

"Tell me What Kind of Horses you Have... And I Will Tell you Who you Are".

Online communication - friendship globalized or communication banalized

by Monika Savier



Oliver Wibihal & Aleksí Busch

The possibilities of the internet seem to be endless. Information and communication are combined in new ways and result in portals of every kind, and also for the lover of the Arabian Horse. So-called "social networks", virtual fan communities and discussion boards communicate globally, day and night. Contrary to real-life relationships you do not need to invest that much online.

Sometimes just having horses of the same strain gives rise to long conversations or even new friendships, across all borders. There are things called Arabian horse shows on the internet, and you can participate – and have success – without even leaving the comfort of your home or training a horse. Or think about springtime, when breeders all over the world proudly present their off-



spring on the world wide web and conduct intense discussions about breeding and quality. Even if some of the photos only give you a slight clue as to what this foal is and can be. But that does not seem to be important. The important and new aspect is: All users are more or less equal and stand even chances to attract interest in their breeding programmes.

Who, now, does create such a portal? What is needed for it? And what does that mean for breeders and their horses? What are the possibilities and benefits for the world-wide community of breeders and friends of the Arabian horse and what are the risks and dangers of the virtual world which is more illusion than reality sometimes?

I talked to the founders of StraightEgyptians.com, Oliver Wibihal and Aleksí Busch who operate this world-wide known Online Magazine for the Arabian Horse. Due to their initiative, Arabian Horse enthusiasts around the globe have been able to come together for over ten years now.

Monika: How did you think of that idea of starting an online magazine for the Arabian scene?

Oliver: Even as a youngster, I used to spend my time with Arabian horses. I grew up on the Kauber Platte stud, so to speak, and later on published the Arabier International magazine. The magazine was quite successful actually, but I took up university and had to stop working on it. Tragically, I developed an allergy against horses almost at the same time. All of that forced me to look for a way of dealing with Arabian horses virtually, from a distance. In 1996, my partner Aleksí gave me a gift, that was the StraightEgyptians.com domain.

Monika: If I got you right, this small private initia-

tive was very quick in developing into an international portal?

Oliver: Exactly. In the beginning, all there was was this smallish website, but a lot of people reacted to it at amazing speed. There was something entirely new about this portal, and that was its internationality. We got emails from all over the world. Country borders were non-existent after a very short time. The first mails from the UK, France, Australia and the US were enthusiastic and there were a lot of people to support us and give us ideas. Take the "Stallion Portraits" section, for example, that was a suggestion from some breeders. The portal basically developed along the lines these suggestions from all over the world indicated.

Monika: In administrating the portal, do you divide the tasks among the two of you? You are the one to deal with contents, the horse discussions, and Aleksí does portal maintenance?

Oliver: Just like that. Aleksí does all the multimedia applications and the graphics, he's the one with the online competence.

Monika: Contrary to print magazines, in an online magazine you have the opportunity to engage in interactive communication – even if in your forum, it's got a slight time delay. What's in that that's so fascinating for people?

Oliver: There are two reasons: for one thing, communication has become much less complicated and you can have contact to people all over the world. You don't have to write a letter, take it to the mail office and wait for an eternity for the answer, you just give a mouse click and there you are in somebody else's kitchen or living room – anywhere in the world.

And the second important aspect is that even small and totally unknown breeders can, via the forum, communicate with great breeders known all over the



world and exchange views on horses. Let me give you an example: there is Dr Marei from Egypt answering an interesting question for a small breeder from Germany, then there is a comment from Hansi Heck and Mrs Richmond of Simeon Stud in Australia makes a contribution as well... it does make you feel you are on the same level and well acknowledged.

Monika: Isn't there something of a vanity fair about it when you present yourself in the forum with your own horses?

Oliver: There is more to it, as it's just a new thing for breeders to be able to present themselves free of cost. They can even promote themselves and their horses. Until recently, the cost for that was prohibitive. Sometimes it's enough to present yourself in the forum with two photos and lo! there you are, selling your horses world-wide.

There were times when you had to do a lot of expensive advertising to achieve that. We often get thanks from small breeders for that, saying they could never have managed to make contact with breeders from Qatar or Saudi Arabia without the portal.

Monika: These are certainly the advantages of online advertising across all borders, there is some „equal rights“ stuff in that, but on the other hand, globalised marketing does contain dangers. Just think about semen being sold world-wide, there will be a time when we won't have any locally or environmentally influenced strains of Arabians any more. They will all look the same... won't they?

Oliver: Exactly, international semen marketing and globalized breeding horse sales will result in a Standard Arabian some day. We will see ever less of certain Arabian types, such as “typically Spanish” or “typically Polish”, at least for the occasion of shows. There will be a kind of “standard show horse” instead. The shows are ever more boring as they are, I hardly attend any anymore. Globalisation is egalisation, at least as far as presenting Arabians in hand is concerned. Riders are still maintaining different breeding criteria that are highly individual, but the show horse breeders are all coming to aim for one model only. That's not only a shame but also dangerous, as the gene pool is getting ever more restricted. I think of straight Egyptians in particular. If you visit the Middle East, that's quite apparent. They re-imported some strains and are not even aware of some others anymore. Internet intensifies that, certain types will get more attention and the small breeders will imitate the big ones. Personal tastes and originality will be supplanted, they are not suitable for the shows.

Monika: In addition, the online format makes it possible to manipulate photographs. Using an image processing application, you touch up that lack of a dish or give some other illusion. What can you do with respect to that?

Oliver: Unfortunately, that's all fact today. However, it's much worse that people will allow themselves to be seduced into whatever, just from the pictures. They book a stallion when the picture in the forum is all they have ever seen of him. Let's assume that photograph is a

good one taken by Gigi Grasso – it's still just a small moment out of the life of that horse who can have other and less advantageous aspects. People just refuse to believe that, however. Many just don't go to the trouble of taking a live look at that stallion, they see his pic on the internet, click the “send semen” button and there they are. Next year, they might wonder why the foal looks nothing like his sire. That doesn't exactly matter, however, just take him to a professional show trainer who will sweat him down wherever necessary and will show him long enough for him to win something, anything.

Monika: Does that mean the handlers are getting ever more important nowadays?

Oliver: It's all in the hands of the handlers today, basically. A sheikh won't buy a show horse without his handler. The handlers know, from their own experience, what is wanted for shows. Expensive handlers buy expensive horses to be exhibited on expensive shows for wealthy customers. However, that sector is getting ever smaller. There is an increasing number of breeders who won't have anything to do with that.

Monika: Back to your forum's portal – that's actually another kind of show, but fortunately it's the same conditions for everybody when taking part here. How many visitors do you have in your portal? Are there numbers available?

Oliver: If we count clicks to individual pages, that gets to be uncountable. What we calculate with is individual visitors per month, and that's 130,000 on average.

Monika: Which are the countries most visitors come from?

Aleksi: The visitors are mainly from the US,

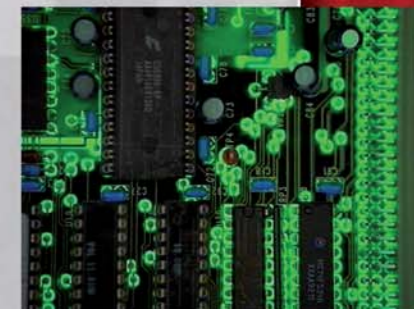
Europe, Australia, and the Middle East... but on principle, they are from everywhere. Across the world there is an increasing number of people with access to the internet and **StraightEgyptians.com** just mirrors that. Some browse quite often, some less often, but for some it's like a drug. People have told us that the first thing they do in the morning after getting out of bed is logging in on the internet and having a look at who answered what entries in the forum... Or else, the postings tell a story that is to be continued. For example, there is somebody who promotes his stallion one year, and the next year, he enters pictures of the offspring and people can comment on that... Of course, that's somewhat of a risk, as comments are not always peaceful.

Monika: Well, it's just like a soap opera and all of us can take part in it, thanks to the forum. After all, people like taking part in life, especially other peoples' lives, just like in a serial novel. The forum offers this kind of observation spectacle, and people like it especially when they can take part in some heated discussion and can see who scores and in which round – did you plan it that way?

Aleksi: No. That aspect is quite true, however, and then there are interested parties with a certain goal in mind when starting a discussion...

Monika: What do you do when there are manipulations, such as a horse being raised to heaven or destroyed using fake arguments?

Aleksi: This forum is monitored by us. We are likely





to ask critical questions to postings and will enter strong counterarguments.

Monika: Is there a code of honour in order to avoid untruth? Some kind of „online culture of debate“ people will have to adhere to?

Aleksi: Participants mostly come back to a normal level usually, because replies are open to everyone and the sender is known, but we can also terminate a posting or eliminate it when the thread has obviously come to an end or we cannot bring it back to truth. We can also interfere if there is somebody trying to influence a discussion by using several user names or asking colleagues or such to post certain opinions. We do note that and write an email to these individuals, asking them to stop it. There were useraccounts we had to eliminate entirely. We can also put the account of a difficult user on an observation list that enables us to keep a sharp eye on his postings.

Monika: What you have here, this enterprise, that's quite a communications empire you need to manage and administrate. Is that your full time job?

Aleksi: Both of us are employed elsewhere and the portal is what we do in our leisure time. Which means we spend almost all of our leisure time in front of the PC keyboard.

Monika: Sounds as if there might be a commercial use, making it a potential good job?

Aleksi: Of course, yes, but we want to keep up the non profit state, otherwise we would have even more to do. There would be a lot we would have to publish then, just because of the money, and Oliver would not like it at all if he were no longer able to introduce his own opinion just because some paying customer would prefer him not to. The only thing

now that earns some money and covers the cost to some extent is banner advertisement. As you can see, however, we keep that at a low level. We could have a banner in every posting, but that's something we don't want. It's meant to keep being a hobby we have fun with. If we were to depend on it because we do it professionally, that quickly eliminates the fun of it.

Monika: There has been a new portal in existence for two months now, www.arabianessence.com by Gigi Grasso and Elvis Giughera. In your opinion, is there a space available for them in the virtual world of horses?

Aleksi: Of course, the Web has an infinity of space. Every portal needs to develop a profile of its own. If it's done well, it will be successful because there's a demand for it.

Monika: Is there a friendly advice you can give to Gigi and Elvis for their new internet platform?

Aleksi: It's just the same with online stuff as with print magazines: contents are what counts. On the long run, a brightly coloured list of links won't be profitable. A beautifully designed surface is not enough. Something needs to happen. There need to be issues, even if they entail a controversial discussion, or else the users need to be able to upload photographs, share opinions and interact. Anybody will quickly notice whether a portal is alive or is just a „ghost item“.

Monika: So the forum is what deals with that interactive part?

Aleksi: By now, yes. In the beginning, that was just a very primitive gadget, we just entered an article at some time and asked people for their opinion on it. That gave rise to the whole development. Still,

you cannot take it for granted that this will happen all of its own. You need to have editorial postings all around, motivating people to have their own opinion and write it down there.

Monika: If I take a look at your enormously voluminous archives, one could get the notion that after ten years of StraightEgyptians.com it's high time to publish the contents and contributions from all over the world as a book, maybe titled „the best of ... by Straightegyptian.com“?

Aleksi: Not a bad idea actually, but if I think of all the work that would entail... no, that's too much overall. We want to stay in our niche and feel quite well as www.publishers. The Internet has a whole lot of advantages as compared to print media, but there are a lot of disadvantages as well...

Monika: Such as?

Aleksi: With a book, you can have a beautiful graphic design, and you can hold it in your hands, touching it. A portal, on the other hand, is the sum of minimum possibilities. You have to find a low common denominator for the display options, because otherwise, many PCs and monitors out there in the world won't be able to cope and people can't open pages, or they get the wrong format.

Monika: It seems to me that interactivity, meaning the option of quasi direct communication, is the most important advantage of the portal...

Aleksi: ...and the one that's used the most. A lot of users did find out how to use these new ways of communication. And how they, with little effort, can attract people they would otherwise never have reached. Sure, „mainstream“ does dominate our website and forum too, however, besides that, we also have space for all kinds of niches. And we're

happy to hear how people meet, share, and even make new friendships!

Monika: Which are the pages visitors will click most often?

Aleksi: No problem there, there's the forum that gets clicks to no end, then there is the page with the portraits that's quite a favourite, and the show features. At this time of the year, in winter when the show season draws to an end, it's stud features.

Monika: Is there something you have always wanted to tell your readers?

Oliver: Not in general, but in particular. Among others, the forum has the power of peacefully transmitting a political message. To give an example, we will these days post an information in the forum, telling people that Egypt and Israel will, for the first time, exchange stallions and use them as sires, respectively. The contact between these two studs was made via the forum and I would very much like to know how the Arabian world is going to react.

Monika: That's wonderful. In my opinion, it's something that cannot be said too often: we need to distinguish between the population, meaning the culture, of a country, and the political class which tries to represent the population and often gets across something else instead.

Oliver: We are really pleased if, with our communications platform, we can make people all over the world start to do some thinking of their own. That's quite much of a success nowadays.

Monika: Thank you very much for this interview and I hope there will be corresponding results from it. □