members.

Outside stimuli made less difference in group members’ decisions to read messages than internal ones. News events led frequently or very frequently to reading for 24.4% of RC participants; and watching an episode of “An American Love Story” was as powerful an incentive to 47.9% of ALS participants. Receiving Web Lab’s e-mail newsletter led frequently to reading for only 19.5% of RC group members and for 31.4% of ALS.

Being “too busy with other things” was far and away the most popular reason for not reading messages, cited by 58% of RC group members and 60.6% of ALS participants.

The 711 ALS Group members who never posted were sent evaluation surveys requesting information on their reading behaviors. A quarter (25.7%) of these respondents said they read more than three-quarters of the posted messages each week, in contrast to approximately half of the posters. This is a fairly remarkable figure — that one out of four people was interested enough in the dialogue to read virtually all of it despite taking no part in the conversation.

The time these group members invested in reading was less than posters, but still notable: 18.6% of these respondents reported two hours or more per week reading messages; and another 15.8% reported spending one to two hours. They were more responsive to the ALS newsletter

than posters: for 33.6% of respondents, the newsletter led them to read “frequently” or “very frequently.” But as with posters, interest in the group was paramount: nearly half were led to read “frequently” or “very frequently” by “wanting to know if there was anything new” (48.2%) or “being interested in what people...were talking about” (53.1%). Being busy was far and away the most-cited reason for not reading, cited by 64% of non-posters; lack of interest in the discussion was cited by 37%.

POSTING. As noted earlier, ALS participants contributed significantly fewer messages to their groups overall than their RC counterparts. About two-thirds of RC’s 765 registrants posted messages to their groups. ALS group members were about evenly split between posters (49%) and non-posters (51%).

Those who did contribute messages to ALS were far less prolific than RC posters. In RC, the average poster contributed 25.7 messages; the ALS counterpart contributed 7.4, fewer than one-third as many. Comparing the three-week ALS results with just the first three weeks of RC, the disparity remains: the average RC poster contributed 17.4 messages in that period, still more than twice as much as the ALS average. In RC, the median poster contributed nine messages (adjusted for the timeframe, this figure would be slightly over six); in ALS, only four. In short, ALS attracted fewer active contributors than RC, and those people posted fewer messages.

The prolific posters of RC said they were led primarily by their own new thoughts and feelings to post messages: 62.1% indicated this as a frequent or very frequent stimulus. In ALS, nearly as many (56.8%) agreed; but “wanting to respond to a really interesting post” was a powerful incentive for an even larger number (67.6%). Receiving Web Lab’s e-mail newsletter was the weakest stimulus to posting in both dialogue experiments: only 9.7% of RC respondents and 11.5% of ALS members were frequently or very frequently stimulated by it to post.

In RC, the biggest disincentive to contributing new messages was members’ contentment with what they had already written: the feeling of having “spoken your mind” prevented 60% from writing more messages either “some” or “a lot” of the time. Being busy came in second, at 46.3%; with boredom third at 37.7%. Fewer than a quarter (22.4%) cited lack of response. With RC’s much higher level of posting activity, it was likely that group members could find someone to engage with their particular interests. Many quotations from narrative evaluation questionnaire responses by RC participants reflected a sense of satisfaction with the dialogue and their own participation:

I liked the informed posts that brought context and information. I liked reading the personal insights and opinions. I liked the exchange and energy of the dialogue. I liked the opportunity to explore my own opinions with the hope that they would be read by a critical and thoughtful audience.

A wonderful opportunity to bounce my ideas off of a diverse group of folks I would not normally have encountered.

One-fifth of RC contributors wrote only one or two messages; at the other end of the spectrum, one-fifth wrote thirty-three or more messages. Three RC posters wrote over 300 messages apiece (the top poster wrote 326 separate messages). Six percent of RC contributors posted 100 messages or more, and about twelve posters (2.5% of the contributors) wrote more than 200.

RC’s longer time-frame is a factor here, but not a decisive one. Nearly 70% of RC’s messages were contributed in its first three weeks; while ALS lasted three weeks in all. A very rough

adjustment for this disparity would yield 6% of RC contributors posting sixty-nine or more messages; while only two ALS members — one-tenth of one percent — posted as often.

Comparable figures for ALS demonstrate its much lower level of activity: 38% of contributors wrote only one or two messages — the largest concentration of posters fit this category; only 3% wrote thirty-three or more messages. The three top ALS posters contributed 102, eighty-four, and sixty-six messages respectively. Most ALS posters —taken together, they add up to 59% of the whole — wrote between three and thirty-three messages over the lives of their groups; only 3.1% posted more often than this.

For ALS, being too busy was the leading reason not to post, cited by 51.7% as a frequent or very frequent cause; having “spoken my mind” was next at 41.5%; with boredom and lack of response tied for third at 31%. Many of those who provided detailed reasons for not posting seemed to have experienced no strong incentive to contribute more, as described by these two:

I had the strong feeling that people were talking past each other. In other words many people had their set ideas which [are] unlikely to change merely by participating in an online discussion.

People were not responding to one another much. I admired the one brave young woman who continued to post. After awhile, though, it appeared to me that I had better ways of spending my time.

Both dialogue experiments exhibited a tendency to produce a vocal minority, a core group. One factor was certain participants’ copious posting: on average, the top five RC contributors posted 56% of their groups’ messages; in ALS, they contributed 54%. Another factor was attrition: participation in both dialogues dropped off after an initial week or so of activity. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of RC contributors posted messages in four or more weeks and only 17% of ALS contributors posted in all three weeks. By the end of the dialogue groups’ first week, nearly 60% of both dialogues’ initial contributors had stopped posting. Those persisting the longest shaped the dialogues.

Participants in Web Lab dialogues committed to take part in their groups for one month (RC) or three weeks (ALS). In addition to having made such commitments, there were other incentives to stick with their groups, as described earlier: introductions that connected participants into a conversation-sized group, protection from drive-by posters and flame wars (aggressive exchanges of excoriating insult), and a Web site and newsletters full of discussion ideas and helpful advice. Yet even under such encouraging conditions, most group members stopped posting. Seen in this light, these dialogues call the question of how much any group has to say over time about any social-issue topic, as this RC participant pointed out:

There were few things I didn’t like about RC, but the main thing I think was a gradual decrease in group interest as the month wore on. By the end of our time together, not much in the way of new stuff was being posted.

ALS had both a personal dimension as support group and a public dimension as issue forum. As it turned out, the support-group dimension had more longevity than the social-issue discussion: personal anecdote multiplies endlessly while social theory is sunk by too much repetition. This is from a member of the most active Relationship Group:

Our group ran out of things to say. Those who went to the OneList group were all interested in a detailed continuation of the relationship bit. They tended to be people who weren’t responded to in the larger group. But I was interested in taking a step back, thinking about it more sociologically and politically.

The most active RC group contributed 1,880 messages over a period of 57 days; posters active in the first week totaled 58% (which happened to coincide exactly with the average for all RC groups); by the fifth week, this had declined to 23% (slightly under RC's overall average of 25%). In the first week, 451 messages were posted; in the second week, there were 263, and for the third through fifth weeks, weekly postings averaged 281. Weekly postings stayed relatively high because the four most frequent contributors, who stuck with the group throughout, posted a combined total of 1,047 messages, 55.7% of the group's total.

The most active ALS group contributed 568 messages over its twenty-two-day lifespan. The largest number of messages (seventy-nine) was posted on 16 September, the third day after the group was launched; by 22 September, daily postings had declined to thirty-five messages. Messages posted in the first week totaled 345 (61.7%); in the second week, 139 (24.5%); and in the third and final week, seventy (12.3%). (An additional fourteen messages were posted by four group members on the last day, providing the remaining 2.5% of the total.) The top three posters in this group contributed 40.4% of the group's total.

HOW DID PARTICIPATION AFFECT THINKING?

"To understand everything makes one tolerant," said Madame de Staël, who lived in the sort of interesting times that, like our own, require a great deal of effort to achieve understanding. As everyone surely knows, dialogue about differences doesn't necessarily lead to their dissolution. Disagreements on any controversial topic — both President Clinton versus Congress and cross-cultural relationships undoubtedly fit this label — are often grounded in strongly divergent values or life circumstances, not easily amenable to change.

There is not much evidence that either Reality Check or American Love Stories altered participants' thinking. RC produced very little transformation in participants' views and feelings about the impeachment and its cast of characters. Well over half (58.3%) of RC participants selected "Not at all" or "Not very much" when indicating the degree of change in their own feelings; 31% checked "somewhat." ALS figures are almost identical. When asked if the dialogues had affected their views and feelings, 55.8% of respondents checked "Not at all" or "Not very much" and 32.1% checked "somewhat."

The first quotation below is from a Reality Check participant; the next two are from ALS.

[I]t did show me that others want to try to exchange and understand different points of view, even if they don't change their minds.

It helped reaffirm a lot of my beliefs. There are people who accept interracial relationships, and others reject them, a lot based on misconceptions. A lot of people kept their views, a lot affirmed my views, but there wasn't too much transformation.

Whatever people think, they think. You really can't change them, not in term of their really deep values. Would you or I change, just from talking about them? Not the deep values.

But it is amply clear from these experiments that the sustained encounter with conflicting views increased tolerance and comprehension.

Considering the saturation coverage given to impeachment issues during the time of the RC dialogues, it is striking that 58.8% of RC participants reported that they had learned something about the impeachment from their dialogue groups; another 8.5% learned "a lot." An equally impressive 64.4% of ALS participants learned something about cross-cultural

relationships from their groups; an additional 20% learned “a lot.” From the comments provided by ALS group members, it appears much of that learning derived from direct accounts of other participants’ experience:

It was hearing about others’ experiences with the law: one woman’s husband arrested on the way home from work, suspected of stealing; his car was not working. Such terrible discrimination; I had not idea it still existed.

I think of myself as very educated and enlightened on race issues, but I certainly learned more about interracial issues from first hand experiences. That was worth the time I participated.

From RC participants’ accounts, this was much more a matter of information-sharing:

I was amazed at the amount of information on history/politics that the group shared.

There were some scholarly people who offered historical contexts, and I was very interested in their posts.

When they signed on, three-quarters (75.6%) of the people assigned to ALS groups agreed with the statement that “people of different races, ethnicities, or religions can speak truthfully and productively about their differences.” After participating in ALS, the figure rose slightly to 79%, almost entirely due to people who’d previously been in the “don’t know” category. This suggests that hundreds of Americans had a weeks-long conversation largely about race, probably the most polarizing topic on the national agenda, without injury to their optimism or goodwill. In our cynical times, this may be reason to rejoice.

There was a clear increase in RC group members’ respect for their fellows: for 61.7%, respect for fellow participants grew “somewhat” or “a lot,” while it decreased for another 15.3%. The comparable figure for ALS is much lower — 38.3% found respect for fellow participants increased — but still significant, especially considering that after discussing this frequently divisive topic, only 11% indicated that respect had decreased.

RC made me think about the perspectives of others in a more accepting and patient frame of mind.

Reality Check helped me to again realize that other people exist with a different point of view.

It [ALS] made me more aware of the ways I talk about race. How I listened has changed. I pay attention now better than I did. We got exposure to so many points of view. If I had heard any of these things before, I’d have said, “Are you crazy?” Now I stop to think. My first thought is not always so open. It’s done something for my tolerance.

I like the fact that everyone was respectful of other peoples opinions and views, and didn’t put them down for it.

DID PARTICIPANTS FIND THE DIALOGUES SATISFYING?

A whopping 70% of RC group members responding to the evaluation survey found the quality of discussion higher than in other online forums. Nearly half of their ALS counterparts (47.6%) agreed. In comparison to face-to-face discussion, approval stayed high. Over 60% of RC participants (63.1%) said their dialogue groups were superior in quality to comparable in-

person discussions; and 56.5% of their ALS counterparts agreed. The first quote below is from RC, the second and third from ALS:

Please bring it back! The idea of having a limited number of people for an extended period of time freely exchanging ideas that might once have been rejected out of hand was a mind-opening experience. It forced me to think and evaluate my preconceptions; the pain of that was far outweighed by the pleasure!

I loved getting to 'talk' with so many different people from so many different backgrounds and places. I loved that we had so much in common, so many differences and so much to say to each other.

It was a forum to make these issues come alive. It triggered a lot of thought, it created a sense of community amongst those who have spent so much time being rejected by communities.

What made the small group dialogues superior? One way to evaluate these responses is to consider what may be unsatisfying about face-to-face discussion in comparison with the online variety. Sustained dialogue may be unavailable or scarce for the isolated person or workaholic, for the person whose community mistrusts controversy or whose views diverge dangerously from an apparent consensus. Or people may simply shy away from expressing disagreement in person, like these RC participants:

It enabled me to have very frank discussions about controversial issues with people who have very different views from my own. In face-to-face conversation with such people, I usually censor myself in the name of "tact."

What I liked most: Opportunity to 'talk' with others who had similar ideas — I had felt like I was almost alone in my opinions (except for my family).

...and these ALS participants:

I contributed because of the desire on my part to share some of the ideas and thoughts I have had over the years to an audience that might actually want to know them. The two worlds I live in every day are such polar opposites, I most just keep my mouth shut.

These are subjects that are sensitive and tough to bring up - so having an on-line forum for discussion...where differences don't threaten workplace or other day-to-day interactions and relationships, is really valuable.

Many of the ALS participants who described themselves as biracial or involved in an interracial relationship made it clear that they knew few other people fitting this description with whom they could discuss their experience, and that they often encountered hostility or incomprehension when they broached the subject with others. This is from a member of a 25 and Under Group:

My boyfriend and I loved this series and I'm so excited that there are so many of you out there who are willing to talk about race and culture. The United States as a society is so consumed with this problem of race, yet no one seems to want to talk about it. Everyone's too scared to step on the other's toes. I have been in a serious relationship with my boyfriend for 2 years. We are now beginning to talk of marriage. He is Nigerian American and I am... hmmm... I guess Italian American.

It may also be difficult to get an audience for views that are seen by family or friends as too predictable. For the person whose face-to-face conversation typically approaches monologue, it may be difficult to find any willing listeners at all. How many of the people who became obsessed with the impeachment were able to secure the face-to-face attention of their friends and family for the eighth or ninth iteration of their views? How many were given the deference or recognition to which they felt their expertise entitled them?

I learned to share a little better in terms of giving others some space and time.

Actually, I think I was able to converse better with people online than off, but this may in part be due to the fact that the people I see face to face locally are not all that interested in or knowledgeable about the same issues discussed in the group.

I was surprised at the relatively small interest in the fact that I am a 25 year veteran on National politics and a Clinton appointee, with other than a "party line" outlook.

In the Web Lab dialogue groups, many participants felt recognized and heeded: 42.1% of RC participants said that most or almost all of their fellow group members cared what they thought about the topics under discussion; 47.5% agreed that most or almost all of their group members wanted to understand those with whom they disagreed. More than half of RC participants (54.6%) cared "a lot" about what was happening in their dialogue groups.

Slightly fewer ALS participants (36.2%) felt most or almost all of their dialogue group members cared what they thought; and slightly more (49.5%) thought that most or almost all group members were interested in understanding those with whom they disagreed. Just under half of ALS participants (49.1%) cared "very much" about their groups while they were active.

DIALOGUE FRAMEWORK AND PARAMETERS

GROUP SIZE

Reality Check groups averaged fifty-one registrants and thirty-three contributors; but as noted earlier, many contributors dropped out after the first week or so. By week four of RC, an average of only a quarter of the original contributors — around eight individuals — posted messages. Many of the regular contributors were frustrated with the small size of their groups, complaining there were not enough people to keep a good discussion going:

The group rapidly downsized to about six or seven people. I wish there had been a way to add new recruits.

This complaint was shared by a substantial number of ALS group members, where posting levels were considerably lower than in RC; so small group size made even more difference in the level of activity. Starting with fewer active contributors — ALS groups averaged fifty-eight registrants and twenty-eight contributors — the pattern of diminishing participation was similar, if slightly accelerated. By the third and final week of ALS groups, a quarter of the original contributors — seven members per group, on average — posted messages.

Far too many members of my group never posted. It was a bit trying to keep the dialogue going with the same few people who seemed genuinely committed to keeping the lines of communication open.

Only a handful of the people who signed up actually participated. Then it became more and more secluded as time went on, and only the same few people communicated, which I feel isolated the rest even more.

But there was no absolute consensus on group size. While most of those who commented would have liked their groups to be larger, a few (mostly in RC) found them too large. The first quote below is from a RC participant; the second from an ALS group member:

I thought the size of the discussion group was a bit too large. I would have preferred to have only five or six members in the group (preferably the most vocal members). This would have made it easier to get to know each member more personally.

Your description of the groups as being small enough so that relationships could be developed and one's comments or lack there of would be noticed made me think there would be fewer people in my group than there actually were. There was less accountability...

Changing the Nature of Online Conversation, the December 1999 evaluation report on RC, concludes that “Based on current evidence, we believe that 60 registrants and 35 contributors is the maximum that a dialogue group can sustain and still create the desired level of commitment, community and respect for others.” The ALS experience has complicated that conclusion, since groups averaged fifty-eight members, approaching that “maximum”; but the twenty-eight members who on average contributed messages posted many fewer messages than RC, yielding a slew of complaints about the difficulty of keeping discussions moving with so little input.

Extrapolating ALS’s rate of active participation to a future dialogue, it would take close to seventy-five registrants to yield thirty-five active posters. But if those seventy-five participants were assembled to discuss a hot, fast-moving, and popular topic, they might post at the same level as RC members, winding up with forty-eight active contributors, a very large group.

“Sixty registrants and 35 contributors” sets as good a benchmark as any; but so many variables contribute to the level of posting, there is no reliable way to link group size to activity, other than to stipulate that a critical mass of participants is needed to generate a vibrant discussion. For the future, absent any convincing evidence that a change is needed, we recommend retaining sixty participants per group as a ceiling and continuing to track participation levels.

GROUP MODERATION OR FACILITATION

The absence of active group moderation or facilitation is a point of pride with Web Lab, as explained on the ALS Dialogue Group Philosophy page quoted earlier (see “Web Lab’s Dialogue Philosophy”). The issue is presented as a contrast between “administrators...driving the dialogue and defining what’s appropriate” and letting “each group take ownership,” leading to the emergence of “natural leaders.”

This posture resonates strongly with the don’t-fence-me-in ethos of the Internet. The 25 and Under ALS group member quoted below had been active in online discussions since “*before the Internet was really big, from the time I was 15 to 18*”:

I wouldn’t like a moderator. We’re all mature and adult enough to hold our own. I don’t like the idea of Big Brother butting in. There weren’t any problems.

Without question, the reduced anonymity and controlled, limited entry parameters of Web Lab small group dialogues entirely eliminated the “flame wars” that too often force reasonable people to retreat from Internet discussion groups on controversial topics. But short of “flaming,” online discussions can suffer from domination by a few prolific and insistent posters, with resulting attrition; from a milder lack of civility, which may discourage more timid contributors; or from an excess of passionate digression that puts off all but the most determined group members.

A “natural” moderator emerged from one ALS TV Series Group, attempting to intercede between several group members, to cool the enraged misunderstanding each one felt. The first excerpt below is from one antagonist, “Smitty,” a white man who described himself as “*once liberal and a CORE and NAACP member. Now disturbed by nature of dialogue about race.*” The message that prompted this reply had quoted a slogan from early-Sixties civil rights demonstrations in the South: “I am a man.”

I will assume you are a man. No problem. After I know you for 5 years I will be able to make a fair judgment if my assumption was correct. Now how about my white brothers and sisters ... let me know how one of them has messed with you, say, taking in the past two weeks. Please lend me accounts which you can reasonably be certain were bias-driven. Can do?

The following reply is from “Thaduke,” the “natural” moderator, an adept and personable writer who described himself as “*a thirty-four year old AfAm male... living the American Love Story with a wonderful wife and three kids...*”:

Look, Smitty. I'll still post here. I'll still talk to you. But you've gotta know that you're pissing a helluva lotta black people off with the variations of the “it's in your head” and “prove it to me” ploys. I've admitted that much of our anger is misplaced, and that some of the problem we experience we bring on ourselves. Can't you meet me in the middle, and admit that injustice to blacks does happen, and that it's a bitch, or does that make you as crazy as it makes us, and is therefore uncomfortable?

The following excerpt is from a third member of the group, “Charley,” who described himself as “*fairly close to being a clone of Bill Sims, a main character in “An American Love Story.” I'm a 47 year old African American whose wife is White. We have two children. I'm a teacher now, but I spent a large portion of my life chasing the same dream as Bill Sims; I'm a blues guitarist!*” He's responding to another group member's recommendation of the Microsoft Encarta Africana CD-ROM encyclopedia of African history and culture:

That's a Microsoft product. Microsoft is owned by a White man. Catch my drift? (You probably don't so I'll explain. Don't slam people for a lack of knowlege of African History and then refer them to a reference written by Whites. And if the Color of the Author doesn't matter. . . then this whole discussion is kind of silly, isn't it?)

“Link,” the group member who had made the recommendation wrote in her capsule bio that “*I am a spiritual person that tries to understand the unseen purpose of life,*” and in an early message, “*I love being black.*” Annoyed with the previous message, she sent the following reply:

Something in your life must have driven you to the point of madness. Need a doctor??? The product was funded by the owner of Microsoft and I think that is Bill Gates. The product was put together and researched by professors Henry

Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah of Harvard University. Why are you so silly? Oh, I guess you can not help it!!!!

Here, Thaduke, the “natural” moderator intercedes again:

I know charlley has had some...interesting...assessments to post. But calling names isn't going to get us anywhere...remember the philosophy of Weblab: talk with others, not _at_ them.... Just a hopefully helpful hint...

Later, writing to Smitty (the group’s most active poster), Link explodes in frustration:

You prejudice person, be gone “POOF”.

Together, the preceding four contributors to a single TV Series Group posted more than half the group’s messages (52%), setting the tone for that dialogue. The three men alone — in a group comprising exactly two-thirds female members — contributed 38.5% of the total messages. So while a volunteer moderator indeed emerged to mediate between those in obvious conflict, the gender-balance of contributions as opposed to registrants was not something he addressed. There is no indication that he or any other active group member took notice of it.

Evaluative responses to the ALS dialogues included many comments singling out certain participants as overbearing or combative in a way that affected their groups, such as:

I started feeling a little frustrated with a small group of people who were dominating the discussions...

But the only comment that touched on a group’s gender distribution per se was this one:

Non-participation by the male members of the group. Not a whole lot of people responded just us few.

Not being privy to the gender composition of the group, this person assumed more men were present, just not posting.

In the most active ALS group of all, a Relationship Group, activity declined sharply about ten days into the dialogue, when one member contributed repeated and insistent postings criticizing Christianity and promoting his own faith. Although a few members of the group attempted to reason with him, he was evidently upset by postings that disagreed with him:

Lots of words about warm exchanges, or agreeing to disagree. But understanding seems to have reached it's limit, even though i am pretty sure i wasn't understood. I actually went back and detailed the entire content of this discussion subject trying to figure out what happened. I learned some from doing this.

Although another group member attempted to intercede...

I'm really sorry you are feeling this way. I think you are misunderstanding that there is a difference between being heard and having someone agree with your opinion.

...the dialogue never regained its earlier momentum, as this member explained:

I'm not sure that this group needed a moderator, though one would have helped in terms of focus. Someone who could call people out of their silence, someone to pose questions. There was one group member who kept posting about his religion. A moderator could have said “that's useful, but not on point.”

An ALS group monitor describes another such dynamic, this one in a different dialogue group:

I didn't foresee a lot of problems. Personal attacks, people getting angry — I thought this could be defused by having a group identity.... If you have a community and someone starts to get out of hand, someone comes forward. The problem I didn't foresee was people losing interest in the group. One person got fairly personal: she had a right to be angry — her partner, a black man, left the family to marry a white woman, so she had feelings of abandonment and anger — and she responded by making personal attacks. The group slowed down a lot after that.

While “flaming” was completely eliminated without recourse to a facilitator, the Web Lab dialogues were only somewhat successful in dealing with more subtle obstacles to discourse. Of RC participants, 26.1% felt their group members took “very effective” action to counter group members acting “inappropriately”; another 37.5% felt they had been “somewhat effective”; and an additional 22.7% had no opinion. In ALS, the largest segment of participants (41.8%) registered no opinion. Perhaps this stems from lack of experience: a review of the ALS Dialogues digests suggests there were far fewer interventions to smooth troubled waters or mediate misunderstandings than were made by RC group members. Only 15.1% felt group interventions had been “very effective,” although an additional 31.2% found them “somewhat effective.”

There were relatively few calls for more active facilitation of the RC groups, where problems that couldn't be handled by members were reportedly rare. But in ALS, a substantial minority of group members felt more active moderation would have helped to move the discussions along; 20% of the 137 participants whose evaluation surveys included lists of the three most important things they would do to ensure the success of a future online dialogue included facilitation to check facts, pose questions, or moderate disputes:

A moderator would be good for fact-checking. People throw out facts and statistics, and you have no idea if they're true. We had a discussion about illegal immigration. I wanted to know the statistics: what percentage of crime is committed by illegal immigrants? Without facts, all opinions are equal. If you have the numbers, it's harder to dispute.

Periodically offer topics of discussion throughout the test period, but let participants go in their own direction. A constant stir(er) was needed with our group.

Add a moderator who isolated 'hot' topics and facilitated exploration of them.

Having human beings available to monitor and support small-group dialogues seems to us essential to achieving the most participatory and productive discussions. Although Web Lab leadership has suggested that monitor participation might be lessened in future...

ALS was the best test of whether monitors were useful. We were generally happy. They did the featured posts, helped identify technical issues, and helped identify potential trouble-spots and frictions.... Having one moderator to twenty-five groups is a stepping-stone to get to more than twenty-five, eventually more like a hundred.

...and that moderation carries more negative consequences than positive ones...

I have a pretty good sense that the power relationship is dramatically different between moderated and unmoderated groups.... You gain something with a moderator, but lose something too: you lose building relationships

between people as the primary thing, empowerment.... You lose spontaneity, there's not a lot of room in a moderated group to go off on a tangent.

...we disagree. As noted above, while the unmoderated group may rise to the challenge of soothing an outright conflict, Web Lab's small group dialogue experiments provide no evidence that it can effectively address more subtle negative dynamics, such as factors that discourage certain groups of members from posting messages.

For the future, we recommend employing individuals seen as group "mentors" or "facilitators. Their primary role would not be to approve messages, but to assist and stimulate the dialogue with questions and information — a more active role than ALS monitors were asked to play. Clear guidelines and training for these individuals can ensure they do not become the sort of "Big Brother" moderators disliked by both Web Lab and small group dialogue participants.

LENGTH OF DIALOGUE

RC groups were able to re-up for a second or third month of dialogue if enough group members wanted it. Within that framework, each group was self-limiting, ending only when most members were ready. ALS groups were restricted to three weeks, although as noted earlier, there were short-lived attempts by some participants to shift to other discussion environments.

The most obvious benefit to a fixed end-point was carving a limited supply of cyber-time and space out of the limitless reaches of the Internet, substituting a perception of scarcity for the pervasive under-boundedness of online dialogues. This RC participant expressed a common response:

I was grateful that there was a natural closure to the process. It gave me the sense that we should get something accomplished. Since there is an end date there should be a wrap up and so therefore there should be some sense of accomplishment. Look at what we were able to get through or whatever.

It is a truism to say that the people who liked the dialogues wanted them to last longer:

I was thoroughly satisfied with my experience. The only thing I could have wanted would have been for it to last longer.

I think that the time was too short. People work in their own time frames and we were just getting to feel comfortable in discussing things in a REAL way when time was up.

Yet few ALS participants took part in the continuation groups on OneList, and even fewer found them satisfying (they petered out after a few months, as noted under "Web Lab's Dialogue Philosophy"):

That other group, ONELIST or whatever is a mess and I unsubscribed after a day.

I joined OneList, but just a bit. That was just frantic. There were 30 to 40 messages a day; there was no way to keep up with that kind of volume. I joined for a week, and now I understand why [the ALS dialogue] was set up the way it was: We were all assigned to one smaller group and at first I thought that was limiting, you could only talk to the people in our own group. But when it became an open forum, there were so many people, so many topics. The Web gets very

tangled: someone enters in the middle, and you have no way to interpret what they're saying.

Even in RC, where many participants had a far longer time to foster group feeling and plan to continue in some form, the best-laid plans quickly disintegrated. Five RC participants started an online journal called *Dyads*, dedicated to continuing the exchange of views begun via RC. One issue was published on the Web; its contents consisted of the contributors' responses to each other's brief essays, as if embodying the frequently heard wish that "someone should publish our great e-mails." The second issue is listed as "forthcoming," but from a Web search, it appears no content has been added since October 1999.

It also appears that without a time limit, most Web Lab dialogue groups would have perished by attrition before much more time had gone by. In the average RC group, only 9% of the group's messages were contributed in the fifth week, compared to 32% in the first week. Limiting the dialogues' duration is in effect a way to redefine what might otherwise have been a problem — discussion groups' steady and inevitable attrition, despite the enduring enthusiasm of a small core group — as a parameter.

In future, we recommend continuing the policy of establishing a fixed ending date at the outset of each small group dialogue, with a case-by-case option for extending the discussion whenever participants desire it and funding permits. Our advice is to establish a benchmark for extending duration based on the number of active contributors who wish to continue. Base the calculation on the number of active contributors during the first week of a dialogue: continuation should be predicated on a request from 25% of that number, or at least six group members, whichever is larger. In other words, if thirty-two people contributed messages during the first week of a dialogue group, eight advocates would be required to extend it past its original ending-date.

WHAT CAN THE WEB LAB EXPERIMENTS TELL US ABOUT THE FUTURE OF ONLINE DIALOGUE?

THE NEED FOR COMMON GROUND IN CYBER-SPACE

In researching Web Lab's small group dialogues, we tried to determine whether these experiments actually stood out from the crowd of online-discussion options available today. The first question was whether there is in fact space for citizen dialogue on important social issues: are such discussions happening? The second had to do with the character and quality of the communication: is there a substantial difference between the "open mike" approach characterized by anonymous, "drive-by" posting, with its reputation for unloading rather than exchange; and the sort of approach Web Lab has devised, restructuring online dialogue to maximize participation, communication, and accountability?

People who want to start online discussions can choose chat rooms (online gathering-places for real-time conversation), listservs or mailing lists (in which members subscribe to an e-mail list, posting and receiving messages from other subscribers without needing to be online simultaneously), and bulletin or message boards (operated through Web sites which provide a common frame for participants' messages, enabling subscribers to read through the strings of postings and replies that make up a discussion). Services to host such forms of online group communication expand and multiply, making it is easy to set up real-time chat, a mailing list, or a bulletin board devoted to any subject from poetry slams to pet care to anti-poverty programs. Most hosting services support themselves by carrying advertising, so the service is usually free and user-friendly.

One thing we did (in early May 2000 — and if you are at all skeptical about our results, we invite you to try it yourself) was to visit several Web-based hosting services and enter the key words "interracial" or "biracial" into their search engines, to see if this would lead to anything resembling the ALS Dialogues. On ezboard <<http://www.ezboard.com>>, our search turned up one site with activity since 10 April, "Shades of Love," featuring threads ranging from "You Got Beef?" to "Poetry Lounge" and "Sexy Celebrities." Yahoo Clubs <<http://clubs.yahoo.com>> turned up 384 sites (no date parameters were available). We checked the first few that didn't sound like dating or sex sites (unlike "Interracial Swinging" or "UK Horny Interracial"), but all of these were dead in the water, with no activity that month. The hosting service Web Lab used to transfer ALS discussions, OneList, has been subsumed by eGroups, whose site contained fifty-five matches for "biracial." Most are members-only sites, one for each state, sponsored by INTERracialFamily.com and INTERracialSingl.es.com Web sites. The two eGroups sites with the most members were "Beautiful Full Figured Black Women and the White and Hispanic men who truly love and adore them" (161 members); and "adoptive couples that are seeking to adopt biracial or AA infants" (158 members). [Since this report was completed, eGroups was subsumed by Yahoo.]

An "advanced search" on Forum One <<http://www.forumone.com>>, "The Web's Search Engine for Online Forums," turned up 138 matches, almost all Yahoo Clubs, and many of these dead or moribund. Cafe Utne <<http://cafe.utne.com>>, the Web "salon" at the *Utne Reader* site, is one of the oldest and largest online discussion sites, a place to discuss articles from the *Reader* appearing on the site and other topics that interest those who register. It attempts to create a gender balance in its online "conferences" (although registration doesn't require specifying gender, or anything other than a name, e-mail address, and password). Conferences are open and can be joined in progress. When we searched Cafe Utne's topic list for "interracial" or "biracial," there were no matches. But despite coming up empty some of the time, we discovered abundant venues for those who want to find online friendships, sex

partners, and support groups — and nothing at all for those who wish to discuss interracial relationships as a social issue.

Bulletin boards and mailing lists have been a great boon to people who identify with a specific social category, organization, or taste and want easy and inexpensive ways to communicate with others like themselves. But they almost always sort citizens into categories of affinity that curtail the experience of diversity, diminishing encounters with difference that can produce the sort of winning compromise that marks a healthy polity.

It's not that the Web lacks social-issue content. Most print journals, from the *National Review* to the *Nation*, have Web sites, and online magazines, including highly visible enterprises such as *Salon* and *Slate*, are proliferating mightily. Advocacy organization and think-tank sites are available in profusion. But these sites are either the online equivalents of broadcasters, sending information and opinion one way, from publisher to readers, or else the dialogue opportunities they offer are fleeting, anonymous, and otherwise consistent with the mainstream of online discussion. None has created a framework to encourage talking *through* an issue — sustained dialogue, rather than the online equivalent of parting shots. We found nothing that approaches the Web Lab dialogues in facilitating civil, satisfying give-and-take between people who would be unlikely to ever find themselves in the same room together, be it a chat room or the four-walled variety.

In what has been called the “independent sector” — the universe of educational groups, community organizations, policy centers and think-tanks, religious institutions, helping-hand organizations, arts groups, and the many other outfits and alliances that exist for public benefit rather than profit — there is a strong consensus that our society needs creative antidotes to the erosion of social structures that make a commonwealth out of a disparate collection of individuals and special interests. Many Internet experts, like the interviewee quoted below, have faith that the Internet can provide such antidotes in cyber-space, a generous context offering conjunctions and linkages galore, whatever we desire:

The things that people do with each other — all of them will eventually have an online equivalent. It's no mystery, just taking what you'd want from a social institution and creating it on the Internet.

Web Lab has begun to do precisely this, creating an online equivalent of common ground. Its dialogue experiments have been sufficiently encouraging to warrant serious research and development. All that's needed to make this happen is support, which must come from individuals and institutions whose leadership comprehends the need to create protected noncommercial space on the Internet, and shares Web Lab's commitment to the citizen dialogue that can take place there.

THE ONLINE EQUIVALENT OF DEEP SPACE NINE

The “Star Trek” spin-off “Deep Space Nine” (DS9) is set on a space station between warring sectors. Like all the “Star Trek” franchises, this one is staffed with the sci-fi counterpart of a United Nations. Elite humanoids of every description work side-by-side at powerful computers in evident peace and harmony. High-tech translation devices remove whatever impediments to understanding might survive crew members' rigorous training in matters both technical and cultural at Starfleet Academy. Though their differences are great, DS9's crew members always manage to talk their way through them by the end of the episode, restoring the harmony required to defeat an inexhaustible supply of common enemies.

Just like the Web Lab Dialogues.

Skeptical? Here are the conclusions we have formed about Web Lab's small group dialogue model after reviewing the RC and ALS experiences:

- The dialogues attracted what was in many ways an elite group, but its elite character was not the product of exclusion. Rather, the Web Lab dialogues attracted socially conscious, public-spirited, articulate and understanding individuals who wanted to talk about issues of social concern with others who value civil discourse. The contrast between RC and ALS dialogues' composition proves that the desire to take part in these citizen forums cuts across lines of gender and class: RC's active participants were 70% male and 89% white; and ALS's were 80% female and 53% people of color.
- Each participant was drawn to the dialogues for his or her own reasons — not merely to be part of *any* conversation, rather conversation as a means to personal and social ends. While they were there, it was not the place that held them (no one had any particular loyalty to the PBS Web site, for example), but their hopes for what could be accomplished there.
- Surrounded by a universe of contention and combat, dialogue participants modeled another way to disagree, understand, and work out accommodations. The temporary social structures they created demonstrated what is possible when people of goodwill collaborate.
- The dialogues were structured with the help of cutting-edge software, accomplishing many tasks that would otherwise have been both tedious and tremendously complicated to perform. Nevertheless, human complexities and dilemmas arose that required hands-on human intervention to resolve. Ongoing improvement of software makes it increasingly possible to automate things like registration and assignment to groups, leaving a focused area of the dialogues for human intervention: reviewing content, resolving disputes, and providing information and encouragement.
- Participants were protected by the dialogues' structure, and its ethos of mutual respect and conscious commitment from outside incursions such as flame wars. Although they operated freely elsewhere in cyber-space, hostile forces were unable to lob firepower into Web Lab dialogues while racing past. More than any physical barrier, the ethos of the small group dialogues shielded the participants.
- The fellow-feeling and connection created through the dialogues was known from the outset to be temporary. Although participation had value in and of itself, its primary value was as a learning experience, helping participants improve their thinking and writing skills, understand the dynamics of dialogue, communicate productively with people very different from themselves, and envision ways to apply what they learned to their actions in the material world.

DS9's cast of characters is under no illusion that in working out social arrangements and ways of communicating they are creating a lasting community. Rather, it is understood that they are making the best contributions of which transients are capable, spreading the ethos of democratic dialogue where no one has gone before.

THE RIGHT METAPHOR

Because the Internet cannot be adequately grasped as a physical entity, metaphors are more than ordinarily essential to understanding it. The wrong metaphor creates a damaging misimpression, because it implies claims for cyber-space that cyber-space cannot satisfy. The Web Lab dialogue experiments cannot accurately be said to have created *community*, though this potential does exist.

The word “community” has been put through its paces in this epoch of millennial social anxiety — the “intelligence community,” “the homeless community,” and the “business community” are all commonplace usages — but it gets a particularly hard workout in cyberspace. The fashion is to elide the differences between communities in the material world and Internet-based ones, as in this definition by Amy Jo Kim, a Web designer who teaches at Stanford:

[I]n terms of their social dynamics, physical and virtual communities are much the same. Both involve developing a web of relationships among people who have something meaningful in common, such as a beloved hobby, a life-altering illness, a political cause, a religious conviction, a professional relationship, or even simply a neighborhood or town.⁹

“Community” conveys a pleasant, optimistic air, conferring warmth on interest-groups that might otherwise impart a chill: consider the “defense community” versus the “munitions industry” or “weapons cartel.” The sociologist Raymond Williams remarked on this quality:

Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, *etc.*) it seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.¹⁰

There is little doubt that online communications have extended the possibility of community-building, effectively dissolving impediments such as distance and access to capital that make it difficult for those sharing strong common interests to meet and collaborate by other means. But we resist attaching “community” to every fragile commonality or evanescent encounter, or else what language will be left to describe groups of people with a sustained, mutual commitment and recognized accountability?

The telescoped time-frame and temporary nature of the Web Lab dialogue experiments suggests a better metaphor than the elastic idea of “community.” RC and ALS had a great deal in common with other intentionally ad hoc forms of social organization such as the educational summer camps sponsored by labor unions and religious organizations, or the Chautauqua adult education movement begun after the Civil War. As with such adult education activities, RC and ALS participants were drawn from those members of society inclined by education, natural curiosity, or life-circumstances to engage with questions of social moment. Self-improvement and social improvement were seen as necessary companions to citizenship.

Citizenship education efforts like the original Chautauqua were perceived to have social impact through a ripple-effect. Individuals with the drive to engage in civic dialogue came together, added to their learning, discovered affinities and common aims, selectively formed bonds, and returned to their own communities (of geography and/or interest) better-prepared for discussion and action toward social change, as described by this RC participant:

What we really must bear in mind is that we all carry our ideas outside of the forum, so when we change our minds or those of others inside here we potentially are changing the minds of a dozen, or hundreds, outside the forum.

9 Amy Jo Kim, *Community Building on the Web* (Berkeley: Peachpit Press, 2000), p. x.

10 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 66.

The most important thing is getting people to discuss the issues at all. The rest comes naturally.

We concur with the assessment of one online dialogue expert we interviewed, that the Web Lab small group dialogue model's best uses are in focused, high-quality, catalytic dialogues:

The level of commitment [Web Lab] asks from the community is not a mainstream pitch. It doesn't have mass appeal for participants: most people will not offer that level of commitment; they'll express their opinions on the fly, but not in a sustained way. These people self-select... They have the luxury of drawing from a very narrow group of people — PBS, NPR, new articles about this kind of thing. Though the method is revolutionary, the impact is not revolutionary. It's like going to a church group to ask for volunteers versus going to a corporate business meeting. It's ideal for the purpose; but to get a wider group to come and learn, I'm not sure how much outreach you can do. On the other hand, if you can get fifty people to discuss an issue and 50,000 people see it, it's pretty inspiring, pretty valuable.

In essence, the Web Lab dialogues to date have helped move a building-block of community toward completion. It remains to create the infrastructure that can support the creation and replication of online community.

BUILDING THE FUTURE OF ONLINE DIALOGUE

Building community is a dynamic project, always in process and never complete: use it or lose it. If the ties that bind are not constantly exercised, examined, and renewed, what remains is the shell of community without the substance. Without question, communities are being built online. But in any environment, community-building must be sustained, conscious, and participatory; a "community" that lasts a month is an event, not a state of association.

Any real community contains levels and types of participation: some people are organizers; others look after the common welfare, maintaining social infrastructure; pioneers plunge in to innovate; conservatives resist, afraid of losing what works for them; and throngs gather on the sidelines, dabbling, observing, often preoccupied with other concerns.

Certainly these dynamics were present in Web Lab's dialogue experiments. Both RC and ALS created boosters, bashers, and bunches of on-again off-again players. Anyone with organizing experience in physical communities (as opposed to virtual ones) will be familiar with the dialogues' funnel-shaped pattern of participation: an energetic organizing effort resulting in a first enthusiastic flush of engagement which over time narrows to core group of committed members.

Web Lab's leadership has seen the sequence of dialogue experiments as one long learning curve for the organization:

We'll keep learning for a long time. That's the whole methodology and style of Web Lab... We always need humility about how much we know and how much there is to learn.

What has been missing thus far is the right framework for participants to learn in the same way, applying what has been discovered in one dialogue experiment to subsequent experiences, constantly improving the skills and reach of democratic discourse.

Nearly 70% of both RC and ALS registrants indicated a "high" or "very high" interest in online dialogue. But evidently the necessary impetus to act on that interest must be the

opportunity to engage with a topic that matters to the individual. The vast majority of participants to date have been recruited through topical interest, by seeing or hearing a broadcast or reading an article about the subject that mentions the dialogues. Although Web Lab has kept in touch with small group dialogue participants, informing them of new opportunities to take part, only twenty-four of the 1,557 people who registered for ALS said they had participated in "P.O.V." Salon or RC. (This number probably reflects some degree of under-reporting, because not everyone filled out the relevant section of the registration form; but over 800 registrants provided answers to a question on modem speed immediately adjacent in that same section, so it's safe to assume the question was not simply overlooked by hundreds of former small group dialogue participants.) In other words, almost all of those who had joined previous dialogues in order to discuss a varied series of independent documentaries or a presidential impeachment were not drawn to repeat the experience by the chance to talk about cross-cultural relationships.

THE NEED FOR A CENTER

Treating single topics serially is clearly not the best way to advance Web Lab's goal of "building support among opinion leaders, industry leaders and the general public for the notion that our society needs a vigorous 'public sector' on the Web which should be nurtured, supported, and protected."

A critical need now is to actually construct the space station (to return to our earlier metaphor), the cyber-Chautauqua — the place where dialogues can dock for a time, where participants can be encouraged to linger, seek other involvements, initiate discussions, and take on important social roles. One of Web Lab's leaders shared a vision of the group's next stage of development:

We need a site that builds its own community; it should be more ongoing, with changing topics, a place to go with issues, to tie something into short-term, major issues. We haven't even begun to explore the possibilities.

A "site that builds its own community" would require employing Web Lab's own server, as well as its proprietary software. Using Web Lab's small group dialogue parameters of controlled, limited entry and reduced anonymity, it could be structured this way:

- A core "community of practice" recruited from among former Web Lab dialogue participants and others committed to citizen dialogue could be involved in planning and design of the center. Core group members would also be able to participate in members-only dialogues about issues especially critical to the community.
- A cadre of dialogue "mentors" or "facilitators" could receive special Web Lab training in non-intrusive facilitation techniques that support dialogue groups without imposing. They would be involved in the internal dialogues of the "community of practice," and in satellite dialogues, as well as being available to assist visiting nonprofit organization-sponsored dialogues, as described below.
- Satellite dialogues could be "docked" at the site, winding down at predetermined end-points or evolving into new topics at participants' discretion. Satellites could focus on general subject-areas (such as electoral politics or race relations), activating dialogue groups by informing core community members and conducting online outreach efforts whenever a specific topic of keen interest arises (such as new campaign financing legislation or the publication of a controversial study on race).

- Small group dialogues sponsored by cooperating nonprofit organizations could “visit” the site for fixed terms of several weeks, with Web Lab providing the structure, framework, and technical assistance for a fee.
- Baseline funding would be needed from philanthropic sources committed to a “vigorous ‘public sector’” in cyber-space. But so long as clear distinctions were maintained between the center’s core mission of citizen dialogue and activities that generated an income stream, Web Lab could also earn income by licensing its software to for-profit enterprises, such as publications and broadcasters wishing to expand audience interaction or marketing agencies wishing to conduct online focus groups.

With this self-creating community site as a model, others supportive of citizen dialogue could spin off their own themes and variations — perhaps with the long-term goal creating of a chain of such cyber-space stations. For now, though, it would be a considerable achievement to secure support for the first such center for online citizen dialogue.

E-COMMERCE AND E-CULTURE

The Internet has become a mass medium, like newspapers or television. Naturally, at every step of the way, enterprising entrepreneurs have sought opportunities to profit from this phenomenon. Markets are powerful social mechanisms, driving new technologies, creating new applications for existing ones. They prize innovation and ingenuity, stimulating a movable feast of human creativity. Where money is to be made, markets are unbeatable instruments for the distribution of goods and services.

But there is one thing markets absolutely cannot do, and that is to ensure the distribution of social goods whose value is not reckoned in cash. In the material world, markets have not been able to house the homeless, nurse the indigent, feed the undernourished, or stop the pollution of air, soil, and water.

The United States is the only nation on this planet that allowed its airwaves to be exploited for commercial gain before creating policies to assert a public interest. As the dominance of commercial broadcasting here demonstrates, markets have not been able to carve out broadcast spectrum and resources to give divergent voices and disenfranchised communities outlets proportional in any sense to the access available to those who can afford to buy airtime. There is absolutely no sound evidence to support the proposition that the story of cyber-space will turn out differently from the story of broadcasting unless decisive action is taken at a significant scale.

Three possible courses seem available:

- The public sector could act. Governments could introduce regulation and support programs to create protected public space on the Internet — the equivalent of national parks in cyber-space — providing resources for the time and materials needed to animate this domain. Support mechanisms might include publicly financed structures of funding and decision-making roughly parallel to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and PBS or the National Endowment for the Arts and its state and local counterparts; or mandated set-asides; or a tariff on e-commerce that supports public-interest apparatus.
- The commercial sector could act. Private enterprise, through voluntary philanthropies and community service programs, could “tax” itself to create public space, voluntarily supporting the costs of creating and maintaining public-interest sites the way public-spirited businesses have sometimes done in their own home communities, substantially underwriting public facilities and programs. (Of course, many such philanthropic acts

have been encouraged by public policy, notably through the creation of tax incentives to charitable giving.)

- Or the future could continue to rest with insurgent activists. The John Muirs and Frederick Olmsteads of cyber-space — that is, Web Lab and groups like it — would have to settle for the permanent marginality we described early in this report, the equivalent of public service announcements on commercial television, or the areas designated for religious and advocacy groups in major airports and shopping malls — and the rest of us would have to suffer the consequences.

We started this report with a question that bears restating: will the Web's commercial potential push democratic dialogue out of the picture, following the model of commercial broadcasting? Once asked, it gives rise to an even more urgent question: what can be done to prevent this?

What is your answer?