



A PLEA FOR BALANCE

by Michael Gorman

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As most of us do, I absorb cultural change and view the popular culture landscape through, among other things, advertisements. A recent series of TV ads—for the communications company MediaOne—has been most instructive. The first ad combined flashy graphics, that annoying post-modernist advertising device of turning the words of the ad into a kind of round game with different overlapping voices completing the previous sentence, and vaguely New Age-y music. The message was that “the future has arrived” in the shape of MediaOne laying down broadband cable all over these United States. Over pictures of people playing sports, reading, thinking (signified by doped-up looking people staring into space), enjoying “quality time” with each other, etc., the voices intoned “This is the way you are going to learn. This is the way you are going to work. This is the way you are going to play. This is The Way” (cut to image of glowing cable).

MediaOne’s broadband, in short, is going to change society, change our lives, change everything, and *all for the better!* MediaOne is presented as a beneficent, even philanthropic, force. Looking at the images of the radiant broadband cable and listening to the music, one could almost think this is not a commercial firm but something more like a cult. One feels like jumping to one’s feet and saying “I believe, I believe!!! Broadband will save me!!!” I even saw a MediaOne van near

my house one day and was so happy that I could hardly stand it. Broadband is coming! All will be well!!!

Then I saw the next two ads. Same vaguely religious music—plain chant meets Enya kind of thing—but this time MediaOne was about to show us the miraculous, life-enhancing, transformational things that Broadband was going to do for us all. And what were they? World Championship Federation Wrestling and the edifying Mike Tyson/Evander Holyfield fight!!!

The MediaOne campaign is techno-hype at its most refined and shows us, more clearly than ever before, the two fallacies deep at the heart of the Cult of Information and Technology. First, there is the concentration on the *medium*, which, despite the much misunderstood Marshall McLuhan, is not the message. Lauding the magic powers of broadband is much like showing images of a real library and saying “paper is going to change your life.” It is what is on the paper and the skills one needs to use that content that are important. Anyone who doubts this need only spend an hour or so wading hip-deep in the disorganized rubbish and ephemera that makes up most of the World Wide Web. No one can have that experience without realizing that it is content, not the vehicle of communication, that matters and that the vehicles of communication should be judged on strictly utilitarian lines. What is broadband good at? What is the most cost-effective use of the Internet? Where is print-on-paper to be preferred? The only alternative to asking these questions is the kind of inanity that wants computers to do everything for everybody and is prepared to sell out real libraries in pursuit of “virtual libraries.”

The second fallacy illuminated by MediaOne’s glowing cable is that everything is information and information is everything. First of all, libraries have never been all about information or even primarily about information. Ordinary people have used a variety of sources to find out the facts and data that they need to know, sometimes in libraries and sometimes not, since long before the so-called “information revolution.”

Second, the word *information*, as used by its cultists, is essentially meaningless. The only useful definition of “information” is one that distinguishes it from recorded knowledge. It consists of data, facts,

images, and short texts that are capable of being used out of context (the latter are typical of those found in ready reference materials). Information, seen in that light, is peculiarly amenable to being stored, transmitted, and made available by electronic means.

The flip side of the definition is, of course, that recorded knowledge—those texts and texts and images that are more expansive and cumulative and that must be *studied*—needs to be stored, transmitted, and made available by other means. In short, the library of the future will be similar in essence to the libraries of the past and present in that they will use all means of communication (print-on-paper, videos, sound recordings, electronic resources, etc.) to carry out their historic mission. To believe otherwise is to believe that, for the first time in human history, one form of communication—the electronic—is going to obliterate and supersede all others—a proposition which is, on the face of it, absurd.

Here, then, is my controversial plea. I ask for the following to inform our discussions: balance, rationality, truth in advertising, thrifty stewardship, and service.

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Balance is about ensuring that libraries apportion their resources equitably in such a way that their collections contain media of communication and preservation that are best suited to their use.

Rationality is about subjecting every plan, program, initiative, collection development policy, cataloguing policy, etc., to rational analysis; it is about being bound neither by nostalgia nor technophilia. It is about understanding, for example, that the World Wide Web is neither a good thing nor a bad thing—it just is, and should be used when and how it is most useful. Making a Web page is not the pinnacle of professional activity but it is not worthless either.

Truth in advertising is about presenting things to our users and constituents as they are and in telling it like it is, not as we wish or want it to be. The Governor of the great state of California is intent on putting the Internet in every classroom as if that would, at one stroke, solve the deep societal and educational problems that we face. The estimable Vice President of this great country called for every schoolchild to “have access to the Library of Congress”—via the Internet. You and I know, and I suspect these towering political figures know, that this is all froth and nonsense and the real problem is that Johnny and Janie can’t or won’t read, not whether they can’t read from a book, print-out or screen. Then the nonsense gets compounded by those (including some in our own profession) who talk of “computer literacy,” “visual literacy,” and “information literacy” as if they are equivalent to real literacy and as if putting some poor little illiterate in front of a screen is going to make her educated, literate, and happy. It ain’t so, and we do a real disservice to education and society when we pretend that it is. Let us see things as they are and present them to the world as they are.

Thrifty stewardship is about taking the taxpayer’s dollar or anyone else’s dollar and using it in the best way possible. The current Technological South Sea Bubble has led to many of us diverting money from valuable library services into whatever technological innovation has taken the fancy of the moment. I asked a public librarian friend of mine why there always seemed to be money for technology and none for books and other services. She replied “that’s where the money is.” So are we all Willie Suttons now, fixated on the short term and giving no heed to the future or present real needs? If you can only get funding for technology, does that mean that technology is all that matters? An odd concept of professionalism and stewardship if that is so. Perhaps “downsizing,” “rightsizing,” and job anxiety have made cowards of us all and we feel we have no choice but to swim with the tide.

Service is the oldest and most important value of librarianship. In this context, I think a dedication to service would lead us to trying to discover what our patrons want—not what we think they should have or ought to want. Always remember that

the “virtual library” is a profoundly elitist concept, dreamed up in the ivory towers of academe, and as far as can be from the desires of most people for real places, real libraries, human contact, and books to read. Why is it so hard for us to understand this when it is so easy for Mr. Barnes and Mr. Noble?

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Printing recorded knowledge and information on acid-free paper and making multiple copies has proven to be a wonderful way of carrying out the mission of preserving the cultural record. However, almost all of that print-on-paper is the result of an established filtering process (called the publishing industry). No such thing exists for the electronic world. We are still in what I call the Haight-Ashbury stage of electronic publishing—thousands of flowers are blooming (though it is hard to see them for the weeds); everyone is stoned (on technology, not exotic cheroots this time); all is peace and love and it is all going to go on forever and, hey man!, it is all free! Of course, it has never been all free and we have to get serious at some time and start to worry about how we are going to preserve the minority (probably a tiny minority) of enduringly useful electronic documents.

Let me propose two simple strategies. The first is to ask the question “Would I have added this to my library if it were in print?” If the answer is yes, print it on acid-free paper. This second may seem to lack glamour but, on the other hand, what is the alternative? Does anyone seriously think that the government (for who else

would have the means and the staying power?) is going to create a gigantic electronic archive and maintain it indefinitely in the face of dizzyingly frequent technological change? Again, remember that no group but librarians has the history of preserving the records of humankind and the means and the will to do it well. If not us, who? If not now, when?

Finally, what about something else in which we are uniquely expert—bibliographic control? Just contrast the experience of using a well-ordered library with the World Wide Web swamp. No matter how fancy the strategy or “search engine” (the little engine that couldn’t), the fact is that, in searching the Web, one is using nothing more nor less than contextless keyword searching. The searcher lacks completely the results of careful cataloguing, authority work, and cataloguing standards.

Cataloguing is expensive. Not having cataloguing is expensive. You can either spend the money up front to the benefit of many thousands of users or you can abandon those users to thrashing around in the Web and hoping that the 40,000 results that seem to be par for the course for every search contain something of relevance—a process that costs them money and time. Before we go much further with metadata and other fancy notions, perhaps we should think about taking those electronic documents that we determine are of value and applying regular old cataloguing standards and practices to them?

Librarianship is a profession with enduring values (service, intellectual freedom, etc.) and an enduring mission—to acquire, give access to, organize, disseminate, preserve, and provide assistance and instruction in the use of recorded knowledge and information in all forms. We can and should use our values and continue our mission in incorporating electronic documents and resources into our collections, services, and programs.

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