

And God Laughs...

The Arthur Jones Autobiography

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60

“The most valuable invention in history? That would probably depend upon how you define value; but the most influential was the printing press.”

Anon.

Most people even in the supposedly civilized parts of the world continued to live for thousands of years in an almost unchanging manner primarily because almost none of them were literate. Prior to the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg, the publication of a document of any kind was a long, slow and very expensive process; producing a copy of a book required the services of a scribe, but scribes were not what most people assumed they were, they were not literate people themselves, were artists who were trained to copy things like books and maps, copied things that they could not read.

Making a single copy of a book required several years of a scribe's work, and the copy was almost always different from the original because the scribes invariably used artistic license which introduced error, and that was largely responsible for much of the current controversy in regard to ancient history, particularly religious history. But right or wrong, such copies were very expensive and were not available to most people.

The introduction of the printing press changed that situation very quickly, a book thereafter could be copied for less than one percent of its previous cost; and as books became widely available the literacy rate increased in most of the European countries. The Bible was, and probably still is, the most commonly read book in European societies and probably was the most influential book in history. Unfortunately, by the time Bibles could be printed, earlier versions produced by scribes had been changed so much that it is now impossible to determine just what the original authors were trying to say; and when we add the errors introduced by the fact that all languages are largely colloquial, that words do not always have a literal meaning, and the fact that these meanings change from one generation to the next, we eventually reach a point where nobody can determine the author's meaning.

Supposedly scientific terminology, the use of Latin terms in scientific papers, was supposed to solve that problem, but instead has added more confusion even when these terms remain unchanged for centuries; and, generally, they have not remained unchanged. Until recently, torque was expressed in foot-pounds, and not one person in a thousand knew what that term meant; but, recently, that term was changed to Newton-meters, and almost nobody knows what that means.

Feet and inches, or meters? Miles, or knots? Call it what you will, but make up your mind; and having decided, then don't change it. Few if any of the millions of scientific articles being published today can be understood clearly by anybody except their authors, if by them; and a thousand years from now nobody will be able to understand any of them. If a publication is intended to perpetuate current thought for following generations, it might help if people could at least understand what you were trying to say; how can they evaluate it if they can't even understand it?

Worse: it appears that most scientific writers do not want to be understood, are trying to impress others in their field with their own brilliance, rather than attempting to convey information. When we also consider the fact that very little of what we read, and almost nothing of what we hear, is remembered correctly, it follows that the result usually adds more in the way of confusion than it does in the way of education. Most real learning comes from hands-on experience, which is not always practical on a large scale; and the second best method is seeing as well as hearing and reading, which requires a film, a video tape, or a video disc. The problem being cost of audio-visual educational aids.

For many years, 16mm films were used in almost all schools, but film prints were very expensive and did not hold up well when used repeatedly. The recent great reduction in the cost of small-format video tapes helped a lot, but they are still too expensive for truly mass distribution. The solution to this problem was invented nearly twenty years ago by RCA Corporation, but then they fucked it up; they took the most valuable invention in modern history and then ruined it in a mistaken attempt to improve it, and almost lost the company in the process.

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Starting nearly twenty years ago, several of the largest electronics firms in the world, Sony, RCA, Philips, Mashusta, and others, started to develop video discs; eventually invested more than \$4,000,000,000.00 in research, and lost it all because they produced what they were looking for but then failed to recognize it.

There are currently two ways to produce a video disc: one, by stamping them out in a purely mechanical fashion like the earliest phonograph records, at a cost of a few cents each; or, two, by using a laser disc, which is far more expensive to produce. RCA chose the mechanical method, and that was the right decision, but then they made the mistake of adding a very expensive so-called Caddy, a box covering the disc that was intended to protect it; but this protection was not actually required, so all they managed to do was to make their discs so expensive that they could not then be sold to a mass market.

The other companies tried to produce laser discs; reaching this decision because laser discs did not require protection, could be used repeatedly with little or no deterioration in the quality of the image or sound. But then they found that actually producing laser discs in great quantities was all but impossible to do at a reasonable cost; when the first laser disc was actually produced they could sell only one out of each 250 that they made, had to throw 249 video discs away for each one that could be sold. Which brought the distribution of video discs to an abrupt halt, and later delayed mass distribution for years while they tried to solve their production problems. Eventually they were able to produce laser discs much more cheaply, but they are still far too expensive for truly mass distribution.

If the mechanical discs invented by RCA had been put on the market, without a Caddy, a two-hour feature film could have been sold retail for about \$2.00, and at that price would have sold by the billions. But they said . . . “But without the Caddy it will become dirty after a few plays, and then the quality of the image will suffer.”

So what? At a cost of \$2.00, when the first one gets dirty throw it away and buy another copy. In any case, who wants to watch the same film a hundred times? If you attempted to apply the same reasoning to a newspaper it would be clear proof of your insanity. If every page, of every copy, of every issue of a newspaper was covered on both sides by clear plastic, then that newspaper would last almost literally forever; but would have to sell for about \$50.00 a copy, so damned few copies would ever be sold. When so-called soft-cover copies of books were first introduced they sold for only 25 cents a copy, and the result was an almost immediate enormous increase in the sales of books. The same thing would have occurred in sales of audio-visual discs if they were cheap enough; and mechanical discs provided the potential for that low price. Laser discs probably never will, certainly have not done so yet.

During the initial developmental stages of both mechanical and laser discs, I was directly involved with both RCA and Sony, and I tried repeatedly to point out the obvious mistakes they were making; mistakes that were, at least, obvious to me, if not to them. But then I made a mistake of my own.

Being aware of the then ongoing developmental projects for video discs in the mid 1970s, I believed that I saw an enormous opportunity: if the video discs were coming soon, as I then believed, then another requirement for mass marketing of these discs had been overlooked; where did they intend to produce the programs to be distributed on video discs? At the time, there was no surplus in the way of studio production facilities; every studio then in existence was already being used around the clock, and simply had neither time nor space for any additional program production. So I decided to build a huge program production facility; then, when the discs did become available, I would be the only game in town for at least a few years; would get a big jump ahead of any later competitors, because such facilities cannot be built overnight.

So I then built and equipped the largest video program production facility in the world in a huge building in Lake Helen, Florida; and, years later, there it sits, unused. Unused because the video discs did not become available as soon as I expected, and even now are too expensive for mass sales.

At the time that I started to build those studios, the total gross annual sales of so-called ‘How to’ films, tapes and books exceeded the gross sales of all forms of entertainment in this country by a ratio of three to one. Income from movies, television, music, sports, plays, concerts, and all other types of entertainment, was only a third as much as income from instructional materials. And that was what I was interested in, because the costs involved in producing

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instructional programs were far lower than they were for any sort of program intended for the entertainment market. Lower costs, and much greater potential sales; an ideal combination for enormous profits.

But that, of course, required the introduction of video discs at a reasonable price; and that has not happened yet, may never happen.

Years ago, Sony Corporation sent me a one-of-a-kind prototype of a video-disc playing machine for my evaluation; they had \$400,000,000.00 invested in that one machine, and it got lost enroute to me. Which created a brief panic in both New York and Tokyo; but, eventually, it was found; then they had it hand carried to me by armed guards.

My evaluation of that machine? I told them . . . “It is far too complicated; you have about as many keys on it as they put on a typewriter, and that will be very attractive to every computer nerd in this country, both of them, neither of whom have enough money to buy such a machine. But it will be intimidating to your actual potential customers; it will scare them to death, so they could buy it but won’t because they will be afraid that it is simply too complicated for them to use.”

Naturally, they did not believe me; tried to impress me with all of the numerous capabilities provided by all of the keys on the machine. None of which capabilities added anything in the way of an actual requirement for proper use of the machine. I told them . . . “You need only three keys: GO, STOP, and REVERSE; any additional keys are worse than worthless, will kill sales rather than attracting them.”

Somewhat later, when I saw a later model of that machine, it had far fewer keys than the first model; but still had too many.

So, they made their mistakes, and I made mine. But while I lost millions, they lost billions.