

The Rhymes of Dave Hughes

A behind-The-Source look at the Network Nation's poet laureate

by Steven Levy

*So I sing this Electronic
Mating Song,
Sending it on the Wings of the
Blinking Cursor
To lure you into the bed to
Textnet
Where I will Shamelessly
Make Love to your Mind*

—Dave Hughes, TCE054

Every nation needs a poet laureate. Some nations officially appoint one; others just come to understand who theirs is. But it's a dull, vacuous nation that doesn't have its own bard, a heroic figure from whose mouth and pen come the essential wisdom of a nation itself, someone who takes the ethos of a land, infuses it with art, and makes it soar.

The Network Nation, the hidden country among us that consists of thousands of computer users who connect with each other by modem, is fortunate to have Dave Hughes as its poet laureate. Structuralist critics and English-major grinchers, having caught a glimpse of the florid verse printed above,

might blanch at the thought of this, and it is true that clinkers are not unknown among Mr. Hughes's ever-growing oeuvre.

But to point this out is to cavil, because Dave Hughes, aka Sourcevoid Dave, aka The Ancient Sourcetronaut, gives his readers something beyond words. Each electronically disseminated piece he writes, whether a poem, short story, bulletin-board notice, or Source-mail letter, embodies a

philosophy that gets right to the soul of the Network Nation. It's a philosophy that celebrates people, aided by technology, connecting in unprecedented ways. This human-electronic interaction, a virtual orgy of asynchronous love, deeply warms the heart of The Ancient Sourcetronaut and makes the chips in his TRS-80, Osborne 1, and Radio Shack Model 100 computers dance with joy.

This is no callow teenage hacker we are discussing. Dave Hughes is a West Point graduate, a man who ran military bases, for God's sake, a man with a wife and family and a comfortable home in the Rocky Mountain highlands of Colorado City, Colorado. After retiring from the Army, Hughes was working as a rehabilitation consultant to various Colorado towns—he loves the history of the towns of his home state, especially the 900 ghost towns with which he is familiar. When the thought occurred to him that he might be able to benefit from conversation with some like-minded people in other parts of the country, Hughes decided to seek out these people using a new computerized information and confer-



encing service called The Source.

I should mention that since 1977, when the 49-year-old Dave Hughes first touched a computer, he has been in the process of having his mind bent by microprocessor magic. Thirty days after purchasing his TRS-80, he was convinced that it had the power to change his life. He saw how word processing made the act of writing more kinetic. ("Blot out and backspace was a revolution," he says.) Hughes set up computing in a little electronic cottage behind his house, in sight of Pikes Peak. But the biggest change came some two years later when Dave Hughes became active in telecomputing.

"Telling someone what it's like to communicate on the networks," says Dave Hughes, "is like describing sex to a Martian." That's how deeply Hughes feels about the act of electronic interaction, and he believes it's different enough from any previous form of communication to be classified in a bold new category of its own.

*But I shall live
In the Future
Where there is Light on
Screens,
Not the Walls
Of Caves
Or of Paper.*

'Wanna Chat?'

Hughes came to that way of thinking soon after he got on The Source and began to receive uninvited (though certainly not unwelcome) messages on his screen asking him if he wanted to "chat."

Now, a different kind of business consultant in his early 50s with three kids in their teens and 20s and with "important" things to do might consider such an invitation some sort of annoyance. To Dave Hughes, it was a revelation. As he later wrote in an electronic essay, Hughes saw the question "Wanna chat?" as a salutation that "ought to take its place beside historical

utterances such as 'Will you come in here, Doctor Watson?' spoken by Alexander Graham Bell when the first telephone worked." He compared its impact to Neil Armstrong's telling the world that the Eagle had landed on the moon. "The second great step for mankind," crooned Dave, as he responded to the request for a chat with the gusto of a starving man offered a sumptuous meal.

Dave instantly saw the technology's power to bring strangers together and to make friends of strangers. From that first "chat" caller (who turned out, to Dave's astonishment, to be an 11-year-old boy), Dave embarked on an electronic odyssey that would eventually put him in touch with literally thousands of fellow citizens of the Network Nation. He never got over the wonder of seeing a stranger's request to chat appear on his screen, a surprise visitor bearing the champagne of conversation. "Now stop and think, Steve," Dave once wrote me in a message on the EIES network. "How often does a person walk up to you and say 'Like to chat?' People who would no more pick up the phone and randomly dial a Chicago number will initiate a conversation on The Source or Compuserve—just as they would on a passage to India."

Chat People

The friends Dave met on The Source included people from all walks of life. He kept in contact with them by Source mail and found his own writing beginning to change through the influence of electronic communication. He thinks that the disembodied words written in light are somehow hot-wired directly from mind to mind, and this facilitates to an incredible degree the usually painstaking process by which people get to know each other in terms not of their irrelevant corporeal bodies but of their true souls.

Dave was starting an on-line career that would lead to a record

in Source connect time. ("Expensive?" he asks of the more than \$7000 he's spent. "Hell, no. Cheap. Cheaper than a car, which never could have taken me around the world.") Yet it bothered him that The Source's managers did not seem to understand the power of what they had set up. Didn't they realize that the revolution was not to be found in accessing stock prices or UPI news, but in people touching souls electronically? Dave became upset and began to wonder whether this form of communication was indeed valid—whether anyone thought like he did. It was hard to tell, so isolated were the points of contact.

So one day in 1980, David Hughes wrote on a Source bulletin board what has now become a famous plea. If I may use a Hughesesque hyperbole, this "Sourcevoid Manifesto" was the telecommunications equivalent of Luther posting his Ninety-Five Theses on the church door in Wittenberg:

*I sometimes feel like some
intergalactic tennis player
snaring random passing
quantums of pure information
and then flinging my own in
the hopes others will catch
them with their CRTs.*

*... Does anyone out there (if in fact anyone "is" out there)
share the same puzzlement?*

*—from Are we merely vibrating
in an electronic void?*

The response from the "Void" was instantaneous. Over 600 messages assured Dave that, no, he was not alone. A constituency out there was waiting to be connected. And "Sourcevoid" Dave's plea seemed to galvanize them: the bulletin boards hummed with discussion. A new community suddenly began to coalesce.

Electronic Publishers

Dave kept writing of his experiences, and as his writings piled up, he urged The Source to open

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public files so all could share. This was the beginning of what is now one of the most popular aspects of The Source: Electronic Publishing.

It is one of Hughes's major accomplishments. Any Source user can instantly become a publisher with a potential audience of 40,000 Source subscribers. (And The Source pays a royalty too—17 percent of connect time, up from the original 9 percent.)

To quote Dave from a message he sent me on EIES, "No editor publishes, no publisher buys—exactly what I am writing right now. I can write it, agonize over it, revise it, mull it over until I decide to upload it to The Source in about five minutes of connect time (a 50-cent cost). Then I store it for maybe 40 cents a page. But it's instantly accessible to 40,000 others. And if what I have to say becomes an 'electronic best-seller,' then I will have arrived."

Sourcevoid Dave has arrived, of course, with several electronic best-sellers (some of them accessed by more than 1000 readers). His first royalty check was for \$826—for a piece which, Dave notes, The Source never bought! He can count on a steady \$400 a month from his *Source Trek* magazine, revising it any time he likes.

His efforts spurred others to do the same thing, and a tiny community of Sourcewriters has appeared. "Metaphorically, we are creating an electronic Left Bank of Paris," explains Dave.

No other electronic publisher made a bigger stir than a Texan named Ann Blocker, who used her *Sorser* magazine to carry on a torrid electronic affair with none other than Sourcevoid Dave. In her opening article, called "Another Electronic Best-seller," she described how she fell in love with Dave a half hour after accessing his

files. The two wrote each other electronic poems that strangely resembled archaic forms of verse. It was an old-fashioned platonic courtship carried on in the white-hot blaze of modern microprocessor technology. It was weird—and in public, yet, open to anyone with a Source account and some time.

"Dave is one of our evangelists in the great Source religion," Ann wrote, and hundreds of Source readers read on, telecomputing deep into the night in a glow of electronic bliss.

*When ASCII is for artists,
Mehitabel
LEDs will be for Lovers, and
the
Troubadours of Technology
Will bring grace to us all*

The Sourcetronaut Sallies Forth
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he began to explore the other "constellations," as he calls them, of the Network Nation. As befits a pioneer, he goes as a respected troubadour of the new technology, calling himself The Ancient Source-tronaut and appearing just about everywhere. He prowled the files and special interest groups (SIGs) of Compuserve and opened an account on the smaller, more intense EIES network (where he has not been seen lately, complaining that it is not populist enough). He has even explored the relatively new Delphi service and finds the wide open spaces of its formative days exhilarating—some experienced and dedicated chatters have settled there.

Everywhere he goes, Dave finds things that delight him. He is a human Michelin Guide to the sights and oddities of the Network Nation. Ask him what's new on The Source, and he sadly notes that the formerly magical bulletin board called Chatter has lost its bite. (The participants in this ongoing, role-playing fantasy committed the cardinal sin of meeting each other in real life, thereby losing the mystery and the magic and becoming simply a group of insiders.) Dave recommends instead the Small Gods portion of the Parti area of The Source as a repository of exquisite poetry and short pieces of electronic literature. On Compuserve, Dave has long been a fan of Orchestra 80, a special interest group that enables TRS-80 owners to download music-making programs.

Word Dancing

Also on Compuserve, Dave caused a minor riot when he changed the format of the Literary SIG's bulletin board by engaging a willing female partner in an electronic "Word Dance," parrying short comments off previous ones, creating a series of dueling and flirting computer-driven telegrams from the heart. Dave considered it a remedy to what he thought was a relatively unproductive discussion

about literature. Why talk about it, Dave wonders, when you can create it in the most exciting way possible—by the glow of the light emitting diode (LED), with words twice illuminated by high technology and the human spirit. It is this spirit that forms the basis of Word Dancing, his endlessly evolving theory of poetic telecommunications. Dave believes that telecommunications will drastically change the way people write, and he seems willing to take things as far as they can possibly go.

Connected to this Word Dance theory is Dave's belief that telecomputing is a looking glass through which no one passes unchanged. He compares the experience to that of a lawyer traversing the American frontier in the 1850s and setting up practice in a rough-and-ready town. The man is still a lawyer, but he's forever a frontiersman as well, and the type of law he practices bears the mark of his pioneer experience. The Ancient Source-tronaut believes that the current frontier of networking by computer will affect all of us in a similar way. He cherishes this vision.

The Source-tronaut's hangout of late is a bulletin board set up in his own electronic cottage. He receives lots of visitors, counting around 11,000 in less than a year. He has structured the bulletin board to be a simulation of his old Colorado City hometown, with Roger's Bar for drinking and talking politics, the Opera House for uploading and downloading software, the Poker Table information bank, a Post Office for getting in contact with others, and the Town Hall, where you can sound off on issues. It's like traveling back through time via modem.

On a lighter note, Dave Hughes has found himself a bewitching new partner for Word Dancing—the lap-hugging Radio Shack Model 100. The Source-tronaut finds this machine perfect for writing short pieces, and he has used it to improvise a new genre of electronic

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prose he calls "Saloon Journalism." The name comes from the old-time Western bars he haunts in Colorado towns like Durango, Cortez, and Trinidad. With his foot on the brass rail and his Model 100 on the bar, Dave creates brief stories closely tied to the rich history and spirit of his surroundings. "When someone says, 'Hand me another drink, Bartender,' it can be part of my story," he boasts. When he finishes a piece, he hops over to the pay phone, sets the handset into an acoustic coupler attached to the built-in modem, and uploads his new creation to The Source, CompuServe's LitSIG, or his own bulletin board. Yet another instant publication for The Ancient Sourcedrone!

Hard Rock Hughes from Old Town dropped all his bigger computers, grabbed this Model 100, and rushed to

Rogers the minute he heard Prospector John was at the Bar!! He knew what was comin'.

The Eternal Sourcedrone

You can expect to see more from Dave Hughes, and maybe if you're lucky you will come across him on your travels along the digital back roads of the Network Nation. Be prepared for serious Word Dancing. As Sourcedrone Dave wryly puts it, there's more bad poetry on the computer networks than anywhere else in America—but there is poetry, and that in itself is fine. I expect him to keep Word Dancing for a long time, but even if he reaches a sudden demise, The Ancient Sourcedrone has a contingency plan.

"On top of my eventual crypt, there's room for an Osborne," he said to me recently in one of his nonstop telephone conversations.

(For a guy who's so comfortable online, he sure can make a mean phone call.) "I've read there are solar panels that with three hours of sunlight can run an Osborne for an hour. I'll have it in my perpetual care contract that they keep the leaves off the solar panel. And periodically, every six months or so, that solar-powered Osborne will send out those things I think people will be ready for. It will be well prepared."

Nations like England give their poets laureate the honor for life. In the Network Nation, we consider that a short-term contract. Sourcedrone Dave just might be Word Dancing through eternity. □

Author's Note: All poetry selections in this column are copyright Dave Hughes. Steven Levy welcomes your comments and suggestions about telecomputing. You can contact him on The Source (ID TCT670), CompuServe (ID 72065, 635), or by writing Telecomputing, POB 397, Hancock, NH 03449.

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