# Foreword

Sitting at an orange-glowing terminal with the harsh prairie wind whistling outside the nearly-empty, drafty computer laboratory in the winter of 1976, I was introduced to computer-mediated communication. I was connected to the PLATO system that interconnected a handful of mainframes and thousands of attached terminals around the world. It wasn't long before I was linking my students at the University of Illinois via this system to those in an analogous class at the University of Hawaii. We used "pnotes, notesfiles, and talkomatic" – among the many early forerunners of what came to be known generically as email, discussion groups, and live group chat.

As I type today, winter is bearing down on the prairie again, but in front of me are dual LCD monitors. The document fills one screen; the other is filled with Google Wave, pulsing with updates creating ever-widening discussion waves every few seconds. From its inception as Arpanet, it was clear that the vibrant, thriving Internet is all about human interaction through forms of discussion. And, it's not just brief emails and 140-character twitter tweets, but deep and broad engagement through synchronous and asynchronous modes; text and video; audio and graphic; small and large groups.

We seem to know very well the architecture, the electronics, the physical aspects of this network of networks that we call the Internet. Yet, even though the first message was sent over the Arpanet on October 29th in 1969 (Kline, 1969), more than 40 years ago, we seem to know far less about the billions of discussions that have ensued in the intervening decades. What works well; what doesn't? What special ways might we consider in using discussions that don't immediately come to mind? What media can enable richer communication, in what situations? How has discussion impacted learning, careers, lives, and societies? The essence of the Internet is not in the electronics; rather it comes from these connections between and among people, and the ways in which people find to efficiently and effectively connect with one another online.

And, that's the genius of this book. The editors, Lenny Shedletsky and Joan Aitkin, have pulled together a mesmerizing collection of case studies of online discussion. The range of these cases is amazing – from college classes to support groups; from the virtual world of Second Life to live text in sports; from gender focused support discussions to chatting in online gaming; from back channeling to deep discussions in the democratic process of Singapore; from text-based to multimedia modes; and much more. These case studies reveal the power of the Internet. They capture the range and passion of social connectedness online. The cases point to the potential to foster public political discourse, pursue deeply meaningful interactions, and, yes, even to be a connected sports fan on the road in smart phone mode.

Those who seek to see the future of the Internet will do well to read these case studies. While the technologies will change over time, the essence will remain the same – people reaching out to people,

interacting and engaging one another in an ever-expanding, ever-deepening range of discussion online. And where that leads us, I predict, will be very important in determining our collective future.

## REFERENCE

Kline, C.S. (1969). First-arpanet-imp-log.jpg [Web]. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:First-arpanet-imp-log.jpg

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