
Posted on Sun, Sep. 04, 2005

eBay's 'global society' looms larger

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BALTIMORE SUN

"If we were a nation, we would be the ninth most populous nation in the world," noted eBay CEO Meg Whitman during a CNBC documentary in June. By "we," she meant the 135 million users who had registered on the site by the end of 2004.

Add to that figure those who lurk on eBay, talk about eBay, read about eBay, create businesses based on eBay, fantasize about finding treasures or making a fortune on eBay, and the population of this virtual nation would soar astronomically.

As it reconfigures consumer culture, the auction site, which officially turns 10 years old this weekend, stirs passionate debate over its impact on society. Does it signify the end of civil society as we know it? Is it a portal to a new, global society? Does it place materialism above any other belief system? Does it define who we are as a society? If we are what we consume, are we eBay?

Sharon Zukin is both fascinated and repelled by eBay. By translating "every experience and every object into a dollar value" it "has really hurried us down the slippery slope toward damnation," says the professor of sociology at Brooklyn College and the City University Graduate Center.

Peter Sealey takes a different view. The co-director of the Center for Marketing and Technology at University of California, Berkeley's Haas School of Business calls eBay a "transformational technology" on the magnitude of the telephone and the television.

For Susan Barnes, associate director of the Lab for Social Computing at the Rochester Institute of Technology, eBay, as it builds communities of buyers and collectors, "was ahead of its time to view the Internet as a social medium."

Created as a kind of "global garage sale" by software engineer Pierre Omidyar, eBay has transcended its original purpose to become a reflection of a society's mores and obsessions. Items listed on eBay such as the grilled cheese sandwich with an image of the Virgin Mary (sold for \$28,000 to an online casino) and a court sketch artist's signed images of Michael Jackson's trial speak to America's dueling preoccupations with piety and celebrity.

As all-powerful as it appears, however, eBay can't always promise a good return for junk foods inadvertently manufactured in the image of the Shroud of Turin.

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