Misconceptions about Information Transfer—
Some Timely Constructive Criticism

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As all of us know who attended the Banquet last night and witnessed the passing out of endless citations and kudos, it is very easy and popular in our Society to be "pro" something—to give praise and approval for writings or research, or for the Conference arrangements. It is far more difficult—and very unpopular—to be “con”. Yet we in the Society claim to believe in truthful inquiry, and I have recently observed that most of us at this Conference—and indeed throughout the entire United States—have been accepting as fact a totally incorrect notion. And so I must, reluctantly, take the “con” approach in this paper and set the record straight.

Let's look at the record:

“In the beginning was the word, and the word was God . . . and God created the heavens and earth . . . (and so forth) . . . and God created man . . .” The rest is history. And, incidentally—although this is not the principal misconception I wish to correct—because the WORD preceded man, and because Adam and Eve were created with the power of speech and used it (with qualified success) in the Garden of Eden, therefore, we might say that OUR profession, that of information transfer technologists, is the world's oldest profession—and not that high-priced spread.

But back to the main thrust.

Herodotus tells us that, already by the Classic Ancient Period, books were fairly plentiful, and that scholars were finding it troublesome to keep up with everything available in their respective fields. To help with this problem someone had invented the concordance—an index in which every different word occurring in a text is listed together with the text of every brief passage in which that word occurs, so that information on pertinent topics can be retrieved without having to scan full texts. One of the tasks of the staff in the great library of Alexandria, we are told, was to generate concordances. It was a very slow process. Today of course we have a KWIC process.

With the decline of Rome, the concordance almost disappeared. But it was revived gradually with the rebirth of scholarship, and especially following the introduction of printing in Western Europe. Within three years after initial publication of the King James Bible, there were not one, but two concordances to it on the market—a 24 volume unabridged King James Concordance (weighing 280 pounds), and a one-volume (11 pound) abridged Concordance that was derived by applying a stop list of 37 inconsequential words such as “the”, “and,” “in”, and “to”. This abridged Concordance was sold very widely in England, and, for generations, was regarded with almost as much veneration as the Bible itself.

Now, also in England, but somewhat later, there was invented or developed what is now an even more widely owned and revered reference aid—the lexicon, or dictionary. Dr. Samuel Johnson, as we all know, is given most of the credit because he applied a total systems approach to his famous Dictionary, or Lexicon, and gave full attention, not only to its compilation, but also to its format, typography, printing, distribution, and promotion.

Johnson's dictionary was an instant success and Johnson himself was greatly lionized. But he also aroused great controversy and hatred for a while in some quarters—particularly among some fundamentalist religious sects—because they felt Johnson was irreverent and a sinner to use sources other than the Bible Concordance in selecting words to be included in his Lexicon, or Dictionary.

James Boswell records—and other sources confirm—that the fundamentalist opposition to the Johnson Lexicon erupted into dangerous violence on one occasion, when a certain fundamentalist preacher and his followers, their abridged Bible Concordances held under
their arms, confronted Johnson and his admirers at an autographing party in Johnson's habitual London coffee house, and there accused Johnson of blasphemy. Words flew. Johnson tried at first to explain to them the differences between their index work and his authority guide; but the fundamentalists bridled at his implication that their Concordance to the Bible was not to be considered authoritative, and they flew into a rage. Then the fundamentalists began to hurl their Concordances at Johnson and his group, who responded, naturally, by seizing copies of the Dictionary (weight, 12 pounds) and flinging them back. There were reportedly several fatalities and many injuries on both sides before the London guard troops could separate the combatants and haul the intruders off to prison.

Boswell describes this bloody encounter in his diary in great detail, and he records that it occurred on April 19, 1755.

Which brings me to my point. It is about time that everyone at this conference and, indeed, that everyone in the United States, realized that this year, 1975, is not—as is so widely and erroneously believed—the 200th anniversary, but that it is in fact the 220th anniversary, of the Battle of Concordance and Lexicon.

References