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HOME ALONE

Downtrodden masses march through a bleak gray citiscape reminiscent of industrial London enshrouded in a killer fog. They slog onward, toward a building where a few letters show above the door: IBRAR. Inside, in a vast hall, people sit quietly at tables with huge tomes in front of them. A door opens and jack-booted thugs in Nazi-like red uniforms goose-step into the hall holding up one finger to their lips: "Shhhsh."

This frightening scene ends seconds later when you are whisked out of the city to a brilliant green countryside and a storybook home containing a Packard Bell computer. The voiceover says: "Now you can do it all from home." The commercial ends with the words "Wouldn't you rather be at home?"

Yes, this amazing scene is a television commercial for Packard Bell computers. And it is a pristine example of technological utopianism where the existence of a computer turns the home into cartoon castle of lively colors and safety. Leave the world behind, it says, retreat into a digital fantasy.

But there's more to the message than just that. This commercial is a full-scale attack on the social value of information. It is not just that the computer is being compared to a library. In its subtext it is being presented as an alternative to the ideal of free, public information, still thought by some to be a necessary element of democracy.

Note that by "free" I don't mean only "without charge." I mean free in terms of open, public, and with equal access for all. Keeping information free is actually a costly affair. It implies universal education so that all citizens will be able to make use of information. It implies institutions like libraries and archives that don't bring in countable revenue. It implies taking care of all our information resources, even those that serve the poorest members of our society. It implies a conscious concern for history.

Apple Computer aired its legendary *1984* television commercial during the 1984 Super Bowl. In their vision a lone Olympian frees the masses from a huge telescreen image of Big Brother. In today's Packard Bell commercial, thousands approach the library, but only one is saved. That one, of course, is you - you the viewer, you the person behind the eyes that watch the screen. There is no social solution, just individual salvation.

In 1994 I gave a talk in which I warned the audience that libraries would some day be seen as a threat to the growing information industries. Few in the audience

thought it possible. But these industries have since launched a strong campaign to prevent libraries from delivering digital information to the public. That campaign includes changes to the copyright law, the elimination of "fair use," and special protection for databases of facts. The goal is for every exchange of information to be a commercial transaction. And computer companies, like the giant Microsoft, are investing heavily in content: encyclopedias, databases, and vast collections of sounds and images.

Libraries stand in the way. One company's representative, at a Department of Commerce public hearing on copyright in 1995, objected to the use of the expression "digital library" to describe the proposed National Information Infrastructure. He said that it implied that the information might be "free." While he may have intended the monetary meaning of the word, that can't possibly have been his true concern. Publishers are paid a fair price for the books and other materials that are located in libraries, and they are paid a fair price for the online services that libraries subscribe to for public use.

As another speaker at that same hearing stated: "the word information connotes a certain free as air, free as water connotation to the average person." And this is a bad thing. It's bad because it implies that information hasn't been captured and harnessed for sale. It's bad because people think they can access and share information without going through a purchase process. Perhaps they think they can even invent their own information and distribute it to others, by-passing the publishers altogether. This is what the new information industries oppose: a public forum of information. Because it's bad for business.

Packard Bell actually lies in its commercial. It isn't true that you can now do it all from home. Very little of the world's knowledge is in a form that can be accessed by computer, especially not knowledge that originated before this decade. In the dreary vision of George Orwell's *1984*, all books prior to 1960 had been destroyed along with the history they represented. When we each retreat to our colorful homes inside our gated communities, every word we read on the computer will be the product of today's information corporations. And if publishers succeed in eliminating the libraries or rendering them obsolete, the public forum for information freedom will be gone. Nineteen-eighty-four - we're just running a little behind.

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