Letter from the Editor

Several things have changed. Although the journal has a familiar name, the sponsorship is different. The agreement between MISF and MACAE to publish a joint journal ended this summer. We had printed a cooperative publication for two years, but when Vic Klimoski retired from the MACAE editorship, it seemed best to separate back into two journals. MACAE is publishing a newsletter, “Praxis,” while MISF has kept the title “Practical Thinking” and will continue to publish articles of interest to scholars and the general public.

The theme of this issue is the Internet and its effect on our lives. We have timed the publication of this newsletter to publicize “Afloat in the Digital Pond: Minnesotans reflect on living in digital days.” This conference, co-sponsored by MISF and MNCOGI, will take place March 1, 2008 at Luther Seminary in St. Paul. Further information can be found on page 11 of this journal; on-line sign-up is available at <mncogi@gmail.com>. A registration fee of $20 covers both food and materials for the day. Scholarships are available. We are pleased that a grant from the Minnesota Sesquicentennial Commission allows us to create and promote this conference, one of the first of many events in the celebration of the state’s 150th anniversary.

As a normal rule, I, as editor, try to get other people to write. But I found that I was unable to persuade anyone to write about the Internet for this edition. So this journal contains an article under my byline with reflections about the presence of the Internet in our lives. As I was finishing that article, which grew constantly as the newspapers carried stories about the Internet, I happened on a review in the New York Times of a book, Against the Machine by Lee Siegel. I have added a brief review of this book in a postscript to my article.

I am grateful to the writers who completed assignments for this publication. Sophia Teeple brings us a young person’s assessment of the Internet. Charles Cubrini brings us the view of an older person who looks back to the community and comfort of a small city library. In addition to my own book review, we have a review by Bill McTeer of the Cult of the Amateur and synopses of several new books (not all Internet related, thank heavens), by Colleen Coghlan. David Juncker has provided a brief overview of the Thoreau conference that MISF co-sponsored in early October. A side benefit of having short articles is that I was able to include some illustrations.

I hope that this journal will whet your desire to attend the conference March 1, 2008. We anticipate a lively discussion with many interesting speakers. We also hope to find some some thoughtful wisdom to help us cope with the challenges that the the Internet poses to our lives in Minnesota and in the world.

Lucy Brusic

Note to archivists: there was no Volume 3, Number 2 of this publication.
The Georgian brick building on Gregory Avenue had numerous large windows which allowed swaths of daylight to enter and illumine the vast interior. At least that is how I remember the Julius Forstmann Library in Passaic, New Jersey, from over half a century ago. A large open space lined with dark wood bookshelves and a real operating fireplace greeted me every time I entered the front door. So did a staggering yet comforting array of books, magazines, and newspapers stacked up or spread out in that quiet, spacious, even noble, interior where I spent many hours doing research for high school papers on John Milton, Greek and Roman gods, and numerous science assignments. It was quiet and peaceful there, a little like being in church. The chess club and other groups met there, as I recall; so did many of my classmates. Bill Cromie and Bob Ackerman clowned around, much to the annoyance of the vigilant librarians; Alice Sullivan and Maureen McCarthy chatted and batted their eyelids, much to my adolescent delight.

Thoughts of the Forstmann Library have been dancing in my head recently as I find myself traveling to and using the still new, sleek, spacious Minneapolis Central Library. This luminous library, which looks like a secular cathedral, has been evoking images and memories of the facility from my younger days. But, as with so many things in life, things have vastly changed during the intervening years, thanks especially to the development of computers and Internet technology. For instance, the card catalogues, like my male and female friends, are long gone, though it is possible that chess clubs might still meet in the library. It wouldn’t surprise me if they did. I have seen many groups convene in that space; and I have attended several conferences at the Minneapolis Library, each of which utilized digital technology and quirky sound systems.

Banks of computers, with people standing in line to use them, occupy the central downstairs space. It is conceivable, perhaps even likely, that some patrons of the library might use those computers to do research on John Milton or astronomical phenomena but never physically open a book. To my bemusement I have often noted more people pawing through the DVD racks than roaming in the book stacks. No question, technology has changed the way the library is constituted and used. But the library is used. I am impressed when I see hundreds of people coming and going, stopping and staying, sitting and chatting. I marvel that so many patrons use the library in Roseville, for example, that I often have to cruise the parking lot to find a place to park.

Not so with the downtown library, though. I usually take the bus to get there; and I can’t help noticing that the same kind of technology that has changed library space has affected other public space as well. On a recent trip to the downtown library, for example, I noticed that, for a time, there were 24 people on the bus with me, 12 of whom were talking on cell phones, listening to iPods, or wrestling with laptops. I felt a trifle anachronistic in that temporary community, for I was utilizing older technology to ease my journey: I was listening to a book... on a Walkman.

In a recent article in The New Yorker (Nov. 5, 2007), Anthony Grafton reflects on libraries and their use in a much more sophisticated way than I. He traces the history of information gathering, storage, organization, and retrieval, using the New York Public Library as a point of departure (which is only about ten miles from the Forstmann Library in Passaic, by the way). Grafton describes how Internet technologies are reshaping the way information is sorted and captured, noting that it is possible for many people to do many things without ever having physically to hold a book. He concludes that for the foreseeable future any serious reader will have to cope with the screen: libraries and archives are being digitalized and organized in ways that makes emerging technologies preferable, even inescapable.

However, Grafton also opines that materials contained in books and in other paper forms will be with us for a long time as well. “...If you want to know what one of Coleridge’s annotated books or an early “Spider-Man” comic book really looks and feels like,” he says, “or if you just want to read one of those millions of books which are being digitalized, you still have to do it the old way, and you will have to for decades to come.” So it seems that a laptop on the table in the coffee shop, like the one in the Minneapolis Public Library, can and will tell you a lot; but a dif-
different, perhaps deeper form of knowledge will still come from books, thousands of which, I am relieved to say, also occupy space downtown and in scores of other local libraries.

The touch and feel of paper, while no longer the only way to search and learn, can nonetheless evoke memory. It was by paging through a paper copy of *The New Yorker* article that I started to travel down the road of memory to the Forstmann Library. Along the way, happy to report, the idea of doing a Google search struck me; and it resulted in the discovery that the Julius Forstmann Library still stands on Gregory Avenue in Passaic, though it is now called "Passaic Public Library." A picture on the site (see preceding page) shows the Georgian entrance virtually as I remember it. And an accompanying picture on the home page shows three people sitting, reading, and obviously enjoying newspapers and books. Not a computer in sight, though I sensed them lurking behind the stacks or just off camera.

The fireplace is still there too. In my mind's eye I can almost see Bill wading a spitball and Maureen giggling at his antics. Long live libraries with resources, paper and electronic, to stir the mind and imagination – and the memory.

Charles Cubrimi is the pen name of an engaging writer and musician of minor repute. He grew up in New Jersey and moved to Minnesota a score of years ago.

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The Internet Strikes Back

by Bill McTeer

I'm feeling just a little guilty. This is a review of Andrew Keen's book *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture* (Doubleday: New York, 2007), but I haven't read every word of the book, which proposes that there are serious social problems being created by the Internet and the Web. Here are some examples of these problems:

1) When it empowers everyone equally, the Web can fatally dilute the cultural contributions of those who have devoted a lifetime to mastering a subject area.

2) Sharing media without controls on the Internet can eliminate the financial wherewithal that supports artists.

3) Embedding paid commercial messages in other content (which many advertisers feel is necessary to combat user control of content presentation) is seriously eroding the credibility of the original content.

4) Relatively easy access to personal information about each of us enables anti-social behavior from totalitarianism to identity theft.

5) Unfettered worldwide access has greatly weakened the ability of governments to protect a moral core of behavior from pornography and betting.

(I quibble that the third and fourth problem don't appear relate to the "amateurs" in the book title.) If the book introduced these issues and then explored thoughtfully how to solve them, it would be very worthwhile. Instead, most of the book is an extended, repetitive, and anecdotal rant about the problems, interspersed with sly elitist and denigrating comments and an evident dislike of liberal institutions like the ACLU. Since I didn't enjoy this writing style, I skimmed, and found some sections that were thoughtful. I particularly recommend the beginning of the "Solutions" chapter for a balanced discussion of what is wrong with Wikipedia and how to fix it (some of what he proposes was started at Wikipedia in late 2007). On the other hand, Keen's solutions for media sharing, product placement, misuse of private information, and moral decay seem rushed and shallow.

In any event, I'm sure Andrew Keen will find plenty of sympathetic speaking opportunities because many people, myself included, frequently find the Web to be distressingly debased.

As a footnote, this book has created at least one twisted disproof of one of its assertions. If you look at the reviews on Amazon (written by the very "amateurs" Keen complains about) several are superbly erudite and well-crafted.

Bill McTeer is an independent computer consultant with wide-ranging interests.
Confessions of a Teenage (Non) Blogger
by Sophia Teeple

I have a confession to make: I don’t use my blog account. Oh, I’ll occasionally post some interesting link, or an amusing anecdote that I think my online friends might enjoy. But I don’t pour my heart out to an online journal that can be read by potential employers or college admissions directors. Blogs and online journals may be a good place for amateur journalists to test the waters, and for professionals to write more freely without a fear of censorship, but in my case, it’s better to use a pen and a journal to record thoughts and feelings than to write about personal matters in a public place.

That said, I do prefer to use many facets of the Internet rather than their old-fashioned counterparts—such as the telephone or an encyclopedia in book form—for convenience and ease, and often to save money as well. For example, using instant-messaging programs (such as AIM or Windows Live) to keep in touch with friends who live far away is much more convenient than calling on the phone, and it saves money on phone bills. Email serves the same function if I need to reach someone who’s not connected to their instant messaging program because they are away from the computer; though, depending on the person, they might not answer promptly. If I’m researching a paper on an obscure topic, it’s easier for me to start on the Internet and find relevant websites than spend an hour at the library and not find anything that will help me. When no one’s online, or I’ve finished my research paper, I can amuse myself for hours poking around on video-sharing sites (YouTube and Newgrounds are my favorites); art gallery sites like DeviantArt and SheezyArt; and the various webcomics (online comic strips that update on a schedule like “xkcd”); and online journals such as “The Hathor Legacy” and “Comikyu Girls,” which I check every week for updates.

I’m not saying the Web is a perfect tool for everything, or that there aren’t annoying quirks and phenomena associated with the Internet. It wouldn’t be an accurate representation of my experience with the Internet if I didn’t mention the problems I’ve encountered. First, a lot of people use the Internet, and by “a lot,” I mean about 1.2 billion people worldwide. With this kind of diversity, you’re bound to find people who disagree with you, or whose opinions offend you. Some of these people can be quite vicious if you provoke them, but if you receive a nasty message, it’s usually not your fault. These people are found everywhere, from the comment section in a blog or a YouTube video to a message board (their traditional hangout). Being a slightly opinionated person, I’ve been on the receiving end of a few nasty messages loaded with personal attacks that usually have nothing to do with the argument. A slang term has been developed for these kinds of attacks: flames. A “flame” is an angry, insulting message that doesn’t intend to advance the discussion, and a “flamer” is a person who sends these kinds of messages. People can send flames for a variety of reasons: they could be very opinionated, or feel very strongly about the issue being discussed. They might be having a bad day, and are letting off steam. It’s even possible that the person sending the flame is just trying to rile people up. In any case, flames and their senders are best left alone. They just aren’t worth the effort of trying to respond to their feeble arguments.

Drawbacks to the web

Another problem I’ve found while using the Internet is that the web-definition of privacy is very different from real-world privacy. For example, most people wouldn’t approach you in public and strike up a conversation, or stand on a street corner and read their most personal journal entries out loud for the whole block to hear. Yet when I started up conversations with people I met on blog communities, or posted my private thoughts into a public online journal, that’s exactly what I was doing. This kind of behavior is not only risky to my ego (especially where the journal is concerned); it could compromise my chances of getting into a good school, getting a good job, or even retaining a job when I get one. It’s hard to maintain total privacy on the Internet, and I now know that I need to use extreme caution when posting on my journal, because I never know who could be reading.

The last problem I notice is that sometimes, especially when I’m on school breaks, I tend to spend a disproportionate amount of time on the computer. I didn’t exaggerate when I said that I could amuse myself for hours. Normally, my schoolwork and other responsibilities keep my Internet usage time in check. However, when I’m spending copious amounts of time at home with few things to do, I can waste a whole day just playing around when I could be knitting, completing chores, or even making a little progress in one of the many books I’m reading. Granted, I don’t do this very often, but I always feel very unproductive when look at the clock and realize I’ve spent a whole day doing essentially nothing on the computer.

Despite these problems I’ve found with my experience
online, I still think the Internet is a useful tool that will become more important in our lives. As we become a more global society, we’ll start connecting with people from other cultures, both to survive in the world economy and to learn more about the people who have suddenly become a lot closer to us. The Internet, with 1.2 billion users worldwide, is the ideal place to connect with people from around the world and learn about their cultures and languages without having to leave the house (although Internet visiting doesn’t count as a substitute for travelling). I’ve talked with people from as far away as India and South Africa through the Internet, and have learned a lot from them.

Furthermore, increased diversity might inspire people to learn other languages, in order to connect with people from different countries. Some of my online friends have learned English as their second (or even third) language, and they practice by talking online with native speakers; I’ve been looking into that as a way to improve my own language skills. I think the Internet will give people a motivation to learn another language as they discover that not everyone they talk to speaks English as their first language.

Rewards of the web

The Internet has definitely changed things like communication, sharing ideas and creative works, and the terms we use to describe our world and the various communities in that world. With the help of the Internet, we have become a part of a much larger community than in the past. Being a part of that community will require us to adhere to a different standard of behavior and rules than we’re used to. However, the rewards of taking part in this global community will definitely be worth the hassle of becoming acclimated to new technologies and etiquettes that come with the Internet.

Sophia Teeple is a local young writer who can usually be found lurking in coffee shops, public libraries, and just out and about if the weather’s nice. This is her first published piece.

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Dec. 1966: ARPA project begins. Larry Roberts is chief scientist.

March 1972: First basic e-mail programs written by Ray Tomlinson at BBN for ARPANET: SNDMSG and READMAIL. “@” sign chosen for its “at” meaning.

1981: IBM announces its first Personal Computer. Microsoft creates DOS.

1983: Domain Name System (DNS) designed by Jon Postel, Paul Mockapetris, and Craig Partridge. .edu, .gov, .com, .mil, .org, .net, and .int created.


1987: 10,000 hosts on the Internet; First Cisco router shipped; 25 million PCs sold in US.

1989: 100,000 hosts on Internet; McAfee Associates founded; anti-virus software available for free. Quantum becomes America Online.


1992: “Surfing the Internet” is coined by Jean Armour Polly.

1993: Mosaic Web browser developed by Marc Andreessen at University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. Web grows by 341,000 percent in a year.


2000: Fixed wireless, high-speed Internet technology is now seen as a viable alternative to copper and fiber optic lines placed in the ground. The Dot-Com Bubble bursts. A majority of the dot-coms ceased trading after burning through their venture capital, often without making a net profit.

January 10, 2000: AOL Merges with Time-Warner. AOL shareholders take 55% stake in newly formed company.

February 2000: A large-scale denial of service attack is launched against some major Web sites like Yahoo! and eBay, alerting Web sites to the need for tighter security measures. 10,000,000 domain names have been registered.

September 2000: 20,000,000 websites on the Internet, numbers doubling since February 2000.

2006: There are an estimated 92 million Web sites online.

August 2006: AOL announces that they will give for free virtually every service for which it charged a monthly fee, with income coming instead from advertising.

October 2006: An estimated 92 million Web sites online (some stats say over 100 million). Google Inc. acquires YouTube for $1.65 billion in a stock-for-stock transaction.

March 2007: 1.114 billion people use the Internet according to Internet World Stats.

April 2007: Search engine giant Google surpasses Microsoft as “the most valuable global brand,” and also is the most visited Web site.
The Internet: Technological Kudzu
by Lucy Brusic

Like kudzu, the vine that has taken over the South, the Internet has taken over our world. South of the forty-fifth parallel, kudzu (a vine imported from Japan early in the twentieth century, with no natural enemy other than cold weather in this country) has swallowed whole swaths of the landscape. Its green leafy mesh, which can grow up to a foot a day, covers trees, telephone poles, and entire forests. At first sight kudzu, which was supposed to control erosion, is kind of amusing since it assumes the shape of whatever it has hidden (sort of like a green ghost) but finally kudzu is scary when one realizes that it could take over the warmer parts of the world.

In some respects, the Internet is like kudzu. It has taken over huge portions of our collective landscape, and there is no way to beat it back. The Internet has developed this control because it is an omnipresent multi-use tool. We check our bank balances and track packages on the web; we engage speakers and register for conferences via the web; we buy airplane tickets; we check out colleges, movies, used cars and potential spouses from our keyboards. Without question, the Internet has changed the way we live our lives, do business, and even think about ourselves.

The question is whether the Internet has moved from being a resource which we control to being a self-propelled force that is changing us and our society. It is the contention of this article that the World Wide Web has become such an integral factor in our lives as American citizens, and as human beings, that we must constantly evaluate its effect, lest it—like wireless kudzu—take over our lives.

To investigate this point, I collected newspaper references to the Internet for a period of a month or so. Ironically, though newspapers are seriously threatened by the growth of the Internet, they also serve as a documentable “record” of its influence.

Social interactions

Many people say that the Internet has changed the nature of social interaction, especially for young people. An article in the Indianapolis Star (Nov. 16, 2008) reported that a poll found “Teens rely on IM to avoid OMG moments.” The article went to say that four in ten teens use instant messaging (IM) to avoid “omigod” moments, to say things that they wouldn’t say in person. These teens use IM to ask for dates or to break up, thereby avoiding face-to-face interaction or confrontation.

On a dark but inescapable note, we also recall the tragic suicide of a 13-year-old Missouri girl who was depressed by fake e-mail messages from the mother of an acquaintance. This example reminds us of the awful potential for harm that lurks in the Internet. The temptation to harm people as a display of power is accentuated by the anonymity of the Internet, although one must remember that the dangers of anonymous mischief stretch far back into human history.

One place where we can see that the Internet is becoming part of the social fabric is that the law is beginning to take note of some of these cases. For example, a subpoena has been issued in the Missouri case—against MySpace, rather than the perpetrator of the hoax. (New York Times, Jan. 10, 2008). A recent case of disciplinary action at an Edina high school for teenage drinking as documented on Facebook photos will probably result in a precedent-setting court case as well. (Minneapolis Star-Tribune, Jan. 10, 2008)

Positive aspects of the net

Other ways in which the Internet impacts our lives are more subtle and less obvious than the stories that make the headlines.

Many of these ways are good or at least have the potential for good. For example, October 13, 2007, was the first Blog Action Day: 15,000 bloggers signed up to write about environmental issues on their weblogs, which normally would cover other subjects. The effect of this effort remains to be seen, since there are some 70 million blogs in cyberspace, but those who participated said that it made them feel that they were part of something bigger than their own personal site. This sense of community is akin to that described by people who participate in various chatrooms and interest-based websites.

Librarians say that almost all scholarly research now begins with a Google search. Search engines have changed the nature of research — from finding the name of an obscure painter to finding the best deal on used books or check-
ing the compatibility of computer parts. The amount of information posted on the web on all subjects is staggering; the search engines that pore through it are a valuable tool to both shoppers and scholars. The net is changing both scholarship and business models.

A local example of the information available on the Internet is ELM (Electronic Library of Minnesota—A World of Information). This technology, available in English and Spanish to all Minnesota residents, is an online access point to more than 17,000 magazines, 15,000 electronic books, a worldwide catalog of more than 60 million records, and 340 full-text newspapers. This state-funded technology is designed to give all Minnesota residents access to accurate and convenient information (<www.mnlinkgateway.org>). In this way, the Internet is more democratic than the old-fashioned research library and certainly more accessible to the casual scholar.

Downside

But there is, of course, a downside. The current writers’ guild strike, which has reduced Jon Stewart to silly sight-gags, is a fallout of the growth of the net. What the script writers union is striking for is a greater share of the on-line profits from podcasts and other Internet rebroadcasting of their work. According to the Star-Tribune (Nov. 4, 2007), 75 percent of Internet users watch three hours of video on the Web each month. Both the writers and the studios have their eyes on the residual rights from these programs, since the profits from rebroadcasting will only expand as the the number of devices that play podcasts grows. In truth, however, the strike is not really the fault of the Internet, but of human greed. But it shows how interwoven the Internet already is with our modern lives.

Politics on the web

Possibly one of the most dangerous extensions of the power of the net is into the world of politics. Here anyone can find and disseminate information that cannot be sent around in any other way. Unfortunately, as Karl Rove has said, “The Web has given angry and vitriolic people more of a voice in public discourse . . . People in the past who have been on the nutty fringe of political life . . . have now been given an inexpensive and easily accessible soapbox.” (Star-Tribune, Nov. 15, 2007) Mindy Finn, a staffer for Mitt Romney, described the Internet world as a “pool of negativity.” George Birnbaum of the New York Post, describes web attacks as “virtual hand-to-hand combat.” (Indianapolis Star, Nov. 18, 2007)

It is worth pointing out that we have returned here to one of the most dangerous aspects of the web—its anonymity and the potential for harm and evil when no one can be held responsible for a negative or false posting. We have given the “crazies” in our society a cloak in which to hide themselves and a soapbox that is just as high as anyone else’s.

An article by the public editor in the New York Times (Nov. 4, 2007) describes this reality. The article, “Civil Discourse, Meet the Internet,” introduces a new NYT Web site, where readers can post comments about news articles and editorials. (The Times admits that other newspapers introduced such sites long before they did.) This site is effectively a “comment desk” that can be accessed from links to certain articles on the NYT web edition. The problem comes in the policing of this site: while the Times is willing, albeit reluctantly, to allow readers to use “screen” names, they really want to nurture a healthy “civil discourse.” In so doing, they confront many of the questions that govern the relationship of the free press to democracy: What is “healthy” civil discourse? Do you permit “vicious name-calling” in observance of First Amendment rights? Does politeness mean that “open dialogue” can never be allowed?

(Other newspapers, such as the Washington Post and USA Today, do not have an editor screen comments before they are posted on their websites. The Times will try to maintain civility by having four staffers screen comments, meaning that human hands will monitor electronic input).

Larger questions

It seems to me that one of the serious questions confronting us as we grow accustomed to and dependent on the Internet is precisely that of the common good versus individual rights, as for example in civil discourse vs. free exchange of opinions. We agree that the good that comes from the Internet in terms of health care, or education, or information exchange is so great that we cannot step back from the web connections that we have made throughout the world—the web is here to stay.

Nonetheless, we need to think about where the common good lies; whether restraints need to be put on web behavior; whether we have misinterpreted the meaning of free speech when we allow name calling and worse.

As I often do in such cases, I turn to the past to dig around for answers. A NYT book review (Nov. 11, 2007, “Trust and Caution”), quotes Joseph Ellis, in his new book American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic, to say that “transform[ing] disagreement from a natural source of strife into a source of stability . . . is arguably the great achievement of the Constitution.” I understand Ellis to mean that we need to continue to recognize and respect diverse opinions—that strength comes from working out compromises. What the compromise is
in terms of the Internet remains to be seen. However, it seems unlikely that we will return to the world of educated journalists who were the "official" record. Or the world of scholars who had the clout to refute misinformation. Or the world where librarians controlled the "reserve" shelf. Or the world in which human interactions were mostly face to face. Nor, I suspect, do we really want to return to such a world—we like speeding over the wide expanse of the web, even at the cost of personal social interaction.

Conclusion

The Internet has taken over our lives. Like kudzu it is here to stay. Like kudzu, it is pernicious and it will overrun our lives if we allow it to do so. And even if we mow it down it will be back to threaten us. The Internet has no natural enemies, unless it is a concentrated order of hackers or a legion of Luddites. Unlike kudzu, however, we can hope that Internet growth will respond to regulation and common sense, though the fact that it cuts down on face-to-face contact is a worrying trend for democratic government.

Still, I do not want to end on a note of negativity. Another sentence from Ellis's book seems apt: "Unlike mathematics, in politics, there was no agreed-upon solution reached by sheer brainpower and logic... but rather an ongoing and never-ending struggle between contested versions of the truth." Although Ellis's quote applies to the American Revolution, it is equally applicable to the present Internet revolution. We who are only at the beginning of this revolution can but speculate on the outcome. But with thought and forbearance we may be able to guide the process a bit and in so doing protect our common values.

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Another small hopeful sign has emerged since I first wrote this article. A NYT article (Jan. 22, 2008) reviewed the PBS special, "Growing Up Online," a Frontline documentary about the first generation of children who have grown up entirely online.

The documentary covered the expected boogeymen of predators, plagiarism, and invaded privacy, but it also pointed out that being online can be a great source of creativity and information for teenagers. The conclusion was that well-grounded children could navigate the Internet without real danger. (See Sophia Tepele's article.)

However, the producers of the film also said, "We need to teach people good citizenship, a sense of morality, [and] right and wrong that transfer to the Internet."

Coda: Another book review


I rather hoped that this book would give me some helpful insights into how to maintain my humanity or at least my humanness in an age that is increasingly dominated by the Internet for dating, selling, buying, opinionating, advertising, and just about every other human function you can name and some that you cannot name in polite society.

Instead, I found that Lee Siegel, who is a cultural critic, supported and one-upped some of my basic reservations about what the web is doing to society. His critique can be summed up as a expose of the commercialism that runs rampant on the web: he feels that almost everything that is posted on the web is posted there for its monetary value. Of course, people are selling various products, but they are also selling themselves or, in the case of blogs, their most intimate thoughts with an eye to making themselves the winner in what he sees as a large popularity contest. One chapter is titled "The Me is the Message."

As many people do, Siegel also inveighs against the challenge to authority posed by the web by reminding us that vastly inaccurate, not to say slanderous, things have been posted with incalculable damage to people's reputations. He notes, as I did, that these postings are defended as "free speech." But he has no answer as to how to repair or to protect the fabric of society that is being damaged by such postings.

He concludes his book, in a chapter called "The Emperor's New Modem," with a list of open secrets about blogging—most of them pointing to the lack of an ethical framework that newspapers and responsible news organizations traditionally provided. I especially liked his Five Open Supersecrets (p.161), which I think are good cautionary advice for anyone buying, selling, researching or even blogging on the web.

1. Not everyone has something meaningful to say.
2. Few people have anything original to say.
3. Only a handful of people know how to write well.
4. Most people will do almost anything to be liked.
5. "Consumers" are always right, but "people" aren't.

I harbor no illusion that the wisdom in these insights is going to have an impact on the web or on web behavior, so I am still looking for answers to my questions about staying human in the Internet age. This book is a passionate jeremiad and a provocative read for anyone interested in humanity and the Internet.
BOOK CORNER


Some people follow the money to solve the world's problems. (Remember Deep Throat's advice in All The President's Men?) Instead, I follow the information. Who knew what when? Is the source and/or the information any good? (Yes, I like Seymour Hersh's articles in The New Yorker.) I read mostly to stay abreast of the ways information moves, changes, and is used. Thus I read William Gibson's novel, Spook Country, because I thought it would extend life in the "culture of the web," as the New York Times described his earlier book, Pattern Recognition. But it didn't, and the book was only okay.

Both are mysteries, always a plus, but Spook Country's mystery doesn't need the web to make the story and the near-future technology moves the story, but doesn't solve the mystery. Pattern Recognition's mystery occurred within and needed the web, especially YouTube-like videos and conflicting and emerging web sites. Spook Country, more obviously a spy novel, emphasizes "locative art," a convergence of wifi, holography, global positioning systems and virtual reality helmets — I think. This doesn't seem especially unusual, maybe because I have edgy friends in the arts. I learned about hacking into global positioning systems and encrypting information through the music of an iPod. But for spy technology, I prefer the novels of Richard Clarke or maybe selected episodes of "24."

What is unfortunately memorable in both novels is that the library is never mentioned. In Spook Country, Alberto, a locative artist, notes his need for lots of information, facts actually, to create each work, but he never says where he gets it. Inchmale can find no mention "in any of the usual places" of the magazine, Node, which may or may not exist and for which Hollis may or may not have been hired to write a 7,000 word article on locative art, but he doesn't say where he looked. The unnamed old man checks Hollis' ex-rocker credentials in Wikipedia and Google hits and accepts the results as good enough to trust her with secrets. Where is the library in these information gathering and validating activities?

Equally memorable is the escalating use of carefully vetted friends as the only sources used to gather good information. Neither Web sites nor technology-based social networking arrangements link them. Surveillance technology figures in, but no tapes are ever mentioned. No mention either of data-mining aggregations or printouts; only oral history addresses the past. No records, nothing tangible or possibly permanent to store anywhere, especially the library. Talk about living in the moment, albeit a well-surveilled moment.

I'm not sure I like the Gibson novels all that much, especially Spook Country, but I'm glad I know something of them. With so much information either too available through the Internet or not available from the government, I have trouble keeping up with what sources exist and what people choose to use and why. What troubles me even more is that the carefully vetted, trusted source in these novels is not the library, and that the library in being unmentioned, may become (along with underwear) unmentionable.

Next reads in my perpetual quest


I read one part of his trilogy set in Beirut in the early 1980s and learned about the complex loyalties and interactions among the many factions in Beirut. So when the author, former managing editor of the Washington Post and long time journalist stationed in the Middle East, wrote another novel set there, I bought it, even in hard-to-handle hardcover. Journalists and former spies write the best "information-flow" novels, and I still know far too little about the Middle East.


I love "search books," that is, books that have more to do with the search than the results and that depend most on information-related decisions. Past favorites include Nicholas Clapp's The Road to Ubar and Roy Moxham's The Great Hedge of India. I hope this latest promise will be especially good because it's about Middle Eastern history (a plus, see above) and about Gilgamesh, part of a class I took in Sumerian, the dead language of ancient Iraq.

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Colleen Coghlan recently retired from the graduate Library and Information Science program at the College of St Catherine. During the summer, she runs a front porch bookstore in Maine called Roseedge Books. She writes a blog about books at <http://roseedgebooks.com/blog>.
Henry David Thoreau: His Journey to the Twenty-First Century
by David Juncker

Last October 5 and 6 a mini-conference sponsored and supported by the Massachusetts-based Thoreau Society and Friends of the Concord Free Public Library, and Minnesota’s Minneapolis Athenaeum, MISF, and Walden University, took place at the Minneapolis Central Library. The theme, promoted and organized by MISF’s resident Thoreau scholar, Dale Schwie, concerned Thoreau’s connections to the twenty-first century, a subject that has gained credence world-wide in the last year.

The two-day presentation of lectures addressed Thoreau’s prodigious studies and projects during the last few years of his life; these included his only journey outside of New England — to Minnesota, his observations of American Indian nations in Minnesota and New England, his detailed reading of nature and natural science, and his early discovery of Darwin’s work.

Thoreau’s skillful, detailed observations and meticulous journal records formed the basis of many of his scientific insights. “I take infinite pains to know all of the phenomena of the spring.” In fact, his prodigious note-keeping from 1851 to 1858 on the timing of seasonal biological events has recently become the base line for a long-term study of “how climate change is altering the timing of seasonal biological events—phenology—and how such shifts may in turn impact the wildlife and wild places of an entire region.” A related new development will be the first conference on eco-criticism, scheduled to take place in October, 2008, in Beijing, China, under the title, “Beyond Thoreau: American and International Responses to Nature.”

Speaker Laura Dassow Walls (U/South Carolina), author of several books about Thoreau, Emerson, and their science, also told of Thoreau’s obtaining an early copy of Darwin’s On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection and of Thoreau’s conclusion that many of the recorded observations he had made locally in New England seemed to support Darwin’s thesis.

The conference concluded with a spirited panel discussion on “Current and Future Thoreau Studies” which included:

H. D. Thoreau’s Essays assembled by Richard Dillman (St. Cloud State University);
Bradley P. Dean’s recently published books: Henry David Thoreau: Faith in a Seed; Wild Fruits; Henry David Thoreau: Rediscovered Last Manuscript; and Henry David Thoreau: Letters to a Spiritual Seeker;
Richard J. Schneider (Wartburg College) noting a new international wave of interest in Thoreau studies and conclusions from leaders and educators in Bulgaria, Russia, Japan, and Spain;

Laura Dassow Walls mention of a need for a comprehensive new publication in the style of The Life and Times of Henry David Thoreau that would tie Thoreau’s skilled observational and recording work in the fields of botany, biology and phenology with equally important work in the social sciences (“Civil Disobedience;” “John Brown’s Raid on Harpers Ferry,” etc.).

Thoreau speaks to today’s leaders by demonstrating the importance and positive effect of detailed, close observation of nature (including human behavior) in the delineation of science and the better understanding of the individual human and his/her place in nature and our natural world.


David Juncker has a Ph.D in Physiology and is the current president of MISF.

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AFLOAT IN THE WIRELESS POND:
Minnesotans reflect on living in digital days

Saturday, March 1, 2008
9:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Northwestern Hall, Luther Seminary,
Como and Hendon, Saint Paul, MN

All ages, all levels welcome!
Seating is limited!
Advance reservations strongly advised.
mncogi@gmail.com

$20 at the door includes materials and lunch.
Students free.

Confirmed speakers: Kenneth Brusic, editor, Orange County Register (Santa Ana, CA)
David Wiggins, National Park Service, Mississippi River Park
Laura Waterman Wittstock, CEO, Wittstock & Associates
Jim Ramstrom, Land Management Information Center
Jane Leonard, Minnesota Sesquicentennial Commission
Thomas Leighton, Principal City Planner, Minneapolis
Carol Urness, Librarian and map historian
Peter Shea, Gustavus Adolphus College
Helen Burke, Minneapolis Central Library
Morgan Grayce Willow, poet
Marian Rengel, Digital Library Project
Tom Eland, Director of Information, MCTC
History Day students

The State of Minnesota is 150 years old. Celebrate by joining other Minnesotans to think about the changes the Internet is making in our lives and in the ways we explore the past, preserve the record of our own times, and shape public policies that enforce the people's right to know, now and for the future. The day will include speakers and demonstrations of the ways in which the Internet is being used for preservation, access, and civic involvement.

Sponsored by Minnesota Independent Scholars' Forum & Minnesota Coalition on Government Information
Funded in part by the Minnesota Sesquicentennial Commission
As the *Internet* takes over the world... 

What will happen to *newspapers*? 
What will happen to *newsletters*, such as this one? 
What will the effect be on *television*? 
Will *social interaction* still happen? 
Will democratic institutions, such as *caucuses*, survive? 

Come to

"*Afloat in the digital pond: Minnesotans reflect on living in digital days*"

and share your ideas. See what other Minnesotans think about these questions. For details, see page 10.