

June 1996

## Not Fit For Print

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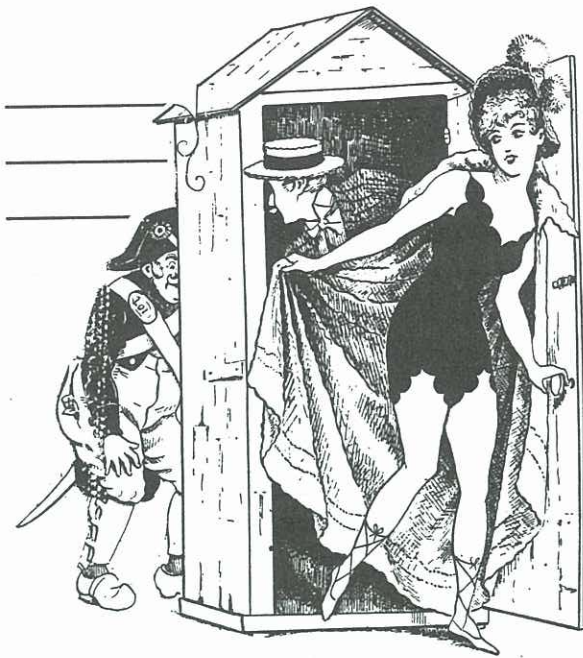
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### Recommended Citation

Leisner, Tony (1996) "Not Fit For Print," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 38.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1929>

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### The Information Game and the Electronic Librarian

by Tony Leisner (Dawson) (71023.3440@compuserve.com)

The last *Not Fit For Print* was devoted to understanding some concepts related to providing top notch service. Not exactly hot stuff when compared to some of the current flap in *American Libraries* about nonprofessionals versus professionals and can the public tell the difference. Or the furor over a recent Will Manley column. Well, the business of delivering good service can't hold a candle to those topics, but it is the core of the library profession. Katina chided me for being late with this article because I was distracted about my upcoming marriage and there is some truth to that charge. However, I noticed that in my long distance romance with a woman who works on a cruise ship that has traversed several seas in the past few months that we have communicated without the intervention of a single human being. In other words, all the services I have consumed have been automated. The satellite uplink to the ship, Inmarsat, the AT&T direct links even from some sleazy bar on the Suez have all been peopleless transactions. Noting the number of these that I have made lately and how smoothly they run makes me aware of the fine service provided by the communication companies. Is it any wonder they want to package and deliver information for a profit? Several new emerging companies have announced that they want a piece of this new business.

Can the provision of information service be made as smooth as my experiences with the Inmarsat? That is the International Marine Satellite for you land bound folks and not for the faint of heart at \$15.00 per minute. Well, IBM thinks so. They were the company that did away with all the print in their own libraries years ago and now they offer a new product called **IBM infoSage** to sift through the Internet and find relevant information to suit

your profiled requirements. It is SDI, Selective Dissemination of Information, and it is nothing new but the arrival of Big Blue in the business is new. First, it is a departure from their old line business of making things like PCs and mainframes. Secondly, it is a grand entry into the service business and by a company with huge resources, staying power and expertise. What does infoSage do? It is an electronic librarian after a fashion. It is a preprogrammed searcher of specific information from 2200 sources every time you demand output. They bill it as a personalized online information resource that works for you. The cost? \$24.95 per month for full time searching. This is far less than any of the previous versions of SDI and will be a formidable barrier to entry for other companies without the deep pockets of IBM. Remember that IBM and Sears stayed with Prodigy for all those money losing years and they did learn some things from that venture although it was just sold by them.

Now it doesn't take a genius to figure out that this is just the start. These 2200 sources are likely the more generic places that industry information would be lurking. Next should come the more expensive, targeted and specialized areas such as law, medicine, patents and chemicals. We all saw the opportunity out there. The Net is loaded with information and the challenge has been how to sort through and get what you need. The automation of research is also known by marketing people as the industrialization of service. In the simplest form, it is the salad bar where you serve yourself instead of an expensive salad chef doing the honors. Self service salad. Self service research, the very same thing. Take as much as you like, go to the bar as often as you can until you are full and it is one price.

What else does IBM have going for them besides experience, deep pockets, a commitment to high grade service and a gold plated name? They have a huge sales force, a large installed base of customers and a CEO who is out to change their destiny. If I were a student, a faculty member (I am), a company president (I am), a researcher or maybe even just curious I would have to sign up for this service. This costs less than a trip to the library, it is delivered to my desk when I want it and it is

exactly what I have asked for and I can download it for dissemination to meet my internal needs.

Why do we automate service? Because we seek to standardize something that has been subject to the vagaries of humans and their talents, moods, work assignments and whims. Long ago we stopped being willing to pay some guy with greasy jeans, a belt buckle that scarred our fender and who wandered over in his own good time to fill our gas tank. We don't want to wait in long lines after searching for a parking space when and only when the bank chose to be open so that we could get twenty bucks from our own account. So why should we treat information any differently? **Fred Goodman** and his **PIK (Public Information Kiosk)** is building ATM type information kiosks and selling them to libraries, governments and agencies that want to automate the delivery of repetitive information. They are going into rail stations, public buildings and shopping malls and you can access them with a credit card for fee services or a library card for non fee services.

What is next for the delivery of flawless, peopleless information service? Well, how many people who are on the Internet actually use a computer to compute anything? Not too many, but plenty of email users, stock price checkers, chatters and the like are there and they don't need a pentium-powered anything to do what they do. What they have is a computer with a phone connection and what they need is a phone with a computer chip inside. Oh sure, a keyboard or scribe instrument will be handy but certainly these people don't need all the hardware that comes with a full blown computer and the phone manufacturers are working fast and furiously to deliver a small phone that computes. Because it is a phone it will be able to download selected information to a data storage and display device at any location depending on the size of the internal chip. So far most of the work is taking place with a 386 old style slow chip because it doesn't need all that computing power to move a little digit or two. So, it is time to start rethinking the needs of all those desktop users and start linking information and communication much more closely. That is why the phone companies, **Ameritech** for example, are so interested in the information game today. They have always sold you the use of their system and now they want to sell you some products too. 🕷