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Eleanor I. Cook  
*Appalachian State University*

Mike Markwith  
*The Faxon Company*

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# Drinking from the Firehose

**E-mail and the White House: The Institutionalization Has Begun**  
by **Eleanor I. Cook** (Serials Librarian,  
Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 COOKEI@  
CONRAD.APPSTATE.EDU)  
Column Editor, **Mike Markwith** (The Faxon Company)



Although I barely knew enough when I started this column a year ago to comment intelligently about matters related to electronic communication, I had strong instincts about what the future might bring and these kept me speculating, furiously. This column's title, "Drinking From the Firehose," illustrates that speculation. The phrase was first heard (by me) when Charles Bailey, Assistant Director for Library Systems, University of Houston, uttered it as part of a paper he gave at a NASIG Conference a few years ago. The expression does not belong to me, to Charles Bailey, or to *Against the Grain*. I have witnessed its use a half a dozen times in various regional workshops, ALA programs, as well as in the general media. It always seems to refer to the handling of vast amounts of information coming over the Internet, in some way.

Well, the firehose has reached the front door of the White House. This phenomenon cannot go unnoticed. The Clinton/Gore Administration: love 'em or hate 'em, take your pick. My observations here are meant to be non-partisan. They are the new kids on the block, and are suffering a severe image problem as I write. By the time this piece reaches its audience, perhaps the tide will have turned. It's really not relevant to our issue. But several things are for certain. For one, government and business are going to be more involved in future enhancements of what is now the Internet and the NREN is a done deal. Whether or not these forces compete or cooperate, and how educational users will be caught in between, is still uncertain. The age of innocence and free-spirited exploration is passing. Commercial and institutional restrictions could dampen the rapidity of technological improvement and innovation.

Another certainty: if the youth of the nation are tapped into the phenomena, it is going to stick around for awhile. A counter-culture referred to

by *Time* magazine as "Cyberpunk," is talked about widely now. If there is a name for it, then it is instantly recognizable by the general public. Unfortunately, when a movement, trend or fad hits mainstream America this way, it usually means that it is on the wane. Cyberpunk used to be the underground version of computing; now networking, Internetting, and hacking have all gone above ground. It was already happening, of course; we cannot give the Clinton/Gore folks all the credit. However, a major shift is occurring. **John Berry**, Editor-in-Chief of *Library Journal*, outlined some of these shifts in a talk he gave during the University of North Carolina's School of Information and Library Science's Alumni Day in April 1993. His talk, entitled "Clintonomics and Libraries: One Editor's View of the Professional—Political Agenda," noted that Clinton and Gore are the first national leaders to <really> be comfortable using computers for communications. Further, the leadership style of this new administration is decidedly different than any who came before them. Theirs is a style of reception, flexibility and facilitation. As Berry observed, "We are not used to leaders who listen."

This shift in attitude comes along just as young people are, in greater numbers, becoming not only comfortable with computer technology, but dependent upon it. It is from this technological platform that adolescents are rebelling, finding their identities, and eventually, finally, making their way into the world beyond. Computers were for years considered novelties in the work place, then in the home. Not anymore. They are more and more a necessary tool now, like the light bulb or the flush toilet. Networking and electronic sharing are the new, innovative concepts; for some invigorating, for others, threatening. The term "collaboration" was foreign to the government until recently. But the culture surrounding computer networking

is based upon this concept; without it, there would be no Internet. If commercial enterprise and old-style government regulators attempt to place their pegs into these new holes, they'll find an uneasy fit. Adaptations will certainly be necessary. Since libraries have been traditional community-builders, they should fit naturally into this picture. And librarians have always known that information "wants to be free." This, *Time* magazine notes, is an underpinning theme of the cyberpunk movement. So, institutionalization of the networking concept is occurring. Cyberpunks now have their own "designer" publications such as *Mondo 2000* and *Wired*. (You can order a sample of *Wired* via the Internet by sending a message to: subscriptions@wired.com; as a serials librarian, I couldn't resist, though when it finally came I had to admit while interesting, it was a little <too> techie for my tastes.) In a publication perhaps a little closer to home, the latest *Educom Review* (May/June 1993) is devoted to the "Bill of Rights and Responsibili-

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ties for Electronic Learners." Get your hands on this issue as soon as possible if you care about the future of electronic communications.

Finally, it is now possible to send e-mail messages to the White House. Last Friday night I tried it, though who knows if I'll ever receive a reply. They claim they only reply via U.S. postal service, which seems to defeat the purpose, in my mind. My message was modest, but encouraging. It was definitely not a fan letter, a crank call, or a complaint. It was just an acknowledgment that I appreciated the new capability and want to encourage its development. I mentioned that I was a librarian; it couldn't hurt, right?

Perhaps in the future we'll see public terminals in shopping malls, post offices, and public libraries. While the potential for vandalism, obscenity and stupidity exists, so does more positive results. Cynicism aside, I repeat, a shift has occurred. Future leaders will not get away with purging official messages sent via governmental e-mail, and the basic skills to be a public servant will include computing skills as well as mental fortitude and good me-

dia presence. Would we elect a leader who couldn't or wouldn't be able to drive a car or use a telephone? Probably not. In the future, we will expect computing skills as well.

The attitude toward information accessibility is our biggest battle. I suspect and at least hope that if nothing else, our current national leadership believes in this challenge too. Whether or not they can be effective in conveying this as a priority remains to be seen.

John Berry's speech in Chapel Hill held a great number of keen observations, and I hope we see some version of them in print somewhere soon. I am grateful to have been able to hear them at such an intimate gathering. In observing the nature of information, he said: "Despite our attempts to suppress it, lock it up, own it, steal it, or hide it, information always escapes and everyone is better off when it is shared. We [librarians] know something that many others have not figured out: information is NOT a commodity; when you share it, sell it or steal it, or whatever you do with it, you always still have it. It is not scarce, and once created

it does not go away. It is the classic free good." Other constituencies are discovering this principle. It is a shift in national thinking, one that will have impact for years to come. May it flourish!

#### Sources:

Elmer-Dewitt, Philip. "Cyberpunk!" *Time*, vol. 141, no. 6 (Feb. 8, 1993), pp. 58-65.

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#### Other background reading of interest:

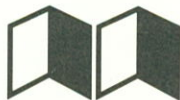
Hernon, Peter & McClure, Charles R. "U.S. Government Information Policy: The Coming of a New Administration." *CD-ROM Professional*, March 1993, pp. 14,20-22.24-25. *Educom Review*, vol. 28, no. 3 (May/June 1993) [whole issue]. ☛

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