Building a French Virtual Community on Internet: The Example of Frognet

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Abstract

Frognet, the name given to the French Virtual Community, was initiated by the French Embassy in Washington in March 92. After describing the various services offered, we will draw some conclusions which could help others interested in starting similar communities on the net.

1 Introduction

Embassies have always searched to develop closer relationships with their citizens and friends in their host country. With Internet they now have a very effective tool to do so, which can be illustrated by the example of Frognet. Originally intended for the use of French researchers in the United States, Frognet is a network of French and francophiles in non-French speaking countries. Its name resulted from the network's first members who formed the French Researchers OrGanization known as FROG. After describing the different services of Frognet, we will try to draw some conclusions which could help people interested in launching such a network.

2 The different services

Although some of our information is available via gophers, web pages, and ftp, most of the members of our community receive our services by e-mail. The decision to give preference to e-mail over other communication services was made right at the beginning despite the advice of some techies who, at that time (March 92), would have preferred to communicate via newsgroup. Two reasons justified our choice. While newsgroup was not at that time sufficiently distributed, many researchers could access the net only through e-mail. But more importantly, and this is still valid today, e-mail was considered as the most active way of communication to develop an on-line community. Our advice today is "advertise on the web, but use e-mail to provide your service".

2.1 Frognews

Frognews, the largest service and by far the most popular, is our "locomotive". Each day we send to our subscribers a short summary of France and the world news, a review of the French press and two pages of common expressions of the French language. More than 7,000 persons (figure 1) receive this service --- 75% percent are located in the US, 10% in Canada, and the rest are scattered in different parts of the world (Japan, Northern European countries, Australia). There has been a constant growth in the number of subscribers: 80 in March 92, 1,000 in December 92, 2,000 in September 93, 3,000 in October 94. Since last September we have been experiencing a much higher rate of growth, which can be explained in part by the simplification of the registration process (at the outset, we asked for registration forms to be sent to us by e-mail), and also by a wider use of the net by non-scientific students. We have noticed lately a growing number of students asked by their French professor to subscribe to our service.

Two points are worth stressing regarding this service.

1) The actual growth we are experiencing would not have been possible without having at our disposal an efficient list manager program developed and hosted by CREN (info@yukon.cren.org).

2) To carry out this service requires one hour of work consisting mainly of managing the list (add and delete). The texts are received from France on Internet. They are slightly revised versions of texts prepared by journalists to be broadcast on Radio France Internationale (RFI), the French public international radio.

The decision to use ready-made texts on the net, rather than produce our own, is part of our success story. Faced with tighter budgets, the Embassy would probably never have decided to launch Frognet had it required to produce from scratch a daily news bulletin.

2.2 Frogjobs

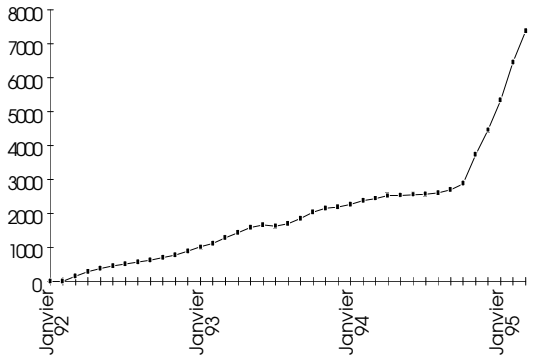
Frogjobs is a specific service aimed at engineers and scientists looking for a job in France. The story of Frogjobs well represents the dynamics on the net. We know where we start, but we do not know where we

will end. Originally aimed at helping our scientific community in the US, Frogjobs has become a service well-appreciated by French scientists in France who were unable to find similar services on the net.

Our original goal was very limited: to announce in the form of a short note the opening of job recruitment procedures in large research institutions. Heavy response to the first announcement required the furnishing of more information, thus leading to the conclusion that we needed a special service for the very specific population of Frognet interested in job openings in France. We could not bother the majority of our members not interested in jobs in France with information on the subject. A separate list was to be opened resulting in Frogjobs. We asked a group in Paris, "Association Bernard Gregory" (ABG), specialized in helping scientists find jobs, to help us gather the information needed to answer our members' questions.

The population of Frogjobs has been growing steadily: 375 in January 94, 995 in August 94, and 1,690 in March 95. 51% of the members live in the United States and Canada, and 30% in France. Once you start a service, it is very difficult to limit its growth by refusing to answer questions either because they are out of range or because they originate outside the intended population. ABG received 6,813 messages and sent 2,635 in 1994. Everyday 70 persons access the ABG gopher and download an average of ten documents each.

figure 1. Rate of growth of subscribers to the FROGNET list.



2.3 Frogmag and Frenchtalk

Frogmag is a monthly electronic magazine produced by our community and Frenchtalk is an open forum of discussion. They cannot be dissociated.

Frogmag was born out of the idea that we needed a more structured way to organize the exchange of information within the community.

The day we launched the Frogjobs list, we decided to open a free discussion list originally called Frogtalk. The exchanges on Frogtalk has been extensive right from the first day, showing that French in foreign countries and francophiles needed a kind of electronic cafe to discuss any subject. The atmosphere in the electronic cafe might be very quiet (three or even no message a day), or suddenly transformed to very animated discussion (up to one hundred messages a day). Any person could enter the cafe and start a heated discussion (as an example, we suggest you join and write a few lines on the protection of French culture).

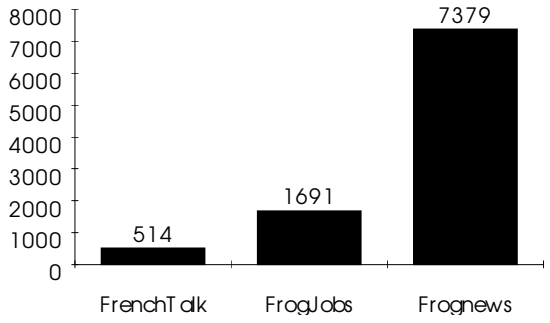
Confronted with regular outbursts on Frogtalk, we made an attempt to monitor the list: a message is sent first to an editor who might decide to post it or not to the group, or to write a summary, etc... It has been quite an exciting experience.

I was accused of installing a "goulag" on the Internet. A professor of French in a major university presented my e-mail which asked for more restraint (i.e. no attacks on a government policy in an Embassy format, otherwise we will have to monitor the list) to his students as an example of a censorship by a government institution!!! I quickly reacted by permanently discontinuing Frogtalk and opening a new list with a new name Frenchtalk, unmonitored , but under the responsibility of a French researcher not related to the Embassy. The potentially high level of activity has discouraged many. A lot join the cafe simply to have a feeling of the atmosphere and then leave (unsubscribe to the list). List membership has remained rather flat. There are 514 persons currently registered.

But the need for more structured communication within the community had to be dealt with and it became the role of Frogmag, a monthly electronic magazine, to fulfill this demand. The first issue of Frogmag was published on the net on December 10, 1994. The production process of Frogmag involves various steps. A permanent editing committee discusses on line the articles to appear in the next issue. Every member of Frognet can propose an article to the committee. The articles are reviewed by the committee and the chief editor is in charge of the final review and preparation of the issue. The dynamics of Frogmag, although largely positive, have not yet reached our level of expectations. Articles are still mainly written by the members of the permanent

committee. Few proposals of articles are sent every month to the committee. We observe in Frogmag the passivity of the vast majority of the community. Members "consume", but rarely produce. Only a few percent (maybe less than one percent in large communities), become active. Our hope is that the voluntary members of the committee do not get discouraged and reach the point of no return. Already, some encouraging signs are noteworthy. A professional journalist has joined the committee. We also have been approached by a well-known paper magazine for collaboration.

figure 2. Number of subscribers for each list.



3 What have we learned?

After over three years of initiatives and monitoring Frognet, what conclusions can be drawn from our experience? Five points can be stressed.

3.1 A known starting point, but an unpredictable future

We originally started Frognet to develop our relations with French researchers in the United States. We very rapidly discovered that we could not impose geographical limits. This is a problem when working in an Embassy which has strict geographic boundaries. But this issue is specific to embassies. The net is a powerful tool that destructs boundaries --- geographical, but also sectors and specialities. People find an e-mail address on the net and start to question and comment, and they wait for an answer (in my case, how to obtain a visa, the e-mail address of a youth hostel in the south of France, a penpal in France, etc). It is our responsibility not to disappoint them, a gigantic task that we are not prepared to carry out.

3.2 The locomotive of the news to cement a community

We started to send news from France as our first service by chance. One of my friends with whom I was discussing the idea to launch Frognet told me some junior staff at the Embassy typed a daily summary of the news and sent it on the net . It was a very popular service, but it was discontinued. I simply jumped on the idea which revealed to be the key to success. News can also be used to start other communities. In a business one could use the press review prepared for the CEO as the first ingredient to develop exchanges within the company.

3.3 E-mail versus the web for developing a community

Although webs and gophers are an efficient way to diffuse information, e-mail, which goes directly to the recipient, should take precedence when the goal is to develop a community. We all love our postman to bring home letters and favorite magazines. Even if our mailbox on the net is rather saturated we strongly feel that our e-mail option is the most appropriate. However, the way tools complement each other should not be overlooked. E-mail service should be referenced on the web, and web pages should be advertised by e-mail.

3.4 No free lunch

The rapidity to put pages on the web and to start new discussion lists may lead to the conclusion that the net permits a nearly free of charge production and exchange of information. The stagnation of our service Frenchtalk and the difficulties to launch Frogmag are there to bring us back to earth. Frogjobs Is very successful because one person devotes half of his time to answer questions and to write summary articles. A list is successful when it is monitored, and good monitoring can be a full time job. The net only barely reduces the cost of the production of information. Its main advantage is the unlimited possibility of distributing information at near to zero cost.

3.5 Recycling of information

Recycling of information is one way to keep costs minimal at a time when a community does not exist and no one is willing to make a big investment to have it developed. This was the case when texts prepared by journalists to be broadcast on the radio were sent to the net. We were probably the first to

imagine such an inexpensive solution to produce news on the net. The concept of information recycling is probably central to the multimedia industry. At a time where the demand is still undefined, recycling is a good way to keep costs at a minimum. We still have to better exploit this idea. RFI (Radio France Internationale) is producing a lot of other shows that can be transmitted as texts on the net. We can also start our own multimedia experiment: broadcasting by voice on the net while making the text available: an efficient way of learning a foreign language.

4 Conclusion

With Frognet, the French Embassy in Washington has certainly been the first of its category in the world to seek to take advantage in an organized way of the potential of internet. But we are still a long way from becoming what we could call an electronic embassy.

We need to develop more ideas and overcome resistance to unconventional approaches. Ambassadors themselves have to be convinced and become the impetus in moving in this direction. I was lucky to serve under Ambassador Jacques Andreani, pioneer among his peers in understanding and promoting the use of the net.

To obtain information on how to join frognet write to: frog@yukon.cren.org

Author Information

Bruno Oudet is a Professor at the University of Grenoble, on leave (91-95) for a temporary assignment at the French Embassy in Washington.