Alan C. Purves, *The Web of Text and the Web of God: An Essay on the Third Information Transformation* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998).

There is a problem that arises in relation to writings about the internet, cyberspace, and new communication technologies such as hypertext which is a problem that has plagued new communication technologies since the printing press if not earlier. And that problem is the firm conviction that This Changes Everything (as the current advertisement goes). This is when previously sensible writers encounter the 'net and succumb to what we might call the digital sublime. Such arguments not only predict that everything will change (and that all the old media are done for) but often that this has indeed already happened. We are living in a hypertext world. Needless to say, I tend to be deeply suspicious of any claims to radical social and cultural transformation based solely on technological innovation, especially when the claims of social and cultural loss are made to seem total and universal.

The late Alan C. Purves was, unfortunately, a victim of this malady in this, his last book. It is a personal, heartfelt book, and one full of good intentions. The book seeks to elucidate how transformations in communications affect transformations in human consciousness (a very McLuhanesque thesis), and how "the new writing and information technologies have affected our cultural, intellectual, and religious belief structures." (v) He asks, "what will happen to worship as the traditional form (and perhaps function) of the book changes?" (5) And he does not assume that these changes are all bad; indeed, he points out that the internet makes resistance possible against rigid social hierarchies and orthodoxies. He writes, for example, "such an anarchic approach is opposed to our abject surrender of authority to those who control the mass media and would have us become mere consumers or idolaters of text and image." (212) The connection of technologies of writing to church structure and history is an important one (and one deserving of more attention by media historians). Also important are the role of texts, iconography, and hermeneutics in contemporary religious practice and it is important that Purves wants to apply to those what has been learned in literary textual analysis (especially reader response criticism) and to explore the implications for these practices if the very nature of the text changes. But these connections are posited primarily as analogies and not pursued with the rigour that their potential demands.

Purves actually presents two books: one is a rather banal and general introduction to hypertext and the second promises to be a discussion of how scriptural writing and practices are becoming hypertextual and the changes in church structure that will result from this. With such a divided focus the book becomes diffuse and as a result neither aspect is covered sufficiently. The book was written as a hypertext (in a program called Storyspace) and Purves had wished it to be published as a hypertext. When no publishers showed interest, he had to re-edit it into a more conventional format. Unfortunately, however, writing in hypertext has resulted in a book that is fragmentary, aphoristic, and repetitious.

The book is organized around five concepts which Purves argues are key to

contemporary hypertextual conditions:

- *anarchy* (arguing that the internet and hypertext are radically nonhierarchical and decentralized, allowing for creativity and chaos),
- *authority* (arguing that in the hypertext world traditional authority is questioned, if not rejected outright; the power of the author — a very individualist concept of the author — is diminished and the power of the reader enhanced; but in general Purves underestimates the activity of readers in print (and viewers of television) — despite drawing on reader response criticism — and overestimates the activity of hypertext users).
- *community* (describing the creation of idealized, small, local communities, especially of worship, which are anti-authoritarian, anarchical networks; community = hypertext),
- *idolatry* (arguing that there is a parallel between religious icons and computer icons, and that by focusing on the authority of the symbol itself we ignore the meanings and further connections beyond), and
- *networks* (in which a variety of types of networks are conflated, but basically arguing that new technologies and practices of writing allow for new connections between people and that God is in these connections).

What seems to be lacking in the book are the reasons for the connections between concepts and objects of analysis. For example, why *have* the Christian churches become more fragmented and localized? What connection *is* there to new textual practices and new technologies? Are there other historical and social circumstances we need to take into account? Though one could assume that the connection between the church and hypertext is merely an analogy, that is not altogether clear. For example, after discussing the movement of people through "rooms" on the internet (in MUDs), he writes, "How does this mobility translate into the spiritual or the ecclesiastical worlds? Do people move through sects (and certainly some do) as through rooms in the multi-user dungeon or the spaces on the hypertext? In which rooms do people find salvation, God, the truth?" These are questions posed, but never answered.

The book has the potential to be a *tour-de-force*, crossing from discussions of hypertext to religion to scribal practices to comic books and television watching. But it ends up hopping about in an overly generalized and highly selective history of communication media, and wandering through areas of media study (ie: media literacy literature) drawing on a rather limited range and depth of studies. Now by saying this, I do not mean to imply that the book would have been better if Purves had cited the "right" sources, but rather that there is a richness of material out there (Bakhtin, Carey, Innis...) which could have helped make this book what it wanted to be.

J. Macgregor Wise
Arizona State University West