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Eleanor I. Cook

Appalachian State University

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Drinking from the Firehose

Tabloids & Listserves; Or, Inquiring Minds Want to Know

by **Eleanor I. Cook** (Serials Librarian, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 COOKEI@CONRAD.APPSTATE.EDU)

I went to the supermarket the other day and bought copies of the *National Enquirer* and the *Sun*. I've never done this before; I was as embarrassed as a teenage boy is when his mother or older sister sends him out to buy feminine hygiene products. I felt compelled to explain to the check-out clerk, "Uh, I'm only buying these because I'm writing an article about tabloid newspapers." She didn't blink an eye. She didn't care about my weird need for self-justification since people buy this stuff all the time. If nothing else, most of us scan the crazy headlines as something to do while we stand in line. (C'mon, you know you do.) I have always been fascinated by their absurdity and have often wondered how much truth is there. Actually, there is more than you might think. I have a friend who ended up as a story in *National Enquirer* in the mid-1970's due to a freak motorcycle accident; he has the clippings to prove it.

In the electronic environment, certain Netnews news groups come close to being online tabloids, though they are devoted to specific topics. Any given tabloid print magazine, on the other hand, will cover many topics, the standard themes being the body alteration, weight loss/gain, marriage, divorce, affair or child-bearing activities of high profile celebrities. Some cover stories of fantastic events unknown in the mainstream press, such as sightings of UFOs, Elvis, Bigfoot, etc. The ever-present stories of John F. Kennedy and his relatives, dead or alive, are also among the meat of many of the stories. All these topics and anything else

you can think of ("Family Lives on Pet Food and is Super Healthy," by Mike Jones, see the *Sun*, v.12, no.39, September 27, 1994, p.29) are included in these rags. Their aim is to entertain. No one claims any of this is fact. Some people believe everything they read, though; and that is scary.

So — you're thinking, what does this have to do with libraries? Or acquisitions work? Let me make some analogies, even if it's a stretch . . .

Everyone knows that this is the year to speculate whether **O.J. Simpson** really murdered his wife Nicole. And are **Michael Jackson** and **Lisa Marie Presley** "really" husband and wife? Inquiring minds want to know the "facts" of these and other fascinating stories.

In the library world, we have our own scandals. For those of us involved in the acquisition of serials, the "War of the Roweses" (Thanks to **Myrna McCallister** for this quip.) and the financially nightmarish aftermath has kept us scanning our mail regularly.

Please note that this is NOT a column specifically concerned with the sale of the **Faxon Company**. This is, rather, a discussion of why gossip, rumor and speculation can actually drive the progress of any given event. It is important that electronic listowners who elect to moderate their lists guard against the potentially harmful spread of mistruth. Gossip can lead to self-fulfilling prophecy. Of course, it ALWAYS comes from a reliable source, doesn't it? Certainly, many rumors are based in fact. Experience suggests

to me, however, that even believing a trusted colleague or friend, without cross-checking, can lead to the making of hasty decisions not grounded in complete information.

Every single one of us has fallen victim to having something we truly believe as fact later discovered to be false. It has been observed that people generally would rather believe in speculative misinformation than to admit that they lack enough information to make a rational judgment. Wishful thinking is something to hang your hat on, even if it comes straight out of someone's imagination. This is particularly true during the unfolding aftermath of a natural disaster. The Internet has been quite handy for spreading both rumor and fact during times of trauma. During California earthquakes, the Oakland fires, and the Los Angeles riots we heard from colleagues who gave us useful damage reports and other critical information. We also received conflicting reports during the L.A. earthquake that needlessly drove many librarians away from attending the **ALA Midwinter** conference in February 1994.

One must weigh the long-term effect of posting certain kinds of information when one is responsible for an electronic list. I commend the listowner and the associate

And They Were There

continued from page 28

discussed how their libraries were accessing databases through the Internet, mounting them locally, updating databases through Internet, and developing databases and making them available through Internet. Databases are mounted as Gopher text files or made available from LISTSERVs. Internet services are also available transparently through menu options on the online catalogs. **Peter Jasco's** helpful tutorial sessions throughout the conference offered practical suggestions on desktop CD-ROM publishing, and purchasing CD-ROM databases,

software and hardware. He gave simple analogies to understand the basics of storage, memory and operating systems. He did not hesitate to give his own well-researched, pointed opinions, which basically concluded with the fact that publishers don't tell you everything and you cannot be depended on for anything they say about their databases. He reminded his audience that all information needs to be verified by the purchaser of the products — years covered, currency, indexing of various fields. He gave practical methods to check their errors of omission. In addition, he specifically mentioned many of the popular systems' vendors and databases, going into detail about their strengths and

weaknesses. The sessions can all be purchased on tape and can be beneficial to searchers/librarians who can learn how to modify their searches to retrieve the best results from the deficient databases — at least until they cancel their subscription and switch to another vendor.

Speaker lists were impressive for both conferences. Beneficial tidbits were also picked up from each presentation including diagrams, specific equipment information, and particular experiences of individual libraries: **OhioLink** and **Z39.50** are the state of the art (**Reiman**); the next frontier — the Internet (**Pooley**); it is a myth that informa-

continued on page 86

editors of <SERIALST> for their initial decision this summer to restrain speculative traffic concerning the sale of **The Faxon Company**. In my opinion, it was a difficult decision to make. Their original statement read:

"A Note from the Editors:

The editors of SERIALST have received several messages asking about librarians' action in light of the coming sale of The Faxon Company. We have decided for two reasons that we will not post messages on this sensitive issue until the sale has been completed. First, we fear that open discussion of the situation on the network would jeopardize the stability of the company and of many libraries' serials budgets and collections.

Second, most of what we librarians are told about this topic is rumor, and we do not want to perpetuate the rumors on the network.

When there has been an announcement that Faxon has sold its North American operations, we will be pleased to receive and post messages relating to this situation.

We appreciate your cooperation and understanding in this matter.

Birdie MacLennan, SERIALST owner and moderator

Ann Ercelawn, SERIALST associate moderator

Marcia Tuttle, SERIALST associate moderator"

•• FROM SERIALST, 7-27-94

In the ensuing weeks, official press releases from the various companies involved came forth. Statements concerning Faxon's performance during this transition were also posted, as well as a number of other moderated responses. Deciding what to post and what to hold back certainly was not easy. While <ACQNET>, the list I moderate, was spared most of this activity, <SERIALST> and the <Newsletter on Serials Pricing Issues> were occasionally on the hot seat. Birdie MacLennan and her colleagues considered a number of questions and challenges in a calm and reasonable manner. Rumors ran rampant and some gossip was vicious or self-serving, but none of this came across on the lists and I am told that the majority of inquiries were reasonable and legitimate. They modestly shun the praise, but I think these people did an excellent job of not allowing the lists to become rumor mills.

Other library lists such as <LIBADMIN> and <MEDLIB-L> also covered the issue of Faxon's sale, and though I did not see these discussions, I have been told they too

were conducted reasonably, in spite of not being moderated. (Not just a rumor, I hope!) In the meantime, many serials acquisitions librarians and library directors have been chewing their proverbial fingernails as the outcome continues to unfold.

Monitoring day-to-day expectations of net-etiquette in combination with controversies that come along now and then can be challenging. Add to this the ever-increasing traffic on the net. According to a recent article in **Internet World**, the dramatic rise in the number of people with access to the Internet is due mainly to the availability of new connection services and an increase in commercial traffic. The net's "ambiance" is swiftly changing; the amount of "junk-mail" being posted has risen, and "Newbies" have higher expectations about what the Internet has to offer, though their initial level of understanding is decreasing. (See Lear-Newman, Elizabeth. "Internet Blues," in **Internet World**, Sept. 1994, pp.76-79.)

The Internet is a free-form, free-wheeling entity that no one owns. But that doesn't mean some of us don't feel a sense of responsibility; if inquiring minds want to know, they'll have to go to the tabloids or news groups to find out the juicy details. Reason still prevails on library lists, and let's hope it stays that way! ☺

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