

significant function that advocacy plays in maintaining the library as a “cornerstone” of democracy. Patricia Glass Schuman in “Advocating for America’s Right to Know,” implores librarians and those in the library profession to lead the charge for advocacy because ultimate responsibility for protecting the public’s right to know lies with libraries and librarians. William R. Gordon in “Advocacy for Democracy I: The Role of the American Library Association,” outlines the long-standing commitment that the ALA has demonstrated to preserving the fundamental right of democracy for all citizens. Finally, Joneta Belfrage provides an international perspective on the importance of libraries in a democratic society in her essay, “Advocacy for Democracy II: The Role of the Swedish Library Association.”

*Libraries & Democracy* is successful in providing an overview of the important contributions that libraries and librarians have made to the history of democracy; it is informative, though occasionally redundant. Kranich’s enthusiasm and knowledge on this topic are obvious, and her critical investigation of the issues concerning the roles and responsibilities of libraries in democracy is notable.

This collection of essays is authored by, and targeted at, those in the information profession. In essence, this book is “preaching to the choir.” We as professional librarians already understand the essential role that libraries play in a free and open society. We as professional librarians understand that access to knowledge, ideas, and information is paramount in the battle against ignorance, intolerance, and prejudice. We as professional librarians understand that America’s libraries are one of the last strongholds in the defense of freedom. What is needed is a way to effectively disseminate this information to those, outside librarianship, who do not understand the vital and essential contributions that libraries and librarians have made to the past, present, and future of this institution we call democracy.—*Kelly C.*

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**Virilio, Paul.** *The Information Bomb.* Trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso, 2000. 160p. \$23 (ISBN 1859847455). LC 00-32471.

If a need exists (and I think it does) for philosophical insight into the anxiety suffered by many over the speed of modern life, the loss of distance as a geographic feature, the blurring of the border between the real and the unreal, and the eclipsing of the local by the global, then Paul Virilio’s *The Information Bomb* is a gem of a confirmation and examination of these anxieties. Anxieties rooted in that defining feature of modern life—technology: “If truth is what is verifiable, the truth of contemporary science is not so much the extent of progress achieved as the scale of technical catastrophes occasioned.”

As one might guess from the book’s title, this is no glowing account of the wonders of the information age but, rather, an exploration of the underside of the computer revolution as humanity and the planet enter the twenty-first century. Technoscience, disinformation, corporations, states, and the “soft stupor” into which individual men, women, and children have been lulled are Virilio’s actors in the disturbing drama being played out on this once immeasurable, but now tiny, globe at an ever accelerating, to the point of dizzying, speed. Technoscience reduces knowledge to bits and bytes, and a new technical wizardry plays with reality, information becoming disinformation, the mind engaging the world almost solely with a screen as intermediary. The television screen and the computer monitor—single eyes obliterate true perspective and depth, transmission speeds compress distance into nothingness, roving and stationary cameras focus on the surface of the mundane and the suspect in complete absence of historical and psychological understanding.

In 145 pages, Virilio’s historically grounded and eclectically informed mind meanders through, and comments on, topics as diverse as: the frontier as American icon; genetic engineering; the soft stupor

that defines the contemporary human condition; the loss of the body's sacred standing in art; the surveillance capacity of information technology; the decline of sociability and eloquence; the replacement of the human in space exploration by the mechanical; the displacement of electoral campaigns with opinion polls; and the seemingly perpetual adolescence of human adults. Central to all his observations is the notion that the speed of modern life is forcing contemplation, as both an activity and a necessity, out of existence. Virilio's is a bleak and troubling perspective, yet so insightful, so grounded in a popular and familiar world that we ignore his analysis and the conclusions that he draws at our own risk.

What of the "information bomb" of the book's title?

At the heart of Virilio's concern is the capacity (indeed, sometimes the apparent *raison d'être*) of information technology to turn reality into virtual reality, to first blur and then obliterate all distinctions. He urges on the reader the all-important, but largely unexamined, distinction between the digitization of information and the analogue processes of thought that produce knowledge and understanding. He warns against the long-term physiological, psychological, and cultural impacts of an environment suffused and fueled by digital information. A digitally dominated environment is one in which the capacity to distinguish between reality and virtual reality atrophies because people no longer possess the mental ability necessary to actually know the world—or even themselves. The power of information technology to penetrate, stupefy, de-fuse the human mind, and wreak havoc on information infrastructures is akin to the power of radioactivity to penetrate matter—to destroy, mutate, and contaminate for centuries. An information bomb ticking away in those short nose-to-screen distances between mind and machine, tethering what is "known" to what is selected/presented/transmitted/package/advertised/highlighted.

A world filled with disinformation becomes one where truth and reality are suspect. A suspect world, one seemingly controlled by powers beyond the reach, much less the influence, of ordinary people, becomes one in which responsibility is claimed by no one.

By way of illustration, Virilio offers a story from Australia of the Bob Dent–Philip Nitschke doctor-assisted suicide case in 1996. Dr. Nitschke built a machine that allowed his terminally ill patient to determine the timing and to administer his own death. "There is much to be said about this 'decisional death,'" writes Virilio, "in which the doctor's participation is confined to developing a *buck-passing machine*, the cause of active euthanasia advancing behind the mask of a cybernetic procedure for inflicting sudden death. A clinical example of the new virtualization of action, in which *remote electronic action* wipes away the patient's guilt, together with the scientist's responsibility [Virilio's emphasis].

Much the same with "smart bombs" in warfare where the responsibility of bombmakers and bombardiers to targets, the relationship between killer and killed is mediated, lessened, sanitized—guiltless. And if the "smart" bomb happens to act dumb, misses, fails, it is a "technical" glitch, a bit of unforeseen mis- or disinformation that also frees human makers and launchers from responsibility for hitting the wrong target.

For Virilio, information technology and technoscience are inducing a period of profound irresponsibility. The demand of speed for immediate action and the loss of geographic distance (a physical feature once linked inextricably with lengthy periods of time) make the time necessary for deliberation and thoughtful action a relic of the past.

What might all this mean in a world of gross inequalities in the balance of political, economic, and military power? Where are those who individually and collectively oppose the seductions of the "soft stupor"? Where are those who will struggle on behalf of time and distance in order that these essential dimensions

can once again contribute to the knowledge and understanding that humanity needs so much? Virilio offers only that the living human being is the “last fortress” against a cyber-dominated world.

This is an important, engaging book. Given the centrality of information tech-

nology and technoscience in life today, it should be held by all libraries serving adult readers. Highly recommended as a book club selection. Guaranteed to generate thought-provoking discussion. A *must* for librarians and educators.—*Elaine Harger, W. Haywood Burns School.*