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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

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Daedalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. "Books, Bricks, and Bytes,"
Fall 1996, Issued as Volume 125, Number 4,
of the *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* \$10.95, ISSN 0011-5266

and

Buildings, books, and bytes: Libraries and communities in the digital age: A report on the public's opinion of library leaders' visions for the future.

Prepared by the Benton Foundation.
Washington, D.C.: Benton Foundation, 1996. 46 p.

Reviewed by **Tom Leonhardt**

What do these two publications have in common, why should they be reviewed together, and why should they appear in this annual report issue? Each has the same title, simply reversing books and buildings (or bricks if you are the academic journal *Daedalus*), each tries to grapple with the question of libraries and the future, and together, they indicate a trend, more obvious in 1996 than heretofore, towards an acceptance of electronic options without abandoning our buildings and our books.

For those of us earning our livings in and around libraries, these questions are not new, they just seem more pointed with the new millennium serving as a thousand-year full moon of the future, bringing out the hidden lunacy in all of us. Thousands of years of evolution and amazing advances in science and technology have failed to eliminate the superstitious part of human nature. Human beings also like to gaze at their collective navel and not just as a new millennium approaches. About a third of the way into a decade, we can't help but project our current fears and favorites into the decade still ten years away. Depending on how satisfied we are with how things are going, we paint either a rosy picture or one of total darkness and gloom. Utopia or dystopia, which is it to be? Happily, both of these publications capture the uncertainty of the future for books, bytes, and buildings, not to mention librarians, publishers, readers, and computer enthusiasts. Both recognize that much is at stake and if we are to make wise decisions now, (decisions made now do not predict the future, rather, they shape it) we must understand what the issues are.

Daedalus, in this issue being reviewed, includes "A Charge to Authors" (p.[362-366]), providing the best summary of the issues that this reviewer has seen. It is too long to include here in its entirety but a few sentences, in the order in which they appear in *Daedalus*, will convey the thoughtfulness in which this important issue was approached.

"Our aim is to look at the whole universe of American libraries, realizing that the small Carnegie library in a Texas town is not confronted with the same challenges as those that preoccupy the men and women responsible for the University of Texas research library at Austin, and that neither is likely to respond in the way the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, or the San Francisco Library is likely to do. The opportunity in this issue of *Daedalus* is not to produce a collection of monographs on specific institutions, but to consider a few of the many conditions that exist, that need to be thought about, and not only by those who manage these libraries. They are incontestably a 'public good,' which ought to be thought about by a larger public.

"What, then, are some of the major themes that this *Daedalus* issue will treat? In no particular order, and not pretending to be exhaustive, though the length of this letter may suggest that this is our purpose, we would cite the following: what do the new technologies portend for libraries, for the ownership of information? What access to knowledge needs to be protected? How can this be accomplished? What 'community' interests need to be taken into account? What are these communities? If the promise of the new technologies is considerable, what costs are likely to be incurred? Who can be expected to pay? Who, indeed, are the new 'patrons' of the libraries of the twenty-first century likely to be? What will electronic availability do to an older print culture? What are the most likely effects to be for publishers, traditionally the 'gatekeepers' to much that came to be stored in libraries? If the public libraries of the late nineteenth century developed in response to quite specific American social conditions, what comparable conditions exist now, and are they likely to be satisfied by libraries? Or, are the contemporary demands novel, requiring a redefinition of what libraries can be expected to do?"

In the nineteen essays in this *Daedalus*, the goals set forth in the charge to authors seem to have been met about as completely as one could hope for and certainly more articulately and thoughtfully than has been the case in other collections of essays and conference programs purporting to deal with the library of the future. One of the contributors, **Hans-Dieter Lehmann**, Director General of the Deutsche Bibliothek in Leipzig, Germany writes that "Libraries are not merely streamlined service centers; books are more than containers of text. They are cultural and intellectual indicators of the first order. Therefore, scholars and librarians must join in developing strategies focused upon specific rather than generalized solutions — strategies that ensure books their proper place and approach the use of digital forms in an appropriate manner *without regard to ideology*. [emphasis mine]."

This collection of essays is not free of ideology, but the ideology that surfaces does not get in the way of the discussion at hand. No one is suggesting that we should choose either books or bytes or bricks to the exclusion of others. Reading this journal issue (a book, really) cover to cover (I suspect the editor arranged these contributions purposefully), it is striking how broadly and how fairly and how clearly (for the most part) the issues are covered. **Peter Lyman** expounds on the question "What is a Digital Library" (I still don't know what it is, but perhaps I'll know one when I see one) and a third-year law student is "Searching for the Catalog of Catalogs."

This is a volume that ALL librarians (and I mean all) should read. Those who work closely with librarians should read it too, especially publishers. Members of the press (newspapers, magazines, television, and those venturing onto the Internet and World Wide Web) should be required to read this issue of *Daedalus* COVER TO COVER before they are allowed to write or speak another word about the book versus the computer, the library

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without walls, and the instant access to complete libraries (not even the entire Nutshell library is online). They should memorize this sentence in Marilyn Gell Mason's "The Yin and Yang of Learning": "If the claim that everyone will have access to everything quickly and efficiently is not now true, the questions remain, *if it were true, would it be desirable?*" [emphasis mine].

These are all readable essays guaranteed to make the reader think. For librarians, reading James H. Billington's "Libraries, the Library of Congress, and the Information Age," and Susan Goldberg Kent's "American Public Libraries: A Long Transformative Moment," will give them hope and bolster their courage as they explain to funding sources why they still need buildings and books. Billington is eloquent in his defense of the American library system. "If you look at our public library system, each of its four distinctive features currently faces a unique threat. First, for democracy to be sustainable on a continental scale in a multicultural society, it must be based on the dynamic use of knowledge.

"Second, this knowledge must be *openly accessible* to all people.

"Third, public libraries expressed the *growing pluralism* of American society. I like to call them temples of pluralism, places where a great diversity of people gathered.

"Fourth, public libraries were, nevertheless, a *unifying force* in the communities where they existed."

Billington also offers warnings about "all the miscellaneous, unsorted, unverified, constantly changing information on the Internet..." a warning echoed by John Gohl in *Educom Review* (January/February 1997, p. 4-5): [re junkmail on the Internet] "However, I must confess to the same skepticism asserted by author and Yale computer scientist David Gelerntner, who says it's ludicrous to suppose that Internet access will fix or even address the main problems of education: Everyone knows what you do with the Web: You surf, sliding from site to site at the click of a mouse button. Exactly which problem will Web-surfing attack? Our children's insufficient shallowness? Excessive attention spans? Unhealthy fixation on in-depth analysis? Stubborn unwillingness to push on to the next topic until they mastered the last? We need less surfing in the schools, not more. The Web is a great source of pictures — are we trying to cure our children of excessive interest in the written word? Depraved indifference to glitz and snazzy graphics?"

Gelerntner's rhetorical questions are equivalent to the following direct one: What is the purpose of the World Wide Web?

This issue of *Daedalus* and the Benton Foundation report are indicative of a trend that picked up steam in 1996, even as the number of Internet users supposedly doubled, and that is a trend towards healthy skepticism about the ability of the Internet and the World Wide Web to solve the problems of librarians, booksellers, subscription agents, and publishers or drive them out of business.

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movie *Fargo* I thought about you. It was so snowy and cold. But I guess you like the cold.

KS: Sport skiing is a great passion of mine and it's a family activity. My wife Jan, two children, and I all ski. Our daughter got her first pair of skis when she was eighteen months old, fourteen years ago. We tease our son (now a teenager too) as a

slower learner because he was born in the fall and had to wait until he was two. I also love motorcycles and I spent years racing cars. My other great passion is music and records. I think that records sound better than CDs because the sound is closer to the real thing. I have a modest collection of about 5000 albums.

ATG: What do you like to read?

KS: The latest book I have been reading is *Snow Falling on Cedars*. I'm an avid

The juxtaposition of the titles of these two publications, appearing in the same year, encourages me. It tells me something is in the air and it goes beyond the small community that gathers in Charleston and in ALA conference cities. The Benton study will be read by policy makers throughout the United States and the *Daedalus* issue will be read (I hope) by academics, college graduates, national policy makers, and newspeople (I have referred two reporters to both publications so that their understanding of the issues they were writing about would become clearer and more complex than they were aware of.). There is hope, after all, that the palette will contain color and that we will understand that there are not really so many either/or situations within the human comedy, and the dilemma (at worst) of the book, the byte, and the building coexisting harmoniously is not one of them. Part of the problem is that we have argued about the issues and not had honest open dialogs. We have argued with more emotion (not necessarily bad) at our disposal than facts. Don't confuse me with the facts, we seemed to be saying to those we disagreed with. The facts you cite don't make up for your stupidity and ignorance.

Finally we have some facts to look at in the Benton Foundation report, an inquiry "about libraries and the challenges they face in the digital world. But [the report] is also about every noncommercial institution — from public TV to the freenets — that provides information to the public. It uses libraries as an exemplar of what can happen to even our most cherished public institutions when they face the onset of the digital revolution, a seismic societal shift. The report's findings about the intersection — and divergence — of library leaders' visions with those of the public hold lessons for everyone who values and wants to promote the public sphere of information and communications.

"The Benton Foundation had several key collaborators in the design and management of the Conference in May 1996 and in the preparation of this study: Leigh Estabrook, Dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois; Lake Research, a Washington DC public opinion firm; and the Tarrance Group, a survey research firm based in Alexandria, Virginia. Additional survey data were obtained from the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut."

Reading this report is reassuring in some ways because the public trusts libraries and depends on and supports them for many things: "providing reading hours and other programs for children; purchasing new books and other printed materials; maintaining and building library buildings; providing computers and online services to children and adults who lack them; and providing a place where librarians help people find information through computers and online services."

But lest we become complacent, the study found that "the youngest Americans polled, those between the ages of 18 and 24, are the least enthusiastic boosters of maintaining and building library buildings. They are also the least enthusiastic of any age group about the importance of libraries in a digital future. And they voted to spend their money on personal computer disks

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reader. When I read soup can labels I know I haven't been reading enough. In an ideal week I read 4-7 books. 🐾

Well, y'all, this interview ended as Keith was going off to direct a television crew in a local cable television fund-raising auction. He was particularly interested in the 1997 Harley motorcycle that had been donated, but said he wouldn't bid on it! Pretty cool, as my daughter would say.

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rather than contribute the same amount in tax dollars to the library for purchasing digital information for home use. Moreover, men were less enthusiastic than women on almost all aspects of the library."

Part of the problem with surveys is that they provide very little context and have to ask simple questions if they hope to get a set of answers that can be tabulated. Of course the 18 to 24 year olds don't want to give their \$20 to anyone. This is not a mature, family-responsible, mortgage paying group. And they don't realize that a lot of \$20 contributions can pay for an expensive reference service (CD-ROM, if you will), while \$20 of their own money won't even buy half of the popular new game for Sego, Nintendo, or your PC. In fact, \$20 doesn't go very far in the software business. The question is posed and answered simplistically, and the answer, while probably quite accurate for the age group, needs to be qualified when looking at the results.

As for women and libraries, regular visits to your public library will tell you that there are more mothers with children there than fathers and more women than men poring over the new book shelf. Why is this so and does it matter?

There is much food for thought in this study and we in the greater library community ought to be grateful to the Benton Foundation for undertaking this study. They properly identify the super bookstores as competitors to libraries and also as allies. Some of those surveyed and interviewed complained that their public library didn't have as many new books as **Barnes & Noble** or **Borders** and that they had to line up for the latest fiction. What can libraries do about that? The superstores are quite liberal about people reading on the premises, even while sipping a cappuccino and listening to a string quartet and the story hours they sponsor are wonderful things, but if you or your children want to take that book home, someone must pay for it, whereas in a library, you can take the book home by charging it out. If the bestseller you want is not in, you will have to wait to

get it and if you can't wait, you can always buy a copy. I wish more people would buy more books and they seem to be more inclined than ever in that regard, but those who buy the books regularly also visit their libraries several times a year. The study also found that "home computer use and library use are highly correlated."

This study does seem to be the start of a trend to look more closely at public perception about libraries in the digital age. "COMING SOON: A joint publication of the Benton Foundation and Libraries for the Future ... A special report will offer case studies of pioneering libraries that are expanding services and forging new alliances in the digital age. Community and national organizations, government agencies, and private corporations are supporting efforts to enhance the digital capabilities of libraries and to help libraries serve individual patrons and their communities. At the same time, librarians and library advocates are assuming an important role in policy debates on issues such as universal service, censorship, and the structure of the telecommunications system. To reserve a copy, call the Benton Foundation at 202-638-5770 or send email to benton@benton.org."

A close reading of these two books suggests that librarians have not been good advocates for their traditional services, choosing instead to shoot themselves in their collective foot by pushing the digital and the electronic to the extent that budget-wary administrators thought they could begin mothballing libraries complete with the books and people inside them. These two works further suggest that this is not a realistic view and not one supported by the public, at least not as far as public libraries are concerned. We probably need a Carnegie study similar to the Benton study to gauge the true feelings of faculty, students, and administrators about the importance of books, bricks, and bytes. But in the meantime, we should all begin honest dialogs about finding the proper mix because all the evidence points to a long coexistence, one long enough to see me through retirement and the beyond at which point my reading days will be over. 🐼

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Value-Added Services and Outsourcing

4. Is all this vendor talk about value-added services just prattle or have library service expectations really changed? Back in the 1970s and early 1980s when libraries had budgets that kept ahead of inflation and adequate staffing, they used multiple vendors and also went direct to major publishers. Service expectations were straightforward: the right book in a timely manner at a fair price. Both the publisher and the vendor had no trouble meeting these expectations. Today, facing shrinking budgets and downsizing, libraries are consolidating their buying, often opting to buy US-published books and UK-distributed books from a single vendor. As a consequence of downsizing and other efficiency initiatives, libraries are focusing on "core competencies": processes and services they feel they can do better than anyone else, and "outsourcing" other things.

What are some of these things that are being outsourced to vendors? Certainly selection (approval plans) must be mentioned. More recently (1995/1996), YBP and other vendors, responding to client requests (expectations), developed bibliographic, processing, and cataloging services in support of their acquisitions services for libraries. These developments have led to collaborations with bibliographic utilities and system providers that have opened doors to the creation of other value-added services. Most of this innovation has been directed at getting the book to the end user faster. Libraries can now take the books out of the shipping box, wand barcodes (enter records into the system), and put the books on the shelf.

Other new vendor services requested by librarians include:

- Web-based searching, ordering and reporting.
- Access to account-specific files of books supplied over the past several years, and current approval allocations.
- Duplication control between approval books, firm orders and standing orders.

In support of these and other technical services, vendors have had to redesign their computer support systems and processes. Investments in state-of-the-art client/server platforms will enable vendors to react more quickly to customer expectations. While some libraries still maintain publisher new book standing order plans and continue to firm order from publishers, this activity will, I sense, soon wither. Vendors (booksellers to libraries) have evolved into "service providers," adding value to the book. These services go far beyond a publisher's reason for being.

Conclusion

This brings me to my final "musing." 5. The trouble with building deep business relationships is the trouble with this paper. There is never enough time to go beyond the superficial.

If 1996 was the year of library/vendor/utility collaboration, then we should strive to make 1997 the year that publishers and system providers also join the value circle. System providers need to become more proactive in the pursuit of collaborative opportunities. 🐼

Parts of this paper were presented at the AAUP Marketing to Libraries Workshop, November 6, 1996, Charleston, South Carolina.