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Drinking from the Firehose

E-mail and the White House: The Institutionalization Has Begun
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Although I barely knew enough
when I started this column a year ago
to comment intelligently about matters
related to electronic communication, I
had strong instincts about what the fu-
ture might bring and these kept me
speculating, furiously. This column’s
title, “Drinking From the Firehose,”
illustrates that speculation. The phrase
was first heard (by me) when Charles
Bailey, Assistant Director for Library
Systems, University of Houston, ut-
tered it as part of a paper he gave at a
NASIG Conference a few years ago.
The expression does not belong to me,
to Charles Bailey, or to Against the
Grain. I have witnessed its use a half
dozens times in various regional work-
shops, ALA programs, as well as in
the general media. It always seems to
refer to the handling of vast amounts
of information coming over the
Internet, in some way.

Well, the firehose has reached the
front door of the White House. This
phenomenon cannot go unnoticed. The
Clinton/Gore Administration: love ‘em
or hate ‘em, take your pick. My obser-
vations here are meant to be
ever-partisan. They are the new kids
on the block, and are suffering a severe
image problem as I write. By the time
this piece reaches its audience, perhaps
the tide will have turned. It’s really not
relevant to our issue. But several things
are for certain. For one, government
and business are going to be more in-
volved in future enhancements of what
is now the Internet and the NREN is a
done deal. Whether or not these forces
compete or cooperate, and how edu-
cational users will be caught in
between, is still uncertain. The age of
innocence and free-spirited exploration
is passing. Commercial and institu-
tional restrictions could dampen the
rapidity of technological improvement
and innovation.

Another certainty: if the youth of
the nation are tapped into the phenom-
ena, it is going to stick around for
awhile. A counter-culture referred to
by Time magazine as “Cyberpunk,” is
talked about widely now. If there is a
name for it, then it is instantly recog-
nizable by the general public.
Unfortunately, when a movement,
trend or fad hits mainstream America
this way, it usually means that it is on
the wane. Cyberpunk used to be the
widely accepted version of computing;
now networking, Internetting, and
hacking have all gone above ground. It
was already happening, of course; we
cannot give the Clinton/Gore folks all
the credit. However, a major shift is
occurring. John Berry, Editor-in-Chief
of Library Journal, outlined some of
these shifts in a talk he gave during the
University of North Carolina’s School
of Information and Library Science’s
Alumni Day in April 1993. His talk,
etitled “Clintonomics and Libraries:
One Editor’s View of the Profes-
sional—Political Agenda,” noted that
Clinton and Gore are the first national
leaders to <really> be comfortable us-
ing computers for communications.
Further, the leadership style of this new
administration is decidedly different
than any who came before them. Theirs
is a style of reception, flexibility and
facilitation. As Berry observed, “We
are not used to leaders who listen.”

This shift in attitude comes along
just as young people are, in greater
numbers, becoming not only comfort-
able with computer technology, but
dependent upon it. It is from this tech-
nological platform that adolescents are
rebell ing, finding their identities, and
eventually, finally, making their way
into the world beyond. Computers were
for years considered novelties in the
work place, then in the home. Not any-
more. They are more and more a
necessary tool now, like the light bulb
or the flush toilet. Networking and
electronic sharing are the new, inno-
 vative concepts; for some invigorating,
for others, threatening. The term “col-
laboration” was foreign to the
government until recently. But the cul-
ture surrounding computer networking

is based upon this concept; without it,
there would be no Internet. If com-
mercial enterprise and old-style
government regulators attempt to place
their pegs into these new holes, they’ll
find an uneasy fit. Adaptations will
certainly be necessary. Since libraries
have been traditional community-
builders, they should fit naturally into
this picture. And librarians have always
known that information “wants to be
free.” This, Time magazine notes, is
an underpinning theme of the
cyberpunk movement. So, institution-
alization of the networking concept is
occurring. Cyberpunks now have their
own “designer” publications such as
Mondo 2000 and Wired. (You can or-
der a sample of Wired via the Internet
by sending a message to: subscrip-
tions@wired.com; as a serials librarian,
I couldn’t resist, though when it finally
came I had to admit while interesting,
it was a little <too> techie for my
tastes.) In a publication perhaps a little
closer to home, the latest Educom
Review (May/June 1993) is devoted to
the “Bill of Rights and Responsibili-

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ties for Electronic Learners.” Get your hands on this issue as soon as possible if you care about the future of electronic communications.

Finally, it is now possible to send e-mail messages to the White House. Last Friday night I tried it, though who knows if I’ll ever receive a reply. They claim they only reply via U.S. postal service, which seems to defeat the purpose, in my mind. My message was modest, but encouraging. It was definitely not a fan letter, a crank call, or a complaint. It was just an acknowledgment that I appreciated the new capability and want to encourage its development. I mentioned that I was a librarian; it couldn’t hurt, right?

Perhaps in the future we’ll see public terminals in shopping malls, post offices, and public libraries. While the potential for vandalism, obscenity and stupidity exists, it does more positive results. Cynicism aside, I repeat, a shift has occurred. Future leaders will not get away with purging official messages sent via governmental e-mail, and the basic skills to be a public servant will include computing skills as well as mental fortitude and good media presence. Would we elect a leader who couldn’t or wouldn’t be able to drive a car or use a telephone? Probably not. In the future, we will expect computing skills as well.

The attitude toward information accessibility is our biggest battle. I suspect and at least hope that if nothing else, our current national leadership believes in this challenge too. Whether or not they can be effective in conveying this as a priority remains to be seen.

John Berry’s speech in Chapel Hill held a great number of keen observations, and I hope we see some version of them in print somewhere soon. I am grateful to have been able to hear them at such an intimate gathering. In observing the nature of information, he said: “Despite our attempts to suppress it, lock it up, own it, steal it, or hide it, information always escapes and everyone is better off when it is shared. We [librarians] know something that many others have not figured out: information is NOT a commodity; when you share it, sell it or steal it, or whatever you do with it, you always still have it. It is not scarce, and once created it does not go away. It is the classic free good.” Other constituencies are discovering this principle. It is a shift in national thinking, one that will have impact for years to come. May it flourish!

Sources:


Other background reading of interest:

Educom Review, vol. 28, no. 3 (May/June 1993) [whole issue].