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Occasional Rambles in the World of the Book

Column Editor: **Richard Abel** <rabel@easystreet.com>

Some years ago I was an active participant and in latter days a bystander in the several major transformations, which have simultaneously altered the ways in which knowledge and information are identified, transmitted, and employed. And this storm of massive revisions seems far from having run its course. But this incredible, generation-and-a-half metamorphosis has been accompanied by a major problem of definition and hence understanding. First, a brief review for reasons of both defending the author from the charge of being a thoughtless blockhead or Luddite and to trace some of the history of some of these sea-changes, which may now be unknown to some readers.

I, manifestly, have in mind the recent and now widespread proliferation of computers accompanied by a vast and near unmanageable array of software designed in substantial measure to control and/or transmit information. One of the earliest and most notable evidences of this transformation

occurred in libraries where the information indexing/cataloging the identity of the packages



(codices) of knowledge and information contained in each individual library was astonishingly quickly transformed into electronic forms. In view of later cultural developments it is of more than a passing irony that one of the first massive first applications of information technology was to shift the mode of bibliographic control of knowledge packages to the computer, the tool of that technology.

My former firm, now a part of **Blackwell Books**, was an early and active participant in this switch of media. Our first endeavors were centered upon getting the production of the individual library/book title forms to be used by the branch managers in selecting/billing the books they selected for each library participating in the then new Approval Plan into machine form. The first cut at this objective was taken with a large bank of automatic typewriters controlled by a single punched paper tape — this innovative device was called a **Flexo-Writer**. In retrospect the entire set-up and procedure in which it was embedded are almost laughable, a kind of an elaborate **Rube Goldberg** contrivance. But it had the then inestimable advantage of producing the error-

free output of some twenty-five typists. We then graduated to the second **IBM 360-30** in Portland, a monstrous, demanding punched-card device. Again it is retrospectively an amusing primitive device — a costly main-frame which we had to run twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to do the work that could now be done with a small bank of desk-top computers in half or less the time and costing but 10% or so of the cost of the mainframe.

At about the same time, a handful of libraries were experimenting with and cobbling together equally outlandish combinations of devices and procedures to convert catalogs to machine-readable form; to struggle with the evolving **L.C. MARC** initiative; to convert book ordering/receiving/accounting systems to main-frame computers; to control circulation; and to get a tighter grip on journal ordering/receiving. We were working with them on the cataloging side of things by furnishing either in-house generated cataloging or **L.C.** cataloging in card, microfiche, or machine readable form for all the books we supplied — resulting from library-initiated orders, standing orders for books-in-series, or Approval Plan submissions.

My company's ventures proved quite robust — some of that software written in the 1960s

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and 1970s was still in use until several years ago. The systems brought up for library use became increasingly useful and robust as well as able to perform a wide array of library in-house functions with increasing sophistication — and increasingly common in a near-totally systematic configuration

Subsequent to the relative mastery of the major in-house library functions a new breed of computer product, widely employed in libraries, came into being — inaugurated by the **Lockheed Missile & Space Co.** This was the creation of a massive data-base of results covering a broad range of scientific and technical experiment and applications crudely indexed for purposes of identification and means of ordering. Roughly simultaneously the early versions of *Science Citation Abstracts* and *Current Contents* were launched by **Eugene Garfield.**

These early indexing and abstracting ventures soon loosed a flood of similar undertakings followed by the rapid emergence of on-line journals. The vast bulk of the currently disseminated information formerly made available in paper and ink form was converted in a relatively brief period of time to electronic form. This migration was, in part, enhanced by the new technology of the electronic transfer of information over long distances — the **DARPA** initiative, exceeding its founder's wildest imaginings.

But as all these marvels in information technology were rolled out in rapid succession a strange and a potentially decisive and potentially debilitating cultural change was set into motion. That aberration was the subtle transformation in the definitions and understandings of the differences between and the complimentary roles of information and knowledge in the training of learning minds and the culture-forming exercises of knowledgeable minds. Knowledge and its pursuit began to be casually displaced by the mere accumulation of information. (The even more decisive and vexed matter of the pursuit of wisdom is best simply set-aside in the present context.) This information is increasingly simply packaged as an accumulation of bits of information (data) as if these slapdash assemblages of more-or-less related crumbs of fact betraying a more-or-less haphazard sense of organization bear some significant meaning. Nearly every library is now awash in crowded terminals with users apparently busy — some clearly seeking to uncover various bits of data for their packrat's hoard. Others are involved in less edifying endeavors — playing games, creating email, trying their hand at day-trading in equities, and various other kinds of pastimes readily offered by the Internet.

Returning to those genuinely searching out bits and pieces of information. At least some are bent on digging out evidence for a paper of greater or lesser import. But for openers we now well understand that the Internet is an absolute sink-hole of inaccurate or positively false informational bits. What intellectual good, a pursuit that libraries have for centuries posited

as the primary purpose for their existence, can such a questionable means of acquiring valid evidence as this be? Further, far too frequently, as any faculty member will tell you, such searches wind up in downloading a paper more-or-less bearing upon the assigned topic. The search strategy in such cases is simply that of locating a site where such a paper might reside or alternatively, the Website of service supplying prefabricated papers on a comprehensive collection written to touch upon the more commonly assigned subject matters.

Such ways of seeking evidence and arguments contrast sharply with the traditional means of proceeding with paper-writing, and the means still employed by scholars in preparing a


serious paper or a book. In these cases some study, often quite intense, is undertaken to form a base-line of broad understanding of the previous learning/hypotheses offered to make sense of the “big, buzzing, blooming confusion” marking the pursuit of knowledge. And it is books which lay out the sustained arguments together with the then-supporting evidence that those seeking to explain the confusion have written out their thoughts. Then, and only then, can a tentative hypothesis be formulated and the

search for evidence to sustain that tentative hypothesis be undertaken.

Books, the library's centuries-long principal *raison d'être*, remain the library's enduring reason for being. Information technology certainly has proved its worth in the operational aspects of the library and as clearly the provision of public IT resources must continue to be supported. The ubiquitous precedence and support of IT by the library community, including the recently renamed Schools of Information Technology, presently being advanced simply reflects a fashionable but ill-founded understanding of the pre-eminent role of culture-learning

and culture-forming roles of the library. Rather than flying the banners of the ill-advised advancement of IT academic

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librarians should be leading the parade celebrating and advancing the critical and central cultural-learning and the culture-forming roles of books and their fundamental place in the library — the memory of the species. Such a role is not presently fashionable — but when has the nuts and bolts of making and preserving a culture ever been anything but fashionable. Fashion has never found a comfortable home in the nuts-and-bolts world of genuine cultural creation and transmission. 

Something To Think About? — “The Name's the Thing!”

Column Editor: **Mary E. (Tinker) Massey** (Serials Librarian, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Jack R. Hunt Library) <Mary.Massey@erau.edu>

Part of the problem with weeding is the need we have to make sure our chosen serial titles actually continue to fit the curricula in academic/special libraries or, they continue to serve the needs of our shifting patronage in public venues. We can usually count on trade magazines to continue entertaining and edifying our patrons in the same traditional ways, but what of the more technical or esoteric journals? **Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU)** is a unique blend of academic and special libraries. While we have some general scholastic programs, the majority of programs are geared toward



the aeronautical and aerospace professional fields. It has been interesting to learn of the programs, research and adjunct studies that abound here. I have been very pleased to have taken a beginning course in the aeronautical sciences as part of my

training, because I have learned the language, nomenclature and acronyms of a difficult field of study. This has allowed me to become more familiar with the needs of the students and faculty. Another third of my training has been learning the reference tools used in our library, so that this summer, I may be privileged to work at the desk for four hours a week. This will help fill in other answers for those mystical needs of the collection. The last third of the training has been learning my job as the serials librarian — selection of serial materials, care/maintenance of the serial collection and cataloging of the materials. Along with these responsibilities is that of de-selection of materials. I find this task the most difficult because I am a “pack rat” at heart. As you have learned in previous articles in this column, **ERAU** is a pleasant library and very friendly, but space is not a strong feature. In order to continue having enough space to operate, we just have to “weed” the collection.

The Periodical Collection can be divided into entertainment journals, technical news journals and technical hardcore materials. The former include such titles as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Men's*

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