

PUBLISH OR BE DAMNED

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By far the most important activity engaged in by the Libertarian Alliance is its publishing programme. Some might suppose that the importance to libertarians of publishing things, and of publications generally, is so blindingly obvious as to need no self-conscious emphasis. Urging libertarians to publish will sound to some like urging fishes to swim or birds to fly.

Yet such is the nature of the libertarian movement that the compelling importance of the written (and mechanically reproduced) word must regularly be emphasised. Variations on the theme that merely spoken verbiage will suffice to achieve the Libertarian millenium - and in a matter of months at that - are constantly heard by the activist leaders of the libertarian movement, to the point of tedium.

To put the above point another way, the purpose of this piece of writing is to endorse the main thrust of its immediate predecessor in the Libertarian Alliance's Tactical Notes series, No.1, *Purpose and Strategy of the Libertarian Alliance*. I have some serious disagreements with TN1 to express, but its emphasis on the importance of thoughtful and sustained libertarian publishing is absolutely right.

LIBERTARIANISM IS PART OF A TRADITION

My main *disagreement* with TN1 is that it suggests that "libertarianism" is somehow fundamentally distinct from such projects as "anti-socialism", "free trade", "monetarism" and "greater reliance on market forces".

But libertarianism is not a mere *alternative* to the classical liberal tradition. It is the distillation - the purification - of these same ideas. Libertarianism is not the *rejection* of the ideas of thinkers like Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, Ayn Rand and Milton Friedman. Rather is it the particular *response* to these ideas which asks why these grandees did not follow the logic of *their own ideas* more rigorously and consistently. To deny the intimacy of the link between classical liberalism and libertarianism is like asserting that water and distilled water are too unrelated chemicals.

POPULARISERS

TN1 confuses the wrong kind of advertising - the wrong kind of popularisation - with the claim that advertising and popularisation as such are irrelevant to the libertarian cause, whereas in fact advertising and popularisation are very close to the heart of what libertarianism is all about. TN1 is perfectly right that to "popularise" libertarianism by forming libertarian political parties has been disastrous, and will go on being disastrous for the foreseeable future. But there is nothing wrong with advertising what libertarianism re-

ally is, and advertising the *right* ways to popularise libertarianism. The purification of a complicated message into its principled essence, summarisable in a few pungent sentences has *everything* to do with advertising! This is exactly what advertising copy-writers slave away all day to achieve! Given that libertarians have been so successful in pinning down in plain written English what the libertarian message consists of, it would be hard to imagine a world in which some at least of "the masses" had *not* paid some attention, and so it has proved.

None of which means that all libertarian writing has to be as simple and accessible as some of it is. Advertising slogans may be simple, but the thought processes which give rise to them and the further thought processes that are sparked off by them may be immensely complex, as may the discussion of what these broad principles might mean in terms of practical policies and actions. The point about advertising slogans is that *on their own* they are useless. They only work if they are slogans *about* something. There has to be a *product*, and that product must be publications, in which the slogans are gone into with real thoroughness, and their implications and connotations are explored.

The difference between experienced libertarian activists and the "popularisers", that is, those who berate us for failing to hand out leaflets to "the masses" on street corners and for failing to communicate with "the man in the street", is not that they want to popularise libertarianism and we don't, but that we know how to popularise libertarianism and they don't.

Being popularisers, we inevitably attract the attention of drones and fools from among the large and varied groups of people among whom our activities strike a spark, as well as that of sensible and talented libertarian comrades. The price of reaching the right people is that we also reach many of the wrong ones.

TN1 grapples with the problem of how to get in touch with the "right people". But even if only they are to be contacted and everybody else ignored, there still remains the problem of reaching these people without knowing beforehand who they are. In practice the only way to reach the "right people" is just to set about reaching people generally, and then to select the most promising of these adherents and *turn* them into the "right people".

Which of course is what TN1 is all about. If all that libertarianism actually meant was the "right people" exchanging their profound and deeply unpopular and anti-populist ideas, there would be no point in such publications as TN1 in the first place. Or TN2.

DIVISION OF LABOUR

I can still remember the venom with which a man fully old enough to know better once criticised me, after I had given a talk about libertarianism and had included in it the fact that I am better at writing libertarian pamphlets than the average bricklayer. Elitist! Snob! Arrogant, conceited fool! He really was angry. I should have less contempt, he raved, for "ordinary people"? Were they not just as capable of sophisticated intellectual analysis as I?

Hardly, for man is the great specialising animal. Almost all of us are quite clever at a few things - that is, we are all un-ordinary in some ways - and are hence given special trust and responsibility and authority in our particular areas of excellence. (If I had some bricks I wanted laying, I'd immediately call in a bricklayer.) The process is entirely voluntary and suits everyone concerned. To object to this is to turn one's back on the whole idea of the division of labour, which is one of the central ideas in Adam Smith's great book *The Wealth of Nations*. I have heard no more from or even of my enraged populist critic. No doubt he continues to be stupid and ineffectual about spreading libertarian ideas, and good at whatever it is that he does know about.

IVORY TOWERS

These champions of ordinariness almost always include in their fulminations the claim that "intellectuals" and (even worse) "academics" live in "ivory towers", which isolate them from all those "ordinary people". It is true that most intellectuals do live inside structures of various kinds, rather than in the open air. However these structures have doors through which people come and go, frequently in their thousands and at very impressionable times in their lives. *Failed* intellectuals, now they really are isolated folk, espe-

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY



cially those with no decent tower to work in. But the notion that the intellectual enterprise as such is cut off from the rest of humanity and its concerns is absurd.

For the average salaried academic, publishing is more like a disease that a respectable working practice and most of them do far too much of it. A mainstream publishing house doesn't have to keep on about the importance of the printing press. This is assumed. Mainstream publishers hire people, and tell them what to do. But the libertarian "movement" is not like that. We seek adherents who will adhere without the glue of wages, and we can only try to persuade our comrades to behave sensibly.

Many self-styled libertarians don't know how to write, or even how to think very coherently. Many of them believe that shouting silly slogans will achieve more than writing and publishing sensible stuff, for the simple reason that they *want* to believe this. Shouting silly slogans is all that they know how to do. Hence the need to keep repeating the facts contained in this pamphlet, and thereby prevent these sloganeers from dragging other new and potentially more useful libertarians off into their daft schemes full of sound and fury and publishing nothing.

The arguments against publishing never amount to very much, partly, I suppose, because their adherents do not wish to make even greater fools of themselves by writing these arguments down and publishing them. Yet the anti-publishing song is regularly sung wherever two or three libertarians are gathered together, especially by recent converts to the cause. Accordingly, it is worth yet again insisting on the importance of publishing in, appropriately enough, a publication.

THE INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF NAZISM AND THE MYTH THAT THERE WEREN'T ANY

It may be that part of the explanation for the belief that big changes can be made to the course of history without the help of intellectuals is that people think that this is what the Nazis did. Popular myth has it that the Nazis just rose up onto the pavements from their beer cellars and started handing out their leaflets, putting up their posters, holding meetings, beating people up and so forth, and that consequently equally dramatic results can be achieved by others, who are equally lacking in any sophisticated intellectual "analysis" of the world and its ways.

The truth about the Nazis is very different. The Nazi era was preceded by decade after decade of cogitation and publication of various kinds, by all manner of academics and intellectuals. But it is now thought better to forget these people. One reason for that is that people feel that these pre-Nazi thinkers were such bad persons that they don't deserve to be remembered, but there is another far more discreditable reason for the neglect of the intellectual foundations of Nazism. This is that these foundations are embarrassingly similar to those now being constructed by the academics of the left, especially in their post 1960s manifestations. Sentimental environmentalism, vehement anti-individualism, anti-capitalism and a general revolt against modernity. We are hearing all of this stuff again now, and it is painfully clear to those who bother to study the *intellectual* rise of Nazism what these ideas led to last time around, and why. Accordingly, most of today's academics and intellectuals now prefer to forget this horribly good example of just how influential their own profession can be, thereby encouraging the idea that a bunch of energetic street politicians and media manipulators is all you need to seize hold of an entire century. (A good summary of the intellectual nature of Nazism is contained in Leonard Peikoff's *The Ominous Parallels*, New American Library, New York, 1982.)

Please understand that I am not sinking to that silly trick of calling all persons who disagree with me - in this case overly enthusiastic libertarian populists - fascists. I am merely surmising that a particular aspect of the "success" of the Nazis, such as it was, is being misunderstood, and then copied in this imaginary form.

Of course - and this is putting it very mildly indeed! - these foolish libertarians aren't the only people who are making this mistake. The British far-left is now rotten with the notion that streets are more important as venues of political debate than academic seminars or intellectual discussion groups, and is becoming more and more overtly anti-intellectual by the day. The massed ranks of left-

ist academics and intellectuals look on in horror, or if they don't they should.

IMPATIENCE

A point rightly emphasised by TN1 is that many libertarians are not prepared to *wait* for mere publications to change the course of history. They demand that something happen now! They want a libertarian world immediately. They have been to a meeting, or perhaps read some piece of writing or other, urging libertarianism in this or that form, and they are convinced. "Converted" even. Yes, yes, this is it! Next step: transform the world in accordance with the piece of writing, with no silly messing about. And in particular, no more writing, except to "decision makers" - that is, to people too preoccupied with the immediate struggle for power to have time left for any more reading.

My Libertarian Alliance colleague Chris Tame is fond of saying that this is like wanting to build a nuclear power station in a fortnight while spending a mere two thousand pounds. That ain't how it works. It takes longer than that and it costs more than that, and merely screaming like a baby in a playpen that this is "not good enough" won't change a thing. Altering the way millions of other people live takes time and effort. To start with, you have to change the way that the more influential ones among them *think*. Just as you yourself may have been influenced to think differently, and as a result are reading this pamphlet.

TN1 also mentions Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, as an example of a book that has changed the course of history. Other books that have made more than the average stir are: *The Bible*, *The Koran*, the writings of John Locke (which did so much to influence the Founding Fathers of the United States of America - themselves notable creators of further influential documents), and - of course - the writings of Karl Marx. You may not like *Das Kapital* (personally I hate it) but you cannot deny its influence. Nor was *Mein Kampf* a mere product of Adolf Hitler's career; it did quite a bit to cause that career.

Intellectual activity as such, unconnected with any favourable historical events or favourable tides of opinion, is not enough. Adam Smith, for example, would have got nowhere had there been no nascent industrial revolution to prove him right. But this is a long way from saying that carefully chosen (i.e. written) words have no impact on history. *The Wealth of Nations* still had to be written. The notion that words count for nothing beside actions neglects the truth that, when it comes to changing the world, words *are* actions.

WHAT DO THE SLOGANS MEAN?

Why are books - books particularly - so important? For many reasons, not the least of which is that there is room for an impressive slogan ("The Wealth of Nations", "The Rights of Man", "On Liberty", "The Constitution of Liberty", "Anarchy, State and Utopia", or some such) on the spine of the book, so that the book can be stored in a way that does not demand a laborious search for it whenever further study is desired. But unlike a mere slogan, a book literally has something to offer behind the slogan, something which explains that slogan, justifies it, illustrates it and renders it persuasive and attractive. Any fool can say he's in favour of "rights", "liberty", "anarchy" and so forth, and wave banners and hand out leaflets thus decorated. But what do these words mean? Does "rights", for example, mean raising the level of income tax or lowering it? The answer will inevitably be more complicated than a mere slogan.

Even if a book consists largely of nonsense, that still causes the slogan to appear in big, accessible writing, and contrives to suggest to the ignorant that there may be arguments for the slogan, buried in the unreadable prose. (Again, think of *Das Kapital*.) Even *bad* books about *good* ideas may do *some* good.

PAMPHLETS

Almost as valuable as a good book, and far more valuable than a bad book, is a good pamphlet. A pamphlet cannot easily be plucked out of a bookshelf after one glance, however meticulous your filing system. If the subject being dealt with ("The Wealth of Nations", "The Constitution of Liberty") is by its nature a complex one, a pamphlet can only scratch the surface of the subject. But

pamphlets do have a habit of being widely and thoroughly read, instead of merely owned, referred to and gossiped about. They are not costly, either in time or in cash, either to write or to read or even to publish. The pamphlet is the ideal medium for a writer who has one quite important thing to say, and who wishes to spare himself and his readers the horror of a book consisting almost entirely of padding.

A pamphlet may be anything from moralistic drum-beating to the obscurely academic plucking of a lute. Different ideas need different instruments, or, to switch to a related metaphor, different things need to be said with different voices. The *same* things need to be said with different voices, in order to reach different people.

Like the best books, the best pamphlets last, especially if they are not too closely bound up with particular events. And although a pamphlet is not a book, there is nothing to stop a pamphleteer referring to a book. This pamphlet mentions several.

Pamphlets can also *add up to* books, be *collected together* into books. These books have much of the verbal impact of pamphlets, because each of the many things said needed only that number of words to get said, unlike thousands of books I wouldn't dream of publicising.

But beware of condemning pamphlets to fly only in formation with other similar efforts. Each piece of writing must be allowed to roam free, seeking out its own readers, unencumbered by other writings that might put its own particular readers off. Beware of magazines and journals. These are a terrible labour to produce, and all too often are to publishing what infanticide is to midwifery. Even if a magazine article is not in fact ephemeral, it has a fatal tendency to seem so. People - most people - just don't read old magazines. Their reprinted highlights, yes; the magazines themselves, no. One of the most important activities of the Libertarian Alliance is that we save good articles from being smothered into oblivion by bad articles, in magazines and journals. That is, we reprint the good articles as pamphlets, and having once reprinted them we *keep on* reprinting them.

Magazines and periodicals do have their place. Some worthwhile libertarian writing would be hard to publish in any other setting, and is accordingly not now being written much. But just as there should be reprints of the most persuasively libertarian writing in non-libertarian periodicals, so too should the best pieces in libertarian periodicals themselves be rescued from obscurity and republished as libertarian pamphlets. As and when we get round to doing further periodicals ourselves, this will be our approach.

MULTIPLICATION

If it seems that I think of a piece of writing as if it were somehow a living, acting, independent organism, well, there is a very real sense in which this is true. A book or a pamphlet is a fundamentally different sort of object to a lump of coal. Coal doesn't need people in order to have a meaningful existence, however glad people may be when they find coal. But a "book" or an "essay" is a senseless concept if entirely subtracted from the idea of writing and reading, from the fact that those funny squiggles all "mean" something to some living, thinking creature. Through reading this piece, there is a very real sense in which you are meeting me. You are certainly meeting my mind. And this is occurring regardless of who else is also reading another copy of this, whether right next to you but in a different paragraph to you, or in another century and on another planet. And whereas people only breed like people, pieces of writing, thanks to the magic of printing, photocopying and so on, can be made to multiply like fleas.

It really is astounding that these assinine anti-publishing libertarians cannot understand that by the very nature of the thing, "publishing" literally *multiplies* the impact of a thought, enabling hundreds and perhaps even millions to encounter that thought through reading the one publication in its many repetitiously created manifestations. (That, incidentally, is a perfect example of a truth that some people should be relentlessly bludgeoned into grasping, and yet which to others is a banality so total that it's mere presence in a magazine might condemn the entire issue to the dustbin, along with another piece which the disgusted ex-reader might have found fascinating, had he only chanced upon that first.)

BETTER DISAGREEMENT

There are other threats to libertarian publishing besides the mere failure to realise its importance.

TN1 denies that libertarianism is part of the larger classical liberal tradition, viewing it instead as a tiny band of illuminati - of exclusively "higher-order" intellectuals destined, if they are lucky, to have tremendous impact in the long run, but more or less doomed to impotence in the short run. ("Marx in 1860".) Indeed, so tiny is this band of brothers that the "libertarian movement" and the mere Libertarian Alliance are spoken of as if they are one and the same thing.

Suspicious readers are entitled to deduce from this piece of conceptual telescoping that the real idea behind TN1 is that the Libertarian Alliance should *run* the libertarian movement. That idea needs only to be stated for its silliness to be obvious, at any rate to me. However, other libertarians do sometimes take seriously the notion that their particular fragment of the libertarian movement ought to be the dominant fragment, to which all the other fragments owe respectful allegiance. But whereas it is a perfectly sensible ambition for the Libertarian Alliance to stimulate several thousand "dedicated, informed and well-organised libertarian propagandists" into a state of self-conscious productivity, it is crazy to imagine that these dedicated persons will be content to be "organised" by us, or by any other central group of apparatchiks. They will organise themselves.

Says TN1:

Among matters controversial within the libertarian movement, on which the group does not at this stage need to have a settled 'line' are: the comparative merits of various economic methodologies (e.g. Austrian or Chicago), the ethical bases of libertarianism (e.g. natural rights or utilitarianism), foreign policy in the current world situation (e.g. unilateral disarmament or support for NATO), the political organisation of a libertarian society (anarchism or minimal-statism), the merits of particular productive techniques (e.g. nuclear generation of electricity), abortion and the rights of children. These are debated vigorously within the group, and it may be that in years to come some of the issues will be so clarified that a definite line is indicated. Or it may be that when the group is much bigger there will be room for more independent groups taking a definite stand on such questions, in addition to continuing the LA as a broad 'alliance'.

Aside from demonstrating how much the libertarian enterprise in reality consists in "second-hand dealing in ideas", notice how ludicrously patronising this is. The "group" will not "at this stage" have a settled line on things, but later such arguments may be "so clarified that a definite line is indicated". To whom? What if the mighty personages to whom agreement is indicated do not convince the rest of the "group"? Well, meanwhile "there will be room for more independent groups taking a definite stand on such questions." What a relief.

If that's going to be the management style of the LA, then there is no danger that one or two thousand people are going to place themselves under our loftily patronising tutelage. One or two dozen would be asking a lot, and they'd all be mediocrities with a constitutional inability to think and decide things for themselves.

But notice this. Even the doomed *attempt* to keep this "group" together would itself involve an endless round of meetings, whose purpose would be to ensure that the broad "alliance" (under the benevolent guidance of the central committee) was held together and continued to operate as a "group". Any potential publication which seemed to threaten the harmony of the group would inevitably be subjected to prolonged and fraught group discussion.

Publishing productivity would suffer further from the delusion that each writer merely doing his best might not be good enough to live up to the impossibly exalted standards ("higher order intellectuals") that TN1 sets for the LA. Writer's block is virtually guaranteed.

In other words, for practical purposes, I am *far more in favour of publishing* than the writer of TN1.

The management style I favour is far simpler, and far more productive. I and whichever libertarians happen to share my particular

editorial tastes and prejudices will concentrate on organising *ourselves* with a view to producing the maximum amount of libertarian writing that is consistent with what we understand by quality. Other libertarians will be permitted, nay encouraged, to run their own rival enterprises, and we will all sell our stuff to each other and to anyone else we can interest in it. There will be plenty of meetings, but few of these meetings - and none of the big ones - will have any managerial implications.

I do not claim that this method of doing things is particularly original. It is called "the free market". How odd that libertarians, so ready to apply free market analysis to the actions of others, are frequently so reluctant to apply its insights to their own activities.

I can summarise my objections to TN1 by saying that the bit of it that I most object to is just under the title, where the real author's name isn't. "Executive Committee" indeed! No committee writes that well. By leaving this stirring if wrong-headed essay unsigned this committee implies that the "Alliance" has now spoken in one unanimous chorus, and that any disagreement with the *pronunciamento* is treasonable. We are individualists we are! More nonsense.

Which brings us nicely to the most immediately helpful thing about publishing, which is that when you are published, you think better, and you argue better. The very important truth (routinely denied by the sloganisers) that we libertarians do not agree exactly with one another about the nature of libertarianism is laid bare, for all to see and to argue about. If all you ever do is argue verbally with people, you will find it very hard to remember even what you said yourself, let alone what anybody else said. But once you publish things everybody has fixed banners to rally around, and fixed targets to aim at. You may change your mind, but you cannot change what you put. That, as I say, has a life of its own.

FROM TWO TO TEN

Suppose that you and your friends have decided that you are libertarians. If there are only three of you, only two of you ... if there is only *one* of you, never mind. Write down your thoughts, and "publish" them, that is, make a couple more copies and be ready for the first person you then meet who seems to sympathise. Don't wait for some unimaginably huge number of people like fifteen or twenty to gather together. *Publish*. How will you know what you think if you don't write it down. How will you say what you want to say, if you don't exploit that lovely rule about writing which says that you can cross out the bad bits, and copy it out again leaving only the good bits? Writing means saying all the things that you wish you had remembered to say, as and when you remember them again. You can't be trapped by mere debating tricks into saying what you don't think. You can think some more, and put what you do think. You talk with people because that makes you a better writer, and you write because that makes you a better talker.

How will those massed throngs of ten, twenty and more, ever get to know about each other, if one of their number has not already been publishing anyway? In one sense publishing is a ruthlessly inegalitarian activity. The writer humbly proposes. The publisher disposes, and you can bet he's one of the writers you are competing with. (Chris Tame and I do have a mysterious knack of getting published again and again by the LA.) But in another sense publishing is egalitarian and welcoming, because it enables those on the edge of what would otherwise be a mere conversation to hear much more exactly what is being said, and in due course to join in on equal terms. Publishing is the difference between being a tiny sect and being a less than tiny movement, just as on a bigger scale it can turn the ruminations of a mere movement member into a slice of history.

And with that we come full circle. Publishing even on the tiniest scale makes the thinking being done by the few people involved a hundred times more coherent, consistent and persuasive. Even if nobody else pays any immediate attention, they at least are becoming cleverer with each publication that they produce. Eventually other clever people do pay attention and one of the original group gets to be more clever still, because now he is being taken up by a publisher in a Great City and sharpening his brain against the best other brains that his culture can provide. And then he becomes so clever that, having a spare month to himself, he finds that he has

written ... a book! That causes an encouraging little stir, makes his reputation even. So he writes another book on a related topic. "What shall we call it?" he says. "Well Adam," says his comrade, "Does not *An Inquiry Into The Nature And Causes Of The Wealth Of Nations* have a certain ring to it?" Yes it does, and the rest is history.

PUBLISHING IS HERE TO STAY

I have already speculated that some of the hostility of some libertarians to publishing may be rooted in a misunderstanding of the recent past. I will end this piece by adding that some of this hostility is also rooted in a misunderstanding of the near future. I refer to the recurring claims made on behalf of new technological developments in the storage and transmission of information - in a word: computers - to the effect that older information storage and communication methods will be rendered obsolete.

No doubt when writing was first devised, there were some who said that speech would cease, yet what actually happened was that people had to talk a whole lot more while deciding what to write, and that once they had written it that gave them a million new things to talk about. The same was said of the printed word, and the result was another quantum leap in the quantity of talking that went on. I can definitely recall the claim being made that television would put an end both to conversation and to reading. And then more recently there came the proposition that computers would put an end to pieces of paper with writing on them. The reality - accepted by everyone with any knowledge of what computers actually do - is that computers have created an unprecedented torrent of paper of every kind.

By everyone, that is, except demented computerised libertarian would-be populists who seem seriously to believe that normal publishing is about to be replaced by computers, linked up to each other via the telephone system. The sheer cost and confusion of using computers like this is intolerable to anyone except those who enjoy playing with computers for their own sake. And secondly, if that ever changes, it is *publications* that will be transmitted! In much the same way that documents are already transmitted by the (much more promising in the short run) technology of the facsimile machine.

In the course of a panel discussion on libertarian strategy and tactics in which I participated, at the Libertarian International Convention of 1984 in London, one of my fellow panelists made the claim that, what with all these new-fangled gadgets that are capable of storing the entire contents of the Library of Congress on the head of a pin, communication by computer would become democratised, in the sense that the "middle man" would be cut out. People would be able to type their own additions to whatever publications they chanced upon down their wires and cables, and subsequent readers would benefit from these additions.

This is about as sensible as saying that people benefit now from the graffiti on cinema posters. Far from "middle men" being rendered obsolete by these vast new tidal waves of information, they will become more necessary than ever.

In short there will still be "publishing", and if anything even more so. The last thing that most computerised readers will want is to wade through a lot of additional scrawl put there by some lunatic libertarian electro-populist. Likewise those who actually want to read libertarian stuff will not welcome piles of majoritarian abuse superimposed upon their preferred reading matter. Unless electronic "publications" have the same finality, exclusivity and standardised form that printed publications have now, they will simply be ignored. And, *most people will go on reading these publications from bits of paper*, paper being a truly wondrous invention which, had it been invented after the computer instead of before it would have been greeted as a notable advance upon the more primitive presentation methods of the conventional computer.

All this technomania is just another example of what TN1 rightly identifies as the short-cut syndrome, in this case the belief that a premature craze for computer networking will serve as some sort of substitute for eloquent and effective libertarian communication of the conventionally written and published kind.