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Op-Ed

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Against the Grain

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Opinions and Editorials

Against the Grain would like to encourage more opinion editorials on the world we live and work in. Here are some first shots.

Send comments and future editorials to any of our editors — KS

Our First-teenth Nervous Breakdown

by **Chuck Hamaker** (LSU)

"Service is the heart of our profession" says **Hardy R. Franklin**, ALA's president for 1993-94 in the new issue of *College and Research Library News*. I must respectfully disagree with him. The end of what we do is service, but the heart of our profession is selection. Without selection to provide the foundation, there is no service. I don't just mean selecting books, so bear with me while I explain. Libraries may be having a nervous breakdown as they try to be all things to all people, ignoring selection as the creative force.

There is a mood or move within librarianship to accept as our primary responsibility and goal the necessity of providing our "customers" or patrons with what they want when they want it. This is not and never has been the library's mission. The new mission statement directors and selectors and many librarians in between seem to want to live by is "tell me what you want and I'll get it for you." I disagree. There are lots of things I probably won't get you. The umpteenth biography of Marilyn Monroe if you are working on a freshman English paper. Nostradamus for your enlightenment after we've replaced it 5 times in the last two years; the nth copy of a popular author's novel you can buy for \$5.99 in paperback at the bookstore; Russian language articles on herpes simplex for a social science undergraduate term paper — the list could go on. I think you see my point. WE DO NOT supply all things for all people. We SELECT what kinds of information sources are reasonable in given situations.

A president of a publishing company, in talking with **Katina Strauch** around ALA time in LA mentioned a basic principle that is behind this essay. He said, "Service costs money." When we expend resources in library settings, we make priority decisions; we select how funds will be spent, staff hours used. Thus, the concept that "service is the

heart of the library," could equally well be put as "cost is the heart of the library." Nowhere is this more obvious than in the arena of access services.

Even if we want to believe in a future where ILL (or document delivery, or the Internet or purchase on demand) delivers all, in fact we don't really mean we will get you everything. If we don't ask the critical "why" and "what" we are like the masqueraders on the Mardi Gras float. The crowd chants "THROW ME SOMETHING MISTER" and the veiled personage on the float loosens a strand of beads, dangles it suggestively and pitches it to the waiting reveler. By suggesting to ourselves or our clientele we can deliver anything they want, we are like that veiled figure on the float, teasing with beautiful beads knowing that he doesn't have enough to give to everyone. It's like the character in the Endymion Parade who dangles a stuffed

"The road to hell is paved with indulging every user demand."

teddy bear just to hear the crowd roar for it, then throws the cheapest beads he has. Just what they want, right to their waiting hands, is not the business we are engaged in. We aren't dealing in one-size-fits-all baubles. We are a profession dealing with issues of selection. And selection is all about what is appropriate in a given situation; not what everyone wants, or says they want.

The difference between what is not in the library and what is in the library is monumental. If that undergrad wants those Russian herpes simplex articles and we have them easily available in our collection, even if what he really wants is to xerox them, cut out the letters and use them to spell out "I love you" as a valentine in Russian, then "à chacune son gout." Within our immediate collections, we have a professional ethic that says we have SELECTED the resources to fit the context of our collecting re-

sponsibilities and if you have legitimate access to the collection, ultimately how you use them is your business. This is almost a religion with librarians. But if we don't have the resources at hand, we have and will SELECT those demands we will respond to.

Document Delivery is SELECTION. Which resources do we use for what kinds of requests? What is the most economical source for the library, and yes, is the request reasonable for the requestor's needs?

Reference service is selection. Which resources or approaches do we use to send the searcher on the most expeditious path to fulfilling the information need? Which encyclopedia, dictionary, atlas, guide, will provide the most elegant answer to the question at hand? We don't just throw anything to the questioner, we select from the vast range of resources and formats available to point out the most likely route to meet the need. We assess the need, we assess our resources and SELECT.

Cataloging, often considered by some as "just" a processing function, is quintessential selection. IT is selection of the most appropriate headings, classification, description. Because it is not rote, original cataloging is traditionally handled by professional catalogers. It is a matter of SELECTION of the most appropriate access points, models, rules. It particularizes the principles, just as reference particularizes the patrons needs to the context of the specific library. From an administrative perspective, cataloging is SELECTION of appropriate priorities for emphasis whether that be staffing for specific tasks, choice of utilities, or cataloging systems or rule interpretations. The key factor that elevates cataloging to the professional realm is the responsibility for selection from a multitude of options. Reduce all cataloging to a set of rules that always works in all situations and cataloging no longer is part of the profession of librarianship.

I don't think I need to define how

Collection Development is SELECTION. That is the primary function day in and day out. But it is selection done within the context (all selection ultimately is context) of the collection, its likely users, future prediction, publishing output, library resources and overall knowledge base of the selector.

Allocating those costs, the library's expenditures of funds or resources, is what selection is about. And there is no library in the country that should lightly consider subordinating its responsibility for allocating expenditures to unfiltered demands of its clientele for access to materials. The appropriate mixture of in-

house collections and external sources is critical. Adjudicating, juggling, weighing the respective merits of those demands is part and parcel of our professional responsibility. The demands for "access" are only some of the legitimate functions to which we must respond. We cannot provide access to everything for everybody and that is not the mission of the academic or of any library. Service is the goal, but selection is the heart of the professional responsibility. That responsibility does not evaporate in the heat of the access debate. If anything, it is intensified. This is not to suggest we need to "control" everything that library custom-

ers "access." We need as much of a hands off approach as we can afford.

But the bottom line is allocation of scarce resources. And that is a professional responsibility that cannot be avoided. "Tell us what you need and we'll get it for you" cannot be the new credo. It has never been our mission and will not be in the future. If we take that as our future, our libraries are headed for a breakdown even more serious than the disruption to collections caused by serial pricing. The road to hell is paved with indulging every user demand. Judicious SELECTION by knowledgeable professionals is the answer.

Reflections upon Hamaker's Editorial

by **Michael A. Keller** (Director,
Stanford University Libraries)

In slightly wicked fashion, one might criticize anatomical characterizations of professional functions or missions. One is unsure what to name this rhetorical technique; it is related to anthropomorphism; perhaps it is a version of anthropomancy. Think of the possibilities: "Service is not the heart of the profession, it is the feet! Or, "library internships are the thymus of the profession." Or, "library management is the right cerebral cortex of the profession." Enough! Basta! Genug!

Aphorisms rarely capture the context and complexity of the idea they are intended to reflect, so I would like to support Chuck Hamaker's underlying principle AND sentiment, while expanding

it somewhat and perhaps altering the context a bit as well.

It may be that making choices or selecting among options is a key characteristic of all professions. Mankind imbues educated practitioners or cognoscenti with peculiar, and perhaps overrated, powers in the exercise of judgment in their fields. At any rate, it is apparent to me that service in librarianship is a result of selection, not only of material for collections and access points, but of numerous other factors in many realms. However, it may be most useful and is certainly more accurate to recognize a quinternion of activities fundamental to librarianship: selection, organization, interpretation, circulation, and preservation. It is the exercise of judgment in these activities on

the information and knowledge content of materials in our collections or potentially available through our circulation function, as well as on the staff, fiscal, and facilities resources on behalf of communities of readers which defines our profession. And, as Hamaker's hammer strokes emphasize, selection is the result of the exercise of judgment.

Finally, not reflected in either Hardy Franklin's theme or in Hamaker's editorial is the notion that librarians make judgments to benefit communities over time, for generations of readers. Those readers understand this aspect of our work very clearly. As we pin our hopes and fears on a more networked and digital future, it is important for us NOT to lose sight of our functions as custodians of culture.

Climb Every Mtn., Ford Every STM

by **John Long** (Institute of Physics
Publishing)

There are so many things happening in the STM community these days ("we are in the eye of the information hurricane"), but one item that seems salient to me is discussed below.

What happens to new areas of research in the STM community when the majority of libraries in the U.S. and Canada cannot obtain the funding to begin new subs in these areas? It is very difficult to know which new areas of research will blossom. For example, who would have guessed in 1982 that chaos and dynamical systems would become so important. Areas that might become very important (and blossom) in the future will include — biotechnology, sen-

sors, advances in materials science (thin films, hard materials), more sophisticated imaging techniques, etc. Will STM publishers continue to pursue these areas when they know that the breakeven time for a new journal is approaching seven years or more? What happens to the young, up and coming stars in the R&D community when they don't have a forum for the exchange of ideas?

The world outside of North America is not going to become less competitive so what are the negative spin-offs of becoming less competitive in the international community? It is easy to lose sight of the fact that it took many years to build the North American STM community (the libraries, the R&D labs, the first-rate universities, publishers, etc.) — are we as a community going to let it

diminish year after year? The North American STM community is much admired by the rest of the world, but instead of being supported, important parts of its structure are slowly eroding. Any reasonable observer would conclude that North American libraries are a crucial part of this complex structure.

The STM community is facing a severe test, and we all know that there are no panaceas for our dilemma. Obvious areas of this harsh test include — economic and technological issues. A less obvious topic might be perception. One might conclude that society, that state, provincial, national governments are "taking the STM community for granted." (For example, "Each Year it costs about \$18,000 to lock up a state prisoner — and about \$5,000 to educate a public

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school student." [We are tempted to ask, Will more prisons make the U.S. more competitive in the world?] See *The New York Times Magazine*, February 20, 1994, "America's Best Buildings," pp. 38-40.]

Is there an erroneous perception that the library will always have the information, that valuable information will continue to be collected and presented in a viable format, that somehow the downward spiral of the library's collection will end? Does society, do governments and corporations realize the risks and

consequences here? ["... some scientists are deeply disturbed by this trend. They say lack of jobs, and declining national support of science when the puzzles yet to be solved are more and more difficult, have begun to sap the vigor of American research." Nobel Prize (1986)-winning chemist, Prof. Dudley Herschbach of Harvard, comments, "The government providers of science funding no longer seem supportive of free, basic research and wild ideas that can lead to great science and wonderful applications." (We might ask, Isn't basic research one of the "engines" that drives the U.S. economy? What happens when promising U.S. or Canadian scientists

are not able to go forward with their careers/research?) See *The New York Times*, February 20, 1994, "End of Cold War Clouds Research as Openings in Science Dwindle," by Malcolm W. Browne, p.1.]

At any rate, a reality check indicates that the STM community needs to issue a wake up call for society, governments, corporations, students, administrations, or we may discover the day (not too far in the future) when the North American STM community will have eroded to a mediocre image of its once first-rate achievements. This is not a happy thought to pass along to our children and grandchildren. ☞