Pelikan's Antidisambiguation: Oyster and McLuhan's Most Important Quotation

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Pelikan’s Antidisambiguation — Oyster and McLuhan’s Most Important Quotation….

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At the time of this writing, in September 2013, the announcement by Oyster (http://www.oysterbooks.com) of their new service offering “Unlimited books, just $9.95 a month” is gathering quite a bit of buzz in the popular technical press. Most of the coverage seems to have picked up the phrase “Netflix for books…” It’s essentially a streaming service for eBooks, a rental library (about which, more later).

If you visit Oysterbooks’ site and click on “About,” you’ll find some of the details about the service they’re introducing. Along with an impressive gallery of faces, who I can only assume represent either Oyster persons themselves, or the target demographic group for the service, we find the following words:

“We created Oyster to evolve the way people read and to create more of the special moments that only books can offer — a bustling subway car, a quiet coffee shop, or lost at sea with a Bengal tiger — our mission is to build the best reading experience, one that is both communal and personal, anytime, anywhere.”

But what is a streaming service for books, one that is “both communal and personal,” I mean, what is it really? When you look at their privacy policy, listed under their Help section, you find that it’s not merely Netflix for books; it’s more something like “Netflix met FaceBook at a stylish coffee shop over ‘a half-double decaffeinated half-cup, with a twist of lemon’ (Thank you, Steve Martin) and thus begat an Oyster.”

Phew! Where do I sign up? Oh, wait… It says, “We are currently rolling out invitations for iPhone and iPod Touch.”

Without wanting to dip even so much as a toe into the bottomless rat hole of accurately determining market share for such devices, I think we may be able to agree that there are at least a dozen or more persons in the world, and maybe several hundred, who are still using mobile devices that didn’t come from Apple.

But let’s leave aside the question of for whom this new service is intended. It may well be that by the time these words are published, we find the following words…

Call us today to hear about our complete subscription management solutions!

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National Approach to Scholarly Communication — will outline what this means for the UK library consortium in supporting members in terms of containing the on-going cost of gold open access while maintaining journal subscriptions and in the practical issues of implementing the Research Council’s policy.

Lorraine’s presentation is a “Neopolitan.” After the Charleston Conference is over, you’ll have to tell us what you think of the Neopolitan format this year. It’s something different that my intrepid team of Conference planners came up with. In the afternoon, we will even have ice cream as a side benefit. And be sure and read Estelle’s article in this issue of ATG — Lessons Learned: Jisc’s Experience in Acquiring Multimedia Resources.
I’ll come back to this “new” jadedness (and McLuhan) in a moment, but first, what Oyster is doing is not new. As Wikipedia’s steadily if gradually improving article on Public Libraries mentions in its section entitled, “History,”

“The establishment of circulating libraries by booksellers and publishers provided a means of gaining profit and creating social centers within the community. The circulating libraries not only provided a place to sell books but also a place to lend books for a price… Circulating libraries also charged a subscription fee, however, the fees were set to entice their patrons, providing subscriptions on a yearly, quarterly, or monthly basis… Circulating libraries were not exclusively lending institutions and often provided a place for other forms of commercial activity, which may or may not be related to print. This was necessary because the circulating libraries did not generate enough funds through subscription fees collected from its borrowers.”

In other words, the idea has been around for centuries.

Now — I mentioned Marshall McLuhan in the column title — specifically, what I consider to be his “most important quotation…” I may have covered this before in these pages, but it has been quite a while, and it bears upon the matter at hand — so here goes…

McLuhan’s name often elicits an almost Pavlovian response when you mention it — I mean, folks will literally respond, in words, out loud, “the medium is the message…”

That’s nice, but it’s kind of like Warhol’s “famous for fifteen minutes” line. Back in the days when I regularly engaged in what was still called “bibliographic instruction,” I used to make regular use of a different McLuhan quotation, for it was both insightful and its method of access was instructive.

In those days, the Social Sciences Index had not been digitized and incorporated into the Social Sciences Citation Index back past something like 1984. In a move to inform the already net-avid students about the wisdom of searching beyond the range covered by the databases, I dug into the bound volumes that were, at that time, still on the Libraries’ shelves.

Purposely selecting volumes late in the series, I searched for the conjunction of the terms “computer” and “privacy.” Hmm. Not much there. But Ah! There it was:


In this article, McLuhan and Powers discussed the long-term effect upon society of the advent of Electronic Fund Transfers. In the decades preceding this time, one’s back account was most likely associated with the branch of the bank at which you had opened it. Check clearance involved paper-based transactions, posting, etc.

“Despite increased efficiency, it is rarely possible to clear a check, locally or regionally, in less than 24 hours,” explained the article, “But the computer can debit or credit an account instantaneously — on an international level if necessary.”

McLuhan and Powers describe “…a hybrid merger of the digital computer, automated accounting procedures, and high-speed data transmission on ‘dedicated’ telephone networks…it is really the creation of a superbank through the electric linking of literally hundreds of local and regional data sources to provide the entire Western world a view of your social and economic standing… As the transaction rate increases, fueled by speed of light transfer, information about people’s finances will be exchanged at the same pace.”

McLuhan and Powers went on, “Private identity which was tied to a specific time and place is already gone: that is, a definition of self which was achieved in a small community where everyone knew everyone else — the world, as it were, of the nineteenth-century banker. That world began to disappear with the advent of the telegraph.”

And in a foretaste of what we now call the Cloud, “The users of that credit database, the computer for specific information: but in actuality the user, as well as the data, will be everywhere at once, in the ‘center’ of the system.”

Here’s the conclusion. This is the quotation I referred to in the title, again, written in 1980, published in 1981.

“The future holds for us a corporate individual who will accept the goldfish bowl as a natural habitat, having recognized that electronic espionage has already become an art form.”