

May 16, 2004

TECHNO FILES

## The Twilight of the Information Middlemen

By JAMES FALLOWS

**T**HE newsstands at La Guardia Airport illustrate a basic problem of the "information economy." You can pay \$5 for a magazine when you walk into the terminal - or, if you keep walking to the air shuttle gates, you can load up on free magazines. Publishers can theorize about why it makes sense to give away what they're also selling: they can attract future subscribers, and they count even the freeloading readers in their audience. But, mainly, they are struggling with the longstanding reality that it is harder to put an exact price on intellectual or creative effort than on, say, a bushel of wheat.

Information is both invaluable and impossible to value. Historically, the main way around this problem has been to pack the results of intellectual or creative effort into something tangible that can be priced and sold: a book, a seat in a theater, an hour of an expert's time. Technology causes economic chaos when it disrupts this packaging plan, as is now happening in the music industry. Ten years ago, if you wanted to play a song, you had to buy a CD or a tape. Now, thanks to downloaded MP3 files, you don't - and the chaos is all the worse because the same young audience that would otherwise be buying the most CD's is the quickest to adopt MP3's. Publishers must shudder as they contemplate the distant but inevitable day when "electronic paper" does the same to them, making downloaded files as convenient to read as ordinary books, magazines and newspapers are today.

But while lawyers and business officials worry about technology's effects on who will be paid, and how, for their creative efforts, the Internet's most fascinating impact has been on those who have decided not to charge for their work. I'm not referring to the open-source movement among software designers, who by creating Linux and other systems want to establish a low-cost alternative to the world of [Microsoft](#)-style commercial software. I mean the emergence of two information sources that make us collectively richer and exist only because of fairly recent changes in the Internet.

One, believe it or not, is the world of blogs. If you've been away, blogs are those essentially personal Web pages where bloggers list their thoughts, include pictures or sound clips, post links to other sites - and keep adding new thoughts. If you haven't been away, I'll acknowledge that much of the blog world inspires despair.

At the democratic extreme, blogs are a nightmare vision of a publishing house's "slush pile" come to life. At the elite end, the dozen or so best-known sites, they are an intensified version of insider journalism. If you don't get quite enough sass, attitude or instant conclusions from the rest of the news media, you can always find more at the leading blogs. But in between are thousands of sites that offer real-time eyewitness testimony from people doing almost anything that some other person might find interesting: training as a surgeon, looking for oil in Siberia, fighting in Iraq. Blogs have only recently become a snap to set up and produce. There are many tools for doing so, including Google's newly simplified version of Blogger.

Blogs have also become easier to navigate, through the system known to techies as R.S.S. I've sat through debates about what those letters originally stood for; what they mean is that you can have new entries from chosen blogs automatically delivered by e-mail soon after they appear. Some people would rather skip R.S.S. and just cruise through favorite blogs periodically. Others like the convenience of a regular R.S.S. feed: it's like home delivery of mail instead of a post office box, but on a much faster cycle. My current favorite among R.S.S. programs has an ugly-even-for-software name: intraVnews. It presents blog entries, sorted by topic, in my Outlook mailbox, and it is free.

If blogs represent the uncoordinated efforts of countless volunteer writers, another information explosion shows the institutional might of the state. Taxpayer money still is behind a surprising amount of crucial data: nearly all weather observations and the supercomputer-based models that create forecasts; most basic scientific research; most research into disease causes and cures. In principle, this publicly financed knowledge has always been the public's property, but until a few years ago there was no easy way to get it from research centers to a wide audience. Thus various middlemen arose - notably scientific journals, which did the expensive work of printing and distributing research papers in return for steep subscription costs.

With the coming of the Internet, these intermediaries were no longer technically necessary - but, like the big music companies, they won't just fade away. So, on several governmental fronts, a quiet but intense struggle for survival is raging. Four years ago, as head of the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Harold Varmus proposed the creation of PubMed Central as a publicly accessible repository of medical research articles. Other "open access" scientific databases have been created, but they are meeting resistance from journals and authors who traditionally have held copyrights.

"It's in the authors' interest to provide open access, so their findings are disseminated," said Peter Suber, author of the Sparc Open Access Newsletter. "It's in the funders' interest, and the public's," but not in some of the journals'. He urges, among other changes, that Congress require research financed by the public to be openly available.

A SIMILAR battle involves, of all things, weather. In the pre-Internet era, the National Weather Service agreed with its middlemen, the commercial weather services, not to compete with them in certain products. Now, the Internet makes the vast range of the weather service's data available to anyone. In a

recent study called "Fair Weather," the National Research Council urged that the service seize this new technological opportunity so that farmers, aviators, city officials and others affected by weather can have free access to information their tax dollars have paid for. Commercial companies, most notably AccuWeather, have been lobbying Congress for rules that would force the National Weather Service to close or restrict some of the excellent free sites it has already opened.

No matter how that battle turns out, the public will win the longer war. The Internet's impact on the value of information may still be in flux, but its long-term impact on middlemen is clear.

*James Fallows is a national correspondent for The Atlantic Monthly. E-mail: [tfiles@nytimes.com](mailto:tfiles@nytimes.com).*

[Copyright 2004 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Help](#) | [Back to Top](#)