Word Wars

By Charles Paul Freund

Back in 1985, the communications theorist Neil Postman announced that intellectual life was coming to an end. George Orwell's dystopian vision was wrong, Postman argued in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, but Aldous Huxley's was 20/20: "What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one." Why so? Because, as Postman interpreted Huxley, people will come to "adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think."

Well, we're nearly 15 years into Postman's brave new world, and there are more techno-distractions around than ever. Yet according to *The New York Times*, people are reading more than they did when Postman wrote.

Why was Postman's own vision so myopic? Because he committed the original sin of the Western intelligentsia: He condemned technology as a threat to culture.

In fact, technology is a conduit for culture, because it is a tool for expression and self-definition. Older forms of expression are not displaced by new ones; they are re-defined and usually amplified by them. Nothing so clearly illustrates that essential fact as do the recent, computer-driven advances in the dissemination of the written word: "publishing," a term whose meaning is taking on new dimensions of simultaneity and community.

These developments appear to have impressed Postman and his many fellow pessimists. Their once-lively "end of literacy" debate is now a dead letter, as it were. That debate climaxed five years ago, when critic Sven Birkerts bid a sad farewell to the book in his popular *Gutenberg Elegies*. Yet just as he was burying print (and with it humanism and individualism), book superstores were sweeping the country, and Internet access to every book on Earth was beginning. The new target of professional dyspeptics has become the consolidation of the book industry, a concern that actually presupposes the vitality of literacy and the importance of publishing.

Large publishers have indeed been consolidating, but that is because technology and changes in retailing have been a boon to small houses at the expense of the old dinosaurs. As Nick Gillespie points out (see chart 4), the selection of books available to readers is vastly greater than it has ever been, and it continues to grow.

The course of publishing may have taken Postman, Birkerts, and other pessimists by surprise, but their own views would have shocked self-appointed cultural stewards of the past. From the rise of the popular book in the late 18th century until the advent of TV, the concern of the intelligentsia was not that too few people were reading too few books. It was that too many people had learned how to read, books had become too affordable, and a mass reading public with bad taste was destroying the quality of cultural life.

English professor Patrick Brantlinger has just published *The Reading Lesson*, a valuable study of 19th-century elitist attitudes toward the "threat" posed by mass literacy. As Brantlinger reminds us, the reading of popular Victorian novels was viewed as "vampiric" and "addictive." Too much reading was an impediment to living; books and the fantasies they inspired ill-prepared their readers for real life. Some utopians posited happy, "unbooked" futures where people wouldn't waste their time reading at all.

The most extreme such statement in this century was made by the German Marxist critic Walter Benjamin, who complained in 1936 that mechanical reproduction robbed a work of its singular, quasi-religious "aura" and removed art from tradition. In fact, mechanical reproduction—including publishing's many incarnations—has created whole new "traditions" for art to occupy.

Publishing *is* technology. It was technology when a scribe pressed cuneiform wedges into prepared clay, and it was perceived (by Plato) as a threat even in antiquity. Indeed, it is a threat, though not to society, creativity, or the individual. It's a threat to the closed class of cultural stewards, who correctly perceive that every publishing advance undermines their power.

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"In Usenet," cyberculture writer Howard Rheingold has written, "every member of the audience is also potentially a publisher." Publishing now implies a many-to-many relationship: many reader/publishers addressing many other reader/publishers. For philosopher Manuel De Landa, such technology is serving humanism, because it is obviously a catalyst for community.

Yet last December, a linguistics professor named John L. Locke issued an apocalyptic warning. In his book, *Awash in All These Words*, Locke claimed that e-mail is making us inarticulate, and worse. "Our social voices are slipping away," he lamented, "leaving people in social isolation." Bad news indeed: The world is ending. Again.
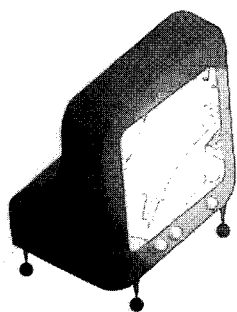
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stores nationwide. The Web retailers are also leading the way in increasing access to foreign titles that have traditionally been very difficult to find in the States: Amazon already has sites specifically for the United Kingdom and Germany; Barnes & Noble is working with European juggernaut Bertelsmann (which is merging with Random House) for a multi-language site.

Informal relations

While statistics about television, video, and publishing suggest the dimensions of the culture boom when it comes to relatively conventional forms of culture, the real hotbed of action may well be in what can be called "informal culture." Reliable numbers on informal culture are hard to come by because much of it is

of production and consumption that are difficult, if not impossible, to police and regulate, whether one is talking about content restrictions, copyright infringement, or "responsible" interpretation of a novel. *Cyber Rights* author Mike Godwin has said that the Internet is "best understood…as a global collection of copying machines that allows people to duplicate and broadcast all sorts of information." As cheap, movable printing presses did, such a technology empowers individuals precisely by undercutting centralized authorities of all kinds.

While such tendencies are most clearly visible when looking at the Internet, the same forces are at work in other areas of cultural proliferation. If, for instance, you don't like what's on TV, you can change channels (there are, of course, many more of those than before). If you find nothing of interest, you can rent a video. If you're still dissatisfied, you can splice together found footage, perhaps dubbing your own sound. If that doesn't

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either noncommercial or exists on a scale where there isn't a strong need for such information.

Informal culture includes the thousands of zines that are published in any given year; self-produced and distributed music, movies, and books; "taper" culture, which trades in illegal or gray-market copies of copyrighted materials as well as in versions that are doctored for comedic or dramatic effect; microbroadcasting; fan communities; and Internet-based culture ranging from informal discussion lists to Web sites featuring streaming audio and video outputs. Certainly, it is in informal culture that the empowering aspects of the culture boom are most clearly on display: Much of it is steeped in conscious reaction to or rejection of "mass culture."

How does informal culture foster proliferation? Consider the Internet, which, because of its global reach and increasingly sophisticated and user-friendly multimedia capabilities, is particularly emblematic of cultural proliferation. Undergirding the Internet is the logic of the culture boom. Perhaps most important, it acts as what *Wired's* Kevin Kelly has called a "supplemental" space. It generally adds to cultural options, rather than simply replacing existing ones—just as television in the end supplemented radio, rather than killing it. Relatively recent (read: already outdated) estimates say the typical Web page has about 500 words on it and put the total number of Web pages at somewhere between 200 million and 1 billion. Using the low estimate, that means the Web has put an extra 10 billion words in circulation, many of which are directed at commenting on and critiquing more-traditional cultural activities.

At the same time, the Web creates opportunities to circumvent traditional cultural gatekeepers by providing additional sites

work for you, then you can grab a camera and make your own program. While relatively few people follow such a progression all the way through, the number of options and escapes—and the sense they are worth pursuing—has certainly grown during the past few decades.

In fact, because the culture boom gluts people with choices and opportunities both to make and to consume, it pushes them toward active behavior. Simply to filter out noise from their cultural systems, they must become active agents. As the range of materials to choose from increases, even passive receivers must actively construct the cultural world around them.
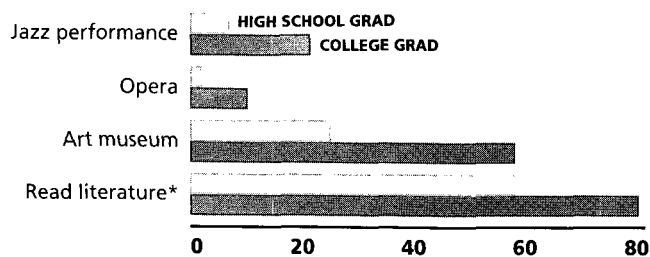
Fueling the explosion

In a pair of articles last year, REASON Senior Editor Charles Paul Freund recalled a time in European history when culture was largely the preserve of aristocrats and the leisure class. (See "Who Killed Culture?," March 1998, and "Buying Into Culture," June 1998, both available·at www.reason.com.) Understanding that background helps to explain why the culture boom is happening now—and why it will likely continue for a long time to come. Relatively speaking, we're all aristocrats now.
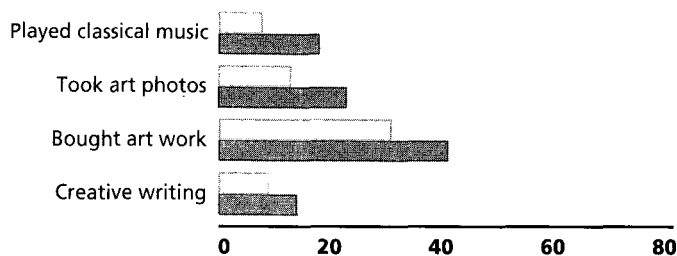
The culture boom is in large part a function of general increases in wealth and related benefits, especially education and increased leisure time. While wealth, education, and leisure do not necessarily create a flourishing culture, they are almost certainly preconditions for a cultural proliferation. If nothing else, National Endowment for the Arts data show that increased
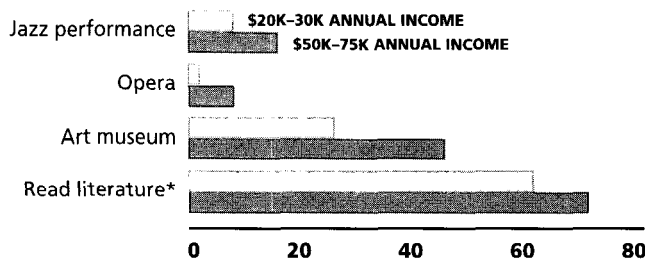
Chart 6: Arts Activities, Income, and Education
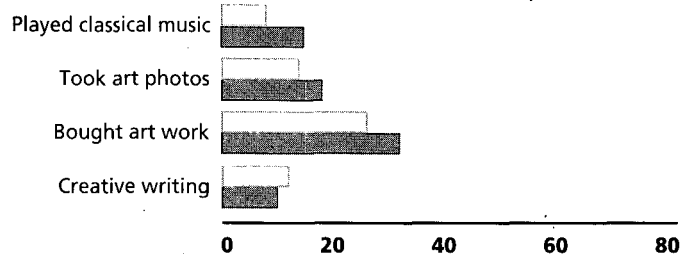### (1997)

Attended at least once during prior year (in percent)

HIGH SCHOOL GRAD
COLLEGE GRAD

- Jazz performance
- Opera
- Art museum
- Read literature*

0   20   40   60   80

Engaged in at least once during prior year (in percent)

- Played classical music
- Took art photos
- Bought art work
- Creative writing

0   20   40   60   80

Attended at least once during prior year (in percent)

$20K–30K ANNUAL INCOME
$50K–75K ANNUAL INCOME

- Jazz performance
- Opera
- Art museum
- Read literature*

0   20   40   60   80

Engaged in at least once during prior year (in percent)

- Played classical music
- Took art photos
- Bought art work
- Creative writing

0   20   40   60   80

*Literature includes novels, short stories, poetry, and plays

Source: National Endowment for the Arts

wealth and education correlate strongly with increased interest in traditionally defined cultural activity (see chart 6).

Americans have in fact been getting substantially richer. Between 1953 and 1993, say W. Michael Cox and Richard Alm in *Myths of Rich and Poor: Why We're Better Off Than We Think* (1999), inflation-adjusted per capita personal income—a comprehensive measure that includes wages and other compensation such as health insurance and retirement plans—rose by about 1.85 percent annually. The boost in income has been very broad-based and cuts across all economic strata.

For instance, an ongoing University of Michigan longitudinal study of several thousand representative individuals found that between 1975 and 1991, people starting in the lowest income bracket on average gained about $28,000 in real income. Such widespread class mobility helps to explain shifting and divergent tastes. Cox and Alm have also documented the ways in which the increase in income has been greatly magnified by a decrease in the real cost of many consumer goods. Calculating goods in terms of the hours an average industrial laborer would need to work to buy a given product, Cox and Alm find, for instance, that the work time required to purchase a movie ticket is only two-thirds of what it was in 1970; that VCRs today cost only 9 percent of what they did 20 years ago; and that camcorders cost only 28 percent of what they did 10 years ago.

Generally rising wealth has been matched by large-scale increases in education and leisure time. In 1970, for instance, only 52 percent of the population over 25 years of age had a high school diploma and only 11 percent had earned a bachelor's degree or more. By 1995, those totals looked very different: 82 percent had graduated high school and 23 percent had graduated college. Like wealth, more education correlates with more interest in both producing and consuming culture. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, for instance, a college graduate is twice as likely as a high school graduate to read literature and three times as likely to attend a jazz concert or visit an art museum. Similarly, college graduates are four times as likely as high school graduates to play classical music, three times as likely to do creative writing, and twice as likely to take art photos.

Twenty-five years ago, Americans spent roughly 64 percent of what's called "waking hours" at "leisure"—that is, not working for pay or doing chores at home. By 1990, that figure had climbed to 70 percent. Although the portrait of "overworked Americans" painted by researchers such as Juliet Schor has been widely embraced by the media, it relies heavily on impressionistic methods such as polls and recollections. In *Time for Life: The Surprising Ways Americans Use Their Time* (1997), John P. Robinson of the University of Maryland and Geoffrey Godbey of Penn State convincingly counter such claims through the use of detailed time diaries. They've found that Americans average about 40 hours of free time per week, a total that represents a gain of about an hour of leisure per day since 1965.

While wealth and related increases in education and leisure are doubtless central to the culture boom, we should not scant the contribution of technology, which economic historian Joel Mokyr dubbed the "lever of riches" in a 1990 book of that title. If Mokyr is correct that "technological creativity" has been one of the "key ingredient[s] of economic growth," it has similarly been a major factor in cultural proliferation. There are obvious examples of this, such as printing processes that have not only enabled books and literature to flourish but have also allowed sheet music and reproductions of artwork to find huge audiences. There are not-so-obvious examples as well, such as how relatively inexpensive musical instruments allowed rock music to develop among lower-class youths and how low-cost stereo equipment essentially made rap music possible: Both are

John Henry, RIP

By Nick Gillespie

When John Henry was a little baby,
Just a sittin' on his mammy's knee,
Said "the Big Bend Tunnel on that C&O Road
Gonna be the death of me, Lord God
Going to be the death of me."

I'm chuckling as I listen to the melancholy 19th-century folk tune "John Henry," which eulogizes the legendary "steel drivin' man" who defeats an automated steam drill in a contest but dies from the effort. The humor derives from the context in which I'm hearing such a tribute to old ways of doing things: I'm on the World Wide Web, at a site called The Folk Den (http://metalab.unc.edu/jimmy/folkden/index.html). It's a moment that limns the Web's vast potential not only for creating new forms of cultural expression and the communities they inspire but for preserving older ones as well.

All sorts of pleasant ironies fill the air alongside the music. The Folk Den is explicitly devoted to using cutting-edge technology to preserve "the tradition of the folk process, that is, the telling of stories and singing of songs, passed on from one generation to another by word of mouth." This particular version of "John Henry" is itself 40 years old and was recorded by Roger McGuinn.

Roger McGuinn Home Page

He's best known as the leader of the popular and influential '60s group The Byrds, a band that helped bring folk—and, later, country—to wider, younger audiences by wedding traditional forms to rock guitars. McGuinn has maintained the site since late 1995. Each month, he posts a new song, available for free as a RealAudio or .wav file (he also includes a short written intro, lyrics, and chord progressions).

From The Folk Den, you can link to the folk music page of the Open Directory Project (http://dmoz.org/Arts/Music/Styles/Folk/), a volunteer-run "self-regulating republic of the Web" that collects and filters links to useful resources on all sorts of topics ("Like any community," reads an information page, "you get what you give"). From there, you can go to sites such as the Digital Tradition Folk Song Database, a searchable collection of international tunes and La Page Trad, a France-based multilanguage site that provides information on festivals, bands, instruments, and organizations. Or you can go to a site for the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings' *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Edited by musicologist Harry Smith and originally released in 1952 as three double-L.P. volumes, those early recordings did more than preserve the past: They helped create the late '50s and early '60s folk revival that inspired musicians like McGuinn in the first place.

All over the Web, similar developments are occurring for all sorts of cultural activity, ranging from classical music to literature to art. The Web is delivering on the promise of what George Gilder once quaintly called "telecomputers." Writing in *Life After Television* (1990), before there was a World Wide Web, Gilder waxed hyperbolic about a future in which such machines would forever change "the balance of power between the distributors and creators of culture," letting individuals more fully set their own terms of cultural production, consumption, and exchange. Hierarchies, argued Gilder, would give way to "'heterarchies'—systems in which each individual rules his own domain."
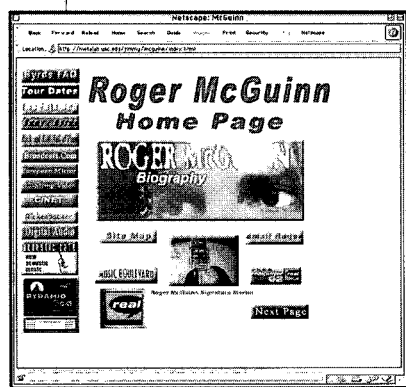
For Gilder, telecomputers would not merely let people do new things ("You could spend a day interacting with Henry Kissinger, Kim Basinger, or Billy Graham," he wrote, perhaps unconsciously underscoring the "to each his own" potential of the future as he envisioned it). More important, by breaking down information "bottlenecks," telecomputers would provide a means of reinvigorating those institutions—"family, religion, education, and the arts"—that "preserve and transmit civilization to new generations."

Wrong in particular details, Gilder nonetheless hit the nail on the head as surely as John Henry hammered his steel drill. The Web is renewing an appreciation for the past even as it delivers us into the cultural future. In doing so, it turns "John Henry" into a happy song.

Well they carried him down to the graveyard
And they buried him in the sand
And every locomotive came a roarin' on by
They cried out, "There lies a steel drivin' man, Lord God
There lies a steel drivin' man."

Rest easy in your grave, John Henry. You may be long gone, but your future never looked better.

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