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Dreams, Madness and Reality

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Against the Grain

"Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians"

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Dreams, Madness, & Reality: The Complicated World of Human Recorded Communication

by **Michael Gorman** (Dean of Library Services, California State University-Fresno)

[This paper was presented at the Charleston Conference, November 4, 1995.]

The history of human recorded communication is the history of a daring attempt to conquer space and time. Before the invention of writing, drawing, and other ways of recording knowledge, human beings only knew what they were told by other human beings who inhabited the same space and time. The oral tradition that existed for many centuries and lingers on today in many ways (another testament to the staying power of all forms of human communication) conquered time to a certain extent in that the knowledge of the dead was transmitted — with conscious and unconscious variation — to the living. It also conquered space in a limited way as bearers of the tradition moved within small areas. The limitations of imperfect transmission, the impossibility of authenticating spoken words, and

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If Rumors Were Horses

Just heard that **Joyce Ogburn** (Yale) has a new job — AUL for Information Services & Automation, **Old Dominion University**, Norfolk, VA. She will begin work on March 1. Congratulations, Joyce!

The Dutch have struck again! Word is that **Wolters Kluwer NV** has agreed to a \$1.9 billion buyout of **CCH Inc.**, one of the nation's largest legal and tax publishers. This works out to \$55.50 per share, nearly double what the Nasdaq stock had traded for previously according to an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, 11/28/95, p.A3, (faxed to **ATG** by **Phil Dankert** of **Cornell** <prd2@cornell.edu> — thanks, Phil!). Says the *Journal*, alluding to how CCH has repositioned itself in the U.S. legal publishing field, "Only a family with a very committed ownership [the Thorne family controls about 57% of CCH] with a long-term perspective could make a decision to nuke earnings for

three years." This purchase by Wolters Kluwer will "create a professional publisher with combined revenue in excess of \$2.4 billion."

Moving right along, did you see **Forbes** magazine for December 18, 1995, p.200? **Chuck Hamaker** (LSU) is quoted in this article which is called, "The Internet's First Victim?" In the brief article, **John R. Hayes**, discusses "cost cutting librarians and computer-literate professors" and asks if their bypassing academic journals is bad news for **Reed Elsevier**.

Got a very nice letter from **Mike Hayes**, Conference Program Manager, **Simba Information, Inc.** (Wilton, CT). We have to apologize to Mike and to Simba for our erroneous report in the Rumors section of the November **ATG**. (see **ATG**, 7#5, November 1995, p.14). The **National Directory Conference** is owned

and operated solely by **SIMBA Information, Inc.** The 1996 Conference will take place in Philadelphia at the Adam's Mark Hotel on

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the fallibility of memory — all gave rise to what we know as “folk memory.” As soon as humankind made its knowledge tangible in the form of writing and pictures, authentic communication across space and time was possible. The earliest forms were graven on stone (free-standing or on the walls of caves and the sides of mountains), graven on metal, impressed on clay, carved on bone, and recorded in all the ways that human ingenuity could devise. The enduring quality of these communications — the ability they have to speak to us across the millennia — was the thing that enabled humans to defy time ... but not space. Until very comparatively recently, the only way to see the cave “paintings” of pre-history or to read the many carvings on stone that exist throughout the world was to visit the sites where they were made or the places to which they had been transported. On the other hand, the fact that we know about those civilizations distant in time and space is a tribute to the durability of the records that they made. If some pre-historic Gingrich had given each of those early people laptop computers, we would be unaware of their very existence.

This is where we see the paradox of recorded communication that haunts us to this day. That paradox is that each advance conquers space with greater ease but is also less permanent than its predecessors.¹ The ultimate, thus far, in this progression both backwards and forwards is the electronic message that can be transmitted almost instantaneously to Japan, Terre Haute, and Australia but may well not survive longer than the time it takes for it to be read.

To take these ruminations to just one practical issue of today, what about the question of “organizing the Internet”? I am a strong advocate of standard library bibliographic control practices and firmly believe that they could be useful in the context of electronic resources. The question is, of course, not how to do it but which electronic documents are worth organizing? There are worthwhile documents in all the blizzard of opinion, diatribe, assertion, and plain lunacy that obscures them from view but which are they and which will be preserved for posterity? Those are the questions and we, bereft of the filtering mechanisms that have narrowed those choices for linear publications of all kinds, must come to grips with them.

I cannot now recall how the subtitle “dreams, madness, and reality” came to be chosen for *Future libraries* — the book that I wrote with **Walt Crawford**.² However it was, it seems to me that it is possible to analyze the present state and future possibilities for libraries and librarians by looking, generally and specifically, at our dreams, our current all-digital-future madness, and the reality that both circumscribes the dreams and throws cold water on the madness.

The Library of the Future

The **dream** of the library of the future is of one that is freely available to all; deals with all documents in all languages, from all countries, and in all formats; and is staffed by skilled professionals ready to assist and teach the use of the records of civilization. Such a library would be part of local and national cooperative arrangements; would be replete with the intelligent use of technologies, old and new; and would be able to finance both a place with extensive collections and convenient and free access to remote resources.

The **madness** is best summed up by the summary of a talk

“How [do we] manage to provide ‘traditional’ resources and services while increasing the intelligent use of technology?”

delivered at a state library association conference earlier this year. “The libraries of tomorrow are being shaped around a vision that once seemed futuristic. Librarians, Internet resources, and the digital library will be interwoven into a NETWORK of human and electronic resources ...” I have never seen a more concise presentation of the case that, for the first time in human history, recorded knowledge and information will only be available in one form — a form that has supplanted all others. It would take far to long here to go into the reasons why this anti-vision of narrowed choice could not and will not work. I will content myself with wondering why such vacuous statements are made in such large numbers and, apparently, greeted with nodding heads?

The **reality** of the library of the future will, of course, be trammled by money or the lack of it. None of us will be able to afford the rich mixture of library materials that total library service would demand, still less will we be able to provide the professional staff that the ideal library demands. The question is, then, one of balance. How to manage to provide “traditional” resources and services while increasing the intelligent use of technology? What are the best ways to use the human resources that one has? How do we provide the library as place and the library without walls? In Boolean terms, we are talking about “AND not OR.” In financial and human terms, we are talking about doing more with less. This is a difficult time and these are difficult problems with which to deal. All the more reason why we should remain clear-headed and committed to the rational use of all library materials and to the cost-effective deployment of technology.

Preserving Recorded Knowledge and Information

One important **dream** and one of the key values of the profession of librarianship is the role of the library in preserving all important records of humankind for posterity. We should always be mindful of the fact that humans in the future will know what we know only if we preserve the texts and images found in library materials of all kinds.

Those who subscribe to the all-digital future **madness** tell us that, in some unexplained manner, all the recorded knowledge and information we have will be digitized and kept in a system of universally accessible electronic archives. To see this for what it is, one has only to contemplate the trillions of dollars that it would take to gather and digitize all those records; the billions of dollars that it would take to maintain and make accessible this electronic Tower of Babel; and the fragility, mutability, and vulnerability of electronic records.

Our **reality** is a world of a preservation/archiving crisis. Almost the only medium that does not present a preservation challenge is print on acid-free paper — and that medium poses problems of storage. We see “slow fires” destroying print on acid paper³, electronic documents vanishing into thin air in huge numbers, films that have ceased to exist or are in such poor condition that we will never know them as they should have been, video records in obsolete formats that require machines that are no longer being made, and sound recordings that are beyond restoration. Individual libraries and librarians are making a difference, document by document, but the need and the funding are so far apart that we may never see an end to this crisis.

“...[H]umans in the future will know what we know only if we preserve the texts and images found in library materials of all kinds.”

Library Collections

The **dream** is of libraries that work indi-

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vidually and together to make optimum use of all means of recording, communicating, and preserving human knowledge and information. Such libraries would have physical, accessible collections and would give access to remote electronic resources.

The all-digital **madness** is best summed up by the slogan "Access not ownership" — a particular favorite of the bumper-sticker school of library thinkers. In this scenario, no library would own anything and all documents would be available in electronic form at the touch of a button. Leaving aside the enormous cost of such a program, the prospect of resourceless libraries sharing what they do not possess is surrealistic, to put it mildly. The slogan also conveniently ignores the fact that the best way to guarantee access is ownership.

The **reality** is, of course, that libraries will continue to acquire, organize, and make accessible the collections that our patrons want and need. (It should never be forgotten that the "virtual library" is an elitist, academic construct created in electronic ivory towers without any reference to the desires and preferences of the people who actually use libraries.) The problems of maintaining and building accessible collections center on acquisitions funds, human resources, and storage. They are unlikely to go away any time soon but that should not deter any librarian from continuing the struggle to maintain our services to individuals and society. That struggle is not made any easier by the fact that our financial woes are exacerbated by the continuing, increasing, and entirely legitimate demand for access to electronic resources and services of all kinds.

Organizing Recorded Knowledge and Information

The **dream** is of a pan-media library in which each meaningfully distinct document is cataloged, classified, and made accessible to all library users through user-friendly integrated systems. In such a future, the established methods of bibliographic control will be expanded to cover electronic resources and the results of that work will be made available through general systems dealing with all media.

In the **madness** of the futurists, the orderly intricate world of bibliographic control will be replaced by magical "search engines" that will use words found in free text as a substitute for controlled vocabularies, classification schemes, and authority files. This "back to the future" approach (it is decades since anyone has taken keyword searching seriously in files larger than the minuscule) is going to make all "information" instantly accessible at little or no cost. There are far more free lunches than there are free bibliographic retrieval systems.

In **reality** bibliographic structures will be brought slowly into the world of the Net as it becomes more and more apparent that the lack of controlled vocabularies and amateurish search strategies yield little but vast amounts of unusable noise. The question, of course, is not whether we should "organize the Net" but to which electronic documents will bibliographic standards be applied? Finding the items of more than transitory value in the bushels of electronic chaff will be no easy task. Cataloging is never, and will never be, inexpensive and money will be spent irrespective of the decision to organize or not. The point is whether one should spend the money once at the beginning of the process for the benefit of all future users or should mandate the expenditure of time and money by those thousands of users as they thresh about in the unorganized Net to very little gain.

The Future of Publishing

The **dream** is a stable, profitable publishing industry that will continue traditional publishing while extending its invaluable filtering, gateway-keeping function into electronic publishing.

The **madness** envisages a world in which every person is her own publisher. There would be absolute freedom to promulgate any text or image without the annoying intervention of publishers, referees, editors, or any other persons trying to ensure some level of quality and coherence. To its proponents, the beauty of this world in which we would all suffer from "information anxiety" and die prematurely of "information overload" is that it is all free! Our governments and institutions will go on indefinitely providing us free access to the Net, free hardware and software to gain that access, and, apparently, unlimited paid time in which to communicate with all our invisible colleges. No stoned hippie in the late 60s ever had such a skewed, crackpot view as that espoused by the "everyone-a-publisher" gang.

Reality can be a funny thing. One often ignored fact is that computer technology has made the production of high-quality printed texts more affordable and more within the grasp of the individual and the smaller company. Far from heralding the imminent "death of the book," computer technology is proving to be the chief factor in a new level of book production quality. Something else to note is that only 10% or less of the price of a book is due to printing and distribution. Even if the Net were to replace print as the medium for disseminating recorded knowledge and even if, against all logic, the Internet remained "free," the savings at the production end would be tiny and the

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increased cost (environmental and financial) of the paper used for printing at the receiving end would be massive.

Intellectual Property and Copyright

Writers, intellectuals, and creators work for a variety of reasons, one of which is monetary reward. Surely it is not unreasonable to **dream** of a world in which copyright and intellectual property are protected regardless of medium of distribution and the creators of works are equitably rewarded and encouraged to produce more works. Beyond the question of rightful payment lie the matters of provenance and authenticity. A creator has the right to be rewarded but she also has the right to know that readers will receive her work without alteration.

The **madness** is of those who, with much vagueness, foretell an all-digital future that will guarantee the authenticity and provenance of each item and reward creators for use. The fact is that there is no way to guarantee the provenance of any electronic document (as even the most casual users of the Net can plainly see) and that copyright, a fiendishly difficult issue for relatively stable linear documents, becomes more complicated by several magnitudes in the electronic arena.

In **reality**, copyright and authenticity may prove to be unenforceable for electronic documents (originals or those that result from digitizing existing texts). A tremendous amount of effort is being devoted to these questions in the highest levels of our profession. To this layman's eye, much work done so far on copyright and intellectual property appears to be going nowhere and to have produced little but high-sounding, empty pronouncements. It is likely that the toothpaste is out of the tube and even CNI might be incapable of putting it back.

The Future of the Library as Place

The **dream** of the library of the future is of a place that incorporates electronic and other technological resources and services when they are the best means to communicate information while, at the same time, giving access to human knowledge in all other forms. The idea that "the library as place" and "the library without walls" are diametrically opposed is a fallacy. The fact is that

"The idea that 'the library as place' and 'the library without walls' are diametrically opposed is a fallacy."

libraries have always reached out beyond their walls — consider telephone reference services, mobile libraries, services to "shut-ins" and institutions, interlibrary loan, and all the other ways in which we have reached out for decades. What we need is to add a "**virtual library service**" program to our existing services and to create an enrichment (not an alternative) to the library as place.

The **madness** of the virtual library would lead to the death of the library and the death of librarianship. No amount of talk about "information specialists" and "knowledge navigators" can disguise the fact that a library without a place is an oxymoron and the best we could hope for in that bleak future would be to become an army of electronic clerks.

The **reality** is that, despite financial adversity, many libraries are thriving as places and (despite the pressures to "downsize," "outsource," "disintermediate," etc.) librarians are retaining their professional self-confidence as the hype subsides and they come to realize their tested values and techniques are needed in a complex enriched world of communication. We should never forget that the library as place will survive and thrive because

library users want it and want and value the services librarians provide.

Learning and the Cult of "Information"

We **dream** that, in the future, learning and literacy will thrive as the acquisition of knowledge through reading is enhanced by technology married to print and other linear resources.

The **madness** is curiously discontinuous. The same people that call for literacy and lament that Johnny can't read (try cuts in public and school libraries as part of that problem!) also preach the "death of the book" and say that all that matters is information. According to them, we are moving into a post-literate society dominated by the image. In this scenario, the Global Village turns out to be populated by illiterates who have rejected learning and are lulled by 1000-channel TV and other anti-intellectual sensory gratifications. They are malleable and readily manipulated politically, financially, and socially.

As for the **reality** — Let us pray.

Conclusion

Would it not be the ultimate irony if the last of the madnesses were to come true and records of humankind came full circle? The journey from the few people of the Aurignacian-Perigordian Epoch in 18,000 BC leaving the graphic images of their lives on the walls of the Lascaux Cave to billions of modern humans sedated by flickering transitory images will have taken a long time but could scarcely be accounted an advance. So, what is it to be? Enhanced and flourishing libraries combining the best of all kinds of recorded knowledge and information on the one hand or a global Lascaux Cave on the other? A new golden age of literacy and learning or the end of the text? For myself, I would prefer to live in a reality informed by dreams and possibilities than to cyber-surf into oblivion as a member of the largest and loneliest crowd in all human history.

FOOTNOTES

¹Wellisch, Hans. Aere perennius? In *Crossroads: proceedings of the first LITA Conference*. Chicago: ALA, 1984. pp. 22-34.

²Crawford, Walt and Michael Gorman. *Future libraries*. Chicago: ALA Books, 1995.

³*Slow fires: on the preservation of the human record* / Council on Library Resources. Santa Monica, CA: American Film Foundation, 1987. 1 videocassette (59 minutes).