

# **The Talking 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Public Discourse and the Written Word in an Accelerating World**

**Ray Suarez**

Senior Correspondent, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*

*A lecture presented by the Center for Interdisciplinary  
Studies of Writing and the Composition, Literacy, and  
Rhetorical Studies Minor*

**Speaker Series**

**No. 15 ♦ 2000**

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## **Preface**

Ray Suarez is the former host of National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* and currently a Senior Correspondent for PBS's *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. He has a twenty-five-year history as a writer and a journalist, complemented by his work to promote public literacy and various Latino and Hispanic communities. Mr. Suarez is a contributing editor of *Si Magazine* and author of a book, *In the Old Neighborhood: What We Lost in the Great Suburban Migration* (Free Press, 1999).

On March 11, 2000, Suarez delivered a keynote lecture as part of the Annual Colloquium of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing. More than 650 people were on hand for Suarez's public lecture, which addressed the changing role of mass media, the Internet, and public discourse in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Suarez also met with the Minneapolis Latino community at a breakfast in his honor held by La Raza Student Cultural Center, took part in the Minnesota Writing Project's Diversity Task Force, and answered questions in a two-hour meeting with University of Minnesota undergraduates and graduates.

What follows is a reprint of Suarez's evening lecture, *The Talking 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Public Discourse and the Written Word in an Accelerating World*, which focused on how major trends in media coverage have changed over the past century and how Suarez anticipates the Internet—which he calls “TV Junior”—will likely influence the written word in the next century. Suarez argued that one of the single largest changes in human life in the last millennium was the move from an almost entirely *empirical worldview*—based on actual lived experience—to a world of *mediated knowledge*—based on a montage of media images. “The ubiquity of information, instead of reinforcing its credibility, has created a credibility crisis,” Suarez argued. The answers to the questions raised—questions regarding accuracy,

sources, and accountability—“have a lot to say about the democracy of information in societies large and small around the globe,” according to Suarez.

CISW is grateful to the many departments and organizations that helped sponsor this event: La Raza Student Cultural Center, the Office of the Vice President for Research and the Dean of the Graduate School, the College of Liberal Arts, the School of Journalism, the Ronald M. Hubb Center, the Bush Faculty Development Program on Excellence and Diversity in Teaching, the McKnight Special Events Fund, and Twin Cities Public Television.

The Center’s Annual Colloquium and its Speaker Series contribute to its primary mission, which is to improve undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. These activities, along with faculty development workshops, conferences, publications and other outreach activities, are designed to foster active engagement with issues and topics related to writing among all of the members of the university community. In addition, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- curricular reform through writing across the curriculum,
- characteristics of writing across the curriculum,
- connections between writing and learning in all fields,
- characteristics for writing beyond the academy,
- the effect of ethnicity, class, and gender on writing, and
- the status of writing ability during the college years.

We are pleased to present Mr. Suarez’s lecture as part of the ongoing discussion about the emergence of new information technologies and how such technologies are changing the

role of writing in within and beyond the academy. We invite you to contact the Center about this publication or other publications and activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor  
Erika R.L. Rivers, Editor  
June 2000



## **The Talking 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Public Discourse and the Written Word in an Accelerating World**

It's great to be back in the Twin Cities, one of the places where *Talk of the Nation* over the years has managed to make a big impact on many listener's lives. Minneapolis-St. Paul is one of the handful of places where someone who works in public broadcasting can be something of a folk hero. So it's always worth coming back for that.

Rewind with me if you will to the last turn of the century, to 1900, for a little illumination of why I find the human voice—speech—such a compelling organizing principle for today's world. Back in 1900, there was no mechanically reproduced human voice heard anywhere on planet earth. There was little or no machine amplification, certainly not in any mass way. Every voice you heard, during your whole life, was heard in what we now call (oddly) “real time”—made by a human being. This very much narrowed the circle of human communication to the circle in which you were standing: the village street, a union hall, a choral society, or the kitchen table. The only way my voice could reach a person at work was to be standing near them in the workplace. The only way for a thought, an idea, a challenge, praise, denigration, hate speech, love poem, commercial information—the only way that it could reach them, for the 98.5% of planet earth (yes, there were phones and those crank-up cylinders, but for the vast mass of humanity as it existed then at the turn of the last century), was from the mouth of a person or through the printed word. But the written word was slow, either painstakingly formed, character by character, by an individual hand, or again, technologically mediated, requiring some kind of machine to put the letters on the page, the pages in a group, and the groups of pages out there in the marketplace.

When you look back to a century ago, one of the greatest single differences with today is the penetration of communications technology to every last corner of the globe. By way of illustration, when I came back from the South Africa series for *Talk of the Nation*, I got an e-mail from a game warden in Kruger National Park in Northern South Africa. He said that as he made his rounds in his jeep, checking the various herds and populations that call Kruger one of the most remote places on earth and one of nature's great treasure troves, he was listening to the program. That's a market penetration folk! From the communications hub at a modern network newsroom in New York, Atlanta, or London, to the stock exchanges that make instantaneous adjustments in buying and selling prices as markets bounce up and down, to the village radios of Africa and Asia—radios that are far from the nearest electrical outlet, that are run on the stored energy from a windup crank—we are now able to bring programming from around the world to a family that is herding cattle and gathering roots and berries for the evening meal. Now, a villager in Burma talks to a reporter from the United States and a few weeks later his voice is heard, not only all across America through national public radio (NPR) member stations, but across the world through partnerships with international broadcasters, and through thousands more listeners with a dish pointed skyward who pull down the international satellite service called NPR worldwide, or who, the next day, because they missed last night's *All Things Considered*, can pull the story of Unocal's oil operations in Burma off the Web in full fidelity.

When in the 1960s Americans watched in fascination at first, and eventually in horror, the events unfolding in Vietnam, it was often remarked how bizarre it was to watch *actual* combat—tense confrontations in dense jungle, all out firefights with North Vietnamese troops—*on television*. But by the time we saw these pictures, it should be

remembered, they were often days old—ancient in today’s terms—the film having been shipped from the front lines to a waiting courier in Hanoi, flown to Hawaii, Los Angeles, or New York, and then developed, edited, and shown. Compare that to today, when such a high premium is now placed on timeliness that cameras are in place *before* events happen, so we are able to watch the landing of Marines in Somalia or Haiti. We are able to watch live sorties taking off from Aviano Air Force Base in Northern Italy heading for distant targets in Yugoslavia. We are able to watch live artillery shells leaving gun emplacements in the Gulf theater of operations, or cruise missiles taking their first unsteady zooms off the deck of a war ship. This technological shift has changed the way most people on earth see their planet, their nation, and their own lives. In the main, it’s been a good thing. But this new world has embedded in it, some problems. How do you know what you know about the world? You may tell me Bill Clinton is the president of the United States, and I think you’re right, but how do you know? Were you at the inauguration? Have you been to the Oval Office? Have you ever gotten a letter from this man called Bill Clinton? If you have, how can you be so sure he really signed it?

One of the single largest changes in human life in the last millennium has been the move from an almost entirely empirical worldview—that is, one based on the actual lived experience of people who knew very little about what happened beyond the borders of their tiny village—to a world of *mediated knowledge*—a world where tribesmen in Borneo wear Michael Jordan T-shirts, Cairo moviegoers shriek when Arnold Schwarzenegger blows up the next bad guy, and late at night, people tapping on a keyboard, their faces bathed in light by a monitor, get the latest news about black helicopters in Idaho, German air force jets in Texas, and the murder of Vince Foster. You mean, you didn’t know Vince Foster was

murdered? Or, that the president, this Bill Clinton that you keep hearing about, is the linchpin in a massive international drug sales operation run from a tiny airstrip in Arkansas? I mean, I hope that I'm not the first person that's telling you this stuff!

In a world that grows more complex every moment, and in a world where you are asked to take more and more on trust, we've got a problem. The impossible task of keeping up with everything is colliding with a backlash against media-generated images. At a time when we need the news business to be a credible observer of the world beyond our own homes, annual surveys show that the average person's faith in the truth of what they see in the pages of newspapers, hear on radio news, or see every night on television is plummeting. The ubiquity of communication, instead of reinforcing its credibility, has created a credibility crisis: *is this thing I'm being told, true?* It has created an authority problem: *who says so, and if I consider the source, how is the source shaping the message that I'm receiving?* This ubiquity has also created a democracy challenge: *as in, where is the individual in this picture—can I talk back to my television set, can I talk back to my radio?* The answers to these questions have a lot to say about the democracy of information in societies large and small around the globe—you can graph them. You can test these variables as you look at different societies and, I think, take away some compelling lessons. As an exercise, you can compare a list of societies with very high rates of literacy with a list of societies with very high incomes. You can compare a list of societies with very high literacy rates, with a list of societies with functioning democracies. You can compare those same literacy rates with the level of state control of the media. You can see where I'm going with this: there are countries with extremely high literacy rates and very low incomes, but they don't stay low income for long. Of course, there are societies with high literacy rates *and* high levels of state control of

the media, but countries don't stay that way for long either. Literacy is key to creating wealth in developing societies. Lee Kwan Yew of Singapore was not, in American terms, a big champion of grass roots democracy, but he sure understood the correlation between literacy and development. The leaders of Costa Rica, for decades, have made investment in improving social indicators, like years of schooling, a national priority ahead of foreign investment in factories, ahead of hydroelectric dams, or fancy hotels. And, a society that makes itself healthier and smarter becomes a magnet for inward investment anyway, with higher wages and better terms of negotiation than, let's say, the Dominican Republic, which is also trying to develop quickly, but has not been able to appreciably raise its life expectancy, lower its infant mortality rate, or push for higher wages. So you may be wondering, what does this have to do with America? What does this have to do with the Twin Cities? Well, look around. The world is here. Even here, in a place where, at least outside of Minnesota, people think it is the whitest place on earth. So the world is here, and development is here and investment in social indicators is something that you have to take seriously when you assess the quality of your life and the life of your fellow Minnesotans.

In his book, *The Declining Significance of Race*, Professor William Julius Wilson, now at Harvard University, argued that a concentration of effects of poverty—those low social indicators, *not* race—had economically marginalized many Americans. He said that the pools of surplus labor concentrated in center cities would not be used until labor markets became very tight. He wrote this at a time when unemployment was routinely above 7%, and unemployment among young black men in center cities was as high as 40% and 50%. It took a little longer than Professor Wilson might have imagined twenty-five years ago, but tight labor markets in the United States are finally reaching down to those the marketplace had

previously written off. Black and Hispanic unemployment are now *both* at historic lows in all age groups. Labor markets are as tight as a drumhead, but many of the new people being hired are not able to advance once they climb up onto that first rung of the ladder because of their poor training in reading and math. The schools offered to many of these neighborhoods are not very good, and the rate of young adult and adult participation in elections is really small. The ratings for the evening news and newspaper readership among under-employed and unemployed are also very low. I am not trying to lock down direct causation here, as in, they're poor, so they're dumb, so they don't read, so they don't vote. It's not nearly that neat.

What I'm trying to do is get us to think about clusters of variables and how they are tightly tied in knots that can't be easily teased apart, so that you can look at each individual strand discretely, without all of the other strands that are tied into a tight tangle. Do low levels of education feed into the high levels of unemployment? Do low levels of education feed into low levels of newspaper and book readership? Have you read anything lately about what's called "The Digital Divide?" In the same month that demographers project that the population of the globe passed six billion, it was also discussed that anyone who owns a computer is a member of a global elite. Not all that long ago, when they were still making their rapid entry onto the scene, you used to have to stop at the airport security barrier, open your bag, and turn your laptop on to demonstrate that it was, after all, a computer. Today, when I board flights like the one I took last night to get here, every second or third person seems to have a black bag, and I would never get on the plane if everyone had to turn on their computer to demonstrate to the person standing at the barrier that it is in fact a computer. Late night flights in the dark are often lit by the glow of flat screens and punctuated by the clack-clack-clack of fingertips on a keyboard—and most people aren't even playing games

anymore. They are part of that twenty-four-hour global economy that is ready to find you, wherever you are to be found. It's happened so fast. The computer did what techno-utopians said it would ten or twelve years ago: it changed everything, and a lot sooner than we all could have imagined.

But that revolutionary, powerful, portable extra brain in the black bag at the airport security scan is still an object taken for granted only in a certain slice of the American population. You may get the feeling from watching television that everybody has a personal computer with a modem (this is due in no small part to the fact that the people who make television have them and tend to universalize their experience). Television programs are chock full of advertisements for software, hardware, Internet service providers, and media applications that are already threatening to make the personal computer not into a vast library at your fingertips, but into TV junior. More on that later. But a modem-equipped computer is still a feature in only a minority of American households, even with its rapid rise to prominence. At every income level, starting at \$20,000, black and Latino households are less likely to own that modem-equipped computer than their counterpart white families, until \$70,000 dollars in annual household income, where the gap closes. But as a percentage of the whole, black and Latino households above \$70,000 are a much smaller share of the total than they are among white households. So, that closing of the gap at higher-than-average incomes, for the moment, doesn't mean all that much.

Again, I'm not trying to draw some sort of one-to-one correlation: get a computer, or you can't be smart; get a computer, or you're going to stay poor. What I'm suggesting is that clusters of variables are tied up in such ways that they sometimes can make entering and navigating the opportunity structure in America tougher than it has to be, or tougher than it

already is. If you can't navigate that opportunity structure, you can't play the wider game. I have no idea whether being poor makes you not vote, or whether not voting makes you poor. I think there are good arguments to be made on both sides of the question. But we know that the poorest Americans are also the most *voiceless* Americans; that if poor people voted their political and economic interest, government and legislation would look a lot different. You can test this assertion rather simply; just track the debates over estate taxes and over the capital gains tax. Poor people don't care if you can't hand tax-free estates over \$600,000 in assessed value down to your children. They don't know, and they don't care. Poor people don't care that you can't sell your widely appreciated Yahoo! stock at a 700% profit and not pay tax. They don't know, and they don't care. U.S. laws are made in the interest of middle-class and wealthy people. Those are the people who vote. Those are the people whose voices are heard in Washington, in your state house, and in city hall. They are also the people most office holders have to speak to in order to get elected again.

I would submit that this *voicelessness* extends far beyond the simple confines of the polling place to all kinds of institutions in society. Our news business in America is basically built on middle-class people following with avid interest the activities, likes, dislikes, and buying patterns of people richer than themselves. This is why national nightly news, watched by a largely middle-class audience, follows the ups and downs of the stock market with such avid interest. It doesn't matter, directly, to most of them whether the Dow is up 100 points today or was down 250 points one day last week. Even at higher-than-average household incomes in the United States, equity holdings rarely are more than a few thousand dollars. On the national news, anchors and correspondents who are well invested (present company included), tell the story of wealthy and powerful people to millions who don't have

retirements riding on Microsoft's stock price. Middle-class people are fascinated by rich people and harbor aspirations to be rich themselves. Poor people appear, if they appear at all on our news, only in glorious, full-color dysfunctionality, or as plucky, lesson-telling, moral-teaching heroes and heroines for the amusement and inspiration of a largely middle-class audience. I know this from spending my whole adult life in newsrooms. What I'm less clear on is what happens next.

These stories illustrate the tension between what is entertaining and what is informative, what is necessary and what is desirable, what you want to know and what it would probably be good for you to know. We haven't done a good job mediating these tensions in the American news business. We always seem to take the path of least resistance in these struggles, deciding that the only alternative to the business as it is would be an "eat your peas" kind of news, full of deadly serious content, the sort-of kale of the information world—high in folic acid, some trace amounts of iron and calcium, and really god-awful tasting. But, important—with that valorized mantle of importance heavily draped around its shoulders. This is the kind of news you would flee in droves. The idea that there is a way to do this that is entertaining, informative, provocative, and responsible (because I have always believed that these are not mutually exclusive attributes of the news business) gets this annoying response: "Yeah, I think we tried that once, but it didn't work, so we stopped."

Instead of being seen as watchdogs of the common good, news professionals are dismissed by more and more of the population as remote, elite, agenda-driven enemies of common sense. This is serious stuff, and the signs in the culture are not particularly encouraging for my professional colleagues, and me or for you as citizens for that matter. But I should point out that this gradual erosion in the public's faith in the news media is not a

result of some odd quirk in the American character, or a bad gene that is victimizing an unwitting and blameless news establishment. Because it goes into the world after the morning meeting chanting its daily mantra “we’re only giving the public what it wants,” the business has not simply lost its moorings, but chopped them up and tossed away the ropes. When gliding over a glassy sea with a fair wind, it’s not a problem; it doesn’t show that much, and nobody gets too upset. However, when the seas are heavy, the absence of a moral compass, the absence of a strong sense of purpose beyond titillation and ratings shines through. The gradual slide of the news business to become what it is today—a freak show, a co-conspirator in the dumping down of America—today gives us breathless daily updates on the continuing saga of one family in Colorado and their as yet unsolved family tragedy. On Boulder TV, the story of Jon-Benet Ramsey is an appropriate part of the daily line-up. It has shaken local administration to its foundations and put the police department and the attorney general for the county in crisis. This is *Colorado* news. But on Miami television, you’ve got to ask yourself why the killing of an eight-year old pin-up is more important than the daily killings in Miami. Television in particular, has made the single largest contribution to the transformation of the American landscape into an eerie, nightmarish place, where danger lurks just around the next turn. What television should say, or would say if it were wanting to be honest, is that “crimes like these are isolated, freaky departures from the norm, so the killing of an unusual little girl is a terrible tragedy, but really nothing for you to worry about in Boston, San Diego, or Minneapolis.” Instead, when giving the choice of truth or panic-mongering, the news business clearly makes its choice, splashing children running out of a school building with their hands behind their heads or holding onto their teachers hands and running across the street, or crying in student parking lots after another shooting, and asking

the question, “is your child safe?” knowing, already, that the answer is *yes*. In fact, your child is safer at school than he or she is at home or on his or her own block. But the newscasts rarely say that.

For three years, NBC was flirting with becoming OJBC by devoting three nightly news programs on two of its cable networks to the continuing legal saga of a minor celebrity who appears to have murdered his wife. Should it have been covered? You bet. If Johnny Unitas was accused of killing his wife, it would be covered. If Bart Starr or Y.A. Tittle were accused of killing their wives, it would be covered, I assure you. So race was only partially the player that it was made to be in this docu-drama. Should the network have sanctioned literally *thousands* of hours of OJ coverage? I personally don’t think so. [I would remind you at this juncture that my opinions do not represent the opinions of Minnesota Public Television, PBS, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the *McNeal/Lehrer News Hour*, or its heirs, assigns, and fellow travelers. It’s just me talking here.] As the OJ trials moved toward their twin conclusions—it turns out that they were fraternal twins, not identical—a lot of other things were happening in the world: giant Zaire was moving toward collapse; the Republican revolution was stalling; the president was raising prodigious sums of money from places that now turn out to be a bit of a problem; Russia stumbled and drifted as its president lay sick and isolated in a clinic away from the capital; Israelis and Palestinians, stuck with each other on the same piece of land, found that fine words on pieces of paper did not immediately translate into a willingness to live together; peace unraveled in Northern Ireland; and in the rest of the country, men without Football Hall of Fame rings killed their wives, and a smaller number of wives killed their husbands. America remained distracted by the pointless carnival in Los Angeles, which, weirdly enough, culminated on the night of the

state of the union address. OJBC, much to its credit, gave us a split screen so that we would be able to watch the OJ verdicts come in at the same time the president fulfilled his constitutionally mandated duty to report from time to time to the Congress on the state of the union. Of course, back then, we didn't realize how lucky we were, because after we were done with OJBC, we turned on the TV and it had become MBC, the Monica Broadcasting Company. All the while the news business fends off its critics with its lazy man's defense, "we're just giving the public what it wants."

But to what end? To the end that for all the complaining about Congress a stunning percentage of Americans can't tell you who their member of Congress is, and can't name their two United States senators? To the end that the Americans who believe themselves to be in danger from crime are often the Americans least likely to be victimized? Because when you talk to white suburbanites, who are more likely to win the state lottery or be struck by lightning than be struck on the head by an assailant, they will tell you that one of their single largest fears in their daily lives is crime. To the end that a murder that has no real effect beyond the grief of one traumatized family trumps the killing of children all over America—killings that really do tell us something about ourselves at the turn of the new century, and should function as a call to action? To the end that the death of a princess in a car accident in France was part of the evening newscast in United States every night, weeks and weeks after her death? If the American press covered health care reform the way it covered Princess Diana's accident investigation, we would have licked our health care problems years ago. Don't hold your breath. The public cannot be let off the hook on this, because somebody was watching all of those Diana shows. Those TVs were not turned on with just the family dog and iguana in the living room. There were actual butts and pairs of eyes and pairs of ears

glued to said television set—following every loving detail of Elton John’s rewriting of his Marilyn Monroe tribute song.

The news business, as a rule, is far more interested in furthering your life as a consumer than your life as a citizen. As far as I can tell, that is okay with many people. That is a condition they find they can happily live with on most days. With millions of us in deep credit card debt, working to support our “stuff” habit, skillful consuming is very important. But in these last few years, I would submit that the cost of a *frayed* notion of citizenship has gotten easier and easier to see. Some press critics took away some encouragement from the recent primary season, saying that issues coverage was good, and a competitive race made for more serious and more extensive coverage than would otherwise have been given to the selection of candidates for president by the two major parties. Allow me to respectfully disagree. The news coverage went very heavily to the food fight and the degree to which the pattern of voting upended the conventional wisdom of the same news business. So it became a story that *they* were surprised. You people were voting, and *they* were surprised, so they wrote stories about it. George W. Bush said he wants to give Americans a large tax cut. John McCain said he wanted to pay off the debt instead of giving such a large tax cut. Governor Bush answered that it’s your money, and you should be allowed to spend it as you choose, that the government has no prior claim to such a large portion of your earnings. Senator McCain answered that sure, we can’t forget where that money comes from, but that we’ve got an obligation to first pay off money that’s already been borrowed on behalf of American taxpayers. Okay, the news business did a decent job of covering that simplistic portion of the story, as far as it went: one guy said “neener-neener” and the other guy said “neener-neener” back. That is what was on the news every night. What would have helped me to assess the

difference between the candidates was not another story about the McCain campaign bus, or the number of powerful men who've endorsed the Texas governor, but rather what difference it would make to the economy to either get more money in my paycheck because the federal government's taking less or, if it might have other effects, like maybe lower interest rates or lower mortgage rates for instance, because the federal government would no longer be borrowing such a large chunk of all the money available to borrow in America. That's what I needed to understand who was right between "neener-neener" and "neener-neener." I didn't get that. What the news business very generously patted itself on the back for and called serious issues coverage was little more than: "is not," "is too," "is not." That took *six weeks*. So what did we get instead? We got McCain comparing Bush to Clinton, and Bush saying he felt really insulted after that. Thin gruel, very thin gruel. Instead of news that helped me figure out whether Bill Bradley's very ambitious plans for Medicaid were really going to leave the system underfunded and put Medicaid in danger, as Al Gore said it would, I instead got Bill Bradley's counteraccusation that Al Gore's answer to his question was old politics, and he wouldn't dignify it with a response. That didn't help me a lot, but I got a lot of that—Bill Bradley's dignified response and Al Gore's frantic accusations. I got too many articles on Naomi Wolf and Al Gore's alpha male earth tones. Gimme a break.

One promise of the techno-utopians is that we can now break the logjam of giant media companies giving us the same old stuff on an ever greater number of channels. Their answer to all of life's naughty riddles, their guide to the perplexed is a one-word answer: Internet. The Internet will salve all wounds, answer all questions, make all things plain, and make life simply better than it is today. But again, I don't get a lot of the *how*? I don't get a lot of the how it's going to do all of these wonderful things. I have the Web in my house, I

consult it from time to time, bathing in its glow, clicking to my oracular goal, and it hasn't changed my life *all that much*. It's changed it some, and in very good ways, but it hasn't re-made me. When I am sitting with a screaming ten-week-old at 2:30 in the morning, no computer on earth can answer the riddle of what to do next. But, people persist in their use of the answer of "the Internet" to all questions.

There was a very good study by Norman Solomon recently. He searched for all of the hits in stories having to do with the Web—four years ago and last year, 1999. He found that four years ago, almost all of the references to the Web had to do with so-called "information technology" and the use of the computer as a *learning tool*, the introduction of the computer in schools, the use as a research tool, etc.—that was about 75% of all the references. Then he looked at all of the hits for last year and found that 80% of all the references were for the computer as a *shopping tool*. The ability to buy things on the Web is our societal narrative—the stories we are telling each other about ourselves—and it had totally become a shopping medium. Basically, it had become a giant, invisible Mall of America with a porno theater tucked into one corner.

Bill Clinton, who when his daughter, Chelsea, went to Stanford (let me remind you, not that long ago, she's still an undergraduate) said upon her departure that he would learn how to send her e-mail. Now, I don't know about you, but for one, I was frightened and disturbed by the notion that the guy who is running around in jeans and chambray shirts with Al Gore hammering wire into elementary schools around the country was now going to *learn* how to send his daughter e-mail.

I will agree with the techno-utopians that the Web is going to change a lot. I just don't agree with them on *what* it is going to change. I do think that it is creating a massive new

market for words, except, I don't agree with people who hope to make a living writing those words—that it's going to let a thousand flowers bloom, that many more writers will be able to sell their work, that people with unpopular views will be able to widely disseminate them. They'll be able to disseminate them all right—there are a million Web sites out there with ten hits on them. Anybody with a couple of bucks for a monthly maintenance fee can have a Web page. That's the Monte game going on here. As media continues to combine, and as mass media continues to come at you from fewer-and-fewer sources, the illusion that we are being sold is that everybody can be a publisher. Everybody can be a broadcaster. The argument is that when broadband comes in, any schnook with a video camera will be able to put his homemade movies out on the Web. So, don't worry about Time-Warner and AOL becoming the largest media company on planet earth, because some guy in Missoula will be able to put his movie up and you will be able to watch it. *If* you ever find out that it exists. Oh, that part; the “if you ever find out it exists” part. He won't be able to have moving strip ads across the top of thousands of unrelated Web pages that tell you to go there, or hypertext links scattered on pages all over the Web, so that when you're reading through *Time* magazine you'll be told to go to his Missoula page. Let's get real here. Words are going to matter. Even as the originally text-rich environment of the Web morphs into one long, non-stop music video-cum-commercial, there will still be a place for text on the Web. There will still be a place for creative people and writers and people who want to try their stuff and send it easily and effortlessly out to many people. But, don't be fooled by the assertion that this is going to put my Missoula movie-maker on some sort of equal footing with Steve Case—that if they both make a movie, you're going to be able to see both of them. Yes and no.

As video and sound crowds out text from the new broadband world, what is that going to mean to the way we talk to each other? Already *e-mailease* threatens to destroy the epistolary art as it is. You know very well that the language that you use in e-mail is quite different from the one that you would use in a *beau adieu*, a love letter to someone. Love letters on the Web don't even work that well. If you go to chat rooms, there is this sort-of digital roller derby going on there, which has its purposes. It's like a big room where everybody is screaming at each other at the top of their lungs, but feels very satisfied at the end of the experience that they have delivered their messages. Nobody heard them, but they were in the room shouting with everybody else and they feel very good about that.

As newspapers continue to wither on the vine, as network news continues to command the eyeballs and attention of an ever-smaller percentage of the entire American audience, as big media giants continue to combine, as big publishers start to publish fewer works of serious non-fiction and fewer works of serious fiction, as a winner-take-all marketplace settles into the writer's creative art, any of you who want to be a part of that world—either as a writer or as a reader who loves words—should worry an awful lot about what this shifting landscape means. Because once this syndrome has moved down and hardened and begun to advance, there will come a point where its own market force, its own tremendous juggernaut-like momentum, will be impossible to stop. Instead, we are just going to have to shake our heads and figure that another place has been made into nothing but commerce and hope for the next technological revolution and that we won't squander that opportunity too. Remember all of the excitement about desktop publishing, and newsletters, and 'zines? That got wiped-out by Web fever. But now that the Web fever has morphed again so that it is now Amazon.com and porno sites, we have to think about what people who

want other people to be their readers are going to do. That winner-take-all marketplace for words and ideas will make a small group of Americans busy and wealthy. I'm not going to be insincere about this: I'm one of those people. I'm writing articles and chapters and coming to things like this. I'm fine. But, to widen that circle in a way that serves our democracy and to widen that circle in a technologically mediated way that allows the number and the type of opinions that you hear and the places that they come from, that's going to get harder and harder, not easier and easier. There aren't going to be suddenly hundreds of new people writing for a *Harper's* online, or hundreds of new people jockeying for front cover space in *Atlantic*, or the *New Republic*, or the *New Yorker*, or the *National Review*, or *Regardie's POWER*, or the *American Prospect*, or *American Heritage*, or any of these journals. We have more of them in America than they have in other countries, and they are more widely read than they are in other countries—a countervailing point to the notion of dumb, uninterested Americans. But, that marketplace is narrowing, and it's making a few hundred people very busy and leaving a lot of writers frustrated and unable to reach readers—gifted people who are ready to work hard for a commission unable to find places to show their work.

The Web and the new world that it ushers in cuts with two very different blades. It does make a lot of things possible. It makes photographic essays that could only be seen in one gallery at one place at one time now viewable by thousands. If you're a painter, the existence of nextMonet.com and Art Direct Gallery.com and Guild.com means that suddenly that you're not tied to one showroom in one city forever. People you will never see, people who will never see the place where you do or show your work will see your paintings and buy them. It makes it possible for artists who have become disgusted with the commercial impulses of the record business to find a new path to listeners. I was talking to John Linnell,

one of the members of “They Might Be Giants,” which was dropped by its major label and went on to sell a million records anyway because it found a pathway to its listeners that a major label was just not going to provide. Those labels want more Mariah Carey and “New Kids” and “InSync” and everything else. They don’t want a quirky, culty, niche-market band. Ice Tea finally got so disgusted with his label (and he doesn’t have to worry about selling discs) that he released his last CD on the Web with no actual physical CD until months later. So, things are happening. It’s commerce, and at the same time it’s art, and it’s ways of connecting up creative people with the people who seek creative work. So, I feel pessimistic some days, optimistic other days, on a day like today I feel like I’m between two stools. I think there is ample evidence about some terrible Jeremiad about how the Web sucks and it’s going to ruin everything; there’s also evidence that good things are happening and that new ways of seeing, new ways of being an artist, new ways of being a writer, are going to be invented, found, or thunk up as we go along.