

Gabbing Away on the Virtu

By **BERNARD RILES**
Special to The Washington Post

When I was a kid, most of the people in my neighborhood knew one another, and on sultry summer evenings, could find each other on somebody's porch. Since I've lived in D.C., however, first in apartments in Southwest and now in a house in Chevy Chase, I've scarcely gotten to know my neighbors. For the most part, aside from reaching rueful agreement in passing about the heat or cold or the tyranny of lawns, we tend to go our separate ways.

But I've missed that old sense of communal comfort. So it was with interest that I learned last year about the "Chevy Chase Community Listserv." All you needed to join the chatter of this online group of neighbors was a computer and Internet service. Sounded interesting: a sort of virtual front porch?

Well, I logged on and found it to be part bulletin board, part debating society. I can write to a central address, the message (which must be signed) will then be distributed simultaneously to all members, and they all can "chat" back at me, minutes or weeks later. In the District, there seem to be more than a dozen of these groups, organized on a geographic basis. My own is now well in excess of 600 households.

Log in one morning and something like the following, referring to a comment by me about the reopening of the neighborhood's historic Avalon Theatre, might turn up: "I share Bernard Riles' well-composed laudatory posting about the quiet joy of Avalon attendance."

That sort of thing can make your whole day. So is the possibility that you might be able to answer others' questions, or they yours.

Anybody know a good carpenter, a plumber, an electrician? (Sometimes, an enthusiastic suggestion by one subscriber is enthusiastically nixed by others). Or: A friend from Minnesota needs an apartment in D.C. for the month of July. What charitable organization might want my old washing machine? Let me recommend a great new restaurant. Or I have four tickets to an Avril Lavigne concert tonight (or two to "Fidelio"). Or does anybody know anything about the looming pre-K registration at Lafayette School?

Occasionally a mysterious message pops up, like, "Is anyone missing a bowling ball?" (If it was claimed, I never heard.) Sitting alone at our keyboards, my neighbors and I share information: how quickly must residents remove snow from their sidewalks; whom to call about burned-out streetlights; reports of identity theft and garage burglaries and suspicious strangers (The purported gutter cleaner who knocked at my door "was much too cheerful to be a serious professional"); when is the best time to take your car in for inspection in the District? (Consensus: never).

But we don't always agree. A discussion about a D.C. bill to regulate the removal of trees on private land morphed into a general discourse on property rights:

Neighbor A: "One of the most beautiful trees in the neighborhood ... was cut down simply to make it easier to build another McMansion."

Neighbor B: "Whether the owner ... wanted to build a Frank Lloyd Wright house or a McMansion is his/her business."

A: "And if they wanted to build a McDonald's instead of a McMansion? ..."

B: "If you want to take someone else's property—pay for it."

The uncertain intersection between adequate municipal services and humanism has been explored:

A: "Sorry the trash wasn't picked up, really I am, but for the love of the God that has blessed us so much, please consider the reality of what most of the world endures every day."

B: "We pay taxes and we want the services that we are entitled to. There is NO EXCUSE."

Discussions of complex issues—property assessments, home rule, taxes—can be thoughtful and informed.

All this energetic reaching out in an urban setting largely marked by detachment has been something of a revelation to me. Until I got on the listserv, I didn't pay a lot of attention to—indeed, was unaware of—many local issues. Now, I'm considerably more attuned to District affairs, and, given the ease of electronic kibitzing, inclined to put in my two cents worth. Politicians have also not overlooked the phenomenon.

Most subscribers to our listserv are represented by D.C. Council members Kathy

Patterson and Adrian Fenty, and, either personally or by staff members, they have joined our dialogue, often commenting on complaints and offering information. As a result, our members have begun to use the listserv to direct gripes and requests to Patterson and Fenty. It appears that, knowing hundreds of households with highly motivated voters are paying attention, council members are quite inclined to respond.

Indeed, on one occasion, a citizen who had put out an unremarkable query about deficient recycling collection received an almost instantaneous answer from Fenty, who was "literally typing this e-mail from the Committee on Public Works oversight hearing" and who promised to raise the matter with the DPW representative "during my round of questions."

This sort of constituent attention, sent to all listserv members, yields a lot of bang for very small change for Fenty, and fast answers for the questioner. On the other hand, it might be that the decision by our neighbor Ann Witt to join the group just as she became the director of the Department of Motor Vehicles could turn out to be one of the worst choices she has made in her professional life (next to, perhaps, becoming director of the DMV). Thus far, however, she has not been noticeably besieged with complaints about three-hour waits to register cars or such, so things may be breaking her way.

Reflection upon the virtual neighborhood created by our e-mail list makes me think what a nice sociological fit this technology makes with other dynamics in our world. Folks probably want more than ever to connect, but we're famously so busy by day's end that we're too tired to do much of anything. The community e-mail list makes neighborly engagement possible while we are sitting at home wearing a T-shirt and comfortable old slippers.

Truth to tell, an e-mail list is no substitute for gossiping on the front porch with folks you really know, but it has its advantages. You can learn a surprising amount about what's happening in, delighting, and upsetting the community. You can be persuaded by a well-taken argument, and offer an opinion that might just seem sensible to the numerous e-list readers.

And for sure, nobody ever got their garbage picked up quicker just by griping about it on the front porch.

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BY CHRISTIAN GRADERT FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

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