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Librarians and library schools are said to be very much at risk these days. The professional literature is full of predictions of the death of librarianship, and a recent surge of eschatological articles and comments in various other forums relegates libraries and library education to the dustbins of a paperless future. Given the closings of library schools over the past several years, given the reductions in numbers of new graduates and in library staffing, and given growing forays from the corporate sector into information commerce, there would appear to be generous evidence to support some of these contentions.

David Charbuck's recent comments in Forbes have been frequently quoted: "When...[full-text retrieval] comes, the local library as we know it all but disappears. In lieu of librarians we will have programmers and database experts.

"Good-bye, Dewey decimals," he says.(FN1)

I don't believe a word of it.

SCAPEGOATS AND TARGETS

In the library world itself, there has been much finger-pointing at reasons or agencies responsible for a doomsday scenario for librarianship. Some library educators have even singled out library directors and "the profession" as culprits for many of the perceived problems of library schools.

Bert Boyce, dean of the School of Library and Information Science, Louisiana State University, asks in a recent article, "The Death of Library Education,"(FN2) "whether there will be any need for librarians in the future." If so, should their training represent a professional discipline or a trade? His answer is, yes, librarians will be needed, but "quite simply," he contends, "it is library education, not the library, nor the need for the librarian, that is dying."

The emphasis in library education should be "on the subject matter of the discipline and not on current techniques." However, absent a sufficient concern for quality, he argues, library education is perishing. High-quality education is available, but so is low-quality education, and "the cheap sack will outsell the costly sack in a free market."

Boyce concludes that the profession itself is content to let the quality of library education deteriorate because it is easier to be mediocre than to find a way to pay for quality.

I don't believe a word of it.

Every library director I know values the quality of mind, communication skills, flexibility, character, and acquired knowledge base of a new professional colleague far more than the minimal level of application expertise one would expect a recent graduate to bring to the job. Yet, skills must be mastered, and the road to a requisite knowledge base may not necessarily lead from a freestanding library school.

Regardless of the resources available, neither a librarian nor a library educator should abjure a commitment to the pursuit of quality.

I believe that reports of impending death for any of the three—library, librarian, library education—are premature. There are many metamorphoses and relocations underway of practitioners, educators, and the places and jurisdictions which they function, but the ways all tend towards change, not demise. If librarianship is going through widely recognized transformations, why should not the educational programs that support the profession reflect the same forces for change? The library, the

librarian, and library education will all be needed tomorrow, whether in a physical or a virtual place; all should demand, stimulate, and produce quality in graduates, programs, services.

CAMPUS VANDALS AND CORPORATE RAIDERS

Dean F. William Summers, School of Library and Information Studies, Florida State University, in a posting on the Internet listserv JESSE, on March 14, 1994, commented, "While there are some notable exceptions, in general the relationship between LIS schools and their university libraries is not a positive one.... One notes with dismay the almost total silence on the part of campus librarians when a library school on their campus is closed."(FN3)

Most members of the library profession are just as concerned about the future of library schools, and the validity of libraries and librarians in the information future, as library school deans and faculty are about library education. Librarians and their professional schools live in a very fragile academic ecosystem, and their place in the campus food chain has never been particularly high.

Thus, Summers is accurate when he concludes, "On any campus the community of professional librarians is far too small and far too vulnerable to be isolated one from another." It is a fact, however, that educators and practitioners on any campus go about their work within different academic, administrative, financial, and political constructs, and when local institutional priorities demand some unfortunate executive decisions regarding librarianship no amount of tears or debate will, as The Rubáiyát says, wipe out a word of it.

In "The Treason of the Learned: The Real Agenda of Those Who Would Destroy Libraries and Books," Michael Gorman, dean of library services, California State University, Fresno, targets other groups for some of the problems libraries are undergoing. He contends that "libraries are under attack as never before, and none more so than academic libraries."(FN4)

Gorman identifies three groups of enemies of academic libraries: bureaucrats, who know little about education or libraries but who recognize that libraries cost a lot of money and who want to reduce those costs; technocrats, who generally believe that technology can pretty much replace and improve upon traditional libraries; and technovandals, who want "to use technology to break up the culture of learning and, in a weird mixture of Nineties cybervision and Sixties radicalism, to replace that world with a howling wilderness of unstructured, unrelated gobbets of 'information' and random images in which the hapless individual wanders without direction or sense of value."

The objectives of this latter group, then, Gorman suggests, are the destruction of print-based knowledge and information industries and, one must conclude, the construction of a bookless future without librarians or library schools. The technovandals would shift responsibility for the collecting, organizing, and analyzing of information from a library digital provider to an electronic end user. The services and value system of librarianship would disappear.

I don't believe a word of it. Or, at least, not most of them. The issues exist, but the groups do not. This appears to be another entry into the ubiquitous ranks of conspiracy theories and a future we will never see.

My colleague Dennis Dillon, a middle manager who is one of the brightest cartographers of the new information geography, has worried that "libraries are going to find themselves in direct competition with billion-dollar multinational corporations."(FN5)

I don't believe the competition will hurt. Rather, there needs to be a stronger synergism developed between the not-for-profit and commercial sectors based on both

competition and cooperation. For years I have echoed colleagues who insist that if librarians don't take charge of new information services, others will. Well, perhaps if others can do it better, they should. Librarians should be eager to link the user and the most effective information provider, regardless of who it is. That is the higher business that we are about.

A PLACE IN THE INFORMATION FUTURE

The role of librarians should, contrary to the more negative references above, become increasingly important as scholarly communication continues to undergo at least some degree of transformation and as the information flow continues to surge. Despite present appearances, I am convinced that academic leaders, computing professionals, and information specialists in general are going to find that there is a critical need for libraries, librarians, and library education in coming years. The only direction that librarians and library educators should be pointing fingers these days is forward.

There is nothing we can learn from the future except by talking about it. The future is never the same as any of our predictions. Extrapolations from current events never quite arrive where we think they will. In order to understand the place of librarians in the information future it is necessary to look just a bit at their place in the past.

Despite the noise from many quarters these days, there has long been a national information infrastructure. It is called libraries. But the failure of the library profession to assert the very special and important role that its members have played in creating and maintaining this long-extant infrastructure—as librarians, and not some other breed of educational or information cat—has helped leave them without the full stature they should command. Because librarianship is a service profession, librarians working in some areas suffer somewhat from client expectations and preconceptions of them. While librarians are generally looked up to in public libraries, and regarded as professional equals among research colleagues in special libraries, they are generally not as strongly respected in academic institutions, where faculty are kings.

Another problem is that the writ of librarianship is too insular. Thank goodness for those colleagues who have been successful in penetrating the pages of the Chronicle of Higher Education, the New York Times, and other mainstream publications with news of the profession's relevance to the needs of the day.

As for publications in the field, however, the culture of librarianship is more appropriately defined in publications such as Library Journal and Wilson Library Bulletin, where it can reach the broader heartland of the profession and a more general readership, than it is in many refereed publications where library specialists appear to speak in tongues only to others in their field.

There comes a time when foolishness must be challenged. It is not prophecy, only common sense in the workplace of ideas, that tells us that books and a paper-based culture will be as much in our future as they have been in the past. The traditional library system will continue, as intertwined with the new information technologies as the oak and linden that were Ovid's metamorphosed Baucis and Philemon.

Only the librarian has the ability to manage the traditional library system as well as the evolving bionic library in which the traditional organic enterprise is extended by and merged with the new. The librarian is educated and trained to deal with the selection, acquisition, organization, service, preservation, and training activities that are required in the print-on-paper information model as well as the digital one. Many librarians have become especially quick studies in the new technologies without losing their feel for the old.

On the other hand, those computing and other information professionals crucial to the digital platform on which electronic information flows have had no reason or means

to learn how knowledge seekers are likely to approach this fresh mixture of the old and the new systems to find the information they need. Neither are these specialists likely to learn the culture, methodologies, or management requirements of the traditional information system. Establish a rational, comprehensive information selection program? Order a book or journal? Catalog and classify it? Process, house, service, preserve it? Only the librarian.

Select for users a new, valuable source from the host of data on the Internet, much of it only loosely describable as “information”? Attach descriptors and access and retrieval pointers? House the system, provide a menu and interface that information seekers will understand, train users in the skills required to make effective use of these new capabilities? Surely the librarian.

One must caution, however, that this is—to borrow a phrase that has been used to define that initial bite of time at the birth of the infant cosmos—merely the first “God’s second” in the Big Bang of the Information Age. Most of the issues, and most of the obstacles and opportunities, are still to be encountered and defined.

LIBRARIANS AND THE ELECTRONIC WORD

One of the most significant contributions that Richard Lanham makes in his landmark work, *The Electronic Word*, is to identify the importance of training and the value of dynamic information scaling in the delivery of information from a digital base.(FN6) An example of scaling is the selection of, or bringing to an appropriate magnitude, information objects for easy understanding and most effective use. This could amount to the reduction by a scholar of an electronic text to its most significant sentence or the construction of customized textbooks built of links to widely distributed information sources. It could include the choice of font and size for the display of information content and (as Lanham describes) the use of performative signs, “tonal colorizers,” and a mix of text, sound, and image to enrich a message.

It is interesting that these points Lanham mentions—training and scaling—both speak to the importance of considering the human capacity to learn new skills and to grasp content and concept in an arena where time, speed, distance, and dimension are no longer confined by human limitations of comprehension. It must also be recognized that cognitive processes or emotional response in megabauds may not necessarily follow previous reactions to signs, signals, or other messages in a slower dimension.

These points also speak to the most important role that librarians have always held in the information process: selection. That is, understanding how knowledge sources are created and organized, deciding in collaboration with other scholars which sources most deserve attention and preservation, and grasping the means to bring the right information—and the right amount of information—and user together.

Richard Lanham understands this. “The library world feels depaysé today, and rightly so. Both of its physical entities, the buildings and the books they contain, can no longer form the basis for planning.... Librarians of electronic information...must consciously construct human attention-structures rather than assemble a collection of books according to commonly accepted rules. They have, perhaps unwillingly, found themselves transported from the ancillary margin of the human sciences to their center.”

It is vital, Lanham says, if students are to be properly served by the education they should receive, for conversation to begin throughout academe regarding the information structure of the future. Where should this conversation most naturally take place, he asks? “The library or library school,” he answers. Validation of the present centrality of these and other agencies does not deter Lanham from forecasting changes throughout

the educational paradigm: "We're going to need a new administrative structure, a new 'informational structure' instead of a 'library,' and a new lower division with a new curriculum:...the arts and sciences...converging on a common 'science of complex systems.'"(FN7)

INFORMATION DEMOCRACY AND ANARCHY

It appears to me that the new information technology is itself helping circumscribe knowledge within this "common 'science of complex systems.'" Information access and distribution are also becoming, for both the better and the worse, incorrigibly democratized. There is much to be said for the avoidance of an information caste system. Demographics suggest how much society will be at the mercy of the plague of illiteracy unless those of us at every level of educational responsibility work to mitigate this problem. But information is not all created equal. It is almost frightening to realize that anyone with appropriate access to the Internet, with software that is free and easily available, and with a minimal level of microcomputing power, can now become a publisher to the world. Perhaps more positively, even an elementary school child can construct a near-limitless personal electronic library simply by identifying and saving links to literally inconceivable amounts and types of information available from around the globe.

The information horses have been unloosed from their barns or corrals, the doors and gates all ajar, and it is difficult to see how these free-running mavericks can ever be reined at all. Librarians can only clutch at them, tag them with identifiers when possible, and construct signposts and navigational tools to track them. Standards must be devised to help better control, if we can, the information to come.

The information world, now wild with its riders and rich in its unstructured wonders, will require the attention of architects and planners, builders, guides, computing and telecommunication specialists, engineers, legal experts, environmentalists, safety and security officers, and information specialists if it is to be turned from wilderness into the rational, near limitless, knowledge structure that is possible.

A ROLE FOR THE EDUCATOR AND ACADEMY

As there will be for the librarian, there will be a role for the library and information educator in this world, although the sign they post above their door may change. Conceivably, they and their tasks may be absorbed into other schools or academic partitions on campus. The barber gave up chirurgery, leeches, and health care in general, and the world is better for it, but medical practice and medical training continue.

I have the strong feeling that library education will be reborn in those institutions in which schools have died, but as components of new educational programs wherein communication, computing, education, and other elements of the liberal and natural arts and sciences are brought together in more holistic curricula.

Regardless of the complexity of the cultural, technical, and fiscal environment surrounding information services, there is no great mystery to successful library education. Recruit bright students with an interest in service and inquiring minds, and engage and challenge them with a gifted faculty.

Insist on the inclusion of research projects and significant writing components in library educational programs. Reinstate a thesis requirement. Like medicine and law and engineering, librarianship is an applied profession as well as one based on a strong subject discipline, and library education should not be shamed for paying attention in syllabus, research, and publication to precept and practice. The profession should demand accreditation and certification—and recertification—especially as tides of change drawn by a fulling technological moon overrun our capacity for their assimilation.

Despite strong support from library associations in areas of trade and social responsibility, an academic apparatus for the profession has never been fully secured. There has been no agreement reached on standards or baselines of education or knowledge to require. There is no academy. Librarians should recognize and bring attention to those in their profession who bring distinction to the field. Fellowship in an appropriate academy could help accomplish this, as well as leverage the knowledge and experience of such a community of information experts and scholars towards the advancement of librarianship and learning.

SHAPING AN INFORMATION RENAISSANCE

Just as the librarians of today are shaping the library of tomorrow, the librarians of tomorrow are being shaped today. Knowledgeable in library and information science, technologically informed, educated broadly in the basic precepts of art and humane concern, dedicated to public service, willing to be leaders and to take risks in shaping the future information society—in whatever other dimension and form it comes—the librarians of the future, like the best librarians of yesterday and today, should be conceived in the truest of renaissance traditions.

David Hoekema, academic dean and professor of philosophy at Calvin College, speaking at a symposium on scholarly publishing on electronic networks, summarized the frequently stated reasons librarians and publishers will be unnecessary in an electronic information future and then blew the arguments away. “We will always need interpreters, evaluators, and guides,” he said; “even when the whole Western and Eastern cultural patrimony has been mounted in a digital chip...the need for explanation, interpretation, and conversation will remain, and it will not be met by machines.”(FN8)

A place for librarians in the information future? Believe it.

Added material

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FOOTNOTES

1. David Charbuck, “Good-bye, Dewey Decimals,” *Forbes*, February 15, 1993, 204–5.
2. Bert Boyce, “The Death of Library Education,” *American Libraries* 25, no. 3 (March 1994): 257–59.
3. F. William Summers, JESSE [electronic listserv; jesse@arizvm.l.ccit.arizona.edu], March 14, 1994.
4. Michael Gorman, “The Treason of the Learned: The Real Agenda of Those Who Would Destroy Libraries and Books,” *Library Journal* 119, no. 3 (February 15, 1994): 130–31.
5. Dennis Dillon, “The Future of Reference IV: Response,” *College and Research Libraries News* 53, no. 8 (September 1992): 513–14.
6. Richard Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 134–35.
7. *Ibid.*, 271.
8. David Hoekema, “Quotable: ‘In the Electronic Age, the New University Library Can Be 10 Times Larger on the Inside Than It Is on the Outside,’” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 19, 1994, B5.

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