

Lost in cyberspace

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

There are more possible moves on a chess board than there are neutrons in our universe, I once read in a chess encyclopedia. I recently asked a University of Chicago mathematician whether that could still be true, now that we know there are hundreds of billions more galaxies than we had thought, each with hundreds of billions of stars. He calculated a bit and said yes. I replied, "In other words, an infinite number!" He backed off in horror: "No, not infinite. That's for the divinity school; in math we'd simply call it a large number."

I think about that kind of quantification when I hear of the possibilities of very large numbers in cyberspace—which I learned recently is not a space at all. Like Pascal and Kant staring at the starry skies, I contemplate these possibilities and find us humans to be small indeed, mere reeds, though—as Pascal would have it—"thinking reeds."

I think about being lost in cyberspace, bewildered, benumbed by the confusion and profusion of signals, aids, bad jokes, good potentials "out there." Adam Hodgkin speaks of that bewilderment in a recent issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*. Tim Berners-Lee, the Web's inventor, proposed retrieval systems on the analogy of books. But "the Web is different from other forms of literature"; it is "dynamic and virtual, where print is permanent and physical," Hodgkin says. And, he adds, "We must admit that the Web is also unreliable, slow, frustrating and misleading." Why? "Precisely because it contains too much information, much of it deliberately misleading."

There are thousands of reference books on it, galores of encyclopedias. Now there are aggregators and integrators and repurposers—there's a whole new vocabulary out there—to help us sift through it all. For example, FOLDDOC, the Free Online Dictionary of Computing (<http://wombat.doc.ic.ac.uk>, it says there).

Reading all this reminded me that in the February 16 M.E.M.O I solicited the names of religious thinkers who have interpreted the Web and associated media expressions. Quite a number of readers sent me suggestions. I piled up alphabetical

listings, but discovered that I did not know how to evaluate them. I don't like to recommend authors or books I have not read, in fields where I am new or lost.

Now I am writing at a desk used for six years by Mark U. Edwards Jr., former president of St. Olaf College. Moving to Minnesota for the months I serve as interim president of the college prompted me to clean out files and appraise commitments to keep or to break. Meanwhile, from his present home in New Hampshire, Edwards is pondering—and writing on—cyberspacial matters that concern religion (see his article “Overinformed,” Nov. 1).

If you sent me something in response to my February request, know that I've forwarded that file to him, to make what use of it he can. You might well be reading material here or wherever else he publishes, on line or off, that follows your suggestions. And what I learned from your samplings of what was for me “too much information” was that I should not ask for material that I cannot digest or make commitments I cannot keep.

Appreciative as I am of Web, Internet and cyberspace, I will be keeping my feet on the ground, leaving virtual reality to those who, like Edwards, know more of what they are talking about. Not “infinitely” more; just more by “a very large number.”