



A Psychologist's Response

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Wisner's article engenders two conflicting reactions in the reader. The first is irritation at the exaggerations and generalizations about both technology and librarianship; the second is sympathy for his reactions to the ramifications of the technological change for the profession and for society. Perhaps reality lies somewhere in between.

Like every living creature, individuals and societies have highly evolved mechanisms for maintaining their homeostasis, preserving their integrity and insuring their own survival, both physical and psychological. One of the most powerful of those mechanisms has a bad press. Its name is spoken with disdain: "Resistance to change." Resistance is shrouded with meaning; resistance is seen as immoral, immature, irrational, unreasonable, unproductive, and unAmerican. And yet, there was a time, not so long ago, when "resistance" meant strength and to resist meant to have courage. We have resisted against war and oppression, and we have applauded "resistance fighters" against the tyranny of evil in its many faces. Resistance exists in all of us, just waiting for the particular event that triggers its release.

For every movement forward—whether in one's personal life or in societal life—there is a countermovement. For every step in the progress toward a technological future, there are those who dig in their heels and cry into the wilderness: "Stop the Madness!" That is the sound of Wisner's article. His article is irritating, angry, whining, and filled with fervor and rhetoric. It is based on beliefs that may be unfounded—certainly they are unsupported by evidence—and on assumptions that not everyone shares.

Yet, there is something touching and appealing in what he says. Something reaches into our consciousness to ring true, to echo some small voice inside ourselves that we have heard but not heeded, or perhaps *felt* but denied as irrational. Wisner is like a prophet of old, with fervent eyes and a forceful voice, forewarning us of the dangers ahead, pleading with us to mend our ways lest we become instruments of our own destruction.

Wisner's article is a classic example of resistance to technological change. It



encompasses all of the symptoms—and all of the power—of resistance. First is *denial*, the belief that if we would just put our minds to it, we could stop the technological bulldozer from running us over. Then comes *anger*; perhaps *rage* is a better word, rage at everything from universities and governments to scholars and students—and at the personal indignity of having to change the printer paper. Then comes the inevitable *rationalizing*. When we experience resistance we always use rationalization to disguise it. And at first glance, rationalizing sounds rational, as it does in Wisner's article with its self-reinforcing arguments. *Exaggerating generalizing*, and *catastrophizing*—these give expression to the feeling that everything around us has come loose and that we are heading for destruction. And then comes the *despair*, a longing for return to the past and *grief* for the losses of things familiar, valued, and beloved. And so it is that technology is blamed for the problems and ills of the world, whether technology caused

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them or not. (In the old days, we blamed our parents for messing up our lives! Then we grew up and forgave them and learned to take responsibility for our own messes.)

When I read Wisner's article my first inclination was to enter into a debate with the author, pointing out how many of his statements are untrue, unfounded, or misinterpretations. But one of the things I have learned in my work with people and organizations is that when feelings are running high, no one changes an opinion or gives up strongly held beliefs through debate. No one "sees the light" because better arguments have been posed. People don't change their attitudes because they *should*!

But on reflection I realized that Wisner is giving voice to those powerful feelings of regret and frustration that engulf many of us in dealing with the irritations and hassles, stresses and harassments, fears about the changes in our lives, fantasies of a future gone haywire, and conflicts of values and questions of morality that have become our companions in our technologically driven lives.

So we read Wisner's article and have two reactions: This argument is full of holes and I could challenge each of his statements with "But on the other hand..." or "But don't you realize..." or "But would you really like us to go back to the horse and buggy?" That is one powerful reaction. But there is an equally powerful reaction that says, "He's right. We *have* lost our sense of purpose and mission. We *have* succumbed to the technological imperative. We *have* complied with the indignities that technology often imposes. We *are* moving so fast into our fantastic future that we have not given our *other* systems—our legal, economic, social, interpersonal, and ethical systems—the time to evolve and catch up. We *do* need to renew ourselves and repledge ourselves to our professional mission (even if it is not the mission for some of us that Wisner envisions). And most important, we *do* need to return our attention to the nature of the human endeavor and to the needs of the people we serve.

So Wisner's article is a manifestation of resistance to technological change, and as such, it deserves respect and gratitude. Resistance to change has a life-preserving psychological function. It warns us when we are going too fast for our own good, cautions and even forces us to slow down and allow our other systems to catch up. It warns us of the consequences of our actions, that we may be making mistakes that will be impossible to undo. It raises arguments to our own assumptions about the world we live in. It poses other values and reminds us of the losses that accompany change. It reminds us that we must resist technology's imperative that we conform with its design, that we give it decision-making power, and that we sacrifice our own creativity on its alter. Most important, it reminds us that our relationships with other people and the human quality of our service are at risk and that we better pay attention. Wisner's resistance may not be to technology but to the secondary changes that technology brings. It may not be resistance to technology itself; it may, in fact, be resistance to the *tyranny* of technological change.