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Intellectual Pollution

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Intellectual Pollution

March 1970

There is pollution of our intellectual environment just as there is pollution of our physical environment, and it takes analogous forms.

1. We find the waste products of research polluting the literature in the form of trivial results, of work already reported in the literature and often there is a better form than that being currently presented. It is clear that the current guardians of our intellectual streams and atmosphere are not interested in choking off this sewage, and that there is a strong vested interest by the majority of workers in getting brownie points for publications. It will take strong legislation and enforcement (perhaps by outsiders who are not involved intimately in the current polluting system) to clean things up. It will not be sufficient to clean up some of the sources of pollution and leave the others still flowing vigorously, because, among other things, those who are choked off one place will immediately turn to the places that are still flowing.
2. Environmental pollution is gradually recognizing that the disposal of waste material that does not decay in time by putting it in storage places is not a solution that is acceptable in the long run. Similarly, though

most people scream at the alternate, the plan to keep archives permanently stored for all eternity is simply not possible in the long run. It appears that in this area we have more time to figure out what information to destroy completely than do the environmental guardians. Our currently used almost random method of information loss works fairly well in the sense that we are not now burdened with an impossible load. On the other hand the loss of some of what we should keep and the preservation of a lot that is pure junk is serious. The sleazy statement that "one man's junk is another man's treasure" is hardly relevant since it is the question of what is almost everyman's junk that we need to get rid of so that we can find that which we wish to have.

3. In the intellectual pollution area we have a phenomena that might well be called "deliberate pollution" of the intellectual atmosphere by experts whose business is doing exactly that - namely many of the advertisers. They are often trying to produce as misleading information as they can, in as large quantities as they can, and by so doing they pollute the intellectual atmosphere.
4. We have the common phenomena of the propagation of errors in information, much as in the environment various pesticides will persist and continue to do damage long after their original purpose has past. The problem of

correcting mistatements and errors, accidental or deliberate, is paid only lip service. The corrections that newspapers occasionally put in the inside pages among the advertisements to correct errors that yesterday occurred on their front pages are typical of what is being done in this area. We need a citation index for errors.

5. We have the side effects of people who are not trained in a field and who misunderstand what is being said - side effects that had not been anticipated but which may do more damage than the original information did good. As in environmental pollution these side effects can be serious.
6. Finally we have the hysteria that one finds among the environmentalists who get so excited about one aspect that they lose all perspective and in clinging to one tree, or valley, or river do more harm to everyone than they do good for anyone. Similarly we have hysterias in the information field - fads for this and that - extremists who say, "the information is not absolutely true, that it is possible that something may turn out to be wrong - so stop everything" without looking carefully at the fact that something must be done (inaction is often a strong action) and we must often act on inadequate information that is also unreliable and sometimes wrong.