

Unclassifiable

Commerce, Community, and Crime on Craigslist

Classified advertisements are a catalogue of our quotidian desires. As such, they offer a unique glimpse into our culture—and an affirmation of the complexity of human interaction.

In her 2005 book *Strange Red Cow and Other Curious Classified Ads from the Past*, Sara Bader examined classified ads from the eighteenth century through the present, and found that although circumstances change (you might forget your spectacles on the stagecoach rather than the local bus, for example), the human need to buy, sell, barter, and connect through advertisements is of long standing. The title of her book comes from one of the more unusual ads she found in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*:

Came to my plantation, in Springfield township, Philadelphia county, near Flour-town, the 26th of March 1776, A STRANGE RED COW. The owner may have her again, on proving his property, and paying charges.

Classified ads even have spawned their

own scholarly studies, with fittingly turgid titles such as *The Discourse of Classified Advertising: Exploring the Nature of Linguistic Simplicity*.

If classified advertisements reflect a culture's sensibilities, then it is only natural that the ads of the twenty-first century have migrated online. The most popular online ad site is Craigslist, which grew out of an e-mail list of local events started by San Franciscan Craig Newmark in 1994. The site officially launched in 1995, incorporated in 1999, and today is one of the world's most popular Internet websites (the online auction site eBay purchased a 25 percent share of Craigslist in 2004). Craigslist now hosts classified ads for more than one hundred cities in the United States, as well as cities in Latin America, Canada, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The design of the site is starkly utilitarian, reminiscent of the earliest days of the Web, with straightforward lists of links for users to peruse, free of any apparent graphic design or glitter. And best of all, it's free—free of commercial advertising and free for most

users to post classifieds at no cost. The site has no pop-up or banner ads, and doesn't even require users to register. The company's revenue comes from the fees it charges employers who list job openings and real estate brokers who list apartments for rent. (Because Craigslist is free, it also seems to be undermining the traditional revenue stream for print newspapers from their Classifieds sections—something that, in media interviews, Newmark seems intermittently tortured about.)

Like traditional classified ads, the listings on Craigslist showcase a wildly diverse range of needs and wants. The site is organized into categories and subcategories—Community (with subcategories for Childcare, Lost and Found, and Events, for example); For Sale; Housing; Jobs; and Discussion Forums covering everything from haiku to politics. The site even hosts a bartering section, where people trade everything imaginable. One college student who learned he “can't keep pets on campus” offers to trade his “really nice American toad” and “5 gallon glass tank” for whatever anyone will offer. Another person, who received “a framed reproduction of Renoir's ‘Luncheon of the Boating Party’” as a birthday gift from a misguided aunt, entreats: “make me an offer for a different birthday present and this painting is yours!” And then there's your more typical solicitor on Craigslist, who identifies himself as “a licensed and insured contractor,” and offers to trade “bath remodeling, electrical, plumbing, carpentry, drywall repair, decks, [or]

painting” services in exchange for a “truck or car” he needs.

But, not surprisingly, if you poke around for a while on Craigslist you'll find that for every honest plumber seeking help with his small business, there's another like the individual who specified he's “fit, clean cut, [and] attractive,” and seeks to offer his plumbing skills to “an attractive woman for some things I need.” The *New York Times* recently reported one barter proposition from a dominatrix who “offered to trade her services (along with ‘dungeon rental’) for plane tickets, carpets, tiling work, and an antique couch.” A quick scroll through the events listings in Washington, D.C. one day yielded the notice, “Lama will Teach Tibetan Buddhism,” followed by a listing promoting strippers for private parties.

Craigslist includes traditional personal ads—men seeking women, women seeking men, and so forth. In one of the personals subcategories, “Missed Connections,” shy Craigslisters compose short notes to flirtatious salesclerks, strangers on a train, cute baristas, barflies who exchange meaningful glances, and other people they briefly encountered and wish to know. These ads are generally written in vague language: “You are about five-foot-five with sandy long brown wavy hair, a cute small model's nose, and the most gorgeous girl in Manhattan. I've seen you twice now and each time you blow me away. You usually get on or off on 49th Street. Does anyone know the girl with the pink iPod????” Many

entries are much cruder. The fact that thousands of timid people pine away online while hoping that, serendipitously, the objects of their interest are themselves sufficiently lonely to troll around on Craigslist looking for *them*, is a great and sad testament to the power of hope.

Another subcategory of the Craigslist personals section is for bolder individuals. Called “Casual Encounters,” it functions as a virtual parlor for people seeking nearly anonymous, commitment-free sex. This part of the site has recently received attention for facilitating prostitution. Craigslist, it turns out, is becoming one of the most popular venues for the world’s oldest profession. Internet surfing is fast replacing streetwalking as the preferred method of finding customers, and tech-savvy prostitutes now regularly advertise their wares online. “Craigslist has become the high-tech 42nd Street,” one police detective recently told the *New York Times*. Law enforcement officers across the country frequently place false ads on Craigslist to catch johns seeking sex, and numerous local law enforcement agencies have broken up prostitution rings by answering ads on the site.

Delving into Craigslist would keep a sociologist (or perhaps a behavioral psychologist) busy for years. A recent documentary film, *24 Hours on Craigslist*, tracked down the people behind Craigslist postings in San Francisco on a randomly selected day. As the filmmakers described: “An Ethel Merman drag queen searches

for the perfect backup band for her Led Zeppelin covers. A suburban professional woman assembles a diabetic cat support group. A couple seeks the perfect rabbi for their marriage. A would-be mother finds her ideal sperm donor. Doors for sale, one night stands, compulsive roommates, transsexual erotic services.” It was all there—and that was only on one day, in one city. As Newmark and CEO Jim Buckmaster frequently tell reporters, Craigslist is user-oriented. “There are big advantages to focusing on user wants and user needs as we do,” Buckmaster told the *Wall Street Journal*. Judging by the majority of the postings on Craigslist, what users most want and need is great real estate and lots of sex.

Erotic services aside, Craigslist is something of an anomaly in the dot-com world. True, its “About Us” section offers the all too familiar (and cloyingly hip) mini-biographies of employees who go by their first names and mention their love of independent films and hatred of “the expanding capitalist nucleus.” By its founder’s own admission, the company is not interested in maximizing profits. It pours money into a Craigslist Foundation that trains leaders for work in the non-profit sector. Even its address bar icon—a purple peace sign—signals a distinct point of view. Craigslist is not just a company; it’s a philosophy. And that philosophy has many appealing qualities: a resistance to excessive advertising, a sincere commitment to making the minutiae of daily life in the

wired world a little easier to manage, and a sensibility that places a great deal of trust and optimism in one's fellow human beings. In an interview last year on the PBS show *Frontline*, Newmark said, "What's different about our site... is that our site operates in a culture of trust. The people on our site expect other people to be trustworthy and good, and that works out really well." The oft-touted Craigslist mantra is "people helping people."

But online communities face peculiar challenges. Communities, after all, can only thrive when trust is a shared value among members and when violations of trust are not widespread, or are effectively penalized. Unlike other online sites such as eBay, Craigslist has no reputation-ranking system to assess the trustworthiness, let alone the identity, of its users. Anyone can pretend to be anyone and sell just about anything. As a result, when you agree to barter with Miss Kinky Boots, you have no idea if she is an honest broker of services, or even if she is really a she. Since Craigslist is not legally liable for the misrepresentations of those who place ads on the site, and since it has fewer than thirty employees monitoring millions of advertisements, users assume a certain level of risk with every one of their transactions. Examples of fraud on Craigslist abound.

In a few notorious cases, the risk has gone far beyond swindling. In October 2007, the first "Craigslist Murder" occurred when Katherine Ann Olson, a twenty-four-year-old woman from Minnesota, was killed after answering

an ad for a babysitting job. A nineteen-year-old man had placed the ad, and when Olson arrived for an interview, he killed her and stuffed her body in the trunk of her car. In another case, in March 2007, a posting on Craigslist was hazardous to someone who didn't even use the website herself: a Tacoma, Washington landlord discovered that a house she owned had been picked clean—even the light fixtures and the kitchen sink were gone. One week earlier, someone had posted an ad on Craigslist claiming that the house was scheduled for demolition and inviting the public to "come and take whatever you want." Police traced the anonymous posting to the owner's niece, whose mother had recently been evicted from the property. She pled guilty to burglary and malicious mischief, but claimed the whole thing was a misunderstanding.

Still, as appalling as these sinister (but thankfully rare) examples are, there are clearly many people who take solace in the sense of community they find in their interactions on Craigslist. As *Wired* noted in a story about *24 Hours on Craigslist*, the filmmakers "interviewed one woman who said she interacts with other posters so much that she feels a greater sense of community on the site than on the neighborhood block where she lives."

Yet for all the talk of Craigslist's aim to be community-centered and "non-commercial," and for all of the site's inclusive, soft-socialist sensibilities, the fact remains that its *raison d'être* is facilitating commerce,

not community. Craigslist is less a genuine community than simply a new kind of counterintuitive brand. It is a hive of micro-capitalism, with people buying and selling from each other—and scamming each other, too. “People helping people” is an inspiring motto, to be sure. But until we under-

stand more about how social behavior is altered by the medium of online technology, a better mantra might be *caveat emptor*.

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