November 1990

The Crisis in Libraries

Richard Abel

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Recommended Citation

Abel, Richard (1990) "The Crisis in Libraries," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 2: Iss. 5, Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2294>

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Some Thoughts on the Crisis in Libraries

by *Richard Abel*

1. There is, and has been for 20 years, a crisis in the libraries. It presents itself immediately in the inability of virtually all scholarly libraries to any longer acquire all the intellectual materials - largely journals and books - needed to support the scholarly objectives of their institutions.

2. But the genuine, underlying problem perceived by that group in the scholarly community called librarians is the disparities in funding between the three legs of the scholarly stool: Producers of information (research or bench scholars); producers of knowledge (synthesizing or library scholars who knead information into the concepts and principles recognized as knowledge products); and the organizers and managers of information/knowledge products across space and time (librarians). The first group has been handsomely funded for a period of 45 years while the latter two groups have for some years been underfunded.

3. The present day information explosion results from the rapid increase in the number of papers printed in journals, reports, proceedings of symposia, etc. reporting new means and methods of research and research results by bench scholars and growing out of the massively increased funding by government and other agencies for information producing scholars.

4. Interestingly enough the key research scholars, the research movers and shakers generating the vast bulk of this new information

use journals in the same way the insiders in the financial community use the financial papers; that is, to place tombstone ads advising that I (we) did this work and I (we) claim this piece of turf as mine (ours). These movers and shakers use journals only minimally in support of their own information needs as they are well locked into worldwide invisible colleges via the electronic networks supported by telecommunications/computer technology and the symposium/conference circuit supported by jet aircraft technology.

5. Journal publication is critical to both maintaining and advancing not only their position in academic and research institutions but also the funding sources for these key players. Both career advancement and funding systems are highly dependent upon the bibliographies which scholars can present in support of such requests. Simply counting papers has become the principal currency in many such decisions. Interestingly, books in some leading academic institutions, heavyweights in the research game, no longer are viewed as counters (currency) in such decisions. In short, a paper counts for more than a book in career advancement and the successful solicitation of research funds.

6. Numerous observers and commentators have pointed out that the failure to support the synthesizing scholar in a measure proportional to that of the information-generating scholar would in time lead to a crisis in scholarship. That crisis would, they predicted, have some of the following characteristics.

a. Information would become increasingly dispersed across space

(in a wide variety of journals, reports, symposia proceedings, chapters of multi-author, state-of-the-art books, electronic data bases, etc.) and ipso-facto in time.

b. The mountain of undigested, unintegrated, near randomly related information would grow over time into a virtually intractable conglomeration largely beyond the power of any given individual to master.

c. The intellectual gulf between one subspecialty and another would widen and deepen, a phenomenon sometimes summed up in a kind of humorous despair as "Learning more and more about less and less."

d. The ability to pass on to the full cohort of succeeding students, not just the exceptionally gifted, the fruits of the accumulation of information, would become increasingly difficult in the absence of the unifying and integrating concepts and principles which are developed out of every body of information by synthesizing scholars and which are the hallmark of a body of knowledge.

Quite clearly the present state of scholarship is characterized by all these as well as other marks of the dysfunction of the scholarly enterprise.

7. Probably no players in the scholarly enterprise are more acutely aware of this dysfunction than librarians whose function in the scholarly enterprise is to collect, organize, manage and disseminate the accumulated body of information/knowledge materials. Their catalog of difficulties include:

a. Budgets for materials which for the last 20 years have been inadequate to meet the scholarly and academic needs of

the agency or institution in which they are embedded.

b. These strained budgets were then asked to acquire access to indexing systems, both in printed and electronic form, in an effort to provide access to the increasingly dispersed information generated by the bench scholars, thus deepening the budgetary problem.

c. Librarians, as counsellors and guides to the artifacts of the scholarly enterprise, are finding it increasingly difficult to advise scholars and students on the intellectual content of their collections. Many are now in fact providing guidance only to the systems available: catalogs, indexing services, electronic searching systems; interlibrary loans, etc. Things are falling apart for want of sufficient numbers of those great intellectual

integrating artifacts - books written by synthesizing scholars which make thousands of pages of journals, etc. or megabits of electronically stored information unnecessary by virtue of having been incorporated into the concepts and principles of a body of knowledge.

d. The number of journals founded to serve an ever growing number of scholarly sub-specialties grows exponentially - further straining inadequate budgets.

8. Libraries have, in both reasoned and impassioned ways, endeavored over many years to communicate to the managers of their agencies or institutions the increasing difficulties they have experienced in trying to hold up their side of the scholarly stool. The usual approach has been to plead for money; not just money for additional materials but for additional staff and physical facilities as well. But, as this paper has tried to make clear, inadequate funding is but a symptom of a

more profound difficulty; a difficulty which resides at the very core of the scholarly enterprise. This distemper arises not out of venality of any kind. It is not a case of a group of scholars interested in discovering new information seeking the lion's share of the financial pie nor position or rank superior to that of their colleagues who are more interested in synthesizing information to create knowledge nor those more comfortable in organizing and

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managing the artifacts of information/knowledge. Rather it is the unhappy outcome of so many human undertakings: The unintended consequence of well-intentioned but ill-conceived plans and policies. This seems a typically American outcome: A morbid preoccupation with short-term results and a pathological disregard for long-term results and the large picture.

9. What is to be done? Librarians have, I submit, a critical role to play in resolving this distortion of the scholarly enterprise. Their role is critical for two reasons:

a. They are the player in the scholarly community whose function is most overtly being hurt and therefore the player with the best standing to promote a program aimed at a better reasoned distribution of funding over the long term.

b. A very large fraction of librarians turned from other scholarly pursuits to the library

profession out of a profound commitment to the book. This commitment not uncommonly grew out of the way in which one or more well-thought-out and well-written books assisted them in ordering and making sense of what had before been a howling wilderness of disparate and unrelated facts, events and jumbled, awkward ways of behaving. This sudden enlightenment, which is the hallmark of great books, grows out of the synthesis and integration

imposed upon a great body of information by a synthesizing scholar. This synthesis leads to the virtually instant comprehensibility and understanding of a previously disorganized and incomprehensible body of apparently unrelated facts and events and precisely parallels the relationship I have tried to outline in this

paper but at the level of social institutions. In short, librarians are particularly well suited to carry this brief for they intuitively if not consciously understand the intellectual and scholarly importance of the book.

For far too long libraries have simply adopted the posture of the faithful servant quietly seeing to the information/knowledge needs of their institutions or agencies. When accosted by faculty for inadequacies in the collection they have simply pleaded lack of funds - we would do a better job if the master provided more money. In a time of growing financial stringency such a response is not only largely meaningless it can only alienate other players in the scholarly community who must, by and large, also cope with budgetary constraints.

Librarians must throw off the livery of servants and re-enter the world of scholarship - a world they

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Library Profile

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technology librarians manage their own branch libraries and function as an independent "cluster."

Automation profile: LIAS (Library Information Access System), locally developed, is the Libraries' online catalog, and supports cataloging, circulation, fund accounting, and electronic mail. MicroLIAS, an IBM PC-based version of LIAS, can be used to create and maintain databases by downloading records from LIAS or by manual input of data. Recently Acquisitions implemented the Fund Accounting control System (FACS) of LIAS, which allows online access to and manipulation of acquisitions budget data for twenty library locations. FACS is available to all collection development personnel and library administrators. Library Computing Services, part of Penn State's computing division, is in the process of migrating LIAS from Honeywell to DEC computers. When this project is completed, LIAS development will focus on the acquisitions component. Library personnel work closely with Library Computing Services in developing and implementing each LIAS component. ♣

And They Were There

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For librarians, Frankfurt could be an important experience. You can meet with book suppliers from many countries. There is a librarians/booksellers meeting area reserved for this purpose. You can talk to the top people in larger publishing houses (by appointment only, and usually for just a few minutes), expressing your views on issues of professional interest. You can see, by country, what is being published. There are halls devoted to art books, children's books, and other specific subjects. For anyone with an interest in the book world, and I do mean world, Frankfurt is a worthwhile experience.

****Some tips on attending the Frankfurt Book Fair****

Hotels are full for miles around, and prices go up about 25% for the duration of the fair. The Book Fair office can help find private home accommodations in and around Frankfurt. Many people stay in Weisbaden or Heidelberg, which are less than an hour away by train. Moderately priced hotels in Frankfurt are about \$125.

Germany, indeed all of Western Europe, is expensive. Restaurant prices are comparable to better restaurants in large US cities.

Busses and trams run to the fair, and cost about one dollar. Taxis are comparable to prices in the States.

There are 10 halls the size of a typical ALA convention. You will do a lot of walking. People wear business attire at the Fair. The weather is comparable to our northeast in October. Don't arrive the day before the Fair; give yourself a couple of days to get over jet lag. The Fair will exhaust (and exhilarate) you. ♣

The Nemesis

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Schools, non-profits and government agencies get a price break: \$95.00. \$495.00 outside North America (Only \$8.33 per issue more for foreigners — have they been watching the British or what?) and a special corporate price of \$200.00 each for 10 or more subscriptions. Hey Katina, take a page from this group, break our newsletter down by "type" of subscriber and you could really make some money on *Against the Grain*. For 12 pages (this first issue's size) 12 times a year (144 pages in all) the bargain rate for Europeans et. al. works out to \$3.44 a page. There are lots of quotable quotes in the *Newsletter* and they fit all sizes. ♣

Some Thoughts

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opted out of some years ago when schools of library science became trade schools imparting only vocational training. The obvious and natural avenue of re-entry is to address the problems and relationships of the organization and management of the products of scholarship across space and time in a scholarly way. The obvious and natural time for re-entering the realm of active scholarship is now, a time when scholarship is in a fundamental disarray.

As the first step, I submit that a small cadre of like-minded book people, prepared to commit to the long, arduous and often discouraging course which this transformation of the role of scholarly librarianship and of the scholarly enterprise will require, band together in a committee to formulate a position and an action program aimed at bringing this transformation about. The Charleston Conference has proved itself to be an enduring gathering of book people prepared to consider and investigate radical departures from the presently accepted dogmas of librarianship and the place of libraries. I submit that a handful - 8-12 - of people who have over the years proved themselves to be the backbone of the Conference gather together to explore the way to proceed.