

Mike Leggett, Forum Moderator

This report outlines:

- aspects of the design adopted for this initial step by the Australia Council to explore the democratic potential of cyberspace;
- operational aspects of the On-Line Forum;
- the strategy employed, and other possible strategies that could be adopted in the future.

Design of the On-Line Forum site

In cyberspace, no one can hear you scream. No chance of being heard if you're shouting, or just talking.

On-line forum's are as old as the internet, but really were so named by the early commercial networks, keen to create a new market place. A more accurate term for these on-line groupings - seminars - also describes the academics who are most experienced with this quite unusual form of communication. This is a form that is not only sightless, but also lacks the cues and clues available via voice communication. Indeed, one has only to visit one of the thousands of IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels and sites to see how awkward and coy most users are with this kind of open forum structure - citizen band radio is the font of wisdom by comparison.

Most web sites, certainly if there are any unusual demands for interaction with them, beyond clicking from one link to another, requires not only substantial publicity but also encouragement and reassurance to people to participate. At this evolutionary stage, web sites are like so many linked theme parks, where the ability to suspend disbelief is as necessary as the need to click-on to the next link. And the next. And the next.....

Even for the 'serious' user, the Web has many predatory spiders just vying for your attention and constantly distracting and obscuring the view through to that authoritative, updated and utterly reliable source site.

The good thing about the Web is that it probably has a better chance of building a community of communities than an earlier contender, community television, ever did. Reaching these communities however, helping to build them, requires completely new, and probably very long term, methods. It may be thought, for instance, that with the access to resources that the business community has that there exist some very mature and productive on-line fora. However, one such site I chanced upon run by a leading firm of international business consultants, contained five two-line exchanges spread over a period of four months.

It is no coincidence that of those who participated in this the initial Ozco On-Line Forum were all drawn from the professions who have utilised internet technology as a matter of course, for many years: teachers, academics and journalists. This is not only about access to technology but also about the need and the skills to develop an internet sensibility and build an internet culture.

The Public's View

- Visibility of the on-line Forum and its relation to the 'live' Forum, particularly for people without experience of the Web, was probably not presented in the best way. Recommendation: review the on-line and off-line publicity strategy for the on-line Forum, in particular by linking from other sites operated by individuals and organisations who are part of the Forum's potential constituency.
- To the uninitiated or inexperienced, encountering the Ozco page for the first time did not make an obvious connection to the Forum. Though it may be considered that a What's New button provides an obvious link, to a newcomer the whole experience would be 'new'. Recommendation: that the Forum series should have its own button on the title page.
- A New Contribution, when posted, appeared by itself. This may have been confusing. It required another button to be pressed (Latest), to show the 10 messages that preceded it. Recommendation: display each New Contribution with the preceding ten messages.
- The display of messages and the Sort orders were not clear: Today sorted from old messages to new according to that day's date; Latest, last ten from new to old; results of a Search sorted old to new. Recommendation: review the range of options and their function within the Forum site.
- Whilst browsing messages opening a new window in the browser and before pressing Respond, would help with reference back to other messages (by toggling back and forth), and would help with composing a response. Recommendation: launch a new browser window when pressing Respond or New Topic.
- Any changes to messages by the Moderator need to be flagged (with time/date?) so that readers are aware that the blue pencil has been used. Recommendation: provide a symbol adjacent to message which indicates kind of moderation applied, from typo correction through to deletion.

Moderator's View

The technical functioning of the Forum and its associated database worked well, (with some exceptions noted below) and was an ingenious solution to some of the problems associated with a forum and its moderation. The moderator encountered a few difficulties:

- the Edit window was awkward to use and employed the skills of the dentist rather than the text or copy editor, having to work through a slot on a very small part of the submitted message. It would be preferable to be able to view several lines of text rather than part of just one line.
- It was not possible to edit para breaks into text.
- Command buttons were placed on three different pages where it would have been preferable to have them all on just one page.
- It should be possible to Archive ALL messages so that 'appeals' against the Moderator could be adjudicated if necessary.
- For security, if the moderation process continues, then a password should be required at the entry point to the database.

Recommendation: revise design of database structure and layout to accommodate these modifications.

'Are We Producing Too Many Arts Graduates?' On-Line Forum: Operational

The basic strategy and operation of the first on-line forum had been determined by the time I commenced on the project. A meeting two days before the Forum date determined the order and content of related Web site pages that I had proposed. These were designed to not only make complete newcomers feel able to join the Forum but also enable the more experienced user to move quickly to the site of the action.

Part of one of the pages explained the facilitating role of the Moderator as to:
"generally assist participants to make the discussion productive by acting as the 'neutral' Chair. The moderator will identify particular topics as they emerge and contribute messages to the Forum with the purpose of moving certain issues toward some degree of greater clarity, if not resolution." The on-line forum also included a facility to enable the Moderator to 'edit' or 'delete' any contributions deemed to be off the topic or abusive.

The following points illustrate some of the operational aspects that emerged during the 27 advertised hours when the Forum site was open for the reading and lodging of contributions.

- the early Web browsers, even on different computer platforms, were designed to interpret HTML coding identically. But in the last year or so there has been some drifting away from previously established standards. When the On-Line Forum first opened it was realised that certain functions of the site were not operating correctly using the Microsoft Explorer browser. Adjustments were made to the coding of pages on both the Ozco site and the Macquarie site, (where the database for managing the Forum was sited) and the errors were quickly corrected.
- a mistakenly posted contribution was deleted, and later on the first day, a series of reports from Michael Dwyer a freelance journalist attending the live Forum in Perth were successfully sub-edited, and thus demonstrated that the system for managing the Forum worked most effectively.
- this ad hoc but effective mode of delivering the live Forum to the On-Line Forum led to one contributor (Peter Andersen) drawing premature conclusions from this third party account (see more later).
- one contributor felt that the range of research done into the issue of arts education and employment had not been wide or thorough enough and therefore it was difficult to maintain a sensible discussion. In my role as Moderator I proposed to find and post some information about TAFE and private college statistics, as it was clear from the references available on the site and in several publications that the statistical basis being used referred to tertiary and 'special' courses only. If it was an industry that was being discussed, it was suggested, then the whole picture should be examined not only that part which trained and employed tertiary graduates.
- Curiously, there was not a single incidence of an 'outsider' contribution, apart from one which actually arrived by snail mail and I keyed into the Forum. The discussion was conducted amongst people who probably new one another and had covered the ground before. There was not a single 'intervention' from a radical perspective, (such as occurred on the floor of the live Forum from Perth undergraduates), even though several groups who could have represented such arguments were not only directly informed about the Forum but also are part of groups who frequently use the internet for such lobbying purposes. Did they feel the purpose of the Forum topic was a tautology, or was it the moderated bulletin board approach that they spurned?

Occasional and Unexplained Lapses in operation

4.4.98

Limited editing to a fixed number of words beyond which the cursor refused to move!

7.4.98

The Forum database was inaccessible to the Moderator and though this meant un-moderated messages might appear on the site in the two hours it was open, it was decided to continue with the session.

8.4.98

The Forum database was neither accessible to the Moderator, or to the public via the Forum button. Though the programmer Mark Gregory re-started the database it was found not to be working and following a conversation with the project leader, Mirielle Eid, the session was abandoned. The following day Mark was unable to explain why this had occurred.

9.4.98

The buttons marked Respond and New Message adjacent to the posted messages were found not to be functioning. This was rectified thirty minutes later during which time a message was posted by the Moderator advising visitors to use the active button at the bottom of the page.

At various times during the hours the Forum operated, there were moments when connections were very slow. It is not known whether this was due to traffic congestion at the Ozco site or at the Macquarie host. Generally though, response times were average for a medium speed modem connection.

Strategy employed and other possible strategies

The Forum sets out to achieve what the Chair, Margaret Seares has described as; "an exchange of ideas among artists, artworkers, academics, and any individual or organisation with a desire to contribute to national debate about the future of the arts in Australia."

The strategy employed in this the first of the Ozco on-line fora was appropriately cautious but equally, approached the vexed question of moderation with imagination. The main advantage of the Moderated HTML Bulletin Board approach from a management perspective is that whilst messages are immediately visible they can be edited or deleted at any appropriate time, from any internet computer. (The Forum was at times effectively managed from a home site using a relatively slow modem connection.)

From a user advantage perspective, any internet computer with WWW browser capability (such as can be used in many public libraries), can be utilised to read and write to the Forum - no personal internet account is required. (Though this does limit the correspondent to the Forum rather than also being able to communicate directly (privately) with other correspondents and thus accelerate the networking of interest groups.

Whilst the use of a reporter, (contributing to the Forum from the live Forum for instance), proved to be an unexpected enhancement to the flow of information from Perth, such ad hoc reporting did lead to misunderstanding between Forum participants. Sources that form the basis of the on-going discussion need to be as reliable as possible. Whilst third party observation can be useful in this context where invited speakers are in effect, initiating the discussion, the words delivered to the on-line Forum need to be their words and not an interpretation or version of them. It would be relevant in this context for instance, to utilise means of delivering actual words verbatim to the screen using speech to screen technology. These can be broken into Subject chunks by the Moderator such that the database search engine can operate efficiently and such that interaction between participants can occur with clarity to other readers and writers. Verbatim reports such as in this example, could likewise be sub-edited for clarity at a later and more convenient time.

The research element of moderation is both an advantage but inevitably a drain. The one contributor who felt that the range of research done into the issue of arts education and employment had not been wide or thorough enough was in some ways cutting the ground away of the original and vital research that had been achieved with the resources available. I feel there is a way of countering such reactions by introducing to participants the sources of the kind of data they might find useful. In pursuing the point that TAFE and private colleges had been excluded from the statistics quoted during the Forum, I spent some time phoning various government departments but at the point it seemed that useful data might be obtained, (from the National Centre for Vocational Education Research in Adelaide), the end of the Forum had been reached. During an on-line forum which has a finite durational span, input from research specialists invited to contribute require first the input of a research specialist who can find these people!

Other forum strategies that may be considered include: Internet Relay Chat. This is a wholly 'live' medium and requires people to have their own internet connection with specific software to enable them to be in a specific place (internet location) at a specific time. It is difficult to moderate, open to interruption from outside and for this reason amongst others, much cherished by 'organic anarchists'.

List Servers likewise require an individual internet email address but can be effectively moderated. The delay in any moderation process would tend not to be noticed as contributions to the topics (threads) on the list are stockpiled along with other email for collection on a regular, maybe daily basis (for most of us who do not have the luxury of a constant on-line connection!) The main advantage is that subscribers to the list (who register to be posted) can enter the forum at times which are convenient to them - when they have the time to

read the accumulated texts and possibly compose a response or contribution. Most lists have many more readers than they do participants so it also has the advantage of keeping people informed about 'what's goin' down', like a cheap press release.

But the main disadvantage of list servs is that essentially they are private discussions between mostly defined communities who are already each on-line.

Conclusion

It is my feeling that the Moderated HTML Bulletin Board is the most effective way to go to achieve the Chair's objectives. Not only does its advantages need to be further developed, but its disadvantages reconsidered.

The disadvantage of moderated sessions is that they have timed periods of operation which may not be convenient for many potential contributors. The options then are:

- to not subject contributions to moderation at all, and use the cover of a disclaimer;
- to moderate the messages at regular intervals but to otherwise to leave them there between intervals, and use the cover of a disclaimer;
- to store messages for moderation before release to the Forum. This is clearly not a good idea if some semblance of a dynamic is to be retained.

Dynamics I feel to be the key to the "exchange of ideas" that the Chair seeks.

- What is the Forum visitor gaining from participation in the process?
- Is that process enjoyable, stimulating, even pleasurable?
- Is the process in fact tedious, like wading around in mud with people you don't really want to talk to?
- Or is the process part of a person's working life and therefore 'to be worked at'?
- Do the participants who are exchanging ideas all recognise that making culture, as an artist, is part of a working day?
- By participating in the Forum, are our views being shared, watched or just exploited? Are we part of a policy formulation process or are we just being market researched?
- What are the outcomes?

It is with these kinds of questions in minds that many people arrive at truly interactive web sites such as the Ozco On-Line Forum, which accept input rather than simply interaction.

But it should be remembered that in just the same way as happens at a live forum, there are many more listeners than there are speakers, then there needs to be provision for those who wish to follow more closely the issues as they are being debated.

For those who are on-line but find the Web tedious, email bulletins or a Forum Digest might be prepared and emailed to them at regular intervals. Replies via email can then be transferred to the database (and so the Web Forum) where the sub-editing function of the Moderator is so valuable in sorting contributions for later ease of retrieval, a function not available using other forum techniques. For those who wish to participate but have no access at all to the internet, these Forum Digests can be produced in hard copy form for mailout and press release purposes.

In many ways, because the Ozco On-Line Forum site has the potential of providing so much more than most other sites, many kinds of questions are raised in the first place. I feel it is from this viewpoint that Input Sites such as the Ozco Forum could become, need very careful and long-term preparation.