

## CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM

By Francis Sullivan



**F**INDING MYSELF AWAY FROM HOME RECENTLY AND WITH A FREE EVENING TO FILL, I WANDERED INTO THE PUBLIC LIBRARY OF THE COLLEGE TOWN I WAS VISITING. IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG BEFORE I NOTICED THAT THE LIBRARY HAD NO BOOKS, AT LEAST NONE ON THE FIRST FLOOR.

When I asked about this, the response was close to, but not exactly, “Books? We don’t need no stinkin’ books! We got DVDs!” So I tiptoed out and went around the corner to the independent bookstore I’ve always liked. There, I found a notice saying the owners had sold out and closed up shop; an additional notice promised that a newer, better, bigger, and shinier chain store was opening soon, selling not just books but also mugs, T-shirts, and other memorabilia.


I was beginning to feel like Rip van Winkle waking up to a changed—and not necessarily better—world, so I decided to give up searching for something to read and headed to my favorite restaurant in search of a quiet dinner. The place was closed for vacation. As I strolled down the street looking for somewhere else to eat, I found many young people hanging out, holding small objects to their ears, and hollering very personal stuff out loud. It used to be that we could assume people walking around shouting to themselves were troubled individuals for whom we should feel sympathy. Now, only half of the screamers are disturbed, assuming, of course, that all those cell phones are actually turned on. Anyhow, I did finally get dinner, went to a meeting the next day, and then returned home to the Washington, DC, suburbs. A few days later, I learned that my favorite independent bookstore in Washington was about to go out of business, too.

In addition to changing social life by shifting the boundary between public and private behavior, the Web and other digital technologies are killing certain kinds of businesses, such as independent bookstores and perhaps, in due course, all bookstores. Does this matter? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? My usual reply to such questions is that, for science, the change is good, even wonderful: the Web has become an amazing source of information and a great enabler of collaboration. Google

Scholar, for example, is superb for doing a search on relevant literature. But let’s not get too complacent. The Web’s infrastructure is fragile, possibilities for forgery are ever-present, and errors are certain to occur. I confess to getting more than a little worried that almost everyone’s CV, often complete with family photos, is on the Web.

Interestingly, I’ve noticed a spate of blogs written by people who claim to prefer print to the Web (this must qualify as self-referential grousing). In some sense, looking at any screen is like looking at TV: images march through your eyeballs and into your brain linearly, so there’s really no opportunity for reflection or editing. Although the tools are called browsers, you can’t actually “browse” by looking at a screen. As everyone has surely experienced by now, it’s very unusual to find something you really want during an online search purely by accident. However, in a bookstore or in an old-fashioned library, this is common. Often, the book you want is the one you didn’t know you wanted until you came across it one shelf down from the one you thought you were looking for. Online booksellers try their best to duplicate this effect, but it doesn’t really work. I once made the mistake of ordering socks from Amazon—the socks themselves were fine, but for six months afterward, Amazon kept telling me about great deals on socks.

I don’t plan to stop using the Web, but I’m adopting a wait-and-see attitude about its ultimate benefit.

P.S. If you need some extra socks, just drop me a line. A paper letter via snail mail would be nice. 

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