Against the Grain

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

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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, y'all 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** aticle in this issue of ***ATG*** — Lessons Learned: Jisc's Experience in Acquiring Multimedia Resources.

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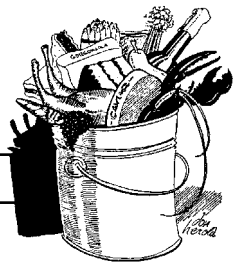
Pelikan's Antidisambiguation — Oyster and McLuhan's Most Important Quotation....



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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. From anywhere a mobile device can go — 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-caf, 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, **Oyster** will have rolled out offerings to a broader market. It only makes sense that they do so — for just as in cable TV, ad-supported magazines, and "free" apps in the App Store, the Customers, I expect, are actually the Product.

Again, from **Oyster's** Privacy Policy "… if you choose, you can use the Services to locate other people with Services accounts, and add them as your friends, either through (i) your contacts list (e.g., address book on your device), or (ii) through a search of email addresses on the Service. If you chose to find your friends through your device's contacts list, then we will access your contact list to determine whether or not someone associated with your contact is using the Services…. If you do not want **Oyster** (sic) to have access to your contacts' email addresses, do not connect your contacts to **Oyster** using the "find friends" feature."

Hold on. Suppose I'm in your contacts list, but I don't want do offer myself to **Oyster**, even if you're willing to offer yourself to **Oyster**. Do I have any say over whether you connect your contacts list to **Oyster** using the "find friends" feature?

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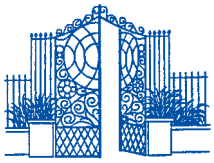

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Nope.

The subscriber to the service may "opt out":

> "You can always opt not to disclose certain information to us, even though it may be needed to take advantage of some of our features."

I won't and can't quote from **Oyster's** Privacy Policy much further. Won't, because you can see it for yourself. Can't, because it's 3,846 words in length, and Antidisambiguation, which is already long enough (I'm sure you'll agree), is targeted to a length of around 1,500 words per breathtaking episode. Perhaps we could go over it all in installments…

Look, this is really all pretty standard language nowadays. We've gotten used to it. For many people, the exchange involved (my info for access to your services) is something they're willing to accept. Many people, I think, may have read a Privacy Policy or two, or maybe several, but I've found it to be a self-limiting activity. After a few dozen, you simply start to give up. A grim facet in my outlook, never sought, but gradually acquired, has come to believe that those who put forth these Privacy Policies are counting on this kind of burnout. "Sometimes," one concludes, "it's best not to know. All these policies are the same. There are no rights anymore anyway. I mean, what can a person do? Am I supposed to go be a hermit?" Or words to that effect…

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." Hmmm. Not much there. But Ah! There it was:

McLuhan, Marshall, and **Bruce Powers.** "Electronic Banking and the Death of Privacy." Journal of Communications, Winter, 1981.

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, who may be anywhere in the world, will have the illusion of centralization as he or she asks 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 in1980, 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."