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Making Good Libraries Better

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Uptight In Library Land: from page 34

- If an employee feels the boss has come up with a good idea, or is generally doing a good job, tell him/her. Yes, supervisors are human too; they also benefit from positive feedback.
- Whether management or staff, schedule time away from the job each year. If you cannot afford a week, or more, during the summer, then schedule a cluster of three or four-day weekends.

These are a few possibilities gleaned from research and observation, coupled with over a quarter century of on-the-job experience. 🐼

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Rumors from page 18

Have you seen **Gold Rush Linker**, the **OpenURL** reference linking service made possible through the **Gold Rush** electronic journal management system. **OpenURL** resolvers are becoming available from many different sources such as integrated library system vendors (e.g., **ExLibris**, **Innovative Interfaces**, **Endeavor**) and through other services such as **Fretwell-Downing**. We have to learn more about all these new services. Who said our life was easy? See www.coalliance.org.

epixtech is now **Dynix**. Check out www.epixtech.com/.

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Making Good Libraries Better

by **Richard Abel** (Consultant; Phone: 503-292-0830; Fax: 503-292-0873)

Librarians of the last generation inherited good libraries, thanks to the generous postwar decades' budgets and the emergence of the re-printers who made good most of the holes in collections attributable to the **Great Depression** and **WW II**.

Further, libraries in mid-century enjoyed the financial muscle to move beyond the traditional role of supplying knowledge in books. Libraries were able to move behind the synthesized bodies of knowledge concepts and ethical precepts articulated in books. They could go back to providing some small portion of the raw information — the unprocessed data used by scholars to synthesize knowledge concepts and ethical precepts — that is contained in journals. Seldom have libraries stood so high historically as cultural institutions and icons as in the 25-year period from about 1950 to 1975.

But much changed beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s. We need not dwell on most of the unhappy consequences of that aberrant period. Rather our focus must rest on the multifarious changes in academe which became visible by the mid-1970s.

For our purposes the most significant outcome of these manifold forces is the progressive decay of book collections and the consequent erosion of library utility to knowledge-seekers manifest in the form of increasing reliance upon the interlibrary loan system. These changes and their historic progression have been analyzed endlessly in all manner of forums for years. So, only a rapid recount of that history need be made here.

1. The 1970s saw the transition of academic governance from deserving academics close to the end of their service who prized libraries to professional management types.

2. The latter are necessarily highly respon-

sive to both marginal income opportunities and marginal cost factors.

3. By the mid-1950s, geometrical increases in support of academic scientific/technological research by government and business were well established.

4. Research faculty and academic management heartily responded to these marginal income opportunities.

5. As a consequence, academic managers came to see research facilities and professional staff as positive financial resources. By comparison, the long-nurtured professional objectives of librarians and their substantial facility came to be viewed as "financial black-holes," to use a favored metaphor.

6. Associated with these macro-changes in marginal and prestige assessments, professional academic prestige migrated from the synthesis and transfer of knowledge concepts and ethical precepts — education and knowledge — to the production.

7. Consequent on these changes in marginal professional financial and prestige quotients, geometrical increases in research results began to pour out of the academy and into the journal literature.

8. Related to these marginal professional increases in the value of producing research results, the system of academic advancement and perks became increasingly dependent upon contributing to this flow of information and data.

9. The obvious consequence of these monstrous year-to-year increases in information generation led to not only the ballooning of existing journals but to the ultimately out-of-control proliferation of new journals. (Incidentally, the open secret that the vast preponderance of this journal literature was of no or, at best, marginal

concern — estimates ranging as high as 75% has not slowed the avalanche of journal pages.)

10. This hothouse growth of journal literature led, in turn, to vast and progressive increases in library subscription costs.

11. These massive increases in journal costs occurred in tandem with progressive reductions in library budgets as academic managers diverted resources to marginally higher, immediate returns.

12. While all this was going on, another even more visible revolution was shakily advancing — the computer revolution.

13. Certainly one of the earliest glory points of the computer revolution was realized in libraries with the conversion of the enormous databases of library catalogs and circulation systems to electronic forms together with the parallel conversion of the books-in-print.

14. The early and marked success of these large databases at marginally small conversion and continuing operation costs led to a euphoric confidence that computers could be successfully employed in dealing with what gave the appearance of another large database, namely, the contents of the world's libraries.

15. This enthusiasm and confidence was shared not only by the electronic pied pipers in computing centers and many librarians but, most importantly, by a large fraction of academic managers.

16. Voila! Here was the silver bullet which would solve the intractable "Library Problem." Libraries could return to the idyllic precincts of

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providing both knowledge and information resources while academic managers could allocate the saved marginal financial resources to the augmentation of other claimants.

17. The vision of digitizing the libraries of the world focused first upon provision of ever-transient information-journals. This was, of course, a natural and rational target. This because:

a. Librarians, and more importantly professional managers, were acutely aware that the "Library Problem" centered on ballooning journal costs.

b. The content of journals consists almost entirely on information — raw data and methodological procedures. Such matter is particularly well suited to the strengths and shortcomings of computers.

c. The content of any given journal is of the most disparate kind — a bit of this, a bit of that — a bit here and there for a reasonable spectrum of the sub-specialists using the journal. The computer shines in organizing such a melange of discrete bits of data, just as it does with the diverse bits of a catalog record.

d. For two generations journals have been the agency of validation for professional scientific worth and status — and *ipso facto* salaries and perks. Hence, the great and sustained reluctance from science faculty librarians have all encountered as they tried to fit the ever-simpler financial cloth they have been handed to the stout figures of research staffs which have been generously nourished for two generations.

e. Journal publishers, coming from a centuries-old publishing tradition which developed the axiom subsequently beloved by *Niemann-Marcus*, "Give the lady what she wants," happily joined the parade.

In short, digitized journals seemed to serve everyone's agenda.

18. Then, the Internet appeared. The frosting was on the cake! Information could, in theory, be down-loaded any place, any time, and, as soon as the other pieces had been put right, at minimal cost.

But several things started to go wrong on the way to the bank.

1. The journal publishers, both for-profit and association, discovered that the savings predicted for digitized journals were, at best, marginal.

2. The not-for-profit start-ups, the visionary pioneers creating a brave new world, began to experience the stiffer head-winds of the financial costs of maturing organizations and the mounting salary demands of enthusiasts now seeking something comparable to what they could earn in the larger marketplace. Their glowing projections began to suffer the same rough treatment which reality was dealing the dotcoms.

3. Increasingly desperate measures were, and are, being resorted to — threatened publishing strikes by researchers, increasing and mounting appeals to friendly foundations to keep the doors open, etc.

4. As forecast by a few hard-headed, spoils-the-party types, several of the unintended consequences of the Internet quickly made their appearance. The most consequential for libraries was the further diversion of information transfer between researchers from journals, and hence libraries, to direct transfers mediated by the Internet.

5. In short, the marginal utility of libraries as an information utility had been pitched on an increasing negative slope.

6. The irony of this diminished utility is that it has been engineered at the very hand of those faculty demands in serving whose professional interests librarians have tortured their budgets into the most extraordinary shapes to serve. And, truth to tell, these tortured shapes fly in the face of the professional standards of librarians.

7. No good deed goes unpunished.

In the meantime, back at the homestead, the neglected knowledge child, the book collection, was demonstrating every symptom of a generation of neglect. When old hands pointed to the neglected child's peaked condition and expiated on the likely unhappy outcomes of this continuing deprivation, the true believers in an electronic salvation were quick to throw the quite marvelous interlibrary loan system into the breach. The air was, and remains, filled with cries of "Access, not ownership," "Just in time not just in case," and other catchy advertising frivolities uttered to disguise manifestly grave and growing shortcomings in book collections across the country.

The interlibrary loan system is a marvelous system. I have been a heavy-duty user of it for years — to use books long out-of-print and seldom appearing on the OP market. I have been able to use all manner of esoteric books which were necessary for some passing purpose. This is all very well for the odd random and/or occasional use but it is a poor substitute for an extensive learning/research project — which is one of the leading functions of all serious libraries.

To illustrate this shortcoming: I am currently involved in writing a book — which incidentally, I hope many librarians will add to their collections when it appears 3-4 years hence. It is tentatively entitled "Gutenberg, the Renaissance and the Rise of the West." It is manifestly a macro-history. It is a synthesis of the work of **Elizabeth Eisenstein** in "*The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*," **Albert Kapr's** work on **Gutenberg** and **Nicholas of Cusa**; and the several macro-histories of **McNeill**, **Landes**, **Mokyr**, **Olson**, **Rosenberg**, et al. Its theoretical foundations are built on **Karl Popper's** ontology of **World III**, the objective world of writings — the very stuff of libraries — and other cultural artifacts together with his epistemology of the creation and falsification of knowledge hypotheses. The continuing theme derives from **John Milton's** potent defense of freedom in his "*Areopagitica*" and particularly from his

encomium of books as "... the viols of the purest efficiency and extraction of the living intellect that bred them ... they contain a potencie of life as active as the soule whose progeny they are." Manifestly such an essay requires mastering the contents a very considerable body of history, particularly that devoted to distinct bodies of history — religion, philosophy, political systems, economic systems, law, science, technology, etc. In short, I am entirely dependent upon a very considerable number and range of books.

To access this extensive literature, I must turn to my nearest public library. That is the Beaverton Public Library — a typical suburban library holding virtually nothing of utility to my research — a fact which incidentally, I fully accept. The interlibrary loan librarian is an accommodating and helpful person who cheerfully serves my most arcane requests — **Joanne Patty**. I have learned a great deal about interlibrary loan in the last two years. The first thing I have discovered is an interesting and telling pattern. The older titles of scholarly standing **Joanne** can usually procure from within a couple of hundred miles of Beaverton. By contrast, the second is most meaningful books falsifying earlier hypotheses or proposing new hypotheses, fairly commonly come greater distances — some as far away as Texas and Ohio.

What does this tell us? It simply confirms what the scholarly publishers have been advising for years. The market for scholarly books has shrunk by 50-60%. Where the typical press run in the 1960s was 750-1000 copies, today it is in the 350-450 copy range. The linked reality is that list prices have escalated to the point that the entire market for most serious books — both individual and institutional — has been severely reduced. Possibly, of even greater harm to knowledge, is the repeated observation of the scholarly publishers that an increasing number of deserving manuscripts are now being rejected.

The clear conclusion is that the library budget crisis has cast a malignant pall over a wide swath of knowledge creation, accumulation, and transfer. The damage is not simply confined to the progressive sapping of the *raison d'être* of libraries as the culture's memory and as the central institution of knowledge transfer. The very reason for the cultural formation and maintenance of libraries is being eroded.

The second observation I make as a heavy-duty user of the interlibrary loan system is the extraordinary delays in getting books and the brief time-spans available to the user. These impedimenta, in turn, complicate the use of every title borrowed, as the user, familiar with these shortcomings, is forced into far more elaborate note taking. Because the needs for documentation at the time of writing cannot be clearly forecast, mountains of notes must be taken to anticipate these contingencies. To compound these difficulties, the writer must routinely go back to the falsifications and hypotheses of predecessors in the course of writing to confirm/rethink arguments used by them. Use is, therefore, made markedly more difficult, time-consuming, and frustrating. If the reader

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has not had to deal with these problems, take my word for it.

Interlibrary loan is a massively poor substitute for an extensive, "just in case" book collection.

Librarians were constrained by the professional demands of others, to depart from their own professional standards and the long and illustrious highway which they have traveled, to the enormous benefit of their cultures, for over two millennia. They traveled this highway so successfully by maintaining a focus on the accumulation and transmission of knowledge concepts and ethical precepts by the building of the best possible collections of books.

By contrast, the supply of information was for all those centuries largely a function of other organizations and channels: conversation, public rooms and coffee-houses, newsletters, clubs and associations, travel, etc. in short, all the channels and organizations still heavily employed. Libraries never figured in any of these channels. Newspapers, telecommunications, journals and magazines are all newcomers, the latest of which is the Internet. Additionally, the users of all these information channels have been expected to pay their own way, until recent days, when library budgets picked up a minuscule fraction of the total costs of this vast and expanding information network. Libraries have now been driven close to, if not beyond, a critical point of decision; namely, a return to their critical cultural role of building and maintaining their knowledge collections and as the aggregators and transfer agents of knowledge concepts and ethical precepts or remaining bit-players in the information transfer network. This is a time when honorable and long-standing professional standards of librarianship must be reaffirmed or alternatively discarded and library workers join the other minions earning a living in one of the minor channels of the information network.

The gold standard of professional practice of librarianship has always been not simply integrity and coherence, but the extent of the collection left by each generation of librarians. A poor library can be judged to have been improved, or a good one to have been diminished, by the decisions made and actions taken by each successive cohort of librarians. Librarians must necessarily build not simply for today's users, but those following generations as well.

How is heritage of miles of shelves holding back-files of journals — miscellaneous collections of disparate bits of information virtually all of it superfluous as it has been falsified or synthesized into knowledge concepts — to be judged? Contrast such an incoherent jumble of information with a heritage of a richer collection of knowledge scrupulously kept current and inclusive. The former is at best a monument to the scut work of the validating of data mining, the latter a vital engine of cultural knowledge creation, accumulation, transfer, and evolution.

The choice librarians made in this time of decision will be reflected in their budgetary allocations. If librarians seek to re-establish their long-standing professional standards, they will begin to incrementally move their material budgets back to their traditional percentages — something in the 60-65% range for books.

I can already hear a number of you protesting, more or less angrily, "There is no way we can do such a thing! We would have the research faculties all over us. We cannot stand that kind of heat."

To all such of you I would first ask, "Where were your research faculties when you were negotiating your budgets with your academic managers?" They were, in the main, notably absent — preferring to save their power for negotiating larger departmental and laboratory budgets. The only substantial faculty campaign for maintaining library budgets, of which I am aware, was initiated by the liberal arts and social sciences faculties of that university.

May I additionally suggest that librarians have prostituted the legitimate exercise of their professional standards in the prerogative of library budgetary priorities to the service of the loudly asserted professional standards of their research faculties? Librarians' professional responsibilities and identity are immediately and directly tied to the building of generations-long, indeed centuries-long, knowledge collections, not to providing the means of validating temporal claims to tenure, salary increases, additional lab space, research eminence, etc.

Should librarians choose to continue in the ways of the last three decades, they can only be viewed as hapless tenderfeet who have been handed a gunny-sack at dusk and led into the woods on a snipe hunt by the more sophisticated on the campus.

And how, some might ask, will the research faculties satisfy their endless but necessary quest for information? In precisely the same way the only live-wires among them — and the only productive ones — have been doing for centuries. By correspondence, by attending all types of conferences; by telephone; by fellowships in other labs; by more-or-less ad hoc literature searches, largely to fatten bibliographies, and now by the Internet, the forerunner of which was expressly designed to serve just such ends.

Let me now outline a highly probable near-term development. Someone out there is formulating an entirely new and novel system of information delivery based upon the Internet. That person likely is presently involved in the journal vending business or works in one of the aggregators. This familiarity has facilitated our entrepreneurial ability to think critically about the history and place of journals in the information transfer process. He/she has prized out the fundamental insight that the journal is, and has always been, a miscellaneous collection of information/data, no two pieces of the data contained in any single issues likely to be useful to any

single user. Journal issues have, since their inception, been cobbled together out of disparate bits and pieces as this was the only means to enjoy the mass-production economies of the printing press and so keep the inchoate mass of information/data affordable. The major publishers have endeavored to stem this geometrically increasing irrelevance of the constantly increasing mass of publishing by creating twiggling or sub-specialty journals, such as the numerous separate and specialist versions of *Nature*.

Having traced out the logic of this fundamental insight and firmly grasped its implications, as well as that of the power of the computer to manage large databases, and with the fire of the entrepreneurial motivation to change some small part of the world burning in his/her belly, this entrepreneur is busily hammering out a new way to transfer information/data.

The system being created will have many of the characteristics of the book approval plan system. This new system will engender an entirely new relationship with journal publishers based upon a newly developed market reality. That relationship will parallel the agency plan which **Lyman Newlin** developed for our company with book publishers in the 1960s — some form of minimum guaranteed purchase by this information entrepreneur will be offered in exchange for preferential economic terms from the publishers. To this will be coupled a carefully constructed thesaurus — a destined and fixed vocabulary not the messy and misleading keyword fixes so esteemed by the electronic set — to describe in a mutually satisfactory way the specific interests of the researcher. This profile will be readily modifiable as research interests evolve. To this will be coupled a single-unit financial transaction procedure akin to the 3x5 approval forms of early days and the "virtual" forms of today.

All of these backroom mechanics are being engineered to provide real-time access to the vast bulk of the journal information tailored specifically to the unique information and data requirements of each particular researcher.

The service will be marketed directly to researchers. The service will be promoted as the most effective means for the researcher to obtain an absolutely current and inclusive daily survey of all relevant information coupled with a complete contents download capacity — a genuine real-time, current awareness, and document delivery system. This service will be offered at a fee so trivial as to have virtually no impact on the lab budget. The minor cost of such an information current awareness service delivered directly to the office or lab will be quickly incorporated into the calculations for lab budgets and/or grants.

Think about it! Do you librarians wish your time at the tiller to be judged by the gold standard of having had a hand in shaping a better knowledge collection? Or do you wish to be seen as the tenderfoot wandering around out in the wet, wild woods with a gunny sack empty of anything other than some largely irrelevant, moldering journal back files?