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Op-Ed-Opinions and Editorials-We Don't Need No Stinking Librarians

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We Don't Need No Stinking Librarians

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Once upon a time, the Corporate Librarian was the most powerful employee, relative to pay scale, in any organization. Even in rigidly hierarchical companies where a Division President might wait weeks for a face-to-face meeting with the CEO, the librarian would be the one employee outside of the CEO's immediate staff that might see him every day. The librarian was one of the few non-executive employees the CEO recognized in the hallway, or on the elevator. The librarian knew that her ultimate boss needed safe, constant and responsive access to information and movements within and without the corporate setting to do her job.

It may be the case that in some situations the Librarian used this power to become a high priestess of access: holding the curtain open only far enough to pass out the required text and keeping prying eyes from glimpsing what went on within. If so, the inevitable power struggle that invigorates every complex organization from religion to government would mark that librarian not as a guide but a gatekeeper. Researchers and executives resented the librarian as an obstacle to advancement and an impediment to access. Haughty, expensive and full of disdain for the researchers and executives who needed her, the librarian returned all the animosity in full. Not only returned it, but weighted it with the ability to drop a comment to the CEO about the utter confusion in a particular department. To put this tension in a solid nineteenth century framework, we can use Matthew Arnold's classification. The Barbarians (Management) and Philistines (Researchers) were maintaining themselves against the Populists with just the type of formal institution the Corporate Library, with its staff of initiates, embodied. But the revolt of the masses was coming.

It is said that when **Solon** traveled through the Eastern Mediterranean in search of the best laws for the Athenians, his journey brought him to **Lydia**. Visiting **Croesus**, he of the legendary wealth, **Solon** was asked how a state might be organized to assure equality for all. **Solon** did not answer, but spying a wheat field he waded into the swaying grain. Moving methodically he broke off every stalk of grain that rose above those around it. Today's **Solon** is the Internet, and the decapitation of expertise and excellence is no longer symbolic. It is as if the principles of the Cultural Revolution had become embedded in the Corporation. Instead of **Huey Long's** "Every Man a King," we had **Nicolas Negroponte's** "Every man his own information scientist."

The irony of this situation is best expressed by pointing out that the librarians could not only be expected to attend their own hanging, but that they would research the best brand of rope and bring it with them to the scaffold. It has been the Librarian community that has consistently insisted on the unmediated access of all to all the information available. Whether it is unfiltered access to the Internet at the local branch of your public library or **Bloomberg Terminals** and **Lexis-Nexis** for everyone on the Corporate Intranet, they gave, and continue to give, the weapons of their own undoing to those who would destroy them.

If, in fact, the Internet had been the end product of some fabulous discovery like the cure for AIDS or cancer, then the library community would have been wrong to withhold it. But the Internet is not a solution, it is a tool; a limited tool from the tool chest that includes all the art and science of librarianship since Antiquity. Not only is it only a tool, it is a crude tool, more like a ball peen hammer than a scalpel. It does a great job of mashing together all kinds of raw information, mixing it with excessive amounts of speculation, and formatting the results in a way that the undiscerning can rely on. Driven by a large complement of sellers (the hardware, content and software industries) and a small vanguard of professionals who had lost confidence in their own discipline (the librarians, a.k.a. "Information Scientists") the Internet has been simultaneously sold and proselytized as the "really big thing that will change life as we know it."

By now, everyone knows that the Web was shamelessly over-hyped. If it were just another example of binge thinking we could all just look back and arch our brows at how silly we were. Like a college freshman waking after his first frat party, we feel silly and a little embarrassed at what went on. Unfortunately, we still have to cope with the hangover. In what could be called hype "blowback," all the claims made for the "unmediated" access that the Internet was going to provide, are coming back at a very difficult time for America's corporations. Suddenly faced with the need to cut expenses, the Barbarians are saying things like: "Why do

we even need a Library?" In budget meetings across the country the Corporate Library Networks that were constructed so painstakingly over the last fifty years, are being dismantled. Middle management types who think "The One-Minute Manager" is deep but fifty-nine seconds too long are making one minute decisions to cut library funding, cut librarians or simply close libraries as too expensive, and besides "the employees can get it on the Internet."

Now researchers, managers and professionals are hacking away at their terminals trying to find information that a library professional could have supplied in a flash. Most of these employees are paid far more than the librarian. They spend far more time searching and produce results that are far less useful. Mediation of information was a good thing. Nobody thinks they should have unmediated access to the Pharmacopeia; a little advice from your doctor helps.

The librarians are being thrown overboard as a first move to rid the corporation of an "unjustifiable cost center" that's "just a luxury." Collections are being consolidated, dispersed or just plain discarded. Librarians who still have jobs are afraid to engage in any serious collection development. They don't want to look old-fashioned. They are blending into the wallpaper with new job titles like "Document Specialist" and the distinct service they provided the corporate community is vanishing. For many corporations, becoming "lean" has also meant becoming stupid. Gone are the skills that the librarian possessed. Gone is the institutional memory the librarian maintained. Even if a

strong counter-argument were to be made by the library community, it's too late. Collections could not be reconstituted and the institutional amnesia is irreversible.

Most of you who have read this far are academic librarians. Holding jobs in institutions of higher education where libraries are understood to be central to the mission of the university. You feel secure. Opening your arms you welcome the intrusion of the new technology into your library. Innocently you divert significant portions of your budget unquestioningly. But what if the Corporate Librarian is the canary in the coalmine?