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Two Years of Cyber Deprivation in Lithuania

By TED BONGIOVANNI

Imagine that you wake up in a strange land. Your room is small but comfortable. As the sun streams through fine lace curtains, you look at your watch. It's 4:30 A.M., far too early for the sun to be shining. Then you remember: Thirty-five years after President Kennedy's call to serve, you're in the [Peace Corps](#), and you're going to be living in this strange land for the next two years.

Your laptop is on the nightstand. In your previous, computer-junkie life, you spent a few hours a day surfing the Net. Now, the happy hissing, chirping and buzzing sounds of your modem connecting have been replaced by roosters cackling outside your window. Twenty-four months of cyber deprivation? What were you thinking?

Two years ago, when I left a job with a book publisher to teach English with the Peace Corps in [Lithuania](#), I figured it was one big happy world out there in cyberspace, and it didn't matter if you were logging on from Los Angeles or Lithuania.

Wrong.

I knew I was in trouble the minute I picked up a telephone -- fire engine red, heavy as a hydrant and sporting a round disc with little holes about its periphery through which I could see numbers. I remembered seeing disks like this in my childhood -- dials! Arcane devices. A mechanical legacy now reduced to a verb in American English.



Credit: The New York Times

It also meant that the phone system used little clicks instead of bright beeps -- that is, pulse dialing instead of tone dialing. No problem I thought. I'd configured dialup connections before. Just switch the modem setting to pulse dial and I'd be in business.

Besides, before leaving the States, I had secured the names of three Internet providers and a little adapter from a company called Teleadapt that would allow me to graft my modern, modular J11 phone jack to the aging Soviet-era telephone grid.

Connecting to the Internet in Lithuania turned out to be only half as complicated as docking the Shuttle on the Mir. I hadn't intended to go where no man had gone before, but I do have a Macintosh, which is about as common in Lithuania as limiting one's self to a single shot of vodka.

Romas Romanauskas of the Lithuanian Mathematics Institute obviously considered my Powerbook a curious little toy. He rolled the trackball around and followed the cursor trails with his eyes instead of looking at me while talked.

"I can give you an account," Romanauskas mused, "but you've got to make it work."

He wrote my login information on the blank side of a 3-inch by 10-inch brown Russian computer punch card. We tested the connection using ZTerm, a text-based dial up program. It worked. I had only been in country a week, I gloated, and I was already back online.

But visions of applets dancing in my head were quickly dashed when I got home and discovered that I would need SLIP software instead of the PPP software I had been using in America. For the next few days I had to be content with composing my messages in SimpleText, a bare bones word processor, then uploading them to the server. But at least I was a link on the Net, albeit a slow-moving, colorless link.

My Aunt Helen was more reliable than my phone connection, which seemed to fade in and out like a radio station at some outpost of civilization.

Like any good American, I was happy with this arrangement for all of about five minutes, then decided that I wanted something better. I downloaded InterSLIP software, which required learning lots of commands in UNIX, still the lingua franca of the Internet. After writing a connect script while suffering from serious surfing withdrawal, I had a working SLIP connection and my screen was awash in icons and Netscape's teetering, drunken "N."

My ISP offered six phone lines, all of which were busy most of the time. It took stubborn persistence to connect. I scoffed when I saw a news broadcast from back home in which an America Online subscriber threw his hands up in disgust after a mere three failed connection attempts. AOL customers were threatening lawsuits over connectivity that would have been state-of-the-art where I was living.

After the Peace Corps finished teaching us all the Lithuanian they thought we needed to know, I was shipped off to Rietavas, five hours by bus from Vilnius and not far from the coast. The first phone line ever installed in Lithuania had stretched from Rietavas to Palanga, and I am convinced that the original cable is still in use.

Half of the time, my modem couldn't even detect the phone system's faint, burring dial tone. After much experimentation, I discovered that I could fool the modem by running into my host family's kitchen and lifting the receiver of the other telephone. Needless to say, my hosts thought this was rather strange, since for all of the time I spent trying to get the computer to work I probably could have read *War and Peace*, handwritten letters home and hand delivered them. But that would have been too un-American. I had to show these Eastern Europeans how technology makes our lives easier.

I jumped for joy the day I heard that the billionaire financier George Soros's [Open Society Fund](#) had launched its Internet program. Thirty 28.8 Kbps modems, only three phone numbers to call, and PPP instead of SLIP. I made all the changes to my computer, crossed myself, said three Hail Mary's and clicked on connect. It worked! On the first try! I started checking e-mail several times a week again and even ventured out onto the World Wide Web.

By then, I had got used to reading old newspapers. My Aunt Helen, who sent copies of *People* and *The New York Times Week in Review*, was still more reliable than my phone connection, which seemed to fade in and out like a radio station at some outpost of civilization. I resolved to stick to e-mail and to surf the Web only on the two occasions each month when I went into Vilnius, where people could dial up at will or even had direct connections. These trips were like furloughs to cyberspace for good behavior.

But after serving my two-year sentence in real space, returning to high-bandwidth America left me with a sense of cosmic culture shock, like astronauts who visited the moon and were said never to have viewed Earth the same way again.

In fact, cruising the Web on a T1 line left me with a sense of wonder that recalled a scene from the movie "2001, A Space Odyssey." Like Dave Bowman, the stranded astronaut, said of the mysterious black monolith, "My god! It's full of stars."

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