

More Is Less

By David Shenk

With the introduction of PointCast, MSNBC, and myriad other instant electronic news services, 1996 turned out to be the best year yet for news junkies. And this is just the beginning. The Internet and telecom deregulation have spawned a news revolution that will make today's flurry of instantaneous news look like a scene from *The Flintstones*. What's good for Ted Turner and Bill Gates isn't all that great for the rest of us, however. In a world glutted with information, constant updates are not only a diminishing asset, they are becoming a dangerous distraction. Watching could be hazardous to our health.

Since the dawn of time, humans have constructed a quilt of community understanding out of new information. In a world of information

scarcity, messenger-journalists performed the

vital community service of acquiring and transmitting fresh data. Newspapers, wrote Arthur Young in 1793, are "that universal circulation of intelligence, which

in England transmits the last vibration of feeling or alarm, with electric sensibility, from one end of the Kingdom to another." This sentiment was echoed by Adolph Ochs when he bought *The New York Times* in 1896. Its mission, he declared, was to "give the news, all the news ... and give it as early, if not earlier, than can be learned through any other reliable medium."

Then information came into abundance. Data is now so plentiful that consumers face the curious hazard of information glut. We cannot keep up with the information we produce.

In this context, new information becomes more of a diversion than a contribution to society. Today's challenge is to manage the vast quantities of information we already have stored up. News is not, of course, completely irrelevant. But the value of daily updates will pale in comparison to information we already have on hand – how to feed and clothe ourselves, fight pestilence, and govern ourselves using a balance of strict laws and broad liberties. The new challenge is to share this information with each other, to manage it thoughtfully, and to transform it into knowledge inside millions of individual brains. This is not so much fact-hunting as it is data-gardening.

The traditional news media haven't come to terms with this fundamental shift, which is why Yahoo!, AltaVista, and other Web libraries are fast becoming primary information sources. Yet old-school journalists maintain a fierce bias against what they call *old news*. "We've covered that," they snarl. "It's been done." They opt instead for anything that smells new or dramatic – divorces, disgraces, deaths. "My job is not to educate the public," insists TV producer Steve Friedman in a typically myopic declaration of journalistic principle. "My job is to tell the public what's going on." His distinction is criti-

Will the network computer succeed? "In some Nazi-oriented companies it will succeed very well," says Michael Dertouzos, head of computer science at MIT. Yanking expensive PCs and replacing them with cheap NCs will save companies a lot of money. But the cost to innovation will be high.

It's no coincidence that the breakdown in rigid corporate

NC: New Centralism?

By Russ Mitchell

hierarchies and the addition of employee "empowerment" to the management lexicon paralleled the move from mainframes to PCs. With PCs, employees gained more control over their work. And because they could customize the computers, new software that may never have received the approval of MIS managers entered the workplace.

All computers can be networked, of course. But the PC is a smart machine. The NC is a dumb terminal. A network of dumb terminals adds up to a dumb organization.

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Does Not Compute

By Isabel Walcott

and-drop icons or pull-down menus.

Saying you need to be good at math to use a computer is like saying you need to be an architect to live in a house.

A paradigm shift, not money, is the operative need. Teachers need to educate themselves about computers. Computers need to be brought out of math ghettos. Without being introduced to the range of possibilities, students are missing out on what they could be learning. As a result, neither computers nor people can reach their full potential. The *compute* in *computer* denotes only how the device works, not how we work with it.

Isabel Walcott, a multimedia entrepreneur, is designing a major Web site for teenage girls (www.smartgirl.com/).

"Information isn't always power – just ask a librarian."
– David Brake