INFOGLUT, DEMOCRACY, AND SUSTAINABILITY: FUTURES FOR THE SMALL PUBLIC LIBRARY

by

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It is a great pleasure to be with you here this morning. This is the third "Future of Rural and Small Public Libraries" conference to be held by the irrepressible Bernie Vavrek, and the second one that I have attended.

After all the weird things that I said two years ago at the first conference in Omaha, I wonder why Bernie has asked me back. I have two theories as to why. The more obvious explanation is that I am probably the only person in the entire world who is both a full-time futurist (someone who thinks about probable, possible, and preferable futures) and a trustee of a small and somewhat rural library (for your info, it's in a town of 5,000 people and one traffic light, located at the edge of the Syracuse metro area.)

This would appear to be a dynamite combination for a conference on the future of rural and small public libraries. Certainly, it would seem, I must have something wise to say about the future of small libraries. And if I didn't say it two years ago, then perhaps Bernie is generously still hoping that I might yet come up with some useful spark to light your fire and make it all worthwhile.

The second theory as to why I am here has to do with my earlier presentation in Omaha when I touched a lot of bases and apparently avoided stepping on any toes. At least no one threw any corncobs or discarded books at me. But in going for breadth, I may have left everyone confused as to what exactly I was trying to say. So I wonder if Bernie has politely invited me back to get it right this time, and I am appreciative of this second chance in the land of cactus, rather than corncobs.

My earlier presentation was entitled *The Small Library in an Era of Multiple Transformations*. And, indeed, there are many social, political, economic, technological, and ecological transformations in progress. This time, I would like to focus on three interrelated themes that were buried in that first, rambling presentation: the inexorable growth of information overload or infoglut, the subtle decline of democracy in advanced societies, and the new quest for a sustainable global future in the face of a vexing mega-cluster of environmental problems. These are three very large ideas, but please bear with me. I will try to explain how they are important, how they are interrelated, and how they are central to the future of rural and small public libraries – and, indeed, how they should underlie any strategizing that you pursue.

INFOGLUT AND THE END OF PROGRESS

The first of the three major themes that I wish to emphasize is the ever-growing onslaught of information, or infoglut. I contend that this is "the mother of all information problems," ultimately at the root of every library and information society problem that you can think of. Yet, of the 100 policy proposals made by the 1991 White House Conference on Library and Information Services (WHCLIS), not a single one was directly addressed to the pervasive problem of coping with infoglut. Library leaders are good at addressing the smaller problems. But they have yet to develop the capacity to look at the forest as well as the trees: to view libraries in the context of a burgeoning information sector in a complex and changing society—and to fearlessly ask whether, overall, this information sector is helping or hurting society. I'm concerned with this problem because I'm interested in all problems and possibilities, and how they relate to each other. Specifically, I have been struggling with infoglut for the past 14 years, as editor of an abstract journal, Future Survey, which attempts to identify the multi-disciplinary literature on trends, forecasts, and policy proposals in all areas of concern. As an information broker I am fully aware that I simultaneously relieve people of part of their scanning task, while at the same time adding to their information oppression by pointing out more and more important books, reports, and articles that must be read. I regret to say hat even I am slowly succumbing to the deluge.

Ask any professional in any field--even semi-professionals and everyday citizens--about coping with the rising flood of information relevant to their work, their community, and their family, and you will invariably get a worried frown of recognition. We all face this problem of too much information, and, in varying degrees, we're all going bonkers trying to keep up. WHCLIS and many other library professionals, however, seem to think that more access and literacy are the critical problems- so that everyone can have an equal opportunity to go bonkers. I'm not against demand-side measures that enhance individual capacities and enable access for all to the wonderful world of information. But sooner or later we will have to also consider the supply-side problem of infoglut.

The basic background to this problem is easy to understand: more people, spending more time, communicating in more ways, in more communities. First, more people: world population has grown from 2 billion in 1930 to 4 billion in 1975. It will hit 6 billion in 1998 and 8 billion in 2020. That's a lot of people! (Just keep this basic fact of the future in mind by saying "2, 4, 6, 8 – think of how we populate"). Secondly, more of these people are going to schools and colleges, and then entering information-related professions, which are a major component of the emerging service society. Thirdly, in addition to more people going scribble, scribble, scribble (or, nowadays, tap, tap, tap), there are more media options: print, computer terminals, data bases, fax machines, E-mail, cable TV, videotapes, audiotapes, etc. And lastly, the number of communities in which we participate has expanded; notably, we increasingly live in a global society, and thus global issues increasingly deserve our attention, as well as national, regional, state, local, and neighborhood issues.

In *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Knopf, Feb. 1992), Neil Postman of New York University argues that the tie between information and human purpose has been severed. We are a culture consuming itself with information, he says, assuming that information is our friend. But "cultures may also suffer grievously from information glut, information without meaning, information without control mechanisms." He adds that technology increases the supply of information; when the supply is no longer controllable, a general

breakdown in psychic tranquillity and social purpose occurs. Technopoly is what happens when the defenses against infoglut have broken down.

Postman is a well-known critic of the media. A little-known sociologist, Orrin E. Klapp, formerly of The University of Western Ontario and now at San Diego State University, probably has written the most on what I call the infoglut problem. In *Opening and Closing: Strategies of Information Adaptation in Society* (Cambridge, 1978), Klapp employs Sisyphus as an allegory for "an information-overloaded society," and points to the anomaly of information mounting hand-in-hand with societal problems; indeed, "accumulating past a point, it becomes part of the problem." Opening and closing ourselves to information, he argues, is "part of a shifting strategy to get the most of the best information and the least of the worst noise." (p.20)

In a subsequent book, *Overload and Boredom: Essays on the Quality of Life in the Information Society* (Greenwood, 1986), Klapp explains how a society be-comes boring because of huge loads of information. In the condition of infoglut, information degrades by becoming noiselike, and by becoming sterile and redundant, making life flat and insipid. The problem is most severe in the cities, he notes, which questions the notion common among urbanites that boredom is mostly a problem of small towns and rural backwaters. "There is no evidence that people yawn more in small communities than in big ones." (p.4) And so a troubling caution to you well-intended people who seek to bring more information and presumably progress to rural areas: the costs of overload may well outweigh the benefits at some point.

I know of no counter argument to the infoglut problem posed by Postman, Klapp, and others. Information and library professionals seem to ignore the infoglut problem, or to downplay it. It is easy to do so because; 1) the problem is large and multi-disciplinary (thus one hopes that someone else will pay attention to it); 2) it is fuzzy and ill-defined (and the positivist quest for "scientific" precision, by the techno-twits of the information society, still lingers); 3) it is not readily solved or even ameliorated (at a time when quick and easy "solutions" are in demand); and 4) it is just damn depressing (in a culture that still prefers to think of upbeat, positive trends and futures). Again, I make my unhappy assertion that infoglut is the mother of all information

society problems. If you continue to ignore the overload problem, while peddling more and more information, seeking only to get it more quickly to more people, you are nothing more than handmaidens to disaster.

DEMOCRACY RISING--AND FALLING?

My second major theme concerns trends in self-governance. Doubtlessly we can all agree that democracy, for all its flaws, is preferred to other forms of government. Much has been written about democracy, but two points are important to my argument. First, democracy is predicated not only on participation by citizens, but on informed participation. People in library and information professions seem to be aware of this to a degree, by frequently invoking some association between democracy and the state of library funding. The second point is that democracy is more realistically viewed as a relative condition, rather than an absolute like a light bulb that is either on or off. Yet many people, including some political scientists, employ this simplistic notion that we have a democracy and that's that. Such a view invites complacency, and discourages thinking and action about the many ways in which democracy can be strengthened, and well as perceiving erosion in our democratic condition.

Judging from recent literature that I have reviewed in *Future Survey*, our democracy has been corrupted and diminished in recent years--a remarkable irony at a time when we are celebrating the birth of fledgling democracies around the world, notably in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. I will cite a dozen titles:

◆ In *Who Will Tell the People: The Betrayal of American Democracy* (Simon & Schuster, May 1992), William Grieder deplores the "mock democracy" that replaces the will of the people with information management by specialists in controlling the political process.

◆ Similarly, pollster Daniel Yankelovitch, in *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse University Press, May 1991), points to the need for a "deliberative democracy" in contrast to a mere representative democracy; this requires strengthening the public's abilities to contribute to self-governance and to counter the Culture of Technical Control.

- ◆ In *A Dream Deferred: America's Discontent and the Search for a New Democratic Ideal* (Beacon Press, May 1991), Philip Slater thoughtfully points to many avenues in which we can build a new megaculture of democracy.

- ◆ In *Democracy Without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics*, (Oxford UP, 1989), Duke political scientist Robert M. Entman argues that the free market of ideas is not nourishing US democracy, and that Americans do not know more about politics now than they did 20 years ago.

- ◆ Eric Smith echoes this view in *The Unchanging American Voter*, (U of California Press, 1989), arguing that the public's level of knowledge has not changed since 1956.

- ◆ In *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* (Oxford, 1992), Kathleen Hall Jamieson describes how drama has overrun data, and vilification has replaced argument.

- ◆ In *Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics* (Free Press, 1991), Larry J. Sabato of the University of Virginia argues that the modern press has trivialized discourse and warped the democratic process.

- ◆ In *All of the People, All of the Time: Strategic Communication and American Politics* (M.E. Sharpe, 1991), Jarol B. Manheim of GWU points to the growing trend to manage or circumvent the news, resulting in a "democracy of the uninformed".

And the last four books that I cite here all indict the trend toward getting our political information from television:

- ◆ *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* by Shanto Iyengar of UCLA (U of Chicago Press, Oct 1991) describes how the episodic framing of issues by TV propagates a false sense of national well-being.

- ◆ *Television and the Crisis of Democracy* (Westview, 1990), by Douglas Kellner of the University of Texas, claims that the media, especially television, have subverted the very foundations of democratic government.

- ◆ In a steamy polemic entitled *The Unreality Industry* (Birch Lane, 1989), Ian I. Mitroff and Warren Bennis, both professors at the University of

Southern California, attack the deliberate creation of unreality by TV and other vehicles of mass communication and entertainment as "one of the most pivotal social forces shaping our time".

♦ Finally, Neil Postman of NYU again socks it to us in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Viking, 1985).

Please forgive this lengthy list, but I want to emphasize an important point that something is very, very wrong with our democracy. And the public knows it too, judging by the widespread discontent over the course of the recent presidential election. I know of no counter argument that these writers are wrong, or that our democracy is getting any stronger (although it should be noted, hopefully, that press coverage of the 1992 election was better than in 1988, perhaps because so many journalists, citizens, and Democrats were on the lookout for "Willie Horton" pseudo-arguments). And we can be thankful–and hopeful–that we now have a President-elect who can speak in whole sentences, and a Vice President-elect who not only can read books, but can write them. So perhaps certain negative trends in recent years have been or will be reversed, or at least slowed. But it is too early to dismiss or downplay these recent arguments of democratic decline–all of which, incidentally, fail to mention the actual and potential role of libraries. I shall do so, but only after introducing the third theme of sustainability.

THE COMING STRUGGLE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

The third megaproblem that I want to highlight is the growing global struggle for a sustainable future. The major preoccupation of the forty-year period following World War II was the Cold War between the US and the USSR. With the sudden and unanticipated end of the Cold War and the USSR, we are entering a radically new era. Several writers have suggested that the next few decades will focus on the cluster of global environmental issues as a central preoccupation. As articulated by Vice President-elect Al Gore, "we must make the rescue of the environment the central organizing principle for civilization."

The problems are surely familiar: the threat (if not the reality) of global climate change, destruction of the Earth's ozone layer, destruction of biodiversity, deforestation, soil erosion, degraded wetlands, ocean and coastal pollution,

acid precipitation, air pollution, water pollution, indoor pollution, noise pollution, outer space pollution, solid waste, toxic waste, nuclear waste and radiation, electromagnetic pollution, and man- made eco-disasters. And, on top of this is the inexorable growth of world population ("2, 4, 6, 8 – think of how we populate"), which aggravates these problems. Obviously, we cannot continue this industrial era insensitivity to the environment and the humongous costs that we are passing on to future generations.

In the last two decades, and especially in the past five years, there has been a growing consensus that we need a sustainable society and sustainable development, which includes a new ecological economics that acknowledge full costs, environmentally-conscious business, sustainable agriculture, environmentally-appropriate technology and transportation, renewable energy sources and extensive energy conservation, widespread recycling, eco-cities and communities, eco-tourism, environmental literacy taught in schools and colleges, religion that emphasizes stewardship of Creation, and eco-ethics guiding our actions.

The literature on environmental problems and sustainable futures is extensive, and readily illustrates the infoglut problem. For those of you who are info-addicts, I have just published a long biblioessay on the major books and articles appearing in the past five years, citing 312 items in 255 footnotes (*Futures*, 24:8, Oct 1992, 1-33).

Surely, everyone here must know of Al Gore's *Earth in the Balance* (Houghton Mifflin, Jan 1992), the most thoughtful book by any political leader that I have ever seen, and deservedly on the best-seller list because of the author's fame. I'll mention ten other recent, important overview books on global environmental issues to indicate the type of general current affairs reading that any public library that claims to be informing citizens in our democracy should be carrying:

◆　*The First Global Revolution* (Pantheon, Sept 1991), a report by Club of Rome leaders Alexander King and Bertrand Schneider on the new type of world society that is in formation.

- *Beyond the Limits* (Chelsea Green, April 1992), an update of the 1972 Limits to Growth report to the Club of Rome by Donella H. Meadows et al, arguing that today's human world is dangerously beyond its limits.

- *Saving the Planet: How to Shape an Environmentally Sustainable Global Economy* (Norton, Nov 1991) by Lester R. Brown and his Worldwatch Institute colleagues, who also produce the annual *State of the World* reports in 26 languages and the new annual companion, *Vital Signs.*

- *Saving Our Planet* (Chapman & Hall, Aug 1992), a concise and valuable overview by Mostafa Tolba, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme.

- *Our Country, The Planet: Forging a Partnership for Survival* (Island Press, May 1992), an eloquent Third World view by Shridath Ramphal of Guyana, former Secretary-General of the 50-nation Commonwealth and now President of the World Conservation Union.

- *Imperiled Planet: Restoring Our Endangered Ecosystems* (MIT Press, Oct 1990) by Edward Goldsmith, which includes over 250 striking photographs.

- *It's a Matter of Survival* (Harvard University Press, March 1991) by Anita Gordon and David Suzuki, based on a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio series, with the added benefit of large print so Aunt Gladys can get the message.

- *One Earth, One Future* (National Academy Press, Sept 1990) by Cheryl Simon Silver, a non-technical overview of a National Academy of Sciences Forum on Global Change and Our Common Future.

- *The Global Ecology Handbook* (Beacon Press, 1990) by the Global Tomorrow Coalition and Walter Corson, a well-documented overview for college students and the general public.

- *The Population Explosion* (Simon & Schuster, April 1990) by Paul and Anne Ehrlich, which updates Paul Ehrlich's 1968 warning, The Population Bomb by claiming that the bomb has detonated.

I can go on and on, listing many good books in more specialized areas such as the greening of business, sustainable agriculture, recycling, waste

management, toxic waste, water pollution, etc. It is the basic, long-term direction that we must and will be pursuing. The critical point is that the best of these books ought to be in all public libraries to empower citizens to understand the key issues that they and their children will be facing. If these books are not featured on a shelf near the checkout desk, I contend that there is a fundamental problem in conceiving what libraries in a modern democracy are about.

MEGAPROBLEMS AND LIBRARIES

I have focused on three key trends that I think are central to the future of rural and small public libraries in the 21st century, which is what this conference is about. First, the ever-growing flood of information, which makes it more and more difficult to keep up. Second, the subtle erosion of democracy and widespread citizen dissatisfaction, coupled with civic ignorance despite the flood of information--or, very likely, because of it. And thirdly, the growth of environmental problems and the imperative of a major multi-faceted transformation to a sustainable society and a sustainable world, which should be a major element of public discourse.

What do rural and small public libraries have to do with these three large megaproblems?

First, all libraries are fighting the battle of infoglut and probably losing. The challenge is to acknowledge to the world that there is such a problem, and then to develop a system of quality filters, reference tools, and resource sharing networks to cope with the flood. I think that small public libraries are important cultural and educational agencies for small communities, especially so if the communities are in remote areas far from larger libraries. In a complex, knowledge-based society, it is important to have user-friendly community information and learning centers. But they must be up-to-date and linked into the wider world. Similar to independent mom and pop grocery stores of the past, they won't help people or stay in business if they dispense info-equivalents of stale bread and sour milk; but they can become the equivalent of convenience chain stores, now found at nearly every country crossroad.

Second, the crisis of democracy in these complex and confusing times presents an opportunity for all libraries, large and small. They can and should

assert themselves as the missing leg of a three-legged media stool. In recent years, we have come to think of "the media" as television and newspapers, or even television alone. But the library is also a medium, serving as intermediary between information producers and users. Its role in a democracy has been ignored or underplayed. Television is fine and dandy for sound bites and getting a feel for how our leaders look and talk. Newspapers are important for day-to-day news and brief reports. But libraries are the only place to get information that examines any problem in depth–but only if we want this information, and if we know that it is available. I suspect that the potential of libraries to enhance democracy in this way (and in so doing to enhance their own fortunes) has been far from fully explored.

Third, the megaproblem of a sustainable future should be a featured part of featured current affairs literature in every library, both large and small. Whether or not library patrons have access to Madonna's tawdry sex book, or Rush Limbaugh's spirited but ignorant fulminations, is problematic. But every library should do their best to put patrons in touch with the serious thinking on the major issues of the day, and keep patrons in the democratic loop. The TV talk shows are a new social invention to make people feel in touch with issues, albeit superficially. Why can't libraries follow up with the hundreds of books that provide informed background to these issues?

THREE FUTURES FOR RURAL AND SMALL PUBLIC LIBRARIES

It's easy to articulate such general goals for libraries as coping with infoglut, becoming more visible as an essential democratic institution, and putting citizens in touch with sustainable society issues. But how is this done in a time of shrinking or threatened budgets, when libraries themselves-- especially in small communities–may not be sustainable? Consider these three scenarios describing more of the same, how things might get worse, and how things might get better.

More of the Same

This is the most probable scenario, where the basic assumptions of library people remain the same: that all information is good, that infoglut is to be ignored (like Ross Perot's crazy aunt in the basement, which he used to

illustrate the deficit), that more access and more literacy are the key issues for library and information services, that American democracy is not endangered, and that there is no long-term crisis of sustainability. I will also assume that the US economy remains about the same, with a few successes here and a few failures there, but with no spectacular overall improvement and continued strain on public budgets. Under these conditions, I see little hope for public libraries to improve their general condition, especially if they continue to present themselves as they now do–a sort of nice but incidental institution where you can borrow books largely for entertainment. Consequently, in the "More of the Same Scenario," the battle against infoglut will be slowly lost, and rural and small libraries–the most vulnerable parts of the system–will be closed or increasingly irrelevant.

Pessimistic Scenario

In this not-so-probable scenario, the basic assumptions of library people also remain the same, but the US and world economy takes a marked downturn, due to the accumulation of neglected problems, including sustainability issues such as waste disposal, pollution, global climate change, and the millions of environmental refugees from countries well beyond their environmental carrying capacity, adding to millions of political and economic refugees, clamoring for a decent life as depicted by newly-available information technology. (I am sure that those who live near the Arizona-Mexico border, for example, are consummately aware of Third World problems pushing up against the relatively affluent First World.) In this negative scenario, the Clinton Administration does not make a significant dent in the deficit, and the collapse of civil order in Russia, added to a dozen or so brushfires around the world, distract from attending to many pressing domestic problems. Public sector funding becomes even tighter, and libraries get financially whacked as much or even more than other institutions.

Optimistic Scenario

In this least probable scenario, library people finally question their basic assumptions, which is always the first step toward significant change. They will then do any and all of the following:

1) Openly and widely acknowledge the problem of infoglut, and set out to identify and feature what Orrin Klapp calls "most of the best information."

2) Follow the lead of nutritionists in the food sector (who warn against too much junk food, empty calories, fat, salt, and cholesterol) and lead a campaign against too much entertainment and junk information from both trade publishers and academia.

3) Point to the crisis of the ill-informed citizen in our complex and troubled society, and insist that libraries must be seen as a major medium where citizens can learn about our major problems in depth, unlike newspapers or television. This can only be done, however, by highlighting important current affairs literature and overcoming the tyranny of the trivial titles on the best-seller lists.

4) Prepare an annual non-partisan "Citizen's Book List" in handsome catalog form, listing some 50-100 of the most important current affairs books published in the past year, as well as 300-500 additional books of the last few years that are still useful in illuminating our many public problems. Unlike deadly-dull bibliographies, this Book List, to be chosen by an expert panel, will be prepared in a handsome annotated format similar to clothing catalogs that flood our mailboxes, and distributed to every public library. Titles selected for the Citizen's Book List will be treated with the same respect as Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes, most of which have little relevance to our public problems.

5) Prepare and widely distribute an annual State of American Information report, with indicators on the information industry, library budget trends, how many libraries are underfunded and understaffed, how many staff people are underpaid and overworked, and how many libraries have been closed or forced into reduced hours. It is difficult to do so, dues to widely varying administrative situations and lack of data. Still, such a report would be invaluable for busy and ill-informed trustees such as myself, who do not know of any guidelines as to what a well- funded, well-staffed, and well-stocked library ought to be for our small community. (Our Town

Board is friendly to our library, but how much should we ask them to give us?) The report should also include scenarios of probable and preferable informational futures, and global indicators of infotrends outside the U.S. It's remarkable–and ironic–how little overall information on information is readily available. The travel and tourism industry now has two annual reports; information people should be able to get it together for at least one annual report.

6) Tie libraries to schools and lifelong learning, insisting that librarians in community information centers should be paid as much as school teachers, and that adult learning is at least as important as the learning of children in schools. This ought to be quite obvious, because many critical public decisions must be made in the next decade, before any of our children get to voting age. If these decisions are informed, we would have a far better chance of shaping a sustainable society for future generations- and a far better chance of sustaining and even improving libraries, both large and small.

I conclude by emphasizing that this positive scenario is the least probable of the three mentioned here. It will require changing assumptions, which is always difficult. It will require considerable cooperation. It will require a much more assertive stance, to overcome the torpor of our "democracy without citizens" and our "democracy of the uninformed." But this scenario could be realized, and we could start now.