

## WEB TIDE: CASTING THE NET

[At thankfully infrequent intervals, MRS Bulletin seeks the wisdom of Dr. Science I. M. Sage, a consultant in Washington, DC, whose mobile office perpetually circles the Beltway in search of clients.]

MRS Bulletin: Tell us, Dr. Sage, what you think are the most portentous developments of our time?

Dr. Science Sage: Well, anyone who has yet to notice the blistering pace of internet penetration into every nook and cranny of our lives has undoubtedly been stranded on a desert island for some time. The prow of the trend is plowing into audio and video plugins for web browsers, super secure credit transactions at cyber malls, the interactivity of Hot Java™, and on-line services that obviate the need to ever go anywhere to do anything again in the flesh.

MRSB: Can you cite some examples of this trend?

SS: You bet I can! You can trade stocks and bonds, file your tax return, do your grocery shopping, look up some trivia at the Library of Congress, chat with likeminded individuals scattered around the globe (without long distance charges), and send candy and flowers to a friend, all with a few keystrokes.

MRSB: Is there anything these wonders can't do?

SS: Yes, I must confess that so far the olfactory capabilities of the technology are lagging the rest, so the candy and flowers will be non-electronic.

MRSB: Surely this is only affecting the most technically sophisticated among us! Right?

SS: Au contraire! The wake of this technological juggernaut is sucking in plain everyday folk and even some hard cases who still use fountain pens. They are at least now into electronic mail. Judging from the eye-rolling disbelief one encounters when one admits to not having e-mail, there is a decided societal stigma attached nowadays to being electronically challenged. If you are literate and have electricity, there is just no excuse.

MRSB: Pray tell! Can you shed some light on how this all came about?

SS: Of course, but weren't you paying attention for the past ten years? You see, what was supposed to be a weird subculture consisting of computer hackers, technonerd, and neurotics in search of prurient mindless preoccupation, all enjoying a free ride on a system created by taxpayers for

other purposes, has overflowed into normal society, become respectable, and indispensable. That's not to say that it has shed all of its weirdness.

MRSB: What do you mean by that, Dr. Sage?

SS: Let me cite some of your own *Bulletin's* history to make the point. Some years ago, you ran a Postterminaries column called "*-on PROLIFERATION*."<sup>1</sup> (No, it had nothing to do with nuclear weapons.) It had to do with our habit of tacking the Greek *-on* suffix onto just about anything when coining its name. I have always wondered why you neglected to include Klingons in the list of offenses. You probably believed the reference would be too obscure (except of course for inveterate Trekkies). Obscure enough to keep it out of the *Bulletin* it may have been and may still be, but apparently nothing is too strange to be *one* more miraculous stop along today's information highway. To wit, the homepage of the Klingon Language Institute lives *on* the web.<sup>2</sup>

MRSB: How gracious of you to cite one of the *Bulletin's* past gems. But, don't you think the irony of science fiction turned science fact purveying science fiction is more than perverse?

SS: *One person's* perversity is another's entertainment. Don't get too cocky about my citing your publication. In that same column you missed another *-on*, *one* with profound implications. You failed to anticipate the emoticon, :-), the e-mail way of expressing emotions while causing ninety-degree neck craning worldwide. Only orthopedists are :-;) about them, while the rest of us are :-(. It is hard to know if emoticons just reflect healthy inventiveness, or if they foreshadow an ominous emotional distancing in which all that is expressible to your faceless correspondent is categorized and limited by the available typography of punctuation. [Emphasis added.]

MRSB: Surely you don't contend that such developments are decisive indicators of our prospects for the future?

SS: Well, maybe not for society as a whole, but certainly for the pompous publishers of perishable print.

MRSB: Really, Dr. Sage, you don't have to be insulting to make your point! (Remember, your check is not yet in the mail. No instantaneous wire transfers here!)

SS: There, there, don't take it personally. After all, it was the *Bulletin* in another now yellowing POSTERMINARIES entitled "*What Price Print*"<sup>3</sup> that extolled the virtues of the printed page, the palpable "feel" of a hefty

text in one's hand, and other irreplaceable attributes of print having no substitute in the domain of the electron or the phosphor. Now, you must concede, we are a pixel away from coffee-table active-matrix liquid-crystal displays sitting where the duotone prints of yesteryear used to be.

MRSB: Are you saying a content-laden print magazine such as ours has little to look forward to? Where do you stand on this issue? Is the electronification of publishing and everything else going to be a boon or a blight on humankind?

SS: Ahh! You finally asked the sixty-four gigabyte question. There are two sides to this revolution and you telegraphed the essence of the dichotomy in your "*What Price Print*" piece. You characterized it as "transitory utility versus lasting truths." Forget all the technological conveniences on the horizon, the combination of cable TV, telephone, and your internet connection in one wire,<sup>4</sup> the glut of information at your proverbial fingertips with or without the intermediation needed to make sense of it, and the rest of the new fangled world. (Now here is where I earn my fee.) It is a little known fact that I maintain my own web site as part of my Beltway consulting business. All the advice I have to give on any subject is there for the asking and it's fully context searchable. Initially I maintained the tallest of all fire walls on the web, for if my expertise which is my entire livelihood were compromised, I would be downloaded into the poor house. Then I examined my access logs to assess the pattern of site visitation and my fears and your question were resolved. Everyone surfing the web is in transitory utility mode. Nobody will wait as long as it takes microwave water to boil for a file to download. My last- ing truths were in no danger of piracy by the flighty and the fickle. For them, the ever improving tool is the fascination, not what enrichment might be theirs from a sojourn at a consequential site. For now at least, the media that traditionally offer pensive appreciation of content (and I grudgingly include your *Bulletin* in that class) will continue to be the choice of the patient knowledge seekers, even of the electrified literati. So the question becomes not will the technology overtake us, but are these patrons a dwindling breed?

REPORTED BY E.N. KAUFMANN

Hot Java is a trademark of Sun Microsystems, Inc.

1. *MRS Bulletin* XII, No. 7 (1987) p. 100.
2. <http://www.kli.org/>
3. *MRS Bulletin* XII, No. 8 (1987) p. 64.
4. Or wireless, as the case may be.