

OUT OF THE BAG: Even cat lovers can join their own online communities to swap feline tales



# Salute P2P, the wired world's next supernova

**O**NCE THE exclusive territory of spotty, short-sighted university students, lonely singles and niche groups of certified weirdos, the "online community" is now being hailed as the future of the Internet.

Whatever your tastes, no matter how obscure, I defy you to find a subject for which there isn't a chat room, a website, an online club or a UserGroup that satisfies your need to commune with like-minded souls. If cats are your thing, there are literally thousands of sites to choose from and even a Yahoo! "Cats & Kittens" Club to swap fur-ball stories.

Or maybe you would prefer to join the 1,778 members of the "Boy Scout Collectors Society"? Personally, I thought collecting boy scouts was illegal, but there you go.

We humans have a tribal need to surround ourselves with like-minded people. It's a frightening compulsive need, one marketers have recently woken up to with a plethora of "community sites" springing up.

Handbag.com is Boots' way of expanding the relationship with their key target market — women. ThirdAge.com and Vavo.com cater for those of us approaching our twilight years. While QueerCompany.com is for people wanting to attract others with more than just similar minds.

I could go on but the point is that if we identify with a site or if we join an online club, we are far more likely to buy from it, which in turn gets a "Bingo" from the marketing department and a "K-ching" from accounts.

Interestingly, this is exactly how the Internet began. Apart from a brief solo stint as a US Government secrets trading network, it was first used as the way for academic staff and students around the world to communicate, swap papers, or just hang out in cyberspace together.

With the advent of the Netscape browser in the mid-Nineties, the Internet, like the big bang that started the Universe, exploded.

As the commercial world hijacked the Internet that initial sense of academic community was thought to be lost. But not for long — now we are seeing the formation of little galaxies in Cyberspace, clusters of communities that have gravitated

around common interests. The online community is back and it is about to get an enormous shot in the arm from a new wave of technology set "to be the biggest thing since the Internet itself", to paraphrase a host of self-acclaimed Web gurus. The technology is known as "peer-to-peer".

Peer-to-peer technology, or P2P, is simply the ability to connect one PC directly to another using the Internet without going via a website, and yet this simple idea has already started to transform the way we use the Web. It enabled Napster to become the world's biggest online community with more than 50 million members in months; almost one million people a week currently download software that

enables them to join these P2P communities.

The signs are there that this technology will be enormous. In fact, while the four horses of the e-apocalypse were in the midst of their ride through the technology stock market a couple of months ago, P2P was the only area that venture-capital firms were still falling over themselves to invest in.

Yet the doom-and-gloom merchants are still trying to have their way, for we are now starting to see headlines such as "Is P2P Dead?" and

"P2P: The Next Big Fizz". Don't believe a word of it. It's so easy to be an Internet sceptic at the moment — and these people will miss out on a golden opportunity.

In another age they would have laughed at Alexander Graham Bell and then wouldn't have even picked up the damn telephone when it did start to ring, probably because they were fumbling around in the dark having told Edison his shiny glass bulbs were a rather dim idea.

Forming communities is at the heart of the human psyche. It will also be at the heart of the Internet. Because P2P facilitates this very process so easily it will play an integral part in the online communities of the future.

Rather than "the next black hole", I predict P2P will be the next supernova of the wired world and I'm afraid the P2P sceptics are simply living on another planet.

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