



# Equal before the Bar

David Alan Grier

I never intended to take a special role on the team or to become the story, but that's what happened. By the end of the day, I had found the suspect in the Global Tag Challenge (I. Rahwan, et al., "Global Manhunt Pushes the Limits of Social Mobilization," pp. 68-75) and was subsequently accused of demonstrating why crowdsourcing doesn't work.

I had become interested in crowdsourcing when people began identifying my book, *When Computers Were Human* (Princeton University Press, 2007), as telling the prehistory of crowdsourcing. For a brief period in 2007 and 2008, writers gloried in the notion that the Internet had created a new phenomenon that divided work into smaller pieces, distributed them to a crowd, and used marketing mechanisms to control the process. Then someone who had read my book concluded that people had been crowdsourcing long before the Internet and long before modern computers.

I joined the MIT team simply to follow the tweets and see how a modern crowdsourcing activity operated: I was working on a new book and wanted to include examples a little more recent than the 1757 computation of the orbit of Halley's Comet, the production of the 1852 *American Nautical Almanac and Ephemeris*, or the WPA's 1938

Mathematical Tables Project. Don't get me started on any of these. I love them all as grand, chaotic, and oddly heroic efforts.

Teams in the Tag Challenge had to find five targeted people located in New York, London, Stockholm, Bratislava, and my home base, Washington, D.C. I followed the discussion and passed messages on to my students and young colleagues, figuring they might be interested in spending the day combing the city for a young woman wearing a contest T-shirt and being paid to loiter in public places between the hours of 9 a.m. and 7 p.m.

As the day drew to a close, I got the news that no one had yet spotted the Washington suspect. I could tell by the tweets that most of the crowd was looking for her in the city's grand public places: the Mall, the monuments, the Smithsonian, Arlington Cemetery. I reasoned that these were probably the wrong locations; no Washington resident spends much time in those spots, as they're generally filled with tourists and don't offer many places to relax.

I paused to ponder where a woman in her mid-20s might spend the day if she had to be in public. I concluded that the most likely places would be a coffee shop in a trendy neighborhood, certain public parks, or a shoe store. I admit that the last idea relied a bit too much on

an old stereotype, but it would actually be a likely place for the young woman to spend some time.

Living nowhere near the popular parks or the best shoe stores, I thought that I should perhaps check the coffee shops in my neighborhood, which is at least semi-trendy. I went for a walk and found the suspect outside the fourth shop I checked, across the street from the old X and O Café, where I wrote a good part of *When Computers Were Human*.

After my sighting was confirmed, I quickly became the story.

A blogger claimed that my participation proved that crowdsourcing didn't work because it took an expert to find the target. I countered by arguing that crowdsourcing made all participants equal before the bar. All of our ideas were treated equally until the value of each was proven in actual application. I found the suspect at a coffee shop, but she could have been found sitting in a park, riding on the Metro, or even shopping for shoes. It took a crowd to think of all the possibilities and a crowd to check them all. 

*David Alan Grier is the author of many books including the recent The Company We Keep (IEEE CS, 2012). Contact him at [grier@computer.org](mailto:grier@computer.org).*