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Op-Ed – Opinions and Editorials

Our Non-Electronic Future

by **Gordon Graham** (Editor, *LOGOS*)

The so-called electronic revolution is now old enough to have history, which, when analyzed, will show that it was not a revolution, but a series of technical innovations, designed to cope with information en masse and its transmission at high speed.

In other words, it concerned communications, not publishing, but it has caused publishers and librarians, often for unworthy reasons, mostly economic, to concentrate on the medium at the expense of the message, salving their consciences with occasional platitudes about content being king. A great disservice has been done to the vital chain which links author to reader by those who turned "the medium is the message" into a shibboleth. Our entrancement with the vehicle is overshadowing the purpose of our journey.

We learn, as always, by experience. I was an electronic enthusiast twenty-five years ago and have plenty of speeches to prove it. Now I am a print heretic and I am not alone. My perception has been sharpened, during the past seven years by being a journal editor, a role casually undervalued by the electronic practitioners. Perhaps before they leave the stage, the generation which introduced the so-called electronic revolution can lead the rebellion against the shallowness of today's electronic orthodoxies, which claim that in an ideal world everybody will be imparting and acquiring more and more information. On the contrary, it is time to be learning less and understanding it better. The more the electronic culture gallops onwards, emphasizing quantity over quality, speed over deliberation and information and communications over knowledge, the more the immutable value of the age-old paper culture will be appreciated.

Two vital elements are in short supply in publishing today: balance and control. Nowhere is this more evident than among journal publishers, who are pluralists between the print and electronic cultures. In other words, they have a choice. Reference publishers don't have a choice. Their future is the database, because they are selling information in a state of constant accretion and obsolescence. Trade publishers don't have a choice. Their future is the book. Educational publishers, like journal publishers, are pluralists.

There is no lack of experience, vision, wisdom, nor of enterprise and capital. Yet somehow the road ahead is not clear, and becomes even less clear after reading **Bill Gates's** book with that title. Too many pluralists regard the electronic media as a creeping imperative instead of a permanent option. Bewitched by technology, we begin to mistake the means for the end. We start by being seduced, then become compelled. **George Steiner**, that eloquent prophet of a non-print future, goes further. He says: "We are caught on an irresistible tide and our total preoccupation can only be to stay afloat."

We need more countervoices to the electronic absolutists, like Steiner and **Stephen Harnad**. **Bela Hatvany** of **SilverPlatter** wrote recently: "Print publishers will have to turn to electronic publishing and after a while abandon print altogether. They will meet some resistance from consumers, but it will be overcome, because electronic information permits a more thorough job of research in less time and at less expense."

Less time? Less expense? How about better understanding? And even on grounds of time and expense, how many are in the

position of **David H. Walton**, who wrote the other day in a letter to *The London Times*: "I recently tried to download a large file from a popular site ... My terminal estimated that the download time was five hours. In this time I could have taken a train to London, gone to a bookshop or library and read the information I sought."

Mr. Walton could have added that in the bookshop or library the copyright holders' rights are safe. This is only one of the elements of control which are shaky, to say the least, in the electronic wilderness. What can control a medium which is open to all, which is worldwide, which is available twenty-four hours a day and where many messages are anonymous? It is a formless field with no gates, let alone gatekeepers. It is out of control right now.

What is going wrong? The starting error is to assume that that which is technically feasible is therefore socially desirable. Fortunately the human spirit not only acts, it reacts. What is called pejoratively "consumer resistance" has never been more powerful than it is today, as the environmental movements are proving. Among electronic apostles who have become electronic apostates is **Clifford Stoll**, author of *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway* and one of the founders of the Internet in 1974. "While the Internet beckons brightly,"

he says, "seductively flashing an icon of knowledge-as-power, this non-place lures us to surrender our time on earth ... What's miss-

ing is someone who will say hey, this is no good. Editors serve as barometers of quality, and most of an editor's time is spent saying no... Why is it that both drug addicts and computer aficionados are called users?"

Not all heretics are experts. Most are simple citizens rebelling against the tyranny of the terminal. How much of our lives do we want to spend looking at a screen? **Bill Henderson**, of **Pushcart Press**, is the founder of the **Lead Pencil Club**, for people who have emancipated themselves, or would like to emancipate themselves from all devices which seek to undermine the individual's responsibility to decide for him or herself the pace and volume and timing of the information he or she imparts or receives. Clifford Stoll has given up answering email. It lacks, he says, the "closeness, comfort, warmth and well-thought-out logic and reasoning you find in a handwritten letter," to which I would add the sensuous pleasure of slitting the envelope and reading from the actual paper which your correspondent has handled and signed. "What's the hurry?" says Bill Henderson.

While it is only natural that Henderson and Stoll and other heretics record their thoughts in books, it is significant that electronic prophets such as **Bill Gates**, **Nicholas Negroponte** and others also make their statements in books, thereby revealing their perceptions that paper is where substantial thoughts are best recorded. In Bill Gates's hi-tech home, where the lights switch on and off as you enter and leave rooms, the library, with its huge dome suspended below a cupola, is a showpiece. He has hired a New York rare book specialist to stock it for him. And when he wanted to deliver his message her wrote a book.

After thirty years of so-called revolution, 5% of all publishing is electronic, and some of that is more from defense than conviction. Since publishers who question the electronic imperative tend to be accused of being old fuddy duddies, let me

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quote a librarian, who was one of the great electronic pioneers. **Maurice Line**, for many years a senior executive in the British Library, and who was associated with the building of the **British Library's Document Supply Centre**, said [in an article in the current issue of *LOGOS*]: "Prophecies that holdings will give

"A journal editor [is] a role casually undervalued by the electronic practitioners."

way almost completely to access, and proposals that librarians should encourage the process, are bizarre. Few information media have ever been totally superseded. Even stone tablets still exist in the form of tombstones (catalogue entries for the departed?) and other monuments with inscriptions. Each new medium is added to existing ones, taking over a few of their functions and finding new functions that only they can perform."

Line has no doubt that the traditional printed book and journal "need to be with us forever; for whatever computers can do with retrieving nuggets of information, they cannot offer the exposure to information that the printed page offers. A scientific fact is one thing; a well-structured book on some aspect of history or culture, or for that matter science, with a consistent and structured argument is quite another. I cannot conceive of a system where I cannot browse through recent publications in a form that requires nothing but the naked (or bespectacled) eye. ... I could do browsing online, but experiments have shown that this is much slower and less effective, as well as requiring the input of search terms. In addition, I would be largely denied the benefits of serendipity, which frequently extends my range of knowledge and casts new light on areas of interest to me."

If a history of the print and electronic cultures over the past thirty years were written, it would reveal the false prophecies, the blind alleys, the unplanned breakthroughs, the snail-like pace of acceptance, the fast rates of obsolescence, the extraordinary volatility and always, always the siren voices singing of the beautiful future. Meanwhile, print has prospered.

Such a history would have a lot to say about journal publishing, in which the four principal players have successfully confused one another:

Academics, motivated initially by the desire to network their invisible colleges, came progressively to see networking as a substitute for publishing.

Librarians, found themselves in a impossible bind between demanding academic, tight budgets and semi-monopolistic publishers.

Publishers, Having long battered on a comfortable understanding that they were the indispensable link between academics and librarians, progressively found themselves unpopular with both.

Computer people, saw the other three as a lucrative market.

During the past three decades, publishers have been invited to rejoice over the number of people who read their publications, as distinct from the number who buy them. A few years ago in *LOGOS*, I published an account of **OhioLink** and obtained photocopies by fax or originals by interlibrary loan by return. I asked **Tom Sanville**, the director of OhioLink, to let me know how many of the libraries in Ohio had subscriptions to *LOGOS*. "Two," he replied, "but you will be glad to know it's very popular." I managed to be glad. Hence the electronic journal, and hence

site licensing. Are these defensive or are they voluntary safeguards of a long, confused march to access by everybody to everything twenty-four hours a day?

It is time for publishers and librarians alike to fix their eyes on the overriding objective, which is not to transmit information, but to contribute to the maintenance of a society where individuals can record their thoughts in freedom and independence and offer them in an orderly way to the public which can acclaim or reject them. Copyright is the key to this society of freedom, not just because it protects intellectual property, but because it ensures a balance between the rights of creators and the rights of readers. The balance today is in danger of being tilted by trying to turn readers into users and assuming that they are all fast-fact junkies. To adjust the balance, we should be turning more to what we have all taken for granted all our lives — the tried and tested medium of print on paper.

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At a conference held in March 1996 in London on "Publishing in the 21st Century" one of the speakers was a senior

"How much of our lives do we want to spend looking at a screen?"

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- **GOVERNMENT PUBLICATIONS**
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territory only someone who was either intensely curious or clueless or both (i.e. me) would take: New Jersey on the east, Colorado on the west, Minnesota on the north, Texas on the south, and everything in between. Happily, it was impossible to spend any money because I was driving all the time, great for capital accumulation, useful since I was penniless. Then I was promoted to an in-house editor in New York, got a job helping open an editorial office for the **Cambridge University Press** in New York, where I found that having been a college traveler was invaluable. I very much believe that editors need to expose themselves to all sides of the sales process; they should go to sales conferences and spend time seeing how difficult it is to get their books out and sold. Selling is a very necessary, sometimes a humbling experience. All editors should be exposed to this side of the business. It will make them much better!

ATG: *What's the role of the library market in your sales?*

CJ: About 30% of Routledge sales are to libraries and library wholesalers and the rest is to individuals, bookstores and through trade wholesalers. I would like to see the library market grow. I think it will if our books are perceived as essential to libraries. The key is to persuade our reference department to bring in the right products (be they print or electronic), and that brings me back to what I said above, the need for the editor to know what the audience wants and having the ability to match that to the very best that is available, and making everything work.

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ATG: *I know at the beginning of the summer, you just acquired Carfax which publishes, I believe, several hundred journals. Are you trying to expand your journal list?*

CJ: Routledge has some 40 journals of its own and we do plan to grow this program selectively. Carfax is significantly larger, publishing about 200 journals some of which are in fields we have not covered. So the plan is for Carfax to continue from its base in Abingdon, England, as an independent company, parallel to our own. **John Cox** [President of Carfax] and I are talking about ways of cooperating in the USA, combining exhibit space, having Routledge publish topical issues of Carfax journals as separate books etc. We intend to expand on this cooperation where we can.

ATG: *What's the role of bookstores in your sales?*

CJ: About 40% of our sales are through the book trade in the US. I would not like for it to be much higher, because the combination of low prices, high discounts and frightening returns makes it financially unappealing. However, to some extent we need to be visible in the trade, so we are there. To have our books on the bookstore's shelves is a kind of editorial

advertisement for us.

I believe the independent bookstores will stay around if they are in the right place and if they can specialize in some way or other. They can't compete across the board, but in particular subject areas, or particular specialties they can. In the long run, I do not believe that specialized books will find much of a place in the big chains. There just isn't enough turn-over for the very specialized book, and this is being demonstrated in this year's and last year's awful returns. The hope was that a trade market existed for some university press type books, but by and large that hope has not been realized.

It will be a struggle for the independents to reassert themselves as the natural outlet for books from publishers such as ourselves and the university presses. It is hard to hang on, but there is a need to be filled, and I believe it will be. Booksellers and publishers are similarly determined people, and we publishers certainly need the independents very, very much. 🍄

NB: *Colin Jones says that we all need to be more positive about books and publishing. I think he's right. Hope he makes it to Charleston so we can continue the discussion. — KS*

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executive of **AT&T**, who expressed pleasure that over half of the world's population had yet to make a phone call. What was he doing at a conference concerned with publishing? Would you invite a highway engineer to a conference on the joys of travel? Communications is a wonderful business, but it's not the one we're in.

In three full pages in the *Herald Tribune* of 27th March 1997, the **Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corporation** unsurprisingly quoted the words of their president **Mr. Jun-ichiro Miyazu**: "If we ignore the social change brought about by the aggressive progress of digital technology, we won't be able to find the real direction of the multimedia society." This is self-serving gobble-dyook. Because the communications companies have invested untold millions in optical fibers, society is supposed to change.

But those who see print as seminal to the human condition should not denigrate or dismiss the digital doodahs. They are homogenizing humanity with consequences yet unconjured, and sweeping along with them those sections of the publishing industry concerned with information-gathering and dissemination. The rest of the publishing industry is being confused by the fact that the print culture has long regarded numbers sold and speed of delivery — the very heart of

the electronic wonder — as the criteria of success and the foundation of economic viability. The potential of the one discriminating reader has been reduced to the statistic of just another copy sold. There is a one-to-one-ness in paper publishing which should be a matter for quiet reflection amid the noise of the electronic talkfest.

Among publishers of professional information, paper today suffers from declining expectations. In the '70s and '80s, publishing for professions became a pot of gold and the expectations of management and shareholders became correspondingly high. Such companies now have the conundrum of maintaining their high ratios while investing in the electronic media. The actual value to the reader of paper publishing is being overlooked.

The non-print media have become the province of the large corporations whose postures of dynamism and vision must conceal, or, if they don't, should conceal, an inner nervousness. One symptom of this is the way in which the players increasingly make deals with one another on grounds of focusing on their core businesses. I find it troubling when profits become the desideratum instead of the corollary, and when the only way to satisfy shareholders is to cut expenses and people. Publishing is by definition a business with a social conscience, a way of making a modest living, not a fortune.

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So who will carry the torch for the glorious future of print on paper in the 21st century, which we are all tired of hearing about before it even starts? Not those who are intent on seizing what they see as the electronic high ground. Most of them have moved away from publishing into entertainment and communications. The safe future of print is in the hands of those who matter most — the authors and the readers, who in the end will opt for the artifacts that are best suited to the human mind and body. Supporting them will be small- and medium-sized publishers, who are enjoying a renaissance, because they have been fortunate enough not to have enough capital to invest in electronics and clever enough to stay close to their authors and readers.

It is time to ask whether the emperor has any clothes. To the electronic absolutists, to the obsessive terminal gazers, to the false prophets of a paperless society, to those who hint at some mystic link between the millennium and the so-called information revolution, we should say: "We have seen the future and it doesn't work." Paper, not the computer, will remain the vital and reliable repository of human knowledge.

NB — Adapted from a speech to the United Kingdom Serials Group on April 8, 1997. — KS

Rumors
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Principles for **Licensing Electronic Resources** have been drafted by the AALL, ALA, the Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries (AAHSL), ARL, MLA, and SLA. These six associations represent an international membership of libraries of all types and sizes. The intent of the principles is twofold: to guide libraries in negotiating license agreements for access to electronic resources, and to provide licensors with a sense of the issues of importance to libraries and their user communities in such negotiations. The principles are available on the Web at <<http://arl.cni.org/sccomm/licensing/principles/html>>.

The Society for Industrial and Ap-

plied Mathematics (SIAM) has announced a substantial new enhancement to the electronic editions of its 10 research journals. SIAM plans to significantly reduce the waiting period between a paper's acceptance and its electronic publication in a SIAM journal. By mid-1998, SIAM expects to have reduced this time to an average of four months while continuing to maintain its high standards of peer review, copy editing, and production. This will be accomplished through author cooperation and a revamping of the production process within the SIAM office. For more information on how to subscribe, see SIAM's Web site at <<http://epubs.siam.org/help.html>> or contact SIAM Customer Service at 215-382-9800 x321, 800-447-7426 (U.S. only), or <service@siam.org>.

Reference Materials
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tain reference subjects will grow as people share their interests electronically in virtual communities and discussion groups. And finally, librarians and publishers will continue to explore electronic pricing models that provide librarians with an ability to provide patrons with broad access and publishers with an ability to stay in business. This

will be critical as an ever-growing percentage of reference materials are sold electronically."

Answer from Dr. Bohdan S. Wynar:

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