1992

Books, Microforms, Computers and Us: Who's Us?

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The author suggests that in the increasing effort to define, and refine, their identity and image, librarians have recently turned towards computers – and away from books and microforms. The result has been an avoidance of the more important issues facing librarians – such as ownership, accessibility, cost, and preservation of new formats of information – and an ever greater obfuscation of what constitutes the profession of librarianship.

Hypothesis:

Librarianship is a passive, at best reactive, profession which has never been clearly defined either by its members or the public; it has attracted people with relatively low self-esteem who are comfortable with low-pay, ambiguous responsibilities, and little accountability; people who are good complainers, excellent penny-pinchers, and definitely not imaginative strategists.

Corollary:

Librarians' efforts to improve their pay and prestige, and to define their primarily female profession, have depended (as have other attempts of women to achieve equal rights with men[1]) on proving – mostly to each other, rather than to those who could change our status – that we are "like" other professions. Currently, that means association with computers[2] and rejection of the importance of books and microforms.

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Librarians apparently spend large amounts of time programming commercial software, tending equipment which houses databases of library-specific information, writing[3] and talking[4] to each other about what they have done to, with, or for computers. They thus divert time, energy, staff, and budgets away from collections (which include books and microforms) and services and toward computers in one form or another. To what end?

Librarians have overestimated the importance of computers and underestimated the continued importance of books and microforms, largely because of a failure to define the profession. Worse, librarians ignore critical issues by focussing time and attention on computers. The fear that computers will displace librarians may prove valid if only because librarians' obsession with computers diverted them from another professional identity.

Computers, like telephones, telefaxes, copiers, scanners, pencils, and paper, are merely tools of the trade. They are not the substance of the profession. Machine-readable databases, like printed paper and microforms, are simply formats in which information is stored, and from which librarians help users extract information.

Librarians are obsessed with computers because of the lack of any other professional identity; they think the world will bestow respect as the reward for an association with computers. This hope is based on false assumptions and causes wholesale avoidance of crucial issues.

The incorrect assumptions are these:

1. Computers command respect.
2. Computers are the future.
3. Computers are better than print or microform.
4. Patrons prefer computers.
5. Computers make things simpler and easier.

Although there is no evidence to support these blanket assertions, the library profession produces myriad articles, speeches, entire journals, and national meeting programs which implicitly accept them.

There is probably as much evidence that opposite propositions are true:

1. Those who work with computers are modern clerks or maintenance workers.

2. Computers are just a small part of the future.
3. Complex circumstances determine whether print, microform, or computer is best.
4. Patron preferences vary; patron preferences cannot always determine format.
5. Things will continue to get more complex; any simplicity is an illusion.

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Much worse than the profession's acceptance of the first five assumptions is the resultant derogation of responsibility to raise, and respond to, important questions about machine-readable data bases. A true profession would address the strategic political and economic questions in our journals and meetings, rather than fixating on other matters of practical implementation. There are at least six such strategic issues.

1. WHO OWNS THE SOURCE OF INFORMATION?

When a library buys books and microforms, it owns the items which contain information. The library makes decisions about access, storage, and preservation. The tools needed to extract information are simple: eyes, perhaps aided by glasses or contacts; and film and fiche readers. Formats are not only standardized, but stable. The major exception to standardization is language, but that variable is stable in that it has existed for centuries and each language remains stable enough to provide hundreds of years of understanding.

In some cases, ownership of copyright is separate from ownership of the information as an object; but the separation of the two by the law eliminates insurmountable problems, at least with ordinary published material. Libraries in this country can circulate books without paying royalties; patrons can make personal fair use copies for their own use within well understood limits.

Each library makes its own choices about what information to purchase, what format to purchase, and the conditions under which the material will be stored. Through cataloging, it determines how patrons will find out about the material. Through the purchase of indexes, the library further influences access. Each library determines limits on patron use, such as access to the library itself and to its stacks, circulation rules, and photocopy facilities.

Once libraries rely on offsite data bases, or lease such data for local mounting, they no longer own the information. All they buy is the right to use information for a period of time or a number of searches. Library rights are not those of an owner – permanent complete control over the object for all legal purposes – but those of a mere leasor or licensee.

Here is an example from my field, law librarianship. All academic, and most private, law libraries contain one or more of the series of federal court reports published by West Publishing Company. The material is essential to legal research; the text of the opinions is not copyrightable because it emanates from the federal government. West, however, has added copyrighted subject indexing devices known as topics and keynumbers, as well as copyrighted summaries of the opinion. Until the late 1970's, libraries obtained this material by buying paper or microfiche from West. Once in the collection, the material could be used by any library patron, constrained primarily by copyright laws. The patron at my library, for example, might be a Michigan, Wayne State, or other school's law student, a lawyer, a member of the faculty of another school, college, or university, or even a layperson who chose not to identify herself.

In the late 1970's, West developed a machine-readable version of its court reports, including the federal material described above. West's marketing efforts focussed on the private sector, and those about to become relatively affluent members of the private sector: law students. The basic arrangement put in place at that time remains in place now: Law school libraries are given flat rate contracts at a fixed annual rate; in return, they receive access to the data base, equipment and communication lines, and personal, printed and online training. However, this is done in the form of one-year contracts. Each contract clearly restricts use of the data base to the customer-law school's students and faculty. No one else may take advantage of the contract. Law firms cannot use the equipment in the Michigan law library; neither can faculty or students from other schools and colleges; nor can ordinary citizens.

My argument is not about whether that is a desirable situation; as a practical matter, one must have some training in legal concepts and terminology to use the database. And our library continues to purchase paper, and microform, of those same federal court reports, so no one is actually disadvantaged.

But what if budget constraints forced us to choose between computer or print access? Strong student and faculty pressure would support the computer version: It is in many respects faster and easier to use; it is what our students will be expected to use when they enter the practice of law. The result could well be a drastic cut, due to contractual limitations, in our ability to serve anyone other than our primary patrons, i.e. Michigan Law School faculty and students.

What if further budget constraints forced us to choose not between the computer and print version of federal court reports, but between the computer version of federal court reports and printed material not represented in the data base? If we had already cut the printed version in the first hypothetical, we would be forced to continue computer access, because of the primary importance of federal court reports. The result: intolerable limitations in the availability of other material for our primary patrons.

That's what the ownership issue is about.

2. HOW WILL PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS OBTAIN THE INFORMATION?

Printed paper, and standard reduction microforms are – assuming a literate population – easy to get at. Equipment is either not needed, or is standard and inexpensive. In a pinch, a magnifying glass would do. That's not true of machine-readable information, whether in a CD-ROM or a remote database.

Users of computer-based information need both software and hardware; both are almost always proprietary and represent added expense. Worse, both are changing so quickly that constant upgrades are needed. Libraries do not have the choice, for example, of purchasing a compact disc or a tape of information, putting it on a shelf, and expecting that in a decade or two the average user will be able to extract information from the object. We are all familiar with the famous census tapes, usable only with equipment housed in the Smithsonian Institution.

3. HOW MUCH WILL FUTURE ACCESS TO THE INFORMATION COST, AND WHO WILL CONTROL THE COST?

This issue largely represents another aspect of the first two, but I list it separately because it is so inextricably related to shifting national information policies. Obviously, whoever controls cost also controls access. Increasingly, the government is privatizing the distribution of information obtained at public expense.

A huge literature describes this complex process, but one example is informative: "Byting the hand that feeds them: information vendors are robbing the government blind," by Daniel Gross, in the November 1991 *Washington Monthly.* Gross cites LEXIS as well as AGNET, which is used to provide crop, livestock, sales, and other agricultural data from the Department of Agriculture at rates easily affordable to farmers. Now Martin Marietta charges $150 per month plus $45 per hour. Again, there is a vast literature on this subject which can't be summarized here.[5]

Suffice it to say that the complex questions of national information policy have not yet been completely identified, let alone resolved. Many librarians are actively influencing policy development. But the fact remains that no one yet knows what that policy will be, and many are very pessimistic that machine-readable information will flow out of the government as generously in the future as has print-based information under the terms of Title 44.

The fundamental cause of the policy difficulties is the premise that "computers are so different that we have to rethink policies." That opened wide the door to new profits for the Information Industry Association, which has been very happy to encourage rethinking to its own advantage, and to the disadvantage of libraries and their lower and middle class patrons.

Together, these first three issues of ownership, accessibility, and cost comprise the most important issue: Will all citizens have equal access to the information needed for them to participate meaningfully in the nation's economic, political, and social life? We can already see alarming disparities in the economic and social status of different classes of citizens, and this is not the place to analyze the causes. Our inner cities are poor; much of our youth is badly educated; we continue to destroy the environment to build housing and highways at a far greater rate than our population is growing. Will librarians contribute to the development of information haves and have-nots which increased reliance on computers will almost certainly bring?

4. WHAT ARE THE PRESERVATION IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FORMAT-CHOICES WE MAKE TODAY?

At the simplest level, this issue could be stated as: Are we considering the usable life-span of the print, microform, and computer-based media on which we spend our budget's dollars? The life-span of computer-based media is not known.[6]

At a more sophisticated level, this issue could be stated as: Are we adequately assessing the lost-opportunity costs of our decisions? When we choose immediate access to online information and pay by the minute/hour/search, we are choosing not to use that money to purchase print or microform which would permanently be in our collection; or we are choosing not to deacidify or microfilm a deteriorating paper volume.

Have we carefully and fully assessed the cost of the electronic library: online charges, equipment costs, space and training? If an electronic library costs more than a print/microform library – and even if it were

true that patrons prefer the former – is providing current patrons their first choice worth depriving future patrons of the information? For future patrons may be deprived if the cost of electronically accessible information is higher than libraries can pay in the future, or if present dollars spent on electronic access deprive libraries of preservation opportunities.

By what standards do we make these choices? Or, in a rush to be au courant, do we fail to see that there are choices?

5. HAVE WE PUT ENOUGH EFFORT INTO MAKING MICROFORMS WORKABLE FOR OUR PATRONS AND OURSELVES?

Librarians have put much more effort into learning about computers, and into creating what might appear to be electronic libraries, than we ever did into making microforms workable. Microforms were in the basement; computers are at the Reference Desk. Microforms were only tardily cataloged and never proudly publicized; computers are heralded in press releases and internal handouts.

Did we as a profession organize reader printer user groups and fiche duplicator user groups as we have OCLC, RLIN, NOTIS, and Innovative Interfaces user groups? Do we have sessions at our meetings on publicizing new microform sets, as we do on publicizing online catalogs? I think not, although many libraries have spent as much money on microforms as on automation.

Have we instituted professional practices and standards which would imbue microforms with advantages that printed paper cannot provide, to balance off the obvious disadvantages of microforms? These practices might include:

- Free fiche to fiche duplication, so that users are given individual copies of fiche to use where and when they choose, and to ensure ready access for the next user.
- Free fiche to paper copying, on plain paper.
- Adequate numbers of readers – including circulating portable ones – and reader printers.
- Centralized location of microforms and their equipment, close to staff who provide help.
- Customized user aids, from complete and current cataloging to library-specific guides aimed at the local audience.
- Copious staff training, which imbues a positive attitude toward microforms, an attitude which reflects the reality that microforms save space, are permanent, are easy to use, and are not a burden imposed by a cruel world, but a consciously chosen route to providing the most information in a cost-effective manner, freeing up space and acquisitions dollars for other purposes and permanently enhancing the collection.

6. THE FINAL QUESTION: WHAT IS A LIBRARIAN?

A librarian helps a patron to clarify the patron's information needs; provides information to the patron; and gives the patron choices about the use of resources to obtain more information. A librarian takes the initiative to identify critical issues and answer difficult questions so as to build a collection and services that meet patron needs currently and in the future.

A librarian demonstrates professionalism not only by talking to other librarians, but primarily by talking with professionals other than librarians for two purposes: to anticipate future needs for information from the perspective of the library user; and to inform other professions about the role of the library and the librarian.

A librarian prepares for a multi-formatted future by ensuring that all three major information storage media are used appropriately in a manner customized for each library, taking into account space, equipment, staff, present and future patron needs, present and future cost, ownership, and access issues, and preservation needs.

Is that what we're doing?

Is that who we are?

References

[1] See the work of Catharine A. MacKinnon, especially "Reflections on Sex Equality Under Law," 100 *Yale Law Journal* 1281 (March 1991).

[2] I use the word "computer" to mean all forms of machine-readable data: off-site data bases, on-site data bases, CD-ROM, laser discs, etc., and the equipment and software needed to use them. The particular manifestation usually does not matter to my argument; when it does, I will be explicit about differences.

[3] Note the proliferation of journals such as *Library Software Review, Small Computers in Libraries, Library HiTech,* etc.

[4] In addition to uncounted numbers of talks with content similar to the articles in the publications cited above, there are national meetings held annually, such as "Online"; associations such as EDUCOM, with which many librarians are affiliated; and ASIS.

[5] The best compilation, with citations to official government sources, is *Less Access to Less Information by and About the U.S. Government: a 1981-1987 Chronology,* prepared by the American Library Association

Washington Office (Washington, D.C.: The Office, [1988]), 104 pp. Another accessible summary is *Federal Information in the Electronic Age: Policy Issues for the 1990's*, (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of National Affairs, 1990.)

6) See, for example, "Taking a Byte Out of History: The Archival Preservation of Federal Computer Records," 25th Report by the House Committee on Government Operations, House Report 101–978, 1990. The report's primary recommendation is that "The National Archives and Records Administration needs to undertake a thorough review of its role in the long-term preservation of computer records. NARA's policies should address both the preservation of computer records and the practical utility of the records for future users."