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Back Talk — Reminiscences and Looking Forward

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Beginning in the 1970's, the effects of information technology upon the operation of libraries became very pronounced. Catalog cards up to that point in time had been produced using small printing machines which could put out card sets that had to be filed by hand. Since this filing work was very tedious and time consuming, I remember all librarians — irrespective of their other skills — had to help catch up with the backlog of filing at all the libraries I worked in the early 1970's. The rules for filing author, title, and subject cards were arcane and really only understood by cataloging department staff. But they had to allow others to help. We would file the cards but would not pull the rods which passed through holes in the bottom of each card to keep them from being stolen for use as scratch paper. Instead our cataloging department colleagues would first check our work, fixing our mistakes, and then pull the rods out allowing our cards to drop down into place.

But with the 1970's, all of this cataloging information began to be input into the computer. Initially, when I went to library school in 1971 each of us had to create small programs employing "IBM cards" which were then loaded into card readers (taller and longer than a desk) in order to input the information into the computer (about the size of a car) which could then print out the card sets to be filed.

After a number of years, depending upon the particular library and its faith in computer technology, catalog cards were no longer produced. These catalogs were still kept out in the open for students and staff to use, but they were no longer



updated. About 15 years ago these catalogs began to be removed, to the horror of many but not all catalogers and older researchers alike. I was at **Columbia University** when many were moved into back rooms or hallways just in case computers turned out to be a passing fancy. At **Columbia** these catalogs contained thousands upon thousands of two-inch-by-five-inch hand-written cards. For more than 100 years staff with beautiful penmanship were specially employed to compose these cards. Consequently, the removal of the catalogs in some libraries seemed more like a funeral service replete with the tears of the people who day-by-day tenderly cared for and nourished them. Of course there were other libraries where young irreverent librarians with champagne and confetti celebrated the superiority of computers and their liberation from the drudgery of filing cards. But even in these "advanced" libraries, because they greatly feared that the computers would go down; backup catalogs would simultaneously be produced on microfiche. Librarians were all sure that research would grind to a halt if their hallowed catalogs could not be accessed. This safety measure, however, lasted only a few years since when the computer did go down, students would simply go away until the computer was fixed.

But the use of computers to generate library catalogs was only one edge of the library automation revolution. Soon we began to order books using computers — evolving from the use of cards to tapes to online connections with the vendors via telephone lines and finally to the use of the Internet.

The whole nature of reference work also changed. Before the automation age, at the **University**

of **Washington** where I was a Chinese politics graduate student, we only had a shelf list of printed cards (the cards were arranged by call number since the librarians didn't believe in or have the time to file separate author, title, and subject cards). This required you as the researcher to really know the classification system used by that library if you wanted to find anything. At **Washington**, this meant you had to know both the **Library of Congress** system for new books and the **Lai Yung-Hsiang** system for older Chinese books. But of course we all soon discovered that if you couldn't find what you wanted, you could go ask **Mr. Chao**, whose memory was phenomenal. He would listen to your request, ask you a few questions for clarification, and then motion with his lower lip for you to follow him (for his generation it was not polite to motion with your finger in what direction to go). He would then take you to a shelf and pull the book you needed and hand it to you with a satisfied smile. That was service and a hard act to follow if you were an aspiring young reference librarian, as I was soon to become.

But with the advent of computers, reference work changed radically. Students could now do keyword searching. This meant that they could at least partially ignore knowing the classification system (forget the catalog) and the official **Library of Congress** subject headings (forget the librarian and the **Mr. Chaos** of this world) and what we librarians call corporate authorship, something few understand but is quite helpful in a traditional catalog. Instead they could, in a pre-**Google** fashion, just type in the words they were interested in, and voila — they would get results (and official subject and author headings which could be "clicked" on to get more information). This started students down the trail of self help. New catalogs even read the tables of content, book jacket information, and even the entire text of the book or journal article for the researcher — nothing seems to be sacred. Yet, with so many new electronic tools available, the position of a subject librarian is still valued, since students and staff both need help navigating the labyrinth of resources which grow by the day. (We still have catalogers as well but they have computers to help them with their work — no one needs to worry about their penmanship.)

Well, enough reminiscing; let the 2010-11 academic year begin. Today's library is a beehive of IT activity that makes life much easier. The physical library has also changed and continues to change. At the end of this academic year we at the **University of Hong Kong** will "de-book" the third floor to create a learning commons for more the students who will soon come with the advent of a new curriculum reform movement started by the decision to move to a four-year undergraduate curriculum instead of the current three-year variety. We recently welcomed back another new generation of students. Our two-year-old branding statement is "The Libraries, Your Learning Place." I think it is true of all libraries. 🌱

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