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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON INTER-LIBRARY LOANS

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'Several instances of the occurrence of listeria bacteria in milk have been reported'.
Thirteen words. 'Several instances of the occurrence of listeria bacteria in milk have been reported'.

A photocopy of that very short statement was received as the response to an inter-library loan request submitted by a postgraduate student at the University of Strathclyde.

For several years inter-library loans staff have felt that some of the requests they process are for insubstantial material. About eighteen months ago the response I have just quoted was received and triggered a reaction that has led to this paper. 'Ridiculous', 'Pathetic', 'What a waste of time and money' were comments made by colleagues. My considered opinion is that such a response is not value for money in a university library system. Indeed I'd go further and say I cannot envisage any library system where these thirteen words would be value for money.

But, it will be asked, 'How can I judge the value of material? Am I entitled to pass judgement on the quality of material?' I shall not argue my answers to these questions but simply state that I believe I should answer 'yes' to both and affirm my position as a professional able to make a contribution to ensuring the highest quality of processed information. I should enjoy the opportunity and responsibility I have to assess quality and to encourage the spread of sound critical judgement whenever information is processed, transmitted and received.

In contemporary society I fear that our critical judgement is numbed by the inescapable torrent of information which pours over us. We can't stop receiving it, recording

it, processing it and worrying about it; and all the energy and time we spend receiving, recording, processing and worrying is energy and time not available for thinking, for dreaming and for creating. Of course some information is necessary and useful but, equally, some is superfluous and useless; and included in the latter there is information that is senseless and sometimes seductively presented to appear otherwise. One small example. Weather forecasts, carefully presented to indicate the limits of their accuracy, are useful to us all. Nowadays in the United Kingdom I hear over the local and national broadcasting channels statements such as: 'There's a 30% chance of light rain in south-eastern Scotland tomorrow'. So perhaps I should be grateful. 'Several instances of' may be worthless, but at least it is not senseless.

Since the day these thirteen words were received in the Library, inter-library loan staff have been casting an eye over incoming material and, to parody my quotation, 'several examples of poor value for money material have been collected'.

* * * * *

In the year August 1991-July 1992, the Inter-Library Loan Department collected 14,292 requests from readers. How many of the resulting responses would I have judged to be of questionable value for money? I have no idea; or I had no idea, until earlier this year when a snapshot sample of requests was taken and their progress followed to a conclusion.

Clearly the genesis and subsequent progress of a request is conditioned by a number of variable factors which link up in complex interactions. I am very cautious, therefore, about drawing general conclusions from the sample. Nevertheless I think there are some pointers in it to further work that would enhance the quality of academic endeavour.

At Strathclyde, request details are written on to a form which is submitted to the Library; a very few requests are received in the Library by e-mail. Figure 1 shows one side of the form; the other side, for book and conference material, is substantially the same.

On the 1st February 1993, a day at the beginning of the second teaching semester, 30 readers submitted a total of 110 requests. The distribution of the requests by category of reader is shown in Table 1.

Figure 1: Inter-Library Loan Request Form

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University of Strathclyde
The Andersonian Library Tel: Ext 4036

Supervisor's Signature

Name:
Collected by:
Date:

INTER LIBRARY LOAN REQUEST — Serial or Report

P
R
I
N
T

C
L
E
A
R
L
Y

Title/Issuing Body: (Serial) (Report)				
Year	Vol	Part	Pages	
Author of Article:				
Title of Article:				
Source of Reference:				
Reader's Surname:			Initials:	
Address:				
User Number		4th Yr	PG	Staff

COPYRIGHT DECLARATION — I declare that:

- (a) I have not previously been supplied with a copy of the same material by you or any other librarian;
- (b) I will not use the copy except for research or private study and will not supply a copy of it to any other person; and
- (c) to the best of my knowledge no other person with whom I work or study has made or intends to make, at or about the same time as this request, a request for substantially the same material for substantially the same purpose.

I understand that if the declaration is false in a material particular the copy supplied to me by you will be an infringing copy and that I shall be liable for infringement of copyright as if I had made the copy myself.

Signature:

Date:

LIBRARY USE

Rec'd:
Ref:
Due:

8100 115/1

Table 1: General distribution of sample requests

Category of Reader	No. of Readers	No. of Requests
Post-Graduate Students	12	41
Academic Staff	13	43
Final (4th) Year Undergraduate	5	26
Total	30	110

The Inter-Library Loan Service at Strathclyde is available, free-of-charge, to academic staff, postgraduate students and final (4th) year undergraduate students. The latter two categories require to have their requests countersigned by their supervisors. This requirement was introduced many years ago as a method of quantity/relevance control. It does not always work. Spot checks have picked up instances of supervisors signing batches of blank forms, instances of students getting staff other than their supervisors to sign forms, and even occasional instances of forgery. Further, with the increasing demands on academic staff, including the necessity to devise many projects for undergraduate and instructional programmes, supervisors may not be able to check the relevance of all references.

A more detailed breakdown of the requests submitted is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Detailed distribution of sample requests

NUMBER OF REQUESTS TYPE OF READER	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
	POST-GRADUATE	6	1	2		2												1
4TH YEAR UNDERGRADUATE	2	1			1													1
STAFF	6	2		1	1	1		1		1								
TOTAL	14	4	2	1	4	1		1		1								2
TOTAL REQUESTS	14	8	6	4	20	6		8		10								34
\bar{x}	12.6	7.2	5.5	3.6	18.0	5.5		7.3		9.1								31.0

On the sample day, two students from different departments, one undergraduate and one postgraduate, each submitted seventeen requests. One of these batches consisted of references taken from an electronic database. Together the two students accounted for 31% of the total number of requests. At the moment, the inter-library loan budget is not apportioned by individual, department or any other parameter. The flow of requests from an individual is sometimes adjusted, following my personal intervention and discussion with the requester, when the number submitted and in process at one time lies between fifteen and twenty; but there are no hard and fast rules. The undergraduate student with seventeen requests was a final year law student who, a few weeks before, had submitted more than twice that number of requests to obtain material for her dissertation. I discussed the matter with her supervisor and returned the whole bundle, asking for a much smaller selection to be submitted.

As normally happens, the forms were checked for correct completion and bibliographic accuracy, and to eliminate any for items held in Library stock. Completion of the form and provision of bibliographic detail threw up the usual problems of clarity and accuracy. Averaged out over the year, about ten percent of items requested are found in Library stock, although in the sample there were only two; and one of these was 'missing', so an inter-library loan was appropriate.

In Glasgow there is also the University of Glasgow with a very fine library. For a long time there has been an agreement on reciprocal membership between our libraries which is particularly useful for staff and postgraduate students. It is expected that our readers will have tried to find out if the material they need is available at Glasgow before they place an inter-library loan request. At Strathclyde library staff do not check the Glasgow catalogues except when they have a 'hunch'.

After the checking, faulty forms were returned to the readers and the remainder telexed to the British Library Document Supply Centre at Boston Spa.

At this point I should tell you that each request submitted to BLDSC costs the Library more than £4 (DM10) simply for the application. Over the whole year Inter-Library Loan non-staffing costs are roughly equivalent to the amount of money available for book purchasing for of one of our five faculties.

* * * * *

Table 3 summarises the outcomes of the 110 requests.

Table 3: Results of sample requests

OUTCOME	BOOKS OR JOURNAL ISSUES	LIBRARY STOCK	REAPPLY	PHOTOCOPIES	CANCELLED	TOTAL
NO OF REQUESTS	29 (BY 23)	1	1	60	19	110

*(by 23) indicates that three journal issues received satisfied nine original requests.

The nineteen cancelled requests comprised the following:

- 7 returned to the reader for fuller bibliographic details; 6 of these to the postgraduate student who placed seventeen requests. No resubmissions were received.
- 5 NUKL's (No United Kingdom Location). The readers were informed. Application outside the country is only made in very exceptional circumstances.
- 2 the given location failed to supply the material.
- 4 for articles from the same French periodical which was held at one location but the requested issues were not available.
- 1 the location was unable to supply because the book was on loan and overdue.

As they arrived at the Library, I examined each of the sixty photocopies and made my own estimate of their value for money or, to express it differently, their academic significance. I consulted no-one. From my non-specialist standpoint, eight of the responses seemed to me to be academically insignificant and eight more to be doubtful. I have made no attempt to find out if the readers would have supported my views, nor have I attempted to find out how useful the remaining forty-six responses turned out to be.

There were four broad criteria that I applied to each item:

- it should be of reasonable length and/or substance;
- it should record original work - be primary rather than secondary;
- it should show a disciplined, analytic method;
- it should be free from unsubstantiated opinion, speculative judgement and generalisation.

These criteria and my application of them are contentious. I have struggled through a few discussions with some academic friends; but with others I have found agreement that the currency of worthless material is a symptom that all is not well under the information umbrella. Is it acceptable that 13% of inter-library loan requests may be insignificant and another 13% may be of doubtful significance?

Of the eight responses which I rejected, five came from one reader, the postgraduate with seventeen requests. They were weak on investigation and evidence, and the discussion and conclusions were heavy with unsubstantiated opinion. The titles could have perhaps given a prior indication of the results, e.g. 'How the Auditor can work with the Audit Committee' or 'Effective Boards of Directors: an overview'. The other reader with seventeen requests, the final year law student, received only one very low level report: 'The aftermath of the Maxwell scandal: repairing the damage'. The remaining two rejects were for a member of staff in electronic engineering seeking information on a French film music composer. Three short paragraphs were obtained.

Four of the eight doubtful responses were for an undergraduate student writing her dissertation. Her references were to articles written in German, but she wanted only the English summaries - very short paragraphs quoting elementary numerical data. The originals were supplied and they included what looked like useful lists of references, some of which were in English. Three others were for members of staff - very slender reports. The eighth was for a low level, if informative, report, published in 1985, of the award of substantial damages (£250,000) to two female models. They claimed they had suffered a serious staphylococcal infection as a result of demonstrating a hot-tub at a home-show in Miami, Florida.

* * * * *

My assessment suggests, therefore, that one quarter of the responses received in photocopies were of poor to lightweight academic quality. Should, I wonder, this material

have been preserved? Should it have been indexed and disseminated whether by electronic wizardry or by papyrus? Is there not serious wastage of resources?

I believe it is necessary to improve the standards of critical judgement throughout our culture. We librarians cannot do this on our own, but from our position in the process of learning, we can be the catalyst for corrective activity by students, teachers, reviewers, indexers, publishers and authors. There are no new principles or attitudes involved. Old ones need restating and reviving. In some important quarters this is being done. For example: in 1992, the Universities' Staff Development and Training Unit of the United Kingdom Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals published a series of volumes on teaching and learning.¹ The first volume is entitled 'What is Active Learning?' Librarians can identify with much of what is stated in the introduction, especially the first of four distinctive features of active learning: it involves 'searching for meaning and understanding', something much more than 'simply assimilating information'. I quote further: 'This concern with meaning and understanding is not, it need hardly be said, an unfamiliar aim in higher education....What teachers are seeking to develop in their students has been described as critical thinking.... Some of the characteristics of this type of thinking are discipline-specific; others are more broadly applicable, including, the ability to:

- distinguish between verifiable facts and value claims
- determine the reliability of a source
- determine the factual accuracy of statements
- distinguish relevant from irrelevant information, claims or reasons
- recognise logical inconsistencies or fallacies in lines of reasoning
- distinguish between warranted and unwarranted claims
- determine the strength of an argument'

Our professional literature records little or no promotion of such critical thinking and its application to our contribution to the academic environment.

For example, at a recent conference held in England under the title 'Taming the Electronic Jungle' there were only passing references to the 'garbage in-garbage out' problem. Surely that should have been central to the topic?

There was no discussion of information quality in the papers of the IATUL's 14th Biennial Conference 'New Technologies and Information Services - Evolution or Revolution?'² In reality it may turn out to be Suffocation or Malnutrition!

February 1993 saw the publication by the Research Libraries Group in the United States of the report of a sponsored workshop: 'Preferred Library Futures II: Charting the Paths'.³ Six groups of so-called stakeholders (library directors, publishers, consortia and foundation directors, university administrators, faculty, and information technology managers) 'met to consider what an effective university library must be like in the future'. Each group contributed to a list 'Musts for the Research Library by 2000'. It seems only the publishers grasped the nettle: 'librarians need to be more selective in what is bought and in services provided; be more actively involved in allocating campus information dollars; librarians need to lead in university environments'. Faculty pointed out 'that more information is not always better in the research arena. Limitless information access could potentially lead to 'bad research' if it leads to researcher information overload and inadequate investigation of others' work.'

While preparing this paper I came across a reference to a two-page article published in Chemical Technology in 1972. The enticing title was 'Information Pollution and the Ignorance Explosion'.⁴ So far I have resisted the temptation to place an inter-library loan request!

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In an article 'The World's Great Libraries: arks from the deluge',⁵ The Economist of 23rd December 1989, quotes Daniel Boorstin, Librarian Emeritus of the Library of Congress; 'Flimsy bits of information inundate and confuse us. This flood of messages from the instant everywhere fills every niche in our consciousness, crowding out knowledge and understanding.'

Much of that information emanates from or through commercial activity. Libraries are crucial to the survival of many segments of the information market, Librarians have power to wield, and wield it we should on behalf of knowledge and understanding. In the market place profit rules; quality is ruled. In the world of university scholarship our profit is quality.

I shall leave you with a teasing example from the Inter-Library Loan Department's file. An experienced librarian colleague placed a request for an item from a reputable publication. The response was:

The two-volume **Who's Who of European Business and Industry 1990/91** (Triumph, 900 pages, \$295) gives brief bios on 9,500 executives and rundowns on 1,400 companies. Where

else could you learn that Jan Peter Collier, a business executive in Oslo, likes theater, music and, surprise, skiing? Or that Bulgaria is a hunts man's paradise and that a company named Murgash will arrange tours for you and your loved ones to enjoy the hunting of "wolf, fox, jackal, marten and weasel"? No mention is made about hunting down former members of the government.

What do you think? Is that value for money?

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