

BBS Worlds. Looking Back at the Swiss BBS Scene of the 1990s

[BBS Switzerland](#) [cyberspace](#) [feminism](#) [modem](#) [virtual communities](#)

Beatrice Tobler

beatrice.tobler[a]ballenberg.ch

Lic. phil.

Swiss Open-Air Museum Ballenberg

(Translation: Julia Gül Erdogan and Gleb J. Albert)

In this contribution, I summarise and reflect on my field research as an ethnologist on Swiss bulletin board systems. Back in 1994-1995, I conducted participant observation in three BBSes during a time when BBS culture was already in decline, yet there was hardly any research done and the topic was novel. My observations differed a lot from the dematerialised, abstract discourse of “cyberspace” that was omnipresent in the mass media of that time.

In this paper, a 50-year-old European Ethnologist is looking back on her 1995 licentiate thesis (Tobler 1995) about computer bulletin board systems (BBSes).

In retrospect I realised that although my topic was new back then, I still stood in the tradition of European Ethnology (Volkskunde) and Ethnology (Völkerkunde). In the 20th century, European Ethnology was often concerned with disappearing cultural practices, while Ethnology was usually dealing with foreign cultures. In 1994/95, BBS culture was both: exotic and about to disappear. The graphical user interface of the Internet, the World Wide Web, already existed since 1991. However, the latter had its breakthrough shortly after my study: Only through the introduction of the Windows 95 operating system did the idea of a graphical user interface – and thus of the World Wide Web – achieve broad public acceptance.

Shortly before these developments, I wrote my licentiate thesis in European Ethnology at the University of Basel about bulletin board systems. I investigated three thematically different BBS and compared their culture of communication.

Why this subject?

I wanted to break new ground with this topic – there was only little research on new media in the humanities at that time. I did not know of any in Switzerland. But part of my motivation behind choosing this topic was to please my father – a programmer who spent most of his working and leisure time in front of the computer screen since the early 1970s. In 1993, he gave me an Apple Powerbook 180 with a monochrome monitor. My twin brother already owned home computers in the 1980s – first a Sinclair ZX81, then an Atari 1040ST, for which he downloaded software from various BBSes. He belonged to the first generation of teenagers who grew up with affordable home computers: They used to code the software they used themselves, swapped software on floppy disks and developed a playful approach to this technology. My brother gave me the impulse to do research on BBSes. I was the typical female counterpart: I only found access to computers through my studies and used my Powerbook as a tool to write my papers. I played in a band that plastered the city with concert posters at night and met my friends in local pubs. We made appointments by calling each other at home and leaving messages on the tapes of our answering machines.

Who used computers for communication before the WWW?

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Internet in Switzerland was still reserved to academic elites, primarily natural scientists. For my field research on BBSes (December 1994 to May 1995), I received access to the university server at the University of Basel. However, I only got access to Gopher and e-mail services, not to the World Wide Web. Also in the following years, the World Wide Web was used only sparsely. In 1997, our European Ethnology institute was one of the first in the humanities to have its own website. At that time, we only had one telephone line. While we were checking our e-mail, we could not use the phone.

Besides the Internet, there have been BBSes in the USA since the early 1980s, which allowed many-to-many communication besides the universities' networks. In Germany and Switzerland, BBSes were able to gain ground only from the mid-1980s onwards, when there were enough owners of home computers. With Atari, Commodore, Amstrad etc. and DOS computers, the access to BBSes, however, was not a simple task. The early BBS users were

mostly young men with an affinity for technology – even in Switzerland. In France, there was the Minitel videotext system, introduced by the French PTT in 1982, which not only replaced the telephone book but also included a lot of information and booking services as well as chat systems (*messengeries*). The terminal was delivered to all households. Therefore, France was probably the first country in Europe where online communication became a mass phenomenon.

I lived only five kilometres from the French border. In Switzerland, however, online communication was hardly part of everyday life in the mid-1990s. Nevertheless, the topic was present in the newspapers and magazines at the time.

What shaped the public and academic discourse on the Internet and BBSes at that time?

In the mid-1990s, the media reported a lot about the Internet and computer communication. The picture drawn by the new emerging magazines differed greatly from the experiences I made in the examined BBSes. The German magazine *Pl@net* titled: “Endlich unsterblich! Avatare und andere Lebensformen im Netz” (“Finally, Immortal! Avatars and Other Life Forms on the Net”) in 1996, WIRED carried essays on “The Ultimate Man-Machine Interface” and “Superhumanism” in 1995, to name only a few examples. The buzzwords “cyberspace”, “virtual reality” or “cybersex” were on everyone’s lips and in the daily newspapers. While talking about it was trendy, most people had no idea and no personal experience with it.

The titles of the academic literature on the subject revealed fears and fascination regarding the imagined new possibilities. Both the media and the academic discourse were fed by the idea of cyberspace as a second world. It was imagined as an immaterial space that promised escape from the materiality of the body and thus from gender, too. This idea originated in science fiction and was adopted by computer geeks who identified themselves as “cyberpunks”, a genre within science fiction. Both fiction and cyberspace provided a space for negotiating hopes and fears of the present.

Confused by the contradiction between what I read about computer communication and what I experienced myself in the BBSes, I dedicated a chapter of my thesis to the “myth of cyberspace.”

How widespread were BBSes in mid-1990s Switzerland?

While the BBSes of the 1980s focused mainly on discussing computer-related topics and downloading software and other files, in the 1990s virtual communities emerged around different topics. According to unofficial BBS listings, there were between 400 and 500 BBSes in Switzerland in 1994.^[1]

Most of them were located in the German-speaking cities and in Geneva. The names often revealed the intention or topic of the particular BBS. In Basel, for example, there was a gay BBS as well as one specialised in astronomy, while in Zurich there were BBSes for teachers and boy scouts as well as a “Sexy BBS”. Beside the thematic bulletin board systems, there were many commercial BBSes operated by shops and companies which offered software and files for download. The number of BBSes not featured in these listings and acting underground remains beyond my knowledge.

Like local radio stations, BBS were of short range. (Rheingold 1994: 21) This was due to the telephone charges. In Switzerland, there were local and long-distance tariffs, as well as day and night tariffs. In each of the BBSes I examined, there were a few hundred registered users. A few dozen of them regularly contributed to the message boards. Some BBSes connected to BBS networks. They exchanged their data with other BBSes at night, which made it possible to access discussion boards abroad. The range in Europe was certainly smaller than in the USA due to language barriers within the continent and the higher phone tariffs compared to the United States.

The three case studies

I investigated the following BBSes:

1. A Christian BBS: the “Life-BBS” in Zurich, which at that time was the only one in Switzerland connected to the “LifeNet”, a German-speaking network of the “Verbund Christlicher Mailboxen” (“Association of Christian BBSes”).

2. The first German women-only BBS “FEMAIL” in Frankfurt am Main (Germany), which was maintained by the “Softwarehaus von Frauen für Frauen und Mädchen e.V.” (“Women’s Software House for Women and Girls”, a non-profit association) in Frankfurt, as well as the network of women’s BBSes, “FemNet e.V.”, which was founded by the same women. All BBSes which were part of this network granted access to women only, but received additional information from other mixed-gender networks.
3. The “Chaos-Box” in Liestal (Switzerland), a fun- and leisure-focused BBS with an emphasis on entertainment and computer topics, in which pseudonyms were allowed. It was not connected to any network.

Regarding the religious BBS I conducted my research purely online, as a spectator from the outside. This was partly because my contact with the system operator (sysop) failed, partly because I had little personal relation to the topic. I analysed the discussion boards and evaluated the discussions from November 1994 to January 1995.

In the women’s BBS, the very fact that I am a woman allowed me to be a part of it. Since I had dealt with women’s studies and feminism during my studies, the feminist orientation of FEMAIL and FemNet was familiar to me. In January 1995 I took part in a user meeting and was in contact with the system operators of both FEMAIL and FemNet. I dialled in every two days and wrote my own contributions. Here the sysops and the users knew that I was doing research about BBSes.

The “Chaos-Box” appealed to the more playful side in me, so that I felt quite comfortable there, although I was far from being interested in everything that the BBS had on offer. I participated in a poetry game for a while, chatted with other users and occasionally wrote private and public messages. I also took part in a user meeting. I did undercover research and participant observation under the nickname “Laura Mars”.

The LIFE BBS

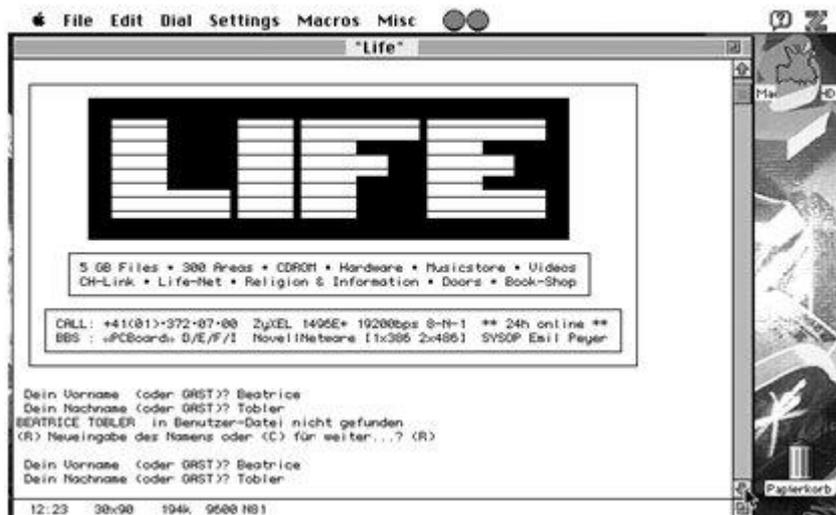


Figure 1. Login Screen of LIFE BBS, 26 November 1994.

The two system operators of “LIFE BBS” were programmers. Nicknames were not allowed.

The serious tonality of the BBS became obvious already in the regulations:

“Users who deliberately damage LIFE in any way (e.g. viruses, abusive letters, slander, etc.) shall be named in public and banned from the System.

In LIFE BBS, the general rule is ‘openness and decency’; anyone may express himself on any subject if he respects the rules of decency. The sysop has the right to inspect the conversations and to intervene if necessary.”

Membership fees were 40 Swiss Francs per year. Once logged in, one could access 46 “conferences” (discussion boards) of the German-speaking religious BBS network LifeNet as well as the general Swiss network SwissLink with 61 conferences. At that time, 35 BBSes were connected to LifeNet among which LIFE BBS was the only one from Switzerland. LIFE BBS also had eight local discussion boards of which users only regularly frequented the main conference. In addition to the conferences, the file area was an important part of the BBS. Software for the operating systems DOS, OS2 and Windows were offered there, but also Bible translations, Bible software, sermons or games such as a Bible crossword puzzle or a game in which one had to tidy up a virtual church. Software for parish administration was offered, too. I analyzed two LifeNet discussion boards: a general discussion board and the “Jokes” board.

In the discussion board, 101 messages were written during the time of investigation, that is approximately 6 messages per day. They were written by 28 different users, including two women. The contributions were all Christian in content. The most common topics were “Jews and Christians” and “Homosexuality”. “Jews and Christians” dealt with the question of whether Jesus was a rabbi, the authenticity of the Bible tradition (question of verbal inspiration), and the question of whether God and the Son of God were one. The discussion on “Homosexuality” dealt with the position of the Bible on this topic. Three men wrote almost half of the posts on this board.

In the “Jokes” discussion board, 68 messages were written in 79 days. Here there were no frequent writers and the messages were also shorter. A total of 25 messages actually contained jokes on biblical and Christian topics, the other contributions debated these jokes, sometimes quite heatedly.

In summary, there were deliberate discussions on both boards, not just quickly written snippets. They were written in a good linguistic style with few spelling mistakes. The goal was not to entertain, but to spread Christian ideas and exchange among like-minded people. On religious boards in general BBS networks such as the German Zerberus network, users didn't discuss how strictly the Bible should be interpreted. Instead, atheists and Christians wrote about basic questions such as “Does God exist?” or “Will animals go to heaven?”

The Women's BBS

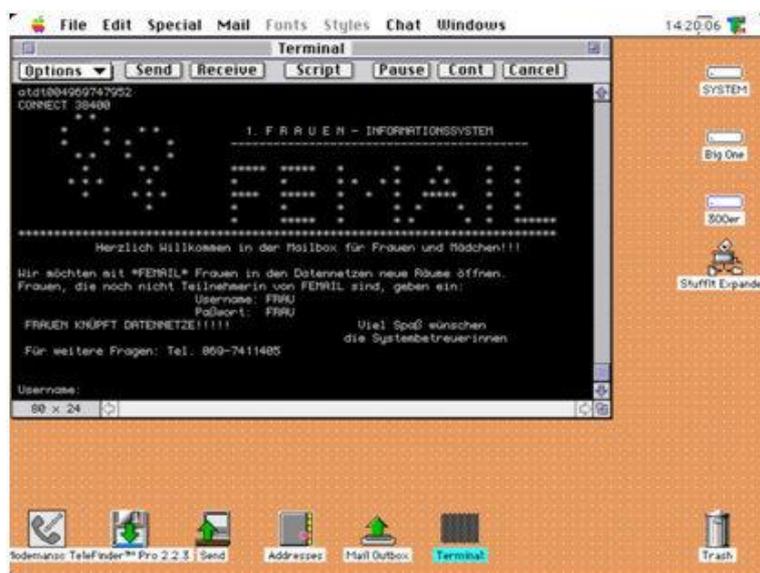


Figure 2. Login Screen of FEMAIL, 30th December 1994.

FEMAIL – the first German women’s BBS – was founded in 1993 in Frankfurt by two women from an association for women’s computer training. After less than a year, the two separated from FEMAIL and founded the FemNet network. Several BBSes were part of that network. Some of them split off again and founded the WOMAN network together with FEMAIL. This brief outline reveals an internal fragmentation despite the common goal. Women’s BBSes were not about entertainment, but about content and had a socio-political goal: to promote women’s access to new technologies. Both FEMAIL and FemNet were maintained by associations. Already this fact distinguishes them from the private BBSes run by male system operators as well as from commercial bulletin board systems. In women’s BBSes, men were excluded from becoming users. The authenticity of the gender was checked by calling each new member on the telephone after registration. Membership in “FEMAIL” cost 180 German Marks per year, while FemNet charged 150 German Marks.

The users in FEMAIL didn’t write a lot. In the period examined (10th December 1994 to 24th April 1995), there was only one message written on a daily average. The messages were spread over 31 discussion boards. The list of participants included 152 names. Nicknames were not allowed here either.

The BBS network FemNet, which reached more women, was more active, with four to five messages a day. On both FEMAIL and FemNet, the most active writers were the system operators themselves.

The discussion boards of women’s BBSes differed from conventional electronic bulletin boards by containing hardly any discussions, hosting large amounts of information instead. The FEMAIL boards almost exclusively consisted of event announcements such as meetings, readings, lectures, courses or book publications. There was no lengthy discussion in the period observed. There were never more than three replies to a message. According to a system operator of FEMAIL, users were more likely to write private mails than public contributions. According to the aforementioned female sysop, women would only discuss if they knew each other. In the early days of FEMAIL, there was a group of women who knew each other and used the BBS regularly. Men in contrast didn’t need to know each other to hold discussions on public boards. “Men...” the sysop said, “... sometimes write such nonsense and also private things on public boards!”

In the women's BBSs the contributions were in a written language style. The serious tone was sometimes lightened a bit by adding German feminine endings to all kind of words in a funny way. One board, for example, was called "Compute" instead of "Computer".

The Chaos Box Liestal



Figure 3. Message from user "Megaflonz" in the Chaos Box, 26th February 1995.

The Chaos Box was founded in 1991. The users – named *Chaoten* (chaotic persons) – were mostly students or apprentices under the age of 20, who enjoyed programming or chatting with other *Chaoten* in their spare time. In May 1995 there were 483 active users registered. Overall, there were 100–200 connections of users to the BBS per day. The Chaos Box could be used free of charge, and nicknames were allowed. Aliases like Technofreak, Cyberpunk, Chaotic or Hacki hint to an identification with the Cyberpunk movement. In addition to the ten discussion boards, the BBS had a chat function as well as a database and a file area where the users offered their self-made ANSI graphics for download showing race cars, advertisements for other BBSes, or topless women. The file library contained various programs for DOS and Windows, including games, tools and learning software.

| BRETTER | | | | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-----------|--------------|-----------------|------------|
| Name des Brettes | Brett-Moderator | Nr. Chaot | Anzahl Msgs. | Letzter Eintrag | neue Msgs. |
| A ALLGEMEINES CHAOS | Kpt. CHAOS | 1 | 884 | 10.05.95 | |
| B CHAOS-DEALS | Kpt. CHAOS | 1 | 1169 | 11.05.95 | NEU |
| C QUIZ-CORNER | | | 1132 | 01.03.95 | NEU |
| E GROOOOOOOOOOHL | | | 1216 | 09.05.95 | NEU |
| F GAMES AND GAMBLERS | Hannibal | 21 | 1922 | 11.05.95 | NEU |
| K CULTURE-CLUB | Pantek | 59 | 521 | 09.05.95 | NEU |
| H COMPUTER-ECKE | Frosch | 103 | 1495 | 10.05.95 | NEU |
| I CHAOS-TALK | Sirius | 387 | 1099 | 11.05.95 | NEU |
| M FORMEL 1 ² | Hawk | 110 | 1082 | 11.05.95 | NEU |
| T TRAVEL BOARD | | | 795 | 01.04.95 | NEU |

Figure 4. The board directory of the Chaos Box.

The BBS maintained a user levelling system not unlike in computer games. New users were called *Frischling* (newbie), after 30 calls one became a *Halbchaot* (semi chaotic person). Further levels could be achieved by filling out a questionnaire, by contributing to discussions or by moderating boards. In addition, there were different titles which were awarded due to the activity or by vote, such as *Kpt./Käptin* (captain, male or female), *Meischter/Meischterin* (master), *Newcomer/Rookie*, *Pflock/Pflöckin* (literally “plug”, meaning a rogue), *Mr. Login*, *Mr. Online* or *Mr. Average*. The usage of the feminine form is remarkable. There were few women in the box, but they were highly appreciated. Even couples found each other through the BBS. Weddings and engagements were communicated and led to many congratulatory messages. There were also fictitious users, for example the agony aunt Eusebia who joined controversial discussions now and then.

The users of the Chaos Box cultivated a kind of insider language with special terms and salutations. Swiss German idioms found their way into the spelling, such as “beschter” instead of “bester” (“best”). In general, the style was mostly spoken language. The content of the messages was casual, entertaining, sometimes a little trivial or even absurd. It was in the Chaos Box that I experienced my first chat. I remember that it was a special moment and I was very excited – even though I cannot reconstruct anymore what exactly was so special about it, as real-time communication has become too normal in my life.

Conclusion

The BBS culture I described in 1995 was about to disappear. At that time, the technology was still complicated to use, including cable clutter and high telephone bills. Nevertheless, the BBS culture still had a bit of pioneering spirit and the Chaos Box still had a touch of cyberpunk. At the time of my research in 1995, the first pocket-sized computers such as the *WiderScreen 2-3/2020: Home Computer Cultures and Society Before the Internet Age (vol.23 no.2–3)*

Apple Newton or the Palm already existed, and the fusion of microcomputer and telephone was imminent: the Nokia Communicator, the first smartphone, appeared in 1996, followed by wireless technology in 1997. All these technologies and their combination really brought us into the digital age, where we are connected, always and everywhere.

However, soon after having disappeared, BBSes experienced a revival as a retro culture. In 2001, I organized a retro computing meeting at the Museum of Communication in Berne, in which the hard core of *Chaoten* and the sysop, *Chefchaot Frosch*, took part with their BBS. It ran its own terminal software *FrogyComm*. Even today, one can download the discussion boards of the former Chaos Box and the terminal software from Frosch's ["Chaos Entertainment Communication GmbH" website](#).



Figure 5. Former Chaoten at the retro computing meeting on 3rd November 2001 at the Museum of Communication in Berne. Photo: Museum of Communication, Berne.

References

All links verified 10.6.2020

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<http://www.btobler.ch/Mailboxwelten.pdf>.

Notes

^[1] Another Swiss BBS list, not known to me at the time and listing 390 BBSes, was published in the US magazine *Boardwatch* (Gallagher 1994). I thank Kevin Driscoll for providing this source.