Making a home for New Media

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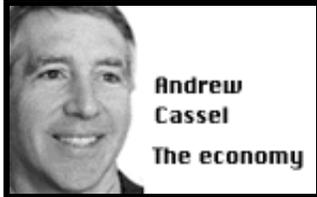**The economy**

The Internet is changing the way we deal with time and space. ``Virtual communities'' are arising for whom geography is obsolete. Companies can do business, and people can communicate easily, around the clock, around the world, trading ideas, information and money in a cyber-universe that has the potential to make the word *local* little more than a quaint anachronism.

All of which would seem at first blush to make the Philadelphia Area New Media Association kind of irrelevant.

Why, after all, would a bunch of World Wide Web developers and programmers -- cyber-geeks whose days are spent interfacing globally through computer screens and networks -- care or need to join with peers who just happen to inhabit the same general terrestrial neighborhood?

Because, it turns out that, if you want to do business, you still need to press flesh.

``The vibrancy of this industry has a lot to do with people like us getting together and drinking beer or having coffee,'' Ric Kolenda told me the other day, live and in person, over a cup of coffee on 3d Street in Old City.
Kolenda, Nathan Solomon and Jon Cooper had come to talk about the New Media Association, which arose when they and a few other cyberspace entrepreneurs began meeting informally over beer in a Manayunk pub about a year ago.

Already the organization has evolved far enough to host regular monthly gatherings, at which members can schmooze or listen to representatives of industry heavyweights such as Microsoft and Netscape. Eventually, the PANMA hopes to hire a full-time executive director, part of whose mission will be to promote the growth of Internet-related businesses in the Greater Philadelphia region.

A goodly cluster of such firms exist already, most of them small startups exploring for niches in a market that didn't exist only five years ago. These are the people who write the programs that make pictures dance onscreen, or deliver a personalized newspaper to your desktop, or let customers search a company's catalog, or vice versa. They know
Java, HTML, SGML, and probably a dozen more acronyms invented since breakfast. It's a dead certainty that work like theirs will eventually be seen, heard or felt in every household and office.

But will the Philadelphia region end up as a net producer or consumer of such work? That's where the local New Media Association comes in.

It's obvious that New York and California, as capitals of the Old Media, have a big leg up in the race to develop new media for advertising and entertainment. Philadelphia, on the other hand, is home to major players in a number of relevant fields, such as financial services, direct marketing, health care and education. Computer jocks who can develop applications for the Internet's less-glitzy ``back end'' -- using interactive databases, for example -- might find fertile soil here. ``Philadelphia is strong enough in information technology that we can grow the business on that,'' said Solomon, who switched from producing TV and radio commercials to Internet programming (http://www.openeye.com) a few years ago. The key could be creating a community that attracts programmers, webmasters and those in related fields to the region.

And that means the non-virtual, face-to-face kind. ``National communities are of value, but personal contact makes you more willing to share what you've learned,'' Solomon said. For all its sophistication, a meeting in cyberspace doesn't allow for body language, or let you look a potential partner or customer square in the eye. ``It's hard to get a sense of where people are coming from just reading e-mail,'' he said.

Cooper, a musician who runs a website for a local multimedia firm (http://www.discmakers.com), added that Internet firms here need to be able to sell their hometown to prospective employees. ``It'll help recruiters if people feel there's a community here for them,'' he said.

``We have a chance here to define a community that will give people a choice'' maintained Kolenda, head of a Manayunk Web-services outfit (http://www.iliad.com). If that's ever going to happen, moreover, clearly now is the time. The eager young techies coming out of Drexel, Penn and Temple need to see people like themselves making careers here, or they'll join the long train of talented people who've helped enrich someplace else.