

The Well: Was it the CIA's first internet project?

The **Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link**, normally shortened to **The WELL**, is one of the oldest [virtual communities](#) in continuous operation. Was it secretly an MK-Ultra type CIA program? As of June 2012, it had 2,693 members.^[2] It is best known for its [Internet forums](#), but also provides email, [shell accounts](#), and web pages. The discussion and topics on The WELL range from deeply serious to trivial, depending on the nature and interests of the participants.^[3] It was the inspiration for the dark net cyber books by William Gibson. It connected to almost 99% of the original “internet celebrity” names. It helped “take down” Kevin Mitnick who many have said was a spy. The Well may have been more than one thought at the time. Above Broadway in San Francisco, the CIA was having hookers give people LSD while they watched from behind two-way mirrors. Was “The Well” another MK-Ultra two-way mirror into the artist community of the digital world?

History

The WELL was started by [Stewart Brand](#) and [Larry Brilliant](#) in 1985, and the name (an acronym for *Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link*)^[4] is partially a reference to some of Brand's earlier projects, including the [Whole Earth Catalog](#). The WELL began as a [dial-up bulletin board system](#) (BBS) influenced by [EIES](#),^[5] became one of the original dial-up [ISPs](#) in the early 1990s when commercial traffic was first allowed, and changed into its current form as the Internet and web technology evolved. Its original management team—Matthew McClure, soon joined by Cliff Figallo and John Coate—collaborated with its early users to foster a sense of [virtual community](#).^[citation needed]

[Gail Ann Williams](#) was hired by Figallo in 1991, as community manager, and has continued in management roles into the current era.

From 1994 to 1999 The WELL was owned by Bruce Katz, founder of [Rockport](#), a manufacturer of walking shoes.^[6]

In April 1999 it was acquired by [Salon](#), several of whose founders such as [Scott Rosenberg](#) had previously been regular participants there.

In August 2005 Salon announced that it was looking for a buyer for The WELL, in order to concentrate on other business lines. In November 2006, a press release of The WELL said, "As Salon has not found a suitable purchaser, it has determined that it is currently in the best interest of the company to retain this business and has therefore suspended all efforts to sell The WELL."^[7]

In June 2012 Salon once again announced that it was looking for a buyer for The WELL as its subscriber base "did not bear financial promise". Additionally, it announced that it had entered into discussions with various parties interested in buying the well.com domain name, and that the remaining

WELL staff had been laid off at the end of May.^[8] The community pledged money to take over The WELL itself and rehire important staff.^[9]

In September 2012, Salon sold The WELL to a new corporation, The WELL Group Inc., owned by a group of eleven investors, who are all long-time members. The CEO was Earl Crabb, who died on February 20th, 2015. The sale price was reported to be \$400,000. Members have no official role in the management, but "can ... go back to what they do best: conversation. And complaining about the management."^{[10][11]}

Notable items in WELL history include being the forum through which [John Perry Barlow](#), [John Gilmore](#), and [Mitch Kapor](#), the founders of the [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#), first met. [Howard Rheingold](#), an early and very active member, was inspired to write his book *The Virtual Community* by his experience on The WELL. According to Rheingold's book, The WELL's [Usenet](#) feed was for years provided by [Apple Computer](#) over [UUCP](#). The WELL was a major online meeting place for fans of the [Grateful Dead](#), especially those who followed the band from concert to concert, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The WELL also played a role in the book *Takedown* about the pursuit and capture of [Kevin Mitnick](#). Founded in [Sausalito, California](#), the service is now based in [San Francisco](#).

Topics of discussion

The WELL is divided into general subject areas known as "conferences". These conferences reflect member interests, and include arts, health, business, regions, hobbies, spirituality, music, politics, games, software and many more.

Within conferences, members open separate conversational threads called "topics" for specific items of interest. For example, the Media conference has (or had) topics devoted to [The New York Times](#), media ethics, and the [Luann](#) comic strip. An example of a local conference is the one on San Francisco, which has topics on restaurants, the city government, and neighborhood news.

"Public" conferences are open to all members, while "private" conferences are restricted to a list of users controlled by the conference hosts, called the "ulist". Some "featured private" or "private independent" conferences (such as "Women on the WELL" and "Recovery") are listed in the WELL's directory, but are access restricted for privacy or membership-restriction reasons. Members may request admission to such conferences. There are also a large number of unlisted "secret private" conferences. The names of these conferences are public, but the contents, hosts, and members are restricted to members of a particular conference. Membership in private conferences is by invitation. WELL members may open their own new public or private independent conferences.

Policy and governance

The directors of The WELL have included Matthew McClure and [Cliff Figallo](#), both veterans of the 1970s commune called [The Farm](#), and Gail Williams, previously known as one of the principals in the political satire group the Plutonium Players. In 2016, The WELL hired Christian Ruzich and Daryl Lynn Johnson, who have over 30 years of combined experience on The WELL, to be the General

Managers. The couple, who met on The WELL, will draw on their years of marketing and online community experience to help The WELL assume its rightful place as the prime destination for premium online conversation and discussion.

The community forums, known as "conferences", are supervised by "conference hosts" who guide conversations and may enforce conference rules on [civility](#) and/or appropriateness. Initially all hosts were selected by staff members. In 1995, [Gail Williams](#) changed the policies to enable user-created forums. Participants at the complete membership level can create their own "independent" personal conferences—either viewable by any WELL member or privately viewable by those members on a restricted membership list—on any subject they please with any rules they like.

Overall support and supervision of the conferencing services is handled by several staff members, often referred to collectively as "confteam", the name of the [UNIX](#) user account used by staff for conference maintenance. They have more system operational powers than conference hosts, along with the additional social authority of selecting "featured conference" hosts and closing accounts for abuse.

WELL members use a consistent login name when posting messages, and a non-fixed [pseudonym](#) field alongside it. The pseudonym (or "pseud" in WELL parlance) defaults to the user's [real name](#), but can be changed at will and so often reflects a quotation from another user, or is an in-joke, or may be left blank. The user's real name can be easily looked-up using their login name. WELL members are not [anonymous](#).

There is a time-honored double meaning to the WELL slogan coined by Stewart Brand, "You Own Your Own Words" or ("[YOYOW](#)"): members have both the rights to their posted words and responsibility for those words, too. (Members can also delete their posts at any time, but a placeholder indicates the former location and author of a deleted or "[scribbled](#)" post, as well as who deleted it.) The Well people were the founders of Burning Man.

Joining and reading

WELL membership is available to almost anyone, but requires a paid subscription and use of one's real name. Most postings on the WELL can be read only by members; however, there are some external member web sites, and a few [publicly readable conferences](#):

- [inkwell.vue](#), an interview conference featuring online conversations with artists, journalist and authors such as [Neil Gaiman](#), [Bruce Sterling](#) and [Farai Chideya](#).
- [deadsongs.vue](#), a conference to discuss [Grateful Dead](#) song lyrics.
- [pre.vue](#), a catch-all where WELL members posted tidbits of all kinds. It is no longer active, but it remains as an archive.

Forums can be read using a regular browser or by logging into a command-line UNIX system via [secure shell](#) and using a classic text-based interface called "[PicoSpan](#)".

Journalists

The WELL was frequently mentioned in the media in the 1980s and 1990s, probably disproportionately to the number of users it had relative to other online systems. This has diminished but not disappeared in recent years, with other online communities becoming commonplace. This early visibility was largely the result of the early policy of providing free accounts for interesting journalists and other select members of the media. As a result, for many journalists it was their first experience of online systems and, later, the Internet, even though other systems existed. Although accounts are now seldom provided for free to journalists, there are still a sizable number on The WELL; for example columnist [Jon Carroll](#) of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, [Wendy M. Grossman](#) of *The Inquirer*, and critic Andy Klein of *Los Angeles CityBeat*.

The WELL also received numerous awards in the 1980s and 1990s, including a [Webby Award](#) for online community in 1998, and an [EFF Pioneer Award](#) in 1994.

In the news

In March 2007, The WELL was noted for refusing membership to [Kevin Mitnick](#), and refunding his membership fee.^[12]

Publications about The WELL

- [Howard Rheingold](#), *The Virtual Community*
(1994) [Perennial ISBN 0-06-097643-8](#) (Hardcover) – [ISBN 0-262-68121-8](#) (2000 revised paperback edition)
- [John Seabrook](#), *Deeper: My Two-Year Odyssey in Cyberspace*
(1997) [Simon & Schuster ISBN 0-684-80175-2](#) (Hardcover) – [ISBN 0-684-83873-7](#) (Paperback)
- [Katie Hafner](#), *The WELL: A Story of Love, Death and Real Life in the Seminal Online Community*
(2001) Carroll & Graf Publishers [ISBN 0-7867-0846-8](#)
Katie Hafner's book, expanded from a [Wired Magazine article](#), chronicles the odd birth, growing pains, and interpersonal dynamics that make The WELL the unusual, perhaps unique online community that it is.
- [Fred Turner](#), *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*
(2006) [University of Chicago Press ISBN 0-226-81741-5](#)
["Where the Counterculture met the New Economy: The WELL and the Origins of Virtual Community"](#), *Technology and Culture*, Vol.46, No.3 (July, 2005), pp. 485–512.

See also

- [Digerati](#)
- [William H. Calvin](#)
- [Global Business Network](#)
- [Cyberia \(book\)](#)
- [Brian Eno](#)
- [Michael Gruber \(author\)](#)
- [Peter Ludlow](#)
- [Tom Mandel](#)
- [Douglas Rushkoff](#)
- [John Seabrook](#)
- [Gail Williams](#)
- [Declan McCullagh](#)
- [Hugh Daniel](#)
- [CIX](#)

References

1.
 - *Pernick, Ron (1995). "[A Timeline of the First Ten Years of The WELL](#)". Retrieved 2008-06-28.*
 - *"[The Well, a Pioneering Online Community, Is for Sale Again](#)". *The New York Times*, June 29, 2012*
 - *"[WELL, The.](#)". *Encyclopædia Britannica Ultimate Reference Suite*. Encyclopædia Britannica. 2015. ISBN 9783803266316.*
 - [Learn About The WELL](#) well.com
 - *"[IRC History -- Electronic Information Exchange System \(EIES\)](#)".*
 - *Markoff, John (January 4, 1994). "[COMPANY NEWS; Influential Computer Service Sold](#)". *New York Times*. Retrieved 27 July 2014.*
 - *"[The Well to Stay With Salon](#)" (Press release). *The WELL*. November 14, 2006. Retrieved 2007-11-08.*
 - *"[Salon 10K filing, June 2012](#)". 2012. Retrieved 2012-07-02.*
 - *"[Will The WELL Survive? Members Pledge \\$100K+ to Buy Influential Virtual Community from Corporate Owners](#)". 2012. Retrieved 2012-07-02.*
 - [Salon Media Group Sells The WELL to The Well Group](#)
 - *Grossman, Wendy. "[Salon sells The WELL to its members](#)". Retrieved 27 July 2014.*
12. [Kevin Mitnick is Unforgiven](#) Wired, March 21, 2007

External links

- [The WELL](#)
- ["The WELL Gopher"](#). Archived from [the original](#) on 2011-09-07. Retained as a *text museum* but now served via HTTP.
- [Wired news: Salon buys The WELL](#)
- [Wired magazine: "The Epic Saga of the WELL"](#) by [Katie Hafner](#)
- [The WELL: Small Town on the Internet Highway System](#) by Cliff Figallo
- [C|net News.com: "The WELL celebrates 20th birthday"](#) at [Archive.is](#) (archived 2013-01-20)
- [Net Wars at The Inquirer: "You own your own 20th anniversary"](#)
- [C|net News.com: "Salon places The WELL up for sale"](#) at [Archive.is](#) (archived 2013-01-19)