

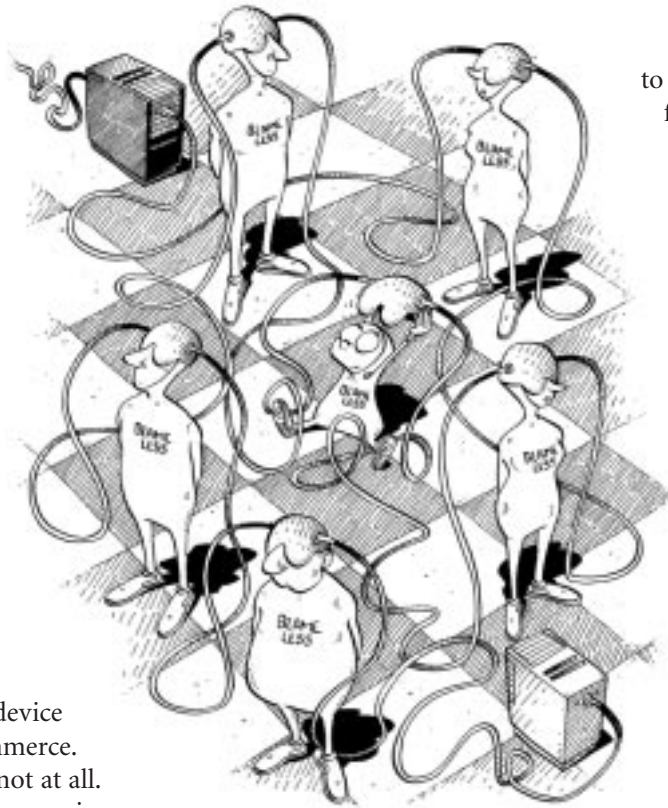
# The Art of Being a Mere Conduit

BY FRED STENSON

## Consider for a moment the mere conduit.

When Metallica estimated that several hundred thousand folks were downloading and trading their music on the Internet, the band did the American thing. They looked for someone to sue. When they came to the Internet Service Providers—the folks who provide Internet and email and bill us handsomely—it appeared to Metallica that they were in charge of the device that allowed the illegal commerce. But the ISPs said, “No, no, not at all. We are mere conduits.” If the music downloaders were thieves, then the ISPs had more in common with the street that the escaping thieves ran down after the robbery than with the thieves themselves.

Same with pornography. That which used to be the peek-a-boo province of furtive men buying bagged magazines off high shelves or sneaking into triple X viewing parlours on the bad side of town is fast disappearing from the real world. The unsightly scourge is off the street—and in your homes, just a couple of mouse clicks away. Down the mere conduit the images stream, on a device that may have made its way into your living room or your child’s bedroom on the educational



ticket. “If you don’t have access to the Internet, your children will be mud men at the science fair of life.” Meanwhile, Bart Simpson is scarfing down the free pornographic nibbles as fast as your Internet connection can move them into his brain. Is he eighteen? Darn tootin’.

A friend once explained to me that the goal of every thinking being is to lead a blameless life. I don’t know if I properly credited the wisdom at the time, but it certainly was true and wise, and it is getting truer and wiser. The blameless life and the mere conduit business are almost the same thing, hand in glove. A good close look at where the society is sailing off

to illustrates a dramatic shift away from things that can be blamed toward things that cannot. In other words, mere conduits are hot, while the stuff that travels in them is not. Or to put it in more McLuhanist terms, the stuff in the conduit may be hot, but the conduit itself is cool, which is far, far better.

The Information Age, the Electronic Age (a.k.a. the Information Revolution) is a picture of cool blamelessness. At a glance you would think that something called the Information Age might be about information, but really it is not. Certainly, it is about moving information, speeding it up, making it leap long distances without wires, lapping the globe 20 times a minute, bringing it in through more and more holes in your house, getting it into your pocket and your car, and bouncing it off satellites into northern Siberia.

But does it really matter *what* is doing all that leaping and bouncing? Or is the importance in the leaping and the bouncing itself?

While researching your answer, try to hire someone to build you a personal web page. First of all, the person will probably be too busy to deal with your lowly web site, and then will astound you with how much money she wants to build it, especially since she’s just told you that it’s so simple a child of five could do it.

Then, if you balk, the computer person will convince you what peril of lost relevance you face if you don't get a web site such that, within a minute or so, you will pay any price. Whatever. Just make it a good one.

But see what happens if you try to interest this person in what you actually want to put on your web site. See the instant glazing over like ice forming at forty below. To this person, this computer wizard, your personal information, views and photos could not matter less. She will probably say you can put a block of that stuff over here and some of this blah-blah over there, and you can have some labels and some buttons and some hot links that allow you to get from this stuff to this other crap instantly. But that is as deep into it as she wants to get.

Essentially, computer people are selling mere conduits while *being* mere conduits, the perfect combination. They earn good money while making sure not to compromise a blameless life. It is not just that they

are bored with your life and career and *curriculum vitae*, though surely they are. It is more their recognition that the only thing that could screw up their blamelessness is listening to, understanding and remembering what you want to say. You could be launching a web site full of pictures of yourself naked with dogs on a trampoline, or giving step-by-step instructions to children in the assembly of pipe bombs. You could be spouting hate and malignancy of any old kind. As long as the computer wizards don't know that, they preserve both the merelessness and the blamelessness of their conduits—and who wouldn't?

Very important is to be able to distinguish between blamelessness and virtue. I don't think mere conduits want to be virtuous any more than they want to be evil. Either way, they would be dealing with the stuff, the content, and, having thereby broken the code of merelessness, would be mere conduits no longer. Being virtuous, for one thing, is a matter of opinion. If you run up a flag, some will salute and others will try to shoot it down and burn it. Even if you start out with more people saluting than burning, fashions can change, and there you'd be stuck with a once-virtuous opinion that has now gone bad. Consider for a moment where the Yippies are now, and Patty Hearst, and the people who staked their political reputations on the non-exportation of Canadian natural gas, and Cat Stevens. Let's face it: one fatwa against your fellow creative artist and you might as well get a lifetime lease on your purgatorial cell.

Mere conduits never make that mistake. They know that it doesn't matter what's flowing as long as it's flowing fast.

I may appear to have set out on this subject for purposes of making some big moral point. You may think I'm about to champion regulation of the Internet, or to plead for more responsibility on the part of its providers. For more black spots over

the exposed private parts of the eight million people currently fornicating in my living room. I am not. That would be choosing to be potentially blamable when I really want, along with everyone else, to be blameless.

For a long time I believed that being a writer made it impossible, that I was doomed to a life of content and opinions. But I have had an awakening such that I realize what really hippie nonsense that is. Obviously, if a person is not careful, you could fall into the trap of writing down your thoughts and opinions, attaching your name, and erecting them on placards for all to see. But you don't have to. You can choose to be a mere conduit instead. Instead of writing your own opinions, have clients to whom you say: "I understand that you are paying me, not for my opinions, but to make yours more intelligible. Either that or more obscure, dainty, palatable, reasonable, left, right or green." Try it and see if you don't feel more superior, cool and smug within minutes.

The theory I'm hatching here is that the happy, satisfying jobs are the ones capable of this transformation. Beware jobs that lead to statements or statistics you have to stand behind. Teachers and professors produce marks. Policemen bring charges. These are trouble spots. Government, so long on process and short on answers, is a happy zone. You would think doctors would have problems because of the need to supply diagnoses, but more modern and happier ones give you an array of possible tests and procedures, and a few probabilities, and say: "You pick. It's your body."

So choose your job carefully and make sure it is the kind that will allow you to be a citizen of the 21st century. Don't be the motley stuff that rides in an open car down the Information Highway; *be* the highway. Be blameless. Be cool. Be happy.

**Fred Stenson** was recently nominated for the Giller Prize for his novel *The Trade*.