

CRAIGSLIST

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efficient, much less controlled and probably less inhibited.

It is also free and instantly accessible, a condition which would seem to render classifieds obsolete. By typing www.fortmyers.craigslist into a computer, one discovers an unrestricted bazaar (or possibly a bizarre) of contemporary American life on the Gulf coast.

"It probably has a lot to do with the downfall of newspapers," says Stephanie Davis, the insightful social columnist and scene blogger for The News-Press in Fort Myers.

"It makes me sad for newspapers, because it's one of the reasons we're dying. On the other hand, in an economy like this, for a person to get on the computer and post something for free rather than paying for it, it's a big advantage. It's like a big flea market, or something."

A flea market with a lot more than for-sale objects.

Although the week's news included the arrest of an alleged murderer who used craigslist's personal ad service to lure women and rob them in New England — news that brought to mind the photos of missing children which appeared last year on pornographic craigslist sites, inspiring huge criticism of the company — people here continued to use craigslist for a huge variety of needs.

They were looking for rides near and far, as if hitchhiking had come back into fashion on the electronic highway. They wanted tennis partners, real estate advice, social companions, sexual partners, lawn workers, geologists, dogs, babysitters, fellow kayakers, fellow "rope escape artists," bands, fellow musicians, artists, muralists, lost relatives, people to stand on corners near businesses and hold up signs of accusation or sales.

They wanted to sell, trade or buy houses, boats, fishing gear, lawn mowers, animals, artwork and anything else you can think of.

They wanted people to take care of them, striking recession-era pleas.

"Recently laid off worker of 22 years with the same company, facing loss of insurance, benefits, job and purpose. I am 42 years of age, divorced, independent, slender, short to med length hair, green eyes with glasses. I am shy at first until you get to know me, have a great sense of humor, intelligent, college educated, love the outdoors, gardening, flowers and travel. Am looking for a strictly platonic relationship / partnership that could possibly provide a place to live with an income and new purpose in life," read one advertisement.

Craigslist tailors itself to cities, towns and regions across the country. On the Fort Myers site, categories including Community, Personals, Discussion Forums, Housing, For Sale, Jobs, Services, Gigs, and Resume. There's a "rants and raves" site too, one of nine categories in the "Personal" section, where people often deliver invective criticism of other people in the community.

The vitality of the tool is unquestionable, although its usefulness is less certain.

"I tried to use it to sell a washer and a dryer, and it was not a pleasant experience," says Mr. Kiniry. "People called, they tried to bargain and offer a third of what I was asking — and that wasn't much — and after it ran for two weeks, I gave up." Nevertheless, people here spend a great deal of energy on craigslist.

The community

In the "Community" category alone for Fort Myers, there were 13 sub-categories and a total of about 750 entries made in recent days.

Anonymous people sought workout partners or personal trainers, Texas Hold'em poker players, basketball players, equestrians willing to exchange riding privileges for stable cleaning, dancing partners and more.

Some of them bordered on the personal — and when it came to personal, some residents here who use the service weren't certain it was effective.

Debra Ivey, a 50-something transplant from Asheville, N.C., listed an ad in the "strictly platonic" section of the personals, with no hidden agenda.

"Moved to fm in December," she wrote. "Would like to meet someone to hang out with who enjoys the outdoors, animals, walking the beach, good movies. Someone who is sincere and honest (the impossible dream!). Someone who likes to go to the mountains. I don't want the pressure of dating, just friends for now and see what happens. I am 5'5", hazel eyes, dark blond short hair, not fat but not skinny either, have a dog and a cat, like to read, travel, hike, swim. I am down to earth and open minded. I would eventually like to divide my time between this area and Nashville."

Only a few days after the ad appeared — her first-ever personal ad — she was strongly ambivalent about the use of the Craigslist.

"I'm too old for bars, and I guess you hope that chatting on line you can weed out if someone seems creepy," she says.

Although it's a free marketplace, which attracts her, "I am very concerned about weirdos on here. Sometimes I wish I had not posted the ad. Even though my ad states 'strictly platonic,' I get the feeling that most men who answer want more. I have heard from 30-year-olds and 75-year-olds, and one woman!! Crazy! I just wanted to meet people, since I moved here recently, but in this day and age, you never know who might be a serial killer."

Nevertheless she met one person on line with whom she went to lunch — "a nice but nerdy guy who actually does seem to just want friends."

Ms. Ivey had used craigslist before to try to sell a house, after her daughter recommended it, but that hadn't worked out. "I had interest but no sale of my house, lots of people wanting rent-to-own or owner financing."

Another craigslist user — a man who asked not to be identified by name but describes himself as a "rope escape artist" — also expressed ambivalence about the service.

His ad seeks males who want to practice escaping from ropes. Only.

"This is NOT a sex ad. That is why it is posted in the platonic," he writes. "I love being tied up with rope (prefer-

ably gagged), and trying to escape my bonds... I have no interest in what you look like or what your stats are. And yes, our clothes are ON while we are tied up...we can challenge each other to some fun rope escapes. Sorry to be so forceful in this, but I often get replies from weirdos who also want M2M sex."

In corresponding later about his use of craigslist, however, he said no one has yet answered that ad, although a similar ad resulted in one occasion when he could practice his sport, and he had once responded to a craigslist ad seeking a keyboard player, and met some friends.

But his concerns echo those of others worried about safety.

"A lot of ads are bogus and only lead the reader to some porno Web site," he says. "The responses the reader gets are simply auto responses. You certainly never know what kind of person is really behind the ad, and if it is real or not."

"Many of those M4M (men for men) ads seem extremely degrading and impersonal. What used to appear as graffiti in the rest room stalls is now in full view for everyone to see in craigslist."

In the news

Given last week's news about craigslist-related crime, the company's CEO, Jim Buckmaster, announced that he is "horrified and deeply saddened that our community services have been associated in any way whatsoever with a crime of violence."

That comment came during a CNN interview, in which he said the company would look for other ways to protect users.

Now, before a user opens a craigslist site, he or she comes across a warning, one that claims that the incidence of violent crime associated with craigslist has been very low, and then offers this advice: "When meeting someone for the first time, please remember to insist on a public meeting place like a café; tell a friend or family member where you're going; take your cell phone along if you have one; consider having a friend accompany you; trust your instincts."

Trusting her instincts is exactly what Ms. Davis, the social columnist, does — and her instincts suggest that anonymity may not be the best thing, for a social whirlwind.

"Craigslist seems to be mostly anonymous," she says. "And I am a Facebook fanatic. With facebook, people's real names are out there. That's helpful for me with my job, because people can post events for free."

"Whereas a nonprofit might buy a newspaper or radio ad to promote their gala or gathering or whatever — they can put it on Facebook as an event for free, and send it to everybody."

"So as a social columnist, I'm finding out about events I'd never know, otherwise."

What about other sites?

"I can't wrap my head around Twitter," Ms. Davis explains. "I can't keep up with it. A lot of people told me I should do it, it would be a great tool, but I socialize in real life. I can only socialize on the Internet so much. So I stick with the facebook thing."

And maybe that's as it should be. ■

RECENT CRAIGSLIST POSTINGS:

If craigslist were a mirror, it would reflect many of the most amusing, or sobering, or touching aspects of our lives. Here are a very few of many craigslist moments in Southwest Florida last week, exactly as they appeared online.

>>"Must be willing to dress up like a \$5 foot-long sub while parading around on the sidewalk asking people if they would like extra mayo with it and you would have to RAISE your eyebrows or wink seductively. The job pays 14.75/hr and you can have all the hours you like during our business hours of 9am till 10. When you come to apply you will be required to sing the \$5 dollar footlong sub song while entering our shop in Lehigh next to the Publix Supermarket. The first one to do this will get the job. Good luck P.S. you have to be LOUD and OBNOXIOUS!!!!"

>>"Recently my younger brother who is 30 with end stage cystic fibrosis was on his death bed waiting years for a double lung transplant. I promised him that day i would get him a fishing trip to remember if he got better. well he got the call for lungs jan 18th. everything went great and he is now strong enough to go to Florida for that special trip. we are just going to find a charter out there when we get there. posting to see if anyone knows how i can make sure he has a real good time. being that close to death and then receiving a second chance is just a miracle. He fought hard every step of the way. if you can help in any way to make his Florida reunion a great time give me a call or email."

>>"I have a request. I havn't been swimming in 7 or 8 years. Public pools are gross and I don't really want to go to the beach. I work inside all day, so I need to get some sun. I am also a big guy, somewhere near 275lbs. Most people don't really want to see that, so I am just being honest! I figure if I am going to ask a stranger if I can use their pool, I might as well ask here!"

>>"If you have a motorcycle that you don't ride any more, we need to talk and I'm easy to get along with. I'll trade X amount of 4, 6, or 8 hr 2 or 3 person Private Charters for your cruiser type motorcycle. I have been a successful Fishing Guide for 28 yrs in Lee County. My web site is www.extremefishingfl.com and I'm a regular host on the Fishing TV Show, Southwest Florida Outdoors. I supply everything you will need but your food and drink. You will fish from a Mercury powered 20 ft Lake & Bay and use G-Loomis rods and Shimano reels. You can even have Gift Certificates for the holidays if you wish. I'll show you why, where, when, and how to of backwater fishing."

>>"i recently got out from the marine corps, i am a hard worker and hate half ass work, have previous experience in a restaurant's such as houlihans, and bubbas, have lot knowledge on boat building worked for action craft which is like a rolls royce of flats boats, if your willing to train me in whatever im willing and ready to work clean record, high school diploma, have discipline, leadership skills, good work ethic, any questions please contact me at 239-321-1059"

>>"want to go to real estate auction tonight in Ft Myers for a couple of hours... anyone out there with a car want to join me?? i need a ride since my wife is using our 1 car...we live in bonita...about 4 minutes from I 75...the auction starts around 630 or 7... i can chip in \$35 for roundtrip gas/car expenses Please call me on my cell..."




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