

On My Mind  
12/17/99

As I write this - on a computer - for posting on the web - another cyber device - it is distressing to realize that I am using the most transitory, short-lived, impermanent of mediums. As a fascinating article in last week's issue of *New York Times Magazine* points out, "once a digital file begins to degrade, there's no period of fading or scratchiness - it's just gone." Digital material corrupts absolutely, but analog materials - like paper - deteriorate more gracefully - the pages just yellow and curl, the article notes.

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The article - in fact the whole issue - is about a millennium time capsule: what should go into it, in what form should the information be stored, in what kind of container should it be put, and where should the time capsule be buried. To answer the questions, the Times put together a number of panels, each assigned to tackle one aspect of the problem.

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The group assigned to solving the information storage problem concluded that the new technology of computers, hard disk storage, floppy disks and CD-ROMS was not the answer, since it has an expected lifetime of only about 20 years. Ink on paper, on the other hand, could be expected to last 1,000 years - if the right kind of ink and paper were used, and the right kind of storage.

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With one of the books on the *Times* best seller list being the newly-discovered letters written to Galileo by his daughter about 400 years ago, and one of my daughters impressed by the wisdom in a letter she's recently found from a great-aunt, I'm seriously thinking of returning to writing all my letters by hand. Or, in the alternative, printing out copies of all the e-mail letters and other writings I now do by computer. With the amount of effort I put into some of them, I'd hate to think none of it would be accessible to any of my grandchildren!

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The biggest problem faced by the group responsible for deciding where to put the time capsule was not so much where to put it, but where to put it so it would be found. Apparently, hundreds of time capsules known to have been buried over the centuries have never been found. The article mentions, as one example, the "M\*A\*S\*H" time capsule buried in 1983, which contained, among other things, Klinger's dress. The capsule was buried on the MGM parking lot, but "construction of a new hotel on the site threw off everyone's bearings, and now it's lost," the article says.

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The panel concluded that a museum would be the best place for the millennium capsule, since museums are in the business of preserving things, choosing New York City's American Museum of Natural History. But museum staff wanted the capsule on display - a natural attitude for museum curators - while the editors on the panel - used to thinking in terms of putting an issue to bed, or closing the issue - wanted it buried. The curators won that debate.

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A contest was held for the composition and form of the capsule, and was won by Spain's foremost architect, Santiago Calatrava. Composed of two tons of stainless steel, and looking like a cross between a flower and an origami sculpture, the capsule will go on permanent display in front of one of the museum's entrances. Calatrava's design, and other submissions, can be seen on the web at [www.nytimes.com/capsule/designs](http://www.nytimes.com/capsule/designs).

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Speaking of design, something is amiss at the Department of Public Safety. I've now seen two policemen with the U.S. flag sewn onto their shirt sleeves backwards. According to my <I>World Almanac</I>, proper flag protocol requires that the blue field of stars appear at the observer's left.

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On the two policemen I saw (one, in line at a bank, the other at the court house) the blue field was on my right.

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I realize that many people here are left-handed - which sometimes causes things to get turned around. I'm also aware that many people here consider themselves as Chamorro or Carolinian first, and as American second, but seems to me that if they're going to display the flag at all, they might as well do it correctly. Particularly when they're officers of the law.

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And speaking of skewed vision, the scenario being proposed for the 12<sup>th</sup> Legislature in the House of Representatives is about as cock-eyed as one can get. The treatment given minority members in the Legislature and the consideration given Rota and Tinian's representative are admittedly sensitive issues - and perhaps even in need of reform, change, modification of some sort.

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But going so far as to arbitrarily make minority members committee chairpersons - as Representative Dino M. Jones has said Benigno R. Fitial should do in exchange for Jones' support of Fitial as next House speaker - goes too far. It would corrupt the very essence of the two-party system, not to mention legislative protocol and procedure. To expect any member of the majority party to cooperate in committee work directed by an arbitrarily-appointed minority chairperson is unrealistic - unless that majority member's objections were bought off, which would make the situation even less acceptable.

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Such a move will ensure that the 12<sup>th</sup> Legislature is a do-nothing travesty, a total shambles. Yet the CNMI simply cannot afford two years of inaction on the part of the Legislature, particularly at a time when the CNMI's economy has not yet recovered, and when the CNMI is under siege both by members of the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Executive branch.

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Will the welfare of the CNMI become a victim of Uncle Willy's self-interest-motivated-machinations? Won't it really be self-defeating, since a do-nothing legislature would practically guarantee federal take-over? Are there not enough aware voters out there to bring pressure on

those legislators who've defected from the Hofschneider camp?

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If the threat of federal takeover of immigration and the imposition of the minimum wage weren't so serious, the situation has all the makings of banana republic-type comedy. Equally funny, but not quite so serious - on one level - is Benigno R. Fitial's attitude toward the <I>Variety</I> and its reporters. Fitial has reportedly refused to be interviewed, to make any (printable) comments to <I>Variety</I> reporters on the grounds that the paper is in competition with the <I>Tribune</I>.

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Newspapers are supposed to report the news. Except in editorials or by-lined columns, they are supposed to be objective and impartial, letting the reader decide whom to believe, who is right or wrong. The <I>Variety</I> reporters are just doing their job - trying to collect news for their readers. That Fitial is so petty, so wrongly partial to the newspaper of his employer, Uncle Willy, that he will not give any information to the "other" paper I find hysterically funny. (And aren't elected officials - such as legislators - supposed to be legislators full time, to NOT have an outside job, or any "boss" other than the voters who elected them?)

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However it does not bode well for Fitial's conduct in the House. Will Fitial be as blatantly biased, as openly prejudiced, as rudely discriminatory there, when it comes to issues involving any of the industries in which Uncle Willy has an interest? When it comes to any issues involving foreign workers, on which Uncle Willy is so dependent? When it comes to any issues involving minimum wage levels, on which Uncle Willy is also heavily dependent? If, as might well be the case, the answer is yes, that situation too, ceases to be quite so funny.

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Also funny, if it weren't so misleading, is the claim by legislators as well as the Retirement Fund administrator, that abolishment of the 30% early retirement bonus will save the government and the Fund from financial disaster. A bill to abolish the bonus is now before the Governor.

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The original intent of the bonus was to reduce the number of government employees by offering them a "reward" if they would leave government and retire. It is not clear whether that reward was supposed to continue to be offered ever afterwards, or only at the time it was originally proposed. But with no words saying otherwise, the reward continued to be offered to all eligible employees upon their retirement. The net result has been a huge drain on government resources.

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Now a bill has been passed by both the House and Senate abolishing the 30% "reward" - but it will affect only those who become government employees after the law goes into effect. All other government employees will still be eligible for the bonus. So for whom, and, more importantly, when, does that save money?

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It's high time the bonus was abolished. But let's not take credit where none is due. According to a report in the <I>Tribune</I>, the full effect will not be felt for another 20 years - no help at all

to the present state of the economy.