

The New Internet Commons

“The Commons,” a term popularized in 1968 by ecologist Garrett Hardin, has come to mean the cultural and natural resources accessible to (and owned and managed by) all members of a society for individual and collective benefit. Today, access to internet, like water and air, has become a crucial resource for economic and social equality and wellbeing. Despite its utopian origins, ownership and control over the management of the internet is largely found in the hands of a few multi million dollar corporations. This series of conversations aims broadly to understand the early unravelings of this utopian vision, the state of the world wide web today, the impact it has on (and possibilities it offers) for more marginalized communities, and the opportunities for regaining control over and restructuring our networked world and digitally mediated value systems that new conceptual, material and digital technologies offer.

This proposal could manifest as a series of events under the overarching theme of The New Internet Commons. The motivation for a series rather than a one-off mega event is to ensure that the conversation is sufficiently focused to be productive, differentiated from recent all encompassing events on the decentralization of the web, and to give voice and space to specific communities and topics. The questions of potential formats and the at the end is thus related to both to the Queer Histories event and the series more broadly.

I: Tom Jennings: Queercore, Cyberpunk and Networked Communities¹

This event will focus on the past, present and future of queer communities online.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

We want to make sure to be inclusive of queer communities of color and to touch on how race and class intersect with queer communities online. The invitees, in so far as they extend beyond Tom Jennings, should reflect this desire.

TENTATIVE DATES

Early to mid November (ideally between Nov. 7th and 11th, though this depends on Tom J, Tom L, David E schedules, at a minimum). Or December 6th - 15th, again pending schedules. (Nov. 8 and December 6 are ideal)

¹ Or... Queercore Society Hacking with Tom Jennings

FORMAT

We currently envision the event as being primarily focused on Tom Jennings, with a performance followed by a (“duet” style) Q+A or panel. To bring in a contrasting voice, we would like to invite another guest (e.g. Jack Harrison-Quintana) who could act a moderator or participate in a discussion on stage with Jennings about queer culture and the internet following his performance/talk, though we will likely have to offer this guest some space to present their own work and context as well.

Another possible format, suggested by Tom Leaser, a colleague of Jennings at Calarts and Navel programming committee member, is for Jennings to give an extended solo lecture about topics relevant to a panel of 4-5 guests.

In both cases, I would introduce the general idea of the series, tying the event into a broader context and David Ertel would present some of his own research / work on early and current queer communities online by way of an introduction to Tom Jennings’ pioneering work developing a protocol for networking computer bulletin boards as well as his foundational role in the Queercore scene.

DAVID ERTEL’S (RELEVANT) BACKGROUND

I became interested in Tom Jennings’ work when I began researching early queer communities on the internet. I wanted to see if I could access archives of early communications online in queer chatrooms and message boards and use that as material for a series of artworks. Part of the idea was to analyze and visualize queer language using quantitative methods in order to understand the language queer people used online to define themselves and their community.

But a larger question I had was, on behalf of the queer community at large, how did we get here? To a world where every interaction in queer spaces online is captured and monetized? Was there, or is there, a better way for queers to form communities online? What can the current movements towards decentralizing the web learn from Jennings’s work on the early Internet as well as the politics of queer and punk culture?

INTRODUCING TOM JENNINGS

In the course of my research I quickly encountered the varied work of Tom Jennings. He created FidoNet in 1984, a “totally decentralized, easy-to-use, low-cost” message board technology”. A couple years later he created an internet service provider called The Little Garden, which radically lowered the cost of internet access for the general public. Both projects were born out of an anti-authoritarian spirit that Jennings lived by in other areas of his life.

In the late 1980s, Jennings co-founded the magazine Homocore, which was one of the first queer punk zines. The writer Dennis Cooper, writing in 1990 for the Village Voice described queercore zines as a reaction against the mainstreaming of queer culture. “These zines share a hatred for political correctness, yuppification, and all things bourgeois, especially within gay culture... Though he’d probably deny it, Jennings’s motor-mouthed editorializing makes him the unofficial conscience of the movement.”

Jennings was at the vanguard of two communities that were rapidly gaining influence in popular culture: the early Internet, and the intersection queer and punk cultures. I’m super excited to ask him about how these cultures influenced each other, how queer life intersected with an emerging networked culture, and how queer culture online has evolved today from his perspective.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS FOR JENNINGS (WIP)

Did you ever see an overlap in the ethos of the queercore and punk movements with the DIY tech scene online? How do you find that the culture of one group inspired your work in the other?

Did you find that your involvement in the queercore scene was totally separate from your work in technology? Was there more of a separation in online and offline life for queer people than there is today?

In an interview for Wired magazine in 1996, you complained that once upon a time, the Internet was full of weirdos and relatively liberated from institutions and norms, but now big businesses are beginning to dominate the scene. You said, “the suits in the Internet business now are taking chances, and even the worst of them have some interest in what’s going on. But in a few years, they’ll be terrible.” Then, of course, the dotcom bubble, Facebook, Google, NSA happened. But do you think that with new decentralized technologies like blockchain, Bitcoin, or Tor, that we are experiencing a renaissance of the Wild West of early Internet culture? Or do you think corporate interests and capitalism are already preempting the liberatory potential of internet technologies?

[add a question about how gay life has become more normative, neoliberal, and how queer culture online has been monetized... what are your thoughts on that]

POTENTIAL SECOND SPEAKER OR INTERVIEWER

Jack Harrison-Quintana is the director of Grindr 4 Equality. Grindr for Equality collaborates with local LGBTQ advocacy groups around the world, using the app’s global reach to deploy health and safety information, including to LGBTQ people in danger. Thanks to the app’s geolocation

technology, Grindr for Equality can respond in a targeted way to specific threats to LGBTQ rights when and where they occur.

Blaine (a fellow Navel member) knows Jack and gave me his contact. We are hoping to include Jack in the event to act a contrast to the Jennings's queercore scene.

On the one hand, Grindr is possibly the epitome of the monetization and centralization of gay culture online, applying big data analytics on sensitive users' information like their HIV status and sexual orientation to drive advertising and subscription sales. Grindr was recently purchased by a Chinese media conglomerate, which some fear could lead to the exposure of data to the Chinese government. This is anathema to the queercore movement, which specifically criticized the mainstreaming and corporatization of queer culture; as well as Jennings's projects to give people more control over their internet use.

On the other hand, Grindr is a powerful company that has the means to effect positive change in marginalized queer communities around the world. So Jack can speak to both the pros and cons of a centralized corporation's role as a steward of the queer community.

Necessary Resources

Money or compensation for invited speakers.

- Tom Leeser may be able to provide funding for Tom Jennings via CalArts
- How much money do we have to fly individuals in?
- What about honoraria

II: Other Potential Events in this Series (tentative, to be expanded on soon!)

- a) Feminist economics department + other links Tom L sent
- b) Alternate value systems, e.g. feral economies
- c) Alexandria library (Kandis's idea)