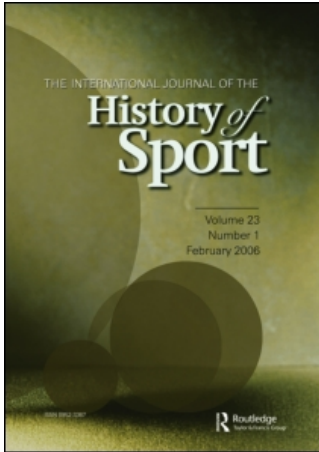


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# Virtually There: Cricket, Community, and Commerce on the Internet

Sanjay Joshi

*This essay records a recent history of how dedicated and public-spirited lovers of a sport created a virtual community of cricket fans using what was then a new medium called the internet. The website “Cricinfo” was initially a product of this community. The essay then shows how commercial concerns came to override those of the virtual community, as Cricinfo was transformed from a community-based enterprise to a commercial entity. All of this happened at a time when the sport and the internet itself was being transformed by new technologies, and entrepreneurs were taking advantage of these changes to create new economic opportunities. The recent acquisition of Cricinfo by the media giant ESPN (itself owned by The Walt Disney Company) merely continues the trajectory outlined in this essay.*

We are not a site that developed a community...We're a community that developed a site. [1]

This is a small history of people who follow cricket on the internet. It is therefore necessarily a narrative of very recent times. Whether or not it qualifies as ‘history’ I will leave to my readers and their definitions of a tricky word. However, I do hope, through this essay, to record the fanatical dedication and tremendous sense of public service that drove lovers of a game to create a virtual community on a new medium of communication – the internet. I aim also to reveal the ways in which commercial concerns came to override those of the virtual community as the internet itself was transformed with new technologies, new possibilities and new opportunities. This is also, necessarily, an essay in the autobiographical mode. My interest in this subject derives squarely from being a witness, and only a very occasional participant, in this virtual world of followers of cricket. It would hardly be fair, therefore, if I did not begin this essay with a clear statement of my own involvement with the subject.

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I moved to the United States in 1988 and like most expatriates, missed many things about home. Cricket was high on that list. I quickly discovered that cricket was as comprehensible to my new American friends as a Japanese tea ceremony – and regarded about as much of a sport! The fact that any game could take five days to complete, was, of course unfathomable. But, for some reason, what really brought the incredulous hoots of laughter was the notion of a sport which had a break for *tea*! Comparisons favouring horticultural growth as a spectator sport were too often forthcoming. Of course I was hearing this from people who play rounders (only they call it baseball) as their national sport. [2] But if that made me feel any better, it got me no closer to following cricket. I had to find some way of getting my cricket fix. Fortunately, my acquisition of elementary computer skills came to coincide with the growth of a new phenomenon which came to be called the internet.

Cricket, it appears, was part of the internet almost from the time the latter was created. Given how much we take the technology around us for granted, and how quickly it has become ubiquitous, it is perhaps important to recall how recently it has evolved. The earliest recognizable ancestor of the now-omnipresent personal computer is less than three decades old. [3] Though we can trace the origins of the internet to the 1969 ARPANET, the World Wide Web dates only from 1989. Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which hosts a wonderful community of cricket lovers among its thousands of chat rooms today, was created in the summer of 1988, and averaged only 12 users on 38 servers worldwide as late as 1990. [4] Probably nothing brings home the very contemporary nature of this history as the fact that the term ‘internet’ itself was formally defined only a decade ago. [5] It is important to keep in mind that even up to the middle of the 1980s, only a handful of scientists and technologists across the world used computers connected to a network to communicate with each other. It was fortunate for cricket enthusiasts living in the cricket wasteland of the United States of America that when these technologies did start reaching a slightly larger audience in the early 1990s, this audience included similarly deprived cricket-crazy technology buffs.

In the early 1990s, online forums became oases in the deserts of a cricketless America for expatriate cricket fanatics. From a universe bereft of cricket, passionate followers of the game discovered – while the really committed ones helped to create – a virtual treasure trove on cricket. It began with Usenet, that early online forum where discussion and votes among users – and they were then still a fairly limited number – were usually enough to set up a new newsgroup. Virtually anyone with access to a computer, modem and a server could then read or post on these newsgroups. [6] The request for discussion (RFD) for creating a newsgroup dedicated to cricket, rec.sport.cricket (RSC) was posted in March 1990 to existing newsgroups dealing with sports, as well as those discussing British and Indian cultural topics, indicating perhaps the geographic origins of most of those who participated in starting what was to become the cyber-world of cricket. [7] Critically important contributions to cricket on the internet have come from passionate followers of the game in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and even Holland and Hong Kong,

among other unexpected locations. However, 'Brits' and 'Desis' (British and folks from the Indian subcontinent, including Sri Lanka) were among the most visible and voluble contributors to the emerging world of cricket on the internet.

The newsgroup RSC became the first focal point for cricket enthusiasts mired in the cricketing wastelands of the world. Discussions, debates and arguments about players and teams, but most importantly quick updates on matches going on across the world, attracted more and more participants to RSC. There were 181 different postings to the new newsgroup in April 1980, its first month of existence, and this more than doubled in the following month. The newsgroup averaged more than 300 posts for the first six months of 1991, and currently averages almost 10,000 posts a month. [8] Discussions on RSC opened up other horizons of the internet to folks from the humanities such as myself, in particular the joys of real-time conversations on IRC. It was but a short step from real-time conversations to real-time updates and then something close to running commentary on cricket games from across the world.

Constraints of space make it impossible to include the names of all the people who played a leading role in pioneering cricket coverage on the internet. Among those remembered fondly even today is Professor K.S. Rao, then at North Dakota State University, who set up an email mailing list for those starved of conversations and information on cricket in 1991. [9] During India's tour of South Africa in 1992–3, Professor Rao apparently used a 'bot' (short for robot) – a computer program that automatically updated scores of ongoing matches on his account at North Dakota. Cricket lovers with connections to the internet could (and apparently frequently did) 'finger' his account to access the latest updated scores. [10] From there it was a short step to actual running commentary on the internet. During a discussion about the history of the newsgroup RSC, a group of the people who were actively involved in making it happen, recalled how running commentary on matches began on IRC. Apparently, in January 1993, a couple of cricket enthusiasts in computer science departments in the US sent over a special set of cables to friends in England, who were thus able to relay to them over the internet, completely illegally of course, audio commentary from the BBC's *Test Match Special* radio broadcast. These US-based enthusiasts, in turn, typed up the audio commentary over IRC for the rest of us to enjoy. [11]

Today, when pornography and/or commerce appear to be the main engines of growth on the internet, it is difficult to even conceive of the internet world little more than a decade ago. As cricket came on the internet almost at the same time as the net itself was emerging, examining this history allows us a glimpse into that very different world of the internet which existed then, and how quickly and completely it has changed. The world of cricket aficionados, fanatics if you will, on the internet in the early and mid 1990s was an amazing one where dedicated volunteers typed in ball-by-ball accounts of matches. Most of these folk were getting to see a game on the TV or were listening to radio commentary. Inspired by nothing more than altruism and sympathy for their deprived brethren, they manually typed in 'running commentary' on these matches to their eagerly waiting audience, across virtual worlds, who egged them on while offering their own 'readings' of the game.

Most online cricket buffs agree that the quality of the early ball-by-ball commentary was usually of the highest quality in this volunteer era, as opposed to the more 'professional' commentary offered now. Sadiq Yusuf (who writes under the nickname of 'Amol Cricketwallah') has been a participant in the world of cricket on the internet from the time it began. Reminiscing about how ball-by-ball commentary was done in the early 1990s, 'Amol' recalls there being around six people with access to live audio on IRC, with 'One to say something like "ball 1, 2 runs". The next to say "that was clipped away to midwicket, where Gooch stupidly misfielded . . .". And the third to say "the crowd doing a Mexican wave, firecrackers going off". And the fourth to chime in "butterfly fluttering across the field between the bowler and mid-on" :-)' All this while, Amol recounts, there would be two others eagerly awaiting their turn to provide commentary! [12] It is important to recall that even as late as 1997, providing running commentary over the internet was a completely voluntary enterprise, with folks often running up high phone bills (not to speak of inviting carpal tunnel syndrome) only with the end of serving a community of like-minded lovers of the game. Providing commentary, moreover, one first-hand account by a commentator recounts, was 'surprisingly hard work', leaving him exhausted by the end of a day's play. [13]

The days of this sort of volunteerism are now over. To be sure, professionalism comes with its advantages, but also at a cost. There are now many websites which offer some version of running commentary on matches, but their commentary is bland and for most part generated by an automatic scoring program manned by paid professionals. These professionals, 'Amol Cricketwallah' says, are not motivated by the same love for cricket as the 'fanatical amateurs' of a decade ago. They provide few details, and often get things wrong when they try to do so, he says. [14] On the plus side, there is hardly any game of any significance anywhere in the world that is not covered by sites such as Cricinfo today. But before the formidable marriage of passion and commerce that produced sites such as Cricinfo, cricket lovers really had to depend on the generosity of spirit (as well as of more material resources) of their compatriots across the seas. There was many a time when there was no coverage of matches. Folks would enter IRC chatrooms such as #cricket and the few who could afford to do so made periodic phone calls to cricket-playing countries to convey the latest scores to an audience starved of cricket news. Or casual visitors to a cricket chatroom who had access to radio or television coverage of a match were inveigled into staying on to provide updates on the match.

A memorable episode during an India-Pakistan limited-overs game in Sharjah in 1995 epitomizes the best and the worst of community-based efforts at providing cricket coverage on the internet. No commentary was available on this match over the internet, when a 15-year old by the name of Prakash, then living in Hong Kong, happened to visit the #cricket chatroom on IRC. Prakash was induced to stay on to type in commentary while watching the game on television at home. Prakash's typing and spelling was not of the highest order, and certainly the commentary was not of the quality which folks on #cricket had been getting from the regulars on the channel. Prakash made errors in spelling names of leading players, as well as in indicating who

was bowling or fielding at a particular time. An IRC log of that day's commentary read as follows:

<prakash> Sachin Tundukar [the correct spelling is Tendulkar] is bolwing [sic; bowling]  
<prakash> out out out out!!!!  
<prakash> Sachin Tundukar is bolwing  
<prakash> sorry, kumble is bowling

But then, troubled by derogatory remarks he was receiving, Prakash temporarily left the chatroom, which provoked this response in the chatroom:

<srinivas> prakash is gone  
<wenyen> prakash please come back  
<gt4667c> please prakash come back

Prakash did return for a while, but then – whether out of thrift, opportunism or sheer exasperation – said he wanted to be paid for his work, which completely alienated the rest of the chatroom ('VKFan' here is an 'op', or one with power to throw people off the channel):

<prakash> ARE YOU PAYING OR NOT??????  
<VKFan> stop it prakash  
<azzie> prakash: its too hard to arrange  
<prakash> ARE YOU PAYING?????  
<prakash> ARE YOU PAYING?  
<azzie> prakash: no  
<azzie> this is not a pay channel  
<azzie> nobody here is paid for whatever services they may offer  
<azzie> its all done on a voluntary basis  
<prakash> fuck you!!!

At which point VKFan expelled Prakash off the channel #cricket, leading to:

<travis> yay! 3 cheers for VKfan  
<travis> <g>  
<VKFan> :-)  
<rogan> We do not pay for comm on #cricket  
<rogan> That is all there is to it

As the Prakash episode reveals, it was never all roses on the online cricket forums. The discussions on RSC and in chatrooms such as #cricket, cover the range from the utterly puerile to incisive, from arguments about relative techniques of players to trading the latest gossip. Regional rivalries, and of course national ones, also bring the worst bigots to these discussions. This is one of the reasons why there are separate 'rooms' these days for commentary and discussion on IRC. Even in the discussion rooms, certain games, for instance those between India and Pakistan, have to be strictly moderated, with jingoists from both sides repeatedly thrown out of the chats,

or even banned, for their abusive conduct. Passion for a sport is as capable of engendering magnificent altruism as it is of abuse and hatred. Given the anonymous though interactive nature of the internet, people often express their dissatisfaction with services or with other individuals in ways that would never be tolerated in face-to-face interactions. This was certainly evident in the way Prakash was treated on #cricket in 1995. Within two years of its inception, patrons of #cricket had come to expect a certain degree of professionalism in the commentaries provided to them by volunteers. When their expectations were belied, as by Prakash's efforts, they were quick to voice their ridicule, ignoring both the youth of the volunteer and the pressures he undoubtedly underwent in providing the commentary. In fact, the reason we still have a log of this particular session of IRC is because some cricket lovers with better English-language skills found Prakash's efforts worthy of their scorn. Travis Basevi prefaced his posting of this log on RSC by saying: 'I know it seems cruel to publish the whole episode on rsc, but... he deserves it.' [15]

Why did he deserve it? Certainly not only on account of his orthographic limitations. To understand this episode, we need to put it in its context. First, at this time, there was no real organization for providing commentary on the internet, except on special occasions. People just 'showed up' on the chatroom, and through this virtual community hoped to exchange news and information about the game. Second, the notion of a community based on voluntary effort was almost universally acknowledged as the norm among regulars on this and other cricket-related forums on the internet. The reason why Prakash was pilloried, and why the event became memorable, is because Prakash's demands for compensation in money for his time and effort completely transgressed the norms on which this community was built. Despite the service he evidently provided, his demand for money was anathema to the cricket lovers on this forum. They even cheered his departure, though it meant they lost access to updates of the match. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that Prakash's efforts on this day, despite his later demands, were for most part also very much in the spirit of service which characterized the efforts of most people in the cricket community on the internet at that time. As Prakash noted during the acrimonious exchange that led to his being thrown off the channel, he was spending a lot of money for his internet connection and had been providing a service which other members on #cricket obviously craved. He was merely asking the community to meet the costs of the service he was providing. Yet 'rogan' summarized the prevailing norm well when he stated, rather disdainfully: 'we do not pay for comm[entary] on #cricket.... That is all there is to it.'

Ironically enough, though, the very same spirit of proud volunteerism and public service also produced one of the most astonishing commercial successes of the 1990s internet dot-com boom. I refer of course to the website Cricinfo, which is not only the largest and most popular website for cricket today, but with 'more than 250 million page views per month, ... is by far the world's favourite web site dedicated to a single sport'. [16] Of all the internet activity on cricket that has taken place, Cricinfo has, deservedly no doubt, generated the most publicity. *The Hindu*, one of

India's premier newspapers, wrote about Cricinfo as early as 1995. [17] Alex Balfour wrote a piece for the UK magazine *Wired* in February 1996, shortly before joining the management team at Cricinfo. [18] Alistair McLellan published the most detailed (though still very incomplete) history of Cricinfo in volume six of the *New Ball* series on cricket writing in 2001, where he lauds its meteoric rise 'from a loose collection of volunteers to a £100 m business in just seven years'. [19]

With journalists' penchant for focusing on personalities and Cricinfo's evident financial successes, much of the published coverage has focused on its 'founder', Dr Simon King, and on Cricinfo as a commercial entity. But this focus on the individual and the commercial successes or misfortunes of the website obscures the very different history and milieu from which Cricinfo emerged. That history is one that reflects much of the history of the internet, and illustrates the processes that have transformed communities to commercial enterprises. The narrative in turn depends on the nature of the sources used by the narrators. Most of the existing accounts of Cricinfo have relied on interviews with one or two of the leading figures in the organization. I have, however, relied on trawling the posts on RSC, where most of the people who contributed to the making of Cricinfo have posted their own perceptions about it. This 'Cricinfo Story' then, reflecting these sources (as well as the somewhat 'subalternist' orientation of this historian), is as concerned with the community that created Cricinfo as its later and more commercial incarnations.

Cricinfo emerged out of the same sets of conversations and predicaments that produced the ball-by-ball commentaries on matches over IRC, and around the same time. Virtually all that has been written in print and online forums recalls that Cricinfo began life as 'bot' on IRC written by Simon King, which would store scorecards of current games. He did this, apparently, because of too many folks showing up on IRC interrupting commentary and asking for scorecards of games. [20] However, given cricket lovers' fascination with statistics, Cricinfo transformed itself into a cricket database. For the record, it should be mentioned that Cricinfo was hardly the first cricket-related 'bot' on the internet. As mentioned earlier, Professor Rao had used a 'bot' (called 'dougie') during a cricket series in 1992–3, prior to the creation of Cricinfo. Other 'bots' (for instance, one called Crickoot or Creakoot) had been used to update scorecards and topics during IRC commentary. Simon King, according to some of the people who were most involved with putting cricket on the internet in the early 1990s, picked up on the idea of using 'bots' to retrieve and organize scorecards and wrote the Cricinfo 'bot' and registered the bot and the name Cricinfo with the bot registration system. [21] Thus, on 2 March 1993, was born Cricinfo. [22] If Cricinfo was not the first cricket 'bot' on the internet, nor the first cricket database, [23] it certainly became the most popular one, largely on account of the unpaid labour of love contributed by hundreds of volunteers who typed, scanned and otherwise wrote scorecards, articles, match reports and the like from cricket games past and present into the Cricinfo database. [24]

The contributions of volunteers to Cricinfo were made in the true spirit of the early internet. It was this spirit of the early internet that disdained commerce and was



appalled that a contributor such as Prakash (whatever his age!) could ask for money for his services. It was this spirit that created a virtual community of people, many of whom had never met or even spoken with each other and who had little else in common other than their love for the game. As most (though by no means all) of these folks were based in the United States, the marginal existence of their object of love (obsession?) may also have contributed to the sense of community fostered by the internet. In any case, it was this spirit that allowed Cricinfo to grow and thrive. As the Cricinfo database grew, it needed more dedicated space. Professor K.S. Rao provided the initial space for it on his own machine, and even donated an older 386 computer for its use. Later, some people bartered a used microwave oven for an old workstation, and this became the 'home' of Cricinfo, which was hosted at the Oregon Graduate Institute, where many of the key contributors to Cricinfo worked or studied. Cricinfo was still a 'bot' on irc at this stage. It was after the move to Oregon that Neeran Karnik installed a 'gopher' server on the machine which made the Cricinfo database available to a larger and less computer-savvy audience, including yours truly. But the contributions kept pouring in, as did now the traffic to the database. Murari Venkataraman worked hard to organize the data. Finally, to update the hardware required to keep Cricinfo functioning, a funding drive was initiated on RSC and cricket. About \$2000 was collected in a short period of time, and a newer machine provided even better access to the Cricinfo database. [25]

My focus on the community that built Cricinfo is not to suggest that Simon King did not play a critical role in its making. There are too many instances of beginnings of great ideas on the internet which then fall apart because their founders lose interest. For the community of cricket lovers to thrive on the internet, there was a need for coordination, for someone to ensure there would be people willing to type up commentaries on games, someone to remind contributors to build up the database. Too many voluntary internet ventures folded up because of lack of leadership. Simon King provided Cricinfo with that leadership. Without his work it is very unlikely that we would have today one of the most amazing databases on cricket, nor would there be a website to which cricket lovers across the world (and no longer only from cricket wastelands) turn to for the most recent updates on current matches. King does not identify himself as a cricket maniac, a label many others on IRC or Cricinfo gladly apply to themselves. Rather than mania, McLellan reveals that King had persistence, organizational skills and, significantly, also an entrepreneurial vision.

The dream of commercial success was not what drove people (King included) to create or contribute to Cricinfo. But the sheer quality of the database contributed by cricket lovers across the world, and the sort of coverage of matches volunteers were able to provide, was driving more and more people to Cricinfo. This expanded even further with the coming of the web interface. The number of visitors to the Cricinfo website grew exponentially, from 127,000 in 1993, to 1.1 million in 1994 and 3.5 million by 1995. [26] It is impossible to pinpoint the exact moment in time when the management team of Cricinfo, and Simon King in particular, decided to go commercial. But it is not difficult to locate this decision sometime in the 1994–6

period – some time after the web interface and massive increase in traffic to the website, and in an environment where dot-coms were beginning to make unimaginably huge amounts of money. Simon King, who had returned to England after his postdoctoral work at Minnesota in 1993, registered Cricinfo as a privately-held company in the U.K. in 1996. [27]

The drift of McLellan's history of Cricinfo, based as it is on interviews with King, is of an inevitable (and for a while a very successful) move to commerce simply as a way to keep up with the boom in the website. 'We weren't thinking commercially,' says King, 'just about the good Cricinfo could do for the game.' [28] King-McLellan in fact point out that the move to make Cricinfo a commercial body occurred only after an unsuccessful attempt by King to give the site away to the International Cricket Conference (ICC) – the London-based organization (and renamed descendant of the erstwhile Imperial Cricket Conference) which governs international cricket. The reluctance of the founder to admit that Cricinfo was moving towards being a commercial enterprise is easy enough to understand given its beginnings. Though all contributors were told that their submissions became the property of Cricinfo, not many folks would have put in huge number of hours and days contributing to the content, and hence the attraction of the site, if they had known they were contributing to the future fortunes of a few. The tone and content of public communications from Cricinfo, too, never made this future apparent. This was perfectly understandable in the early years of the database, when it was very much a community enterprise and the role of Simon King and the 'Cricinfo management' was mainly coordinating, compiling and formatting the inputs from volunteers. RSC is full of requests from Cricinfo in its early years, pointing out the various gaps in the database and asking volunteers to contribute scorecards or statistics. What is less understandable is the continuation of this rhetoric even at a time when the registration of the website as a private company must have been known to the management. A call as late as October 1995 for a 'West Indies representative' for Cricinfo, whose duties included liaison work, coordination and publicizing Cricinfo activities in the region, proudly declared that the position paid 'nothing whatsoever'. 'The CricInfo management,' the call went on to say, 'is a volunteer organisation dedicated to helping fellow enthusiasts follow their favourite sport wherever they are in the world. If you help out, others will too!' [29] This announcement was posted only months before Cricinfo was registered as a private company in 1996.

The first signs of unrest within the community of cricket-lovers on the internet came shortly before its 'privatization'. In 1995, Cricinfo made (free) registration a prerequisite for accessing the recent web version of their site, provoking some protest on RSC. In a long post to RSC, Badrinarayanan Seshadri, then a graduate student at Cornell, responded to the protests on behalf of the Cricinfo management. It is interesting to note, once again, that just months before the registration of Cricinfo as a private company, the language Seshadri chose to use in his defence of the management was that of community rather than commerce. He went to great lengths to explain that there was no deviation from the original principles of Cricinfo, as

some people suggested on RSC. In fact registration was only being requested, he argued, so that Cricinfo would be able to make the strongest possible case before bodies such as the ICC for allocating better resources to Cricinfo for its users. He recounted the history of the community of cricket lovers on the internet to lament their current lack of trust. 'Hundreds of people trusted us and mailed us money for buying a computer. Haven't we acted exactly according to that trust? Haven't we served the user community to your satisfaction?' he asked. Switching registers somewhat, Seshadri moved from history and reason to a much more emotional tone. The Cricinfo management, Seshadri said, was 'deeply pained that not only have we [not] received enough registration but in fact people have rewarded us for our hard work by not even trusting us with innocuous information like email-address[es]'. The management, he argued, was trying to take decisions only with the best interests of the community in mind. 'Is it unjustified to ask for registration information just to serve you better?' he asked. The management itself, he pointed out, was 'not some impersonal entity. . . . We are also people like you, and we do this work in our spare time. Please show a bit of understanding for our efforts. A word of appreciation from you will make us happy.' Indeed, embedded in this long defence of Cricinfo policies was an invitation for anyone to join the management, as long as they were willing to contribute at least ten hours a week to Cricinfo 'without expecting any monetary compensation'. [30]

A majority of the respondents on RSC supported the management, and were very highly critical of the protesters whom they perceived as troublemakers undermining the ethos of trust upon which their community rested. The critics, however, were probably more prescient than the supporters of the Cricinfo management realized. An important thrust of the criticism was that Cricinfo was a community effort, and therefore its management had no right to restrict access to the database without a full discussion with the community of users. There were also serious concerns about corporate fundraising or even the involvement of the ICC, and what these changes may do to the autonomy of a website most still believed was the property of a loosely defined cricket-loving community. [31] The responses to such criticism tended to be dismissive of their concerns. Neeran Karnik, then part of Cricinfo management, insisted that registration was not creating any significant change in the way in which Cricinfo was being run. Karnik accused the protestors of reading too much into a small administrative change and said: 'You make it sound like we're setting out to sell CI [Cricinfo] to a money-grubbing corporation!' [32] Of course, this is exactly what happened soon after.

Some people in the Cricinfo management, however, evidently recognized the implications of some of the criticism. Thus Badrinarayanan Seshadri (who is currently described as the managing director of Cricinfo India Private Limited) [33] was careful in crafting another intervention in this debate, this time clarifying that he was speaking in his personal capacity rather than as a member of the management of Cricinfo. Seshadri insisted that he would be the first to 'oppose CI if it decides to charge money' but that such a scenario would never be on the cards. However, if 'a

few paranoid people think that sky is going to fall on their heads, I can not help them'. Seshadri explained how *he* understood the 'ownership' of Cricinfo. Saying Cricinfo began as the property of one man (Simon King), Seshadri did acknowledge here that '[l]ater, because public money was involved in buying the equipment for CI, and because the data available in that machine was contributed by the public, it has become a public property'. He reiterated a call to respect the communitarian history of Cricinfo, but agreed that there was now a need for a more formal charter for Cricinfo, as well as a clear definition of the goals, and an explicit definition of distribution of power in the organization. [34] RSC would have been the logical place to post such a charter, but to the best of my knowledge, no such document was ever forthcoming. Presumably, once Cricinfo was registered as a private company the next year, the purpose of any such charter became redundant.

In his interview with Alex Balfour, Simon King points out that though he ran Cricinfo as a collective, with all members of the management having a voice in decisions, 'I usually get my way if I feel strongly about something'. [35] From his interviews with McLellan it appears that for a number of reasons, King was determined that Cricinfo should expand and grow in the mid-1990s. When registering the company in 1996, King also took out a bank loan of £10,000 and began travelling to draw in more revenue for Cricinfo. From the other side of the table, from the point of view of the venture capitalists who were funding the dot-com boom in the late 1990s, Cricinfo was a great investment. It had paltry running costs on account of volunteer contributions and a huge audience and name recognition. Andrew Hall, a marketing manager, called Cricinfo a 'no risk start-up'. Alex Balfour, later to be chairman of Cricinfo, was more explicit in an essay he published in a leading media magazine in the UK in 1998 and is worth quoting at length:

A web entrepreneur starts with a solid idea... and publishes a basic site. Internet users come to the site... recommend changes. The entrepreneur listens to the users... or, better still, encourages the user to help make those changes. Delighted to see the site incorporate their ideas the users return, and continue to help. ...

In time the entrepreneur has a large pool of volunteer labour and advisers to draw on. ... As long as the entrepreneur is sufficiently charming and well organised to keep the volunteers happy... the site will continue to develop rapidly.

If volunteers believe that their work is helping to build something which they will find useful, if they can see that their work and ideas making an immediate difference... they will work hard. [36]

Evidently the new management (Balfour's CV says he joined 'Cricinfo Limited' in 1995 as co-founder and director) shared nothing of the communitarian ethos that had created Cricinfo. Contributors were no longer part of a community but only a pool of abstract volunteer labour who needed to be charmed into contributing to the profits of the web entrepreneur.

Cricinfo Limited went from strength to strength. In 1999 Indigo Holdings offered Cricinfo \$5 million for growth. The next year, Satyam Infoway, one of the India's two

top software technology firms, bought out Indigo for \$21 million and offered Cricinfo another \$16 million in exchange for a quarter of the firm's stock. From proudly working for nothing, members of the Cricinfo board, which included King, Seshadri, Balfour and two others, now owned a half-share in a \$150 million firm. [37] Cricinfo became the world's single largest dedicated cricket enterprise and board members' personal worth was now in millions of dollars. Less than a decade had passed since the time when Prakash's demands for ten dollars an hour for commentary had led to his expulsion from an internet cricket channel, and less than five years had passed since a member of management had debunked any idea of a corporate sell-out.

That there would be some resentment from former volunteers is perfectly natural. In fact what is surprising is how little of it there is on RSC. Very few appear to resent the fact that some people became millionaires effectively on the back of the labour of others. [38] It is either because many see nothing wrong with this, or perhaps it is because they all understand and philosophically accept the workings of capitalism better than historians do. Yet the issue of betrayal does reappear frequently in the course of other discussions on RSC. Thus on a discussion of the history of Cricinfo, Vicky Vigneswaran, who was at one time top of the list of contributors of data to Cricinfo, said he was 'disappointed and angry' on hearing of the registration of Cricinfo Limited and to see how 'the hard work of hundreds of volunteers' came to be used 'by some smart operators to make money'. Vicky claims he was 'sidelined' in Cricinfo for his views on going commercial. He appears more disappointed at how the management at Cricinfo treated even people such as Professor Rao – whose contributions of computer and server space had allowed Cricinfo to come into being in the first place. [39] Evidently there is a great deal more that happened in the move to going commercial than is discussed on RSC. Nor would some of these details be entirely appropriate for this forum. But even RSC postings reveal the transformation of Cricinfo, and not just in economic terms. As a commercial entity, Cricinfo was now beholden to its financiers and profit margins rather than its volunteers. While 'management' had been quick to come to RSC and post a defence of its position in 1995, it has apparently seen no reason to do so when much more serious charges were being levelled in 2000 and 2003.

Mismanagement and the lack of a sound business plan meant that Cricinfo Limited faced serious financial difficulties again in 2001. Finally in 2003 Cricinfo 'merged' with the Wisden group, which also brings out the 'Bible of Cricket', the annual *Wisden Almanack*. [40] The transformation to a corporate site is complete. Today, Cricinfo.com proudly announces itself to corporate advertisers as 'the perfect environment for fully-accountable advertising, sponsorship and promotions' on the basis of the 250 million page views per month the site generates. [41] The very large list of clients who have used Cricinfo to promote their products include such multinational giants as Coca-Cola, McDonalds, Shell and IBM. [42]

Probably on account of its history, Cricinfo continues to provide completely free access to its vast database. Ball-by-ball commentary on matches, now presumably

typed by Wisden Cricinfo employees, is also regularly piped in free to IRC cricket, which Cricinfo also controls via professional moderators. But it is quite interesting that the current website has actually blocked access to some of the files from the older Cricinfo site, including one where Simon King provided a history of Cricinfo. [43] An email request for that file to Wisden has not yet elicited a response.

Of course this essay has been written in a spirit of nostalgia. Nostalgia about the good old days – of the early 1990s! Yes, I do miss the somewhat arbitrary though passionate commentary provided by volunteers. I even miss the puritanism of the community spirit which refused to consider the possibility of paying for commentary or service. But then I also miss radio commentaries. The effort of having to imagine the events on the field, I would like to believe, actually made us more involved in the game, and less passive consumers of the images we now get off the television screen. But my love for the past does not stop me from enjoying the obvious advantages of multiple camera angles, slow-motion replays and the like provided by contemporary television coverage of the game. For the same reasons, nostalgia does not prevent me from making Cricinfo one of the first sites I open on my web browser each day.

## Notes

*All websites cited below were last accessed either 23 or 24 December 2004.*

- [1] Simon King, founder of Cricinfo, quoted in the Asian edition of *Time* magazine, 23 Nov. 1998, available at <http://www.time.com/time/asia/asia/magazine/1998/981123/cricket3.html>. I am grateful to a posting by Vicky B. Vigneswaran on the newsgroup `rec.sport.cricket` (hereafter RSC) for directing me to this quotation and website.
- [2] The United States was not always a cricket wasteland, of course. For a brief history of how rounders, a.k.a. baseball, replaced cricket in the United States, see Steven Wells, 'What Goes Around, Comes A-rounders', *The Guardian*, 27 July 2004, available at <http://sport.guardian.co.uk/cricket/comment/0,10070,1269611,00.html>. For a more detailed history of cricket in the USA, see Melville, *The Tented Field*.
- [3] The very earliest personal computer, according to the Blinkenlights Archeological Institute, was the 'Simon', described by Edmund Berkeley in his 1949 book, *Giant Brains, or Machines That Think*. Purists are, however, willing to accept that it is only back to 1977 that we can trace the earliest commercially marketable personal computer, the Apple II. The first IBM personal computer, the IBM 5150 PC, dates from 1981. See <http://www.blinkenlights.com/pc.shtml>
- [4] Daniel Stenberg, 'History of IRC (Internet Relay Chat)', available at <http://daniel.haxx.se/irchistory.html>
- [5] The Federal Networking Council passed a resolution to this effect on 24 Oct. 1995: 'A Brief History of the Internet' by the Internet Society, available at <http://www.isoc.org/internet/history/brief.shtml>
- [6] See Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia on 'Usenet' at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Usenet>; also 'History of the Internet, 1970s' at 'Computer History Museum', available at [http://www.computerhistory.org/exhibits/Internet\\_history/Internet\\_history\\_70s.shtml](http://www.computerhistory.org/exhibits/Internet_history/Internet_history_70s.shtml)
- [7] RSC, Badrinarayanan Seshadri, 14 Sept. 1996, 12.00 am, on 'The history of `rec.sport.cricket`', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/16096beabf08efab>. Seshadri notes that the RFD was posted on 6 March 1990 to the relevant newsgroups. [NB: The

Google archive of this newsgroup gives 12.00 am as the time for most of the messages. This is obviously an error.]

- [8] Based on figures for the first six months of 2004. All data on RSC postings taken from <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/about>
- [9] RSC, Badrinarayanan Seshadri, 14 Sept. 1996.
- [10] RSC, Amol Cricketwallah, 24 April 2002, on 'Official Historian for RSC', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/e4dc1f5c226cce15>
- [11] RSC, Manas Mandal, 28 April 2002, on 'Official Historian for RSC', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/a021bf6b8ad74219>. The dates for the first IRC commentary were provided by Uday Rajan, 5 Feb. 2003, 2.37 pm, on 'Wisden and Cricinfo to Merge!', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/6ee8366753bfdbaf>
- [12] RSC, Amol Cricketwallah, 29 April 2002, 4.01 am, on 'Official Historian for RSC', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/25009f3ef26de5c4>
- [13] For a first-person account of the typing up of ball-by-ball commentary, see Bob Dubery's long account of the voluntary work which went into providing commentary on IRC: RSC, Bob Dubery, 18 May 1997, 12.00 am, on 'Who are the Cricinfo commentators'. He provides this account in response to some unfair carping at the quality of the commentary by another poster on RSC. Most responses, however, lauded the spirit and effort of the voluntary commentators. See <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/6795e4cb400d677c>
- [14] See Amol Cricketwallah on RSC, 29 April 2002, on 'Official Historian for RSC'.
- [15] RSC, Travis Basevi, 7 April 1995, 12.00 am, on '#cricket Comm goes completely nuts', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/b27f992ed34a42bb>. Basevi posted virtually the entire log of that commentary session (with all the original typographical errors) and most others in this discussion agreed with his evaluation of Prakash's moral and orthographical infirmities. The only vote of sympathy for Prakash came much later from Vicky Vigneswaran, who expressed his disappointment that some of the 'respected #cricketers' ridiculed the young man because he was struggling with his typing. RSC, Vicky B. Vigneswaran, 6 Feb. 2003, 2.16 am, on 'Wisden and Cricinfo to Merge!', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/d0ef1e2a8ae73872>. For other instances of ingratitude towards volunteers, see the context to Bob Dubery's post, 18 May 1997.
- [16] Cricinfo Wisden Media Kit, available online at [http://usa.cricinfo.com/link\\_to\\_database/NATIONAL/ENG/MEDIAPACK/index.html](http://usa.cricinfo.com/link_to_database/NATIONAL/ENG/MEDIAPACK/index.html)
- [17] R. Mohan wrote a column in the weekly internet edition of *The Hindu* in late 1995, which was reposted on RSC. RSC, Raghavan Suresh, 8 Nov. 1995, 12.00 am, 'About Cricinfo by R. Mohan in The Hindu', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/0535f488f7f2b7ea>
- [18] Alex Balfour, 'Global Village Green,' *Wired UK*, Feb. 1996, available at the archives of the short-lived magazine, *Wired UK*, <http://www.yoz.com/wired/2.02/es/cricinfo.html>. Also see <http://www.users.dircon.co.uk/~mysore/html/archive6.html>. Balfour's online resume shows him to be the current chairman of Cricinfo Limited, though the document may not have been updated since 2002. See <http://www.users.dircon.co.uk/~mysore/html/cv2.htm>
- [19] McLellan, 'From Minnesota With Love', 149.
- [20] See *ibid.*; Balfour, 'Global Village Green'. Many postings on RSC tell of the beginnings of Cricinfo; perhaps the most authoritative is RSC, Badrinarayanan Seshadri, 21 May 1995, 12.00 am, on 'Letter to management of Cricinfo', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/1da72c8c0194a512>. Seshadri here is writing not just as poster to RSC but in his official capacity as member of the Cricinfo management, responding to certain criticisms of Cricinfo. He begins his post with a very official preface which reads: 'In the following document, "we", "our", "us" etc. describe the CricInfo Management.'

- [21] RSC, Manas Mandal, 28 April 2002, on 'Official Historian for RSC', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/a021bf6b8ad74219>
- [22] McLellan, 'From Minnesota With Love', 153.
- [23] Manas Mandal, in another post argues that the newsgroup rec.sport.cricket.scores was in fact, 'the first "Internet Cricket Database" of any kind, and that the charter of the group reveals Professor Rao's dream 'of archiving the scorecard of \*every\* test match ever played': RSC, Manas Mandal, 17 Sept. 1996, on 'The history of rec.sport.cricket', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/ea41e4309fca47c4>
- [24] A list of contributors on Cricinfo in August 1995 counted about 400 separate contributors, with at least 20 people having made more than a hundred separate contributions to the Cricinfo database by that date: RSC, Gautham N, 23 Aug. 1995, 12.00 am, on 'Top Contributors to the CI database', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/ef49867c971a7ece>
- [25] See RSC, Badrinarayanan Seshadri, 21 May 1995, on 'Letter to management of Cricinfo'; also Uday Rajan, 3 Feb. 2003, 8.27 pm, on 'Wisden and Cricinfo to Merge!', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/4215c26e028ed120>
- [26] McLellan, 'From Minnesota With Love', 155.
- [27] Ibid., 156.
- [28] Ibid., 155.
- [29] RSC, Badrinarayanan Seshadri, 16 Oct. 1995, 12.00 am, on 'CricInfo and the West Indies', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/0c36e47492249caa>
- [30] See RSC, Badrinarayanan Seshadri, 21 May 1995, on 'Letter to management of Cricinfo'.
- [31] RSC, Sanpan (Sandip Pandey), 22 May 1995, 12.00 am, on 'registration at cric.info', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/1f500ae27f1d37a6>, and Amitabha Lahiri, 1 June 1995, on 'registration at cric.info', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/857965d9655d4ae8>. Also RSC, Ravindra Rao, 19 May 1995, 12.00 am, on 'Letter to management of Cricinfo', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/c861b9690ae687c0>
- [32] RSC, Neeran M. Karnik, 23 May 1995, 12.00 am, on 'registration at cric.info', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/fdf8662ddfcbcac1>
- [33] See [http://www.tamil-heritage.org/ec/ec.html#\\_badri](http://www.tamil-heritage.org/ec/ec.html#_badri).
- [34] RSC, Badrinarayanan Seshadri, 24 May 1995, 12.00 am, on 'registration at cric.info', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/4125e535a9df85f1>
- [35] Balfour, 'Global Village Green'.
- [36] Alex Balfour, 'The Only Web Publishing Model That Works', *NMA Magazine*, March 1998, available at <http://www.users.dircon.co.uk/~mysore/html/archive19.html>
- [37] McLellan, 'From Minnesota With Love', 161, 164.
- [38] 'Dougie' appears as one exception. 'Who can blame a supposedly not for profit .org who used the labour of 'volunteers' to become a .com for the benefit of the few? nobody at all :) Who can blame those who ran a .org for becoming rich on the back of volunteers? err, nobody :) Who can blame those who employ computer programmers at slave wages? Nobody :) Who can blame those who do deals with media moguls and use the labour of 'volunteers' to make a mint? NOBODY :)' The 'smileys' are not enough to deflect an evidently deeply felt sense of injustice. RSC, Dougie, 29 June 2000, 12.00 am, on 'What's Happening at Cricinfo', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/b609e513540eec58>
- [39] RSC, Vicky B. Vigneswaran, 5 Feb 2003, 3.18 am, on 'History of Cricinfo? [Re: "Wisden and Cricinfo to Merge!"]', available at <http://groups-beta.google.com/group/rec.sport.cricket/msg/6652bec0aa01d81e>
- [40] See <http://www.cricinfo.com/wisden/about.html>



- [41] Cricinfo Wisden Media Kit, available at [http://usa.cricinfo.com/link\\_to\\_database/NATIONAL/ENG/MEDIAPACK/index.html](http://usa.cricinfo.com/link_to_database/NATIONAL/ENG/MEDIAPACK/index.html)
- [42] Customer list included in the Cricinfo Wisden Media Kit, available at [http://usa.cricinfo.com/link\\_to\\_database/NATIONAL/ENG/MEDIAPACK/advertising-customer-list.html](http://usa.cricinfo.com/link_to_database/NATIONAL/ENG/MEDIAPACK/advertising-customer-list.html)
- [43] For instance, I was prevented from access to an older newsletter from the management using the 'wayback machine' from the archives.org site. For that, try the following link, [http://web.archive.org/web/19990210110536/http://www-ind.cricket.org/link\\_to\\_database/MANAGEMENT/NEWSLETTER](http://web.archive.org/web/19990210110536/http://www-ind.cricket.org/link_to_database/MANAGEMENT/NEWSLETTER) (exercise carried out 23 Dec. 2004).

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- Berkeley, Edmund. *Giant Brains or Machines That Think*. New York: Wiley, 1949.
- Melville, Tom. *The Tented Field*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1998.
- McLellan, Alastair. 'From Minnesota With Love – The Cricinfo Story'. In *The New Ball*, vol. 6, edited by Rob Steen. London: Sports Books Direct, 2001: 147–75.