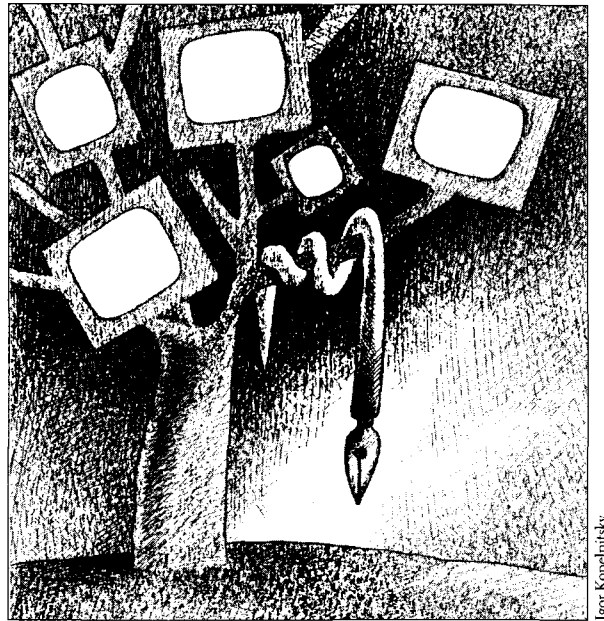


Technovandals and the Future of Libraries

by Michael Gorman



There are discussions at all levels of government about the future of libraries. The federal government is proceeding with plans for the I-WAY (otherwise known as the National Information Superhighway), blithely assuming that it will, at a time and cost and in a manner unknown, supersede most if not all library services and programs. It is taken for granted that the texts of articles and books will be available on the I-WAY at some point in the not-too-distant future. The eerie thing about these discussions is the absence of practical solutions to some problems (copyright and intellectual freedom chief among them) and the assumption that some very weighty practical and technical problems will be solved miraculously by the march of technology. At a more mundane level, universities, municipalities, and school districts are wrestling with the increasing costs of, and the diminishing resources available to, the libraries for which they are responsible.

The multiyear financial squeeze on public institutions imposed by the retrograde public policy of the last 20 years has imposed tremendous burdens on school, public, and academic libraries. To take but one example of many, one of the effects of the "Tax Revolt" in California has been that the richest state of the richest nation on earth ranks 50th out of the 50 states in the proportion of librarians to students in the public schools. Viewed superficially, this may seem regrettable but relatively unimportant. In truth, the effects are far-reaching. Many students entering California's universities, even the best and brightest of them, lack even vestiges of library skills and, more importantly, have not the habit of reading. The former can be partially remedied *if* the students can be caught as freshmen and *if* college and university libraries have the human and financial resources to mount a comprehensive library instruction

program. The latter is a permanent blight. Those who can read functionally but do not read cannot think or write coherently. The net result of the neglect of California's school libraries is a generation of college graduates who have only the narrowest education, who lack the research skills necessary to a full and productive life, and who may never know the joys and rewards of the intellectual life. This is a danger to democracy and society.

Some of the effects of the financial crisis of libraries are obvious—no school librarians; closed public library branches (in a few California cases, whole county library systems have been discontinued); canceled journals; record low levels of book purchase. Some are more insidious, and their results may not be obvious to the general public for many years—for example, the incremental effect on a community whose children know nothing of libraries because there is no accessible public library branch. There is one issue, above all others, that may have the direst long-term effects. That issue—which is, ironically, seen by some as entirely beneficial—concerns the impact of electronic technology on libraries, learning, and society as a whole. Given the general public image of libraries and librarians, it is interesting to note that libraries have been in the forefront of technological innovation. They have long had computerized catalogs, circulation systems, and other housekeeping systems. Almost all libraries have extensive programs providing access to a wealth of electronic information systems (bibliographic, statistical, and full-text) both in CD-ROM and online. In short, they have completed the move from (in the words of Michael Buckland) the Paper Library (paper documents controlled by paper files) to the Automated Library (paper documents controlled by electronic files). The next step is the bone of contention—should libraries move to the *Electronic Library* (electronic documents controlled electronically)? The question is oversimplified, because the issue is not whether libraries should or will have an electronic document component (that is already

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happening) but whether electronic documents will enhance—or be used as an excuse to destroy—the print-based library.

When it comes to the “Is the Book Dead?” debate, one can find in the writings and speeches of even sensible pundits, politicians, and academics the kind of semantic confusion and elision that bespeaks the half-digested idea, the failure to think through what one is saying. This intellectual skating on thin ice began, I believe, with the peculiar usage in recent years of the word “information”—a word that has become so distorted and elastic as to be meaningless, hence entirely suitable to vapid phrases like the “Information Age” and “information science.” Given that one could use “information” to mean anything from a small set of numbers to a tour de force of analysis to a masterpiece of world literature, one was free to assume that there was no qualitative difference between different kinds of “information.” Further, given that assumption, it is easy, if intellectually shoddy, to assume that all kinds of “information” can and should be digitized; that the imminent Information Age would not need books and other nondigitized carriers of “information” and that libraries and librarians would soon take their place on the ash-heap of history. Regrettably, this specious line of reasoning has been swallowed by many, including many librarians. The professional literature is swamped with drivel about “virtual libraries” and “libraries without walls,” yet the central practical problems behind those phrases are largely ignored. We forget at our peril that there are higher “goods of the mind” (a phrase coined by Mortimer Adler) than information (they are—in ascending order—knowledge, understanding, and wisdom). Unfortunately for the seers of the Information Age, those goods are not amenable to electronic transmission. Leaving aside the very real issues of copyright and authority of texts, the fact remains that the book—print on paper—is unrivaled for the sustained reading of texts that alone leads to knowledge and understanding.

The enemies of the academic library fall into three classes: bureaucrats, technocrats, and technovandals. The bureaucrats are, in academe, the exact analogy of the nonmedical hospital administrator. They know little or nothing of education or libraries. They know only that libraries cost a lot of money, money that could be saved if libraries were to be dismantled behind a smoke screen of technology. The technocrats believe that technology can be used to provide an equal to, or something better than, what they always call “traditional” library services. The technovandals want to use technology to break up the culture of learning and, in a weird mixture of 90’s cybervision and 60’s radicalism, to replace that world with a howling wilderness of unstructured, unrelated gobbets of “information” and random images in which the hapless student or teacher wanders without direction or sense of value. Too strong? Consider these words from an October 1993 draft of “Leveraging the Future: The Telecommunications Plan” of California State University’s Academic Communications Network Committee of the Academic Information Resources Council:

... learners increasingly can be free to determine their own learning paths divorced from the sequential, linear, directed flow of printed text, or the weight of authority. Responsibility for collecting, organizing, and analyzing information can be shifted from the provider to the end user. In the learning environment which [*sic*] is student centered and student controlled, learning becomes less

structured and more associative, intuitive, dynamic, and potentially more creative.

I read these words on the 37th anniversary of the day that I first worked in a library. They did more to illuminate the thinking and motives of those who are dedicated to destroying academic libraries than anything I have ever heard or read. Students, teachers, and all those interested in education and learning would do well to heed their warning and understand their implications for education and society. These are people to whom the sustained reading of linear texts—the culture of the book—is anathema. Whenever they hear the word “culture,” they reach for their computer.

The argument that rages (mostly, but not always, covertly) over the position and future of libraries in universities and colleges is ultimately about money and power. There is always an administrative faction that knows the price of libraries but not their value. Most, if not all, librarians, faculty, and students know the value of libraries but do not control the funds necessary to preserve that value. Some of those who wish to choke off libraries are simply interested in gaining the power that would come from appropriating library funds and using them for computing and other technologies. If the report from which the above quotations derives is to be taken seriously, as it should be, it shows that the dispute is about learning, culture, and freedom as well as money and power.

The recipe for wresting money from academic libraries and gaining the power that goes with it is simple. First, denigrate libraries as “museums of compressed wood pulp”—the leaden phrase of “futurist” Raymond Kurzweil, whom, astoundingly, *Library Journal* (the library periodical with the largest circulation in the world) regularly lets air his antilibRARY, antibOOK vapors—then treat any reaction to this caricature as emanating from fearful Luddites. Stir in a hefty dash of sexism (most librarians are female and, therefore, cannot possibly be expected to understand the brave, thrusting male world of computing) and lashings of info-babble about superhighways, wallet-sized libraries, libraries without walls, paradigm shifts, etc., and in no time you will have an army of simpletons, coconspirators, and the honestly puzzled nodding in unison at your insight and progressive thinking.

The antilibRARY, antibOOK forces cover their greed and destructiveness with a veneer of respectability bestowed on them by scholars who, seduced by unexamined claims about technology, become their unwitting dupes. Librarians and friends of libraries should do two things. First, allow no promise or blandishment of those who would destroy libraries to go unquestioned. Second, devise a constructive program that uses technology to enhance library services, to preserve the best of what we have, and to rise to new levels of library service. We should not permit positive acceptance of technology to be used against libraries. It often seems, to put it bluntly, that scholars and librarians can never do enough to satisfy the antibOOK, antilibRARY forces. Nothing short of permanently barred library doors and bonfires of books will placate that crowd. If anyone doubts this, he or she should read any of the numerous pronouncements of the futurists. How about “a new secular ethic rooted in a nanosecond culture, virtual communities, and virtual reality experiences” or “the day of fully viable virtual books [*sic*] is not far off.” Raymond Kurzweil, again in *Library Journal*.

It is a refreshing, but rare, experience to read or hear from someone who questions the economic feasibility and practicality of the bookless future envisaged by the technovandals. It is even rarer to hear someone ask, "Even if we *can* do these things, why would we want to?" One person who asks these questions to brilliant effect is Walt Crawford, a librarian with the Research Libraries Group with whom I am writing a book on the future of libraries. In a number of recent papers given at professional conferences, Crawford sums up a host of issues, economic and technical, that go to the hollow heart of the antilibrary movement.

It is indisputable that, in Crawford's words, "no electronic medium can even *begin* to compare with ink on paper for readability, particularly for sustained reading." It is also indisputable that the *best* resolution of the characters in electronically transmitted light is greatly inferior to that of the characters in the *worst* printed text using reflected light. There is no foreseeable answer to this problem. This means that, in the electronic future of the technovandals, any sustained reading will be done with expensive, resource-wasting printouts that are themselves greatly inferior to economical printed texts. Wait a minute, though. Technovandals believe that the sustained reading of texts is unnecessary and bad. There are only two positions to take logically. On the one hand, you can believe in the power of sustained reading to enlighten, teach, illuminate, and entertain and, therefore, must grant that the printed book is the best technology we have and are likely to have in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, you can believe in the

dumbing down of society to a state of ignorance for the masses and "information" for those who have money and want to make more.

None of the technovandals has addressed the economics of their dystopia in a convincing way. As Crawford points out, only a seventh of the cost of printed materials is due to printing and distribution (other estimates put the proportion as low as a tenth). All the remaining costs will be incurred whether texts are printed or distributed electronically. Even if electronic storage and distribution were free (which they most certainly will not be), the savings would be marginal. This has to be understood in the context of the enormous cost of the destruction of the publishing industry and its replacement by an electronic system funded by . . . whom?

To ignore the economic foundations of a hypothetical world of digitized knowledge and information is to ignore the real threat to freedom that such a world represents. The inconceivably massive capital required to destroy and replace print-based knowledge and information industries can only come from the government in alliance with mega-industry. Those who have the gold make the rules, and those who invest billions in the new digitized world will have control over every aspect of it. The potential for censorship, control of access to knowledge and information, and limitation of intellectual freedom is limitless. If those to whom the life of the mind is important acquiesce in this destruction they shall, by their silence, be committing the ultimate treason to learning and to intellectual freedom.

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All Such Filthy Cheats

by Theodore Pappas



When Vice Admiral Bobby Ray Inman announced on January 18 his decision not to pursue confirmation as Secretary of Defense, he repeated Robert Massie's old charge that William Safire is a plagiarist, saying this "does not, in my judgment, put [Safire] in a position to frame moral judgment on any of us, in or out of public service." The battle that ensued between Safire and Inman on the one hand and between Safire and Massie on the other dragged on for months and included ad hominem attacks launched from *Nightline*, the *Nation*, and the *New York Times*. And though the real issue was not whether Safire is a plagiarist—but whether he had aided and abetted one by distributing an unpublished manuscript by Massie to another writer who ravaged it for an article in *Esquire*—this high-profile caterwauling made one thing clear: plagiarism has become one of the nagging issues of our day.

"If you pillage someone else's memoir for your source material, it tends to indicate a thinness of literary imagination," said an anonymous New York editor to the *Washington Post*. What this Valachi of Grub Street was too cowardly to say is that plagiarists are often untalented louts, and that the lout in question was the ballyhooed young novelist David Leavitt. Last September Bernard Knox pointed out in the *Washington Post Book World* that Leavitt's new novel, *While England Sleeps*, reproduces the story of the failed homosexual affair that British poet Stephen Spender recounts in *World Within World*, his 1951 autobiography. Leavitt stole the basic story and then embellished it with lurid detail. "I don't see why [Leavitt] should unload all his sexual fantasies onto me in my youth," complained Spender, who now is married. Spender sued Leavitt for copyright infringement and for breach of his "moral right" to control use of his writings, a "right" stemming from a new and controversial copyright law in Britain. As a result of the lawsuit, Viking Press canceled Leavitt's book in February in both Britain, where the suit was filed and the book still warehoused, and the United States, where the novel had already reached bookstores and libraries. The American paperback edition of the book, scheduled for this fall, has also been canceled. "The

disowning of a newly published novel is extremely unusual," reported the *Washington Post*. "For a writer like the 32-year-old Leavitt, who has often been cast as a spokesman for his generation, it is unprecedented."

When Baudelaire wondered "how a man of honor could take a newspaper in his hands without a shudder of disgust," he must have had something like the *Washington Post* in mind. For a publisher's disavowal of an author at the eleventh hour may be unusual, but this fiasco with Leavitt is hardly "unprecedented." Jacob Epstein, whose father is editorial director of Random House and whose mother is coeditor of the *New York Review of Books*, was the literary elite's Boy Wonder of 1979, and it was much to their chagrin to learn in late 1980 that the protégé on whom they had bestowed lavish praise had actually plagiarized his Great American Novel, *Wild Oats* (which ironically deals with plagiarism), from a novel by Martin Amis published in 1974, *The Rachel Papers*. Unsurprisingly, Epstein was allowed to slink quietly away, reportedly to a career in that land of tinsel where creativity and originality are not requisites for success—Hollywood.

"Leavitt's aura has been damaged, to state the obvious," concluded the anonymous editor to the *Post*. More obvious still is that the day of the talented reprobate has long since passed. There have always been decadent writers in the West, but the ones we once praised and hailed as artists had more in common with the model citizens of the most civilized nations than with the poseurs, hucksters, and voyeurists of today for whom high culture is the AIDS quilt and performance art. Sade, Wilde, Lawrence, and Gide never needed to plagiarize salacious scenes from the works of others: if personal experience with depravity proved an insufficient wellspring, they were skilled enough to render it fictionally on their own. With "spokesmen" like David Leavitt and Jacob Epstein, what their generation needs is a Milli Vanilli Award in Creative Writing.

Another blow to the literati occurred in April, when Ballantine Books announced that Indrani Aikath-Gyaltsen, the "promising" novelist who committed suicide late last year, had plagiarized her widely acclaimed novel *Cranes' Morning* from Elizabeth Goudge's 1956 novel *The Rosemary Tree*. Aikath-Gyaltsen, who was born in India but educated in the

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