
Send for a Child of Four! or Creating the BI-Less Academic Library

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ABSTRACT

THE AUTHOR ARGUES that libraries should work to decrease, and eventually eliminate, the need for bibliographic instruction (BI) by making libraries and library systems far easier to use than they now are. He describes the nature of such libraries and systems in the future.

LIBRARY INSTRUCTION

Many of the nicest and best librarians I have ever known are deeply involved with Bibliographic Instruction. They practice BI, read and write about BI, and attend colloquia on BI. It seems that, to some, BI *is* librarianship. This author would like to suggest that there are many things wrong with such an idea and that the "traditional" concept of BI is flawed fatally. Let us start with the name. Are all the well-meaning and idealistic librarians who seek, by various means, to teach students to use college and university libraries really instructing them in bibliographic matters? It is obvious that, if a student is to learn to make the maximum use of a library, she or he will have to possess some elementary bibliographic knowledge even in the rare instances when the library has "user-friendly" catalogs and other means of access. In the majority of libraries, she or he will have to know something of the complexities of abbreviations in catalog entries, the wildly varying citation practices of indexing and abstracting tools, and the nature and meaning of the links between bibliographic entries and the materials themselves. In short, she or he will have to be able to vault some of the many bibliographic hurdles that make up the obstacle race

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that libraries force on their users. There are, however, other things that go into using libraries effectively—nonbibliographic matters, simple and complex, of which the student must become knowledgeable. For this reason alone, “traditional” BI should be renamed library instruction (LI), that BI should become LI, and its practitioners, should they wish, may call themselves LIers.

REMOVING THE BARRIERS

The history of progress in librarianship is a history of the removal of the barriers that exist between the library users and the carriers of knowledge and information that they seek. Such phenomena as open stacks, public catalogs, online systems that permit remote access, and many others are all, when seen plainly, the result of the process of removing the librarian as mediator and of devising systems that the populace can use on their own, in theory at least. (The theoretical nature of some of these efforts can readily be seen by anyone consulting a prehistoric card catalog in a major academic library.) There has been much huffing and tut-tutting about the way in which college and university library users have embraced the People’s Choice—the indexes on CD-ROM devices. It is felt that the hapless user, untrained as she or he is in the intricate “strategies” involved in online searching, will do incomplete or otherwise flawed searches. In short, that the *hoi polloi* cannot be trusted to know what they want or ought to want. There is something terribly nannyish about that attitude. If the bulk of users are satisfied with the results that they have obtained, sound utilitarian principles should tell us that CD-ROMs are good. As librarians, we should be rejoicing in the fact that technology has brought us systems that are so well received and so heavily used. This is not to say that most CD-ROM services could not be improved in such a way as to produce better results for their users, but merely to observe that the best systems are those that can be used by the reasonably intelligent, if uninstructed, user. Here we come to the heart of the matter. Many BI programs owe their existence and success to the “user hostile” nature of the systems about which they teach. Replace those systems with others that are truly “user friendly” and the whole purpose of the BI program is called into question.

ON DOING AWAY WITH BI

It was hoped that this article would be anchored to the many writings on BI in the last decade or so and, to that end, I read a large number of articles and conference papers in this area. Though they vary wildly and often disagree with each other with some vehemence, this author was unable to locate any papers that contend,

as this one shall, that the efforts put into BI should be directed toward making BI unnecessary. It is interesting to note the parallel with writings about online reference services that concentrate on improving the nature of the librarian's mediation efforts rather than upon working with the peddlers of such systems to make mediation unnecessary. They are unlike the writings on, to take an example, bibliographic control. The body of the latter contains many examples of papers that argue, for example, that detailed cataloging is a waste of money; that broad classification is better than close classification; that the world would be better off without the Library of Congress *List of Subject Headings*; and that the syndetic apparatus of the catalog costs far more than its meager benefits justify. Why is it that the writings on bibliographic control embrace heresy and even papers that question the very need for such control, whereas the writings on BI appear to be based on the idea that BI is a transcendent good and, therefore, simply discuss the best means to carry it out?

One answer lies in the time that the two areas of librarianship have been in existence. Bibliographic control has been a mature and organized part of librarianship for many decades, whereas, although library instruction has always existed in the practices of individual academic and college librarians, BI as an organized part of academic librarianship is a relatively new phenomenon. Something practiced in large numbers of libraries for more than a century is bound to produce its share of failures. Those failures, in the case of bibliographic control, have been both numerous and of far-reaching and *readily perceived* effect. BI on the other hand has not had the time to produce spectacular failures, and more importantly, such failures as there are have been largely invisible to both library users and library administrators.

Another answer lies in the fact that BI was, in many ways, conjured into existence by the very failings of bibliographic control. It is not too extreme to state that BI is a prominent concern in academic libraries because, to lash out even-handedly at the public and private sectors, the large card catalog has been an unmitigated disaster, and many indexing and abstracting services are horribly difficult to use and yield, even when they are findable, incomprehensible results. BI librarians are to library users what nurses are to hospital patients, coaches are to athletic teams, and auto mechanics are to drivers. Is it any wonder that they never question the essence of what they are doing and concentrate on finding ways to do it better? We cannot eliminate disease from the world, so the nurse need never question her or his vocation. It is unlikely that even the spectacular inanity and corruption of college athletics will cause it to come to an end, so coaches will only question what they do in their most secret hearts.

Japan and Detroit will never produce a perfect automobile, so the auto mechanic will always be with us. However, it is technically and practically possible to devise an academic library in which BI, as we know it today, would be unnecessary. The author also believes that academic librarians of all kinds should work together to achieve such libraries and, in the process, transform completely both the nature of the work that we do individually and the passive and reactive ethos that pervades today's academic librarianship.

PRINCIPLES OF THE BI-LESS LIBRARY

The BI-less academic library will take advantage of modern technology but will not be driven by technology. Such a library will be service oriented and will strive to provide the services that users want rather than the services that we believe they ought to want. It will hold fast to the enduring mission of librarianship—the connection of users with collections of carriers of knowledge and information and with services based on those carriers in the most cost-efficient and cost-beneficial manner possible. Librarianship, as such, is not, and should not be, altered by the indisputable fact that the carriers of knowledge and information found in, or available from, the modern academic library include computer files and video documents of various kinds as well as books, journals, maps, printed and recorded music, etc. In this area as in others, it is very important to see librarianship as having enduring principles and continuity with its own history. It is also important that librarians of all kinds see themselves as members of a unitary profession and that the divisiveness of the past (expressed most notably, though not exclusively, in the distinction between “public” and “technical” services) be done away with. If we are to achieve the BI-less library, we have to work together with a common sense of purpose.

OBSTACLES

There are, of course, barriers to this beau ideal of an academic library. This discussion has alluded to some of the self-inflicted barriers (historical amnesia, professional fragmentation, technomania and “info-babble,” ignorance of enduring principles) but there are others, equally great and not able to be overcome from within the profession. Funding is one such barrier and the politics and strategy of new technology and interaction with the private sector is another.

Libraries are chronically underfunded because they are chronically undervalued. It seems that the best way of making ourselves and libraries more valued is to make the library experience *more pleasant* (by making the library accessible and easy to use) on

the one hand and *more rewarding* (by showing the value of collections and services) on the other. Striving for a library in which BI is unnecessary will assist materially in achieving these goals.

It is certain that the BI-less library is feasible technologically. There are, however, a number of issues concerning the interaction between the library and other campus units and between the library and the purveyors of primary (publishers in all media) and secondary (indexing and abstracting) services that are going to be complex and difficult to resolve. This author is convinced that they are not insuperable, and that a web of economic, technological, and practical accommodations can be achieved by the library and the various other parties.

WHAT WILL THE BI-LESS LIBRARY LOOK LIKE?

There is a fashionable view that, in reaction to the fact that the library of the past and present has been defined by a particular building or set of buildings housing particular collections, the library of the future will be an abstraction—an electronic web in which the physical location of the user is irrelevant. Modern writings are full of statements such as: "Ownership is unimportant, access is all-important." I confess to having played a small part in propagating this view. It is undoubtedly true that the Fortress Library—that self-sufficient ideal that never really existed in fact—is inconceivable in the modern world. This has led some to the conclusion that the physical library no longer has any meaning. It is a good example of the Manichean nature of advanced library thinking today—the kind of simple minded approach that leads to the belief that, since we have electronic communication and electronic documents, printed documents no longer matter. The truth is, alas, more complicated than such dualists can bear. Books *and* computer files *and* all the other kinds of document that exist are important and will continue to be important. In the same way, academic libraries as physical entities and collections are as important to their users as is access to other collections and services by electronic means. In short, the BI-less library will have to deal with both. The library will still be based in a building or in buildings on campus, and the chances are that the use of those buildings will increase. This latter statement is, again, at odds with the ideas of many forward thinkers. They argue that access to library services electronically from offices, dorms, or wherever will diminish use of the physical library. In this, they ignore two other forces. The first is the human need for human contact, a force that drives more library use than is generally acknowledged. The second is that the removal of the barriers to library use that is within our power will awake the sleeping beast of

unsatisfied demand and lead to dramatic increases in that use. The fact is that many academic libraries have marginalized themselves by becoming places that only the dedicated and highly motivated care to use. Who knows what will happen when the library becomes attractive to persons of low motivation who are turned off by current and (usually unintentionally) user-hostile libraries?

MAKING THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY EASIER TO USE

It is a melancholy fact that many academic libraries are uninviting in their aspect and seem almost at pains to hide the very fact that they are libraries in which materials and services are available. Any supermarket that had the layout and signage of the average academic library would be out of business within six months. Why is this? In part, it arises from the fact that many academic library buildings are ill-planned and/or outmoded. The physical plant with which we have to deal is often intrinsically off-putting to the user; inadequate in terms of available space in which to house materials and staff; poorly maintained; and fitted with furniture and equipment that neither harmonize with each other nor are 100 percent functional. This state of affairs often leads to a kind of defeatism. The BI-less library, no matter how severe its physical limitations, will have plentiful, attractive, and informative signs containing short words (in English not library-speak) and will have the best interior decoration and layout that can be contrived. Brief descriptions of the library and its services written in plain English (and in other languages when appropriate) will be available in abundance, as will specialized guides to particular areas and services. Audio tapes containing a "self-guided" tour of the library (in English and in other languages when appropriate) will be made available to all users. Pocket cassette players will also be available to the 0.01 percent of students that do not possess such machines. There will be booths, just inside or just outside the entrance to the library, containing an interactive video presentation about libraries, this particular library, and the range of services that are available. It will be possible for the user to branch off from the main presentation to explore some aspect of the library and its services that he or she finds particularly interesting. Once in the library, the route to each department and service will be clearly marked both by signs and light tracking and on electronic floor plans that will light up not only the desired department and/or service but also the fastest route to it.

Terminals to gain access to the library's comprehensive online computer system (described later) will be numerous, well-sited, and physically easy to use. Implied in the latter is the provision of adequate

space for printed materials, writing notes, etc.; of glare-free easy to read screens and conveniently situated keyboards; and of terminals that can be used by the visually impaired, those in wheelchairs, and others to whom the standard terminal configurations present challenges.

The physical layout and interior of the BI-less library will be self-explanatory and the functions of the librarians and staff will be clear to even the inexperienced user. The task of working within such an environment will involve a complete orientation toward service and the eschewing of elitist and other nonservice oriented traits and attitudes. The BI-less library will need librarians who are inclusive rather than exclusive, flexible rather than rigid, and committed to the idea of the library as a resource for all rather than a shrine to ancient values.

WHAT WILL ACADEMIC LIBRARY ONLINE SYSTEMS BE LIKE?

It is evident to all that electronic bibliographic control systems are a mainstay of the modern library. Such arguments as there are concern the nature of the systems and their cost. We have progressed from automated and partially automated catalogs and circulation systems to the routine installation of comprehensive and integrated systems that also cover serial control, acquisitions, binding, reserved books, and other arcana. It is only a matter of time, it seems, before we move beyond the automation and integration of internal library systems to the integration of those systems with, eventually, all of the following: online systems of other libraries; CD-ROM indexes; indexing and abstracting databases on local mainframe and minicomputers and on remote computers; electronic assemblages of data; full-text electronic databases; and electronic image databases containing graphic and full-text data. Some of these other systems are, at present, in the public domain, others in the private sector. There are strategic and financial difficulties of some complexity to be overcome, but it is entirely probable that integrated access to all of these will be available widely during the 1990s.

In the BI-less library, user-friendly terminals will guide even the neophyte through the maze without pain or human mediation. Upon approaching the terminal, the user will see a brief explanation of the services available. The subsequent "dialogue" might run something like this.

SCREEN: Welcome to the Wormwood Library! I can give you information about all the books, films, music, software, journals, and many other materials that are available to you in this library and from other libraries. Just press the number indicated if you

want material on a subject (1), associated with a person (2), with a title (3), with a classification number (4), ... [goes on to enumerate all the many means of access]

User: 1

Screen: Do you want everything on a subject (Press 1) or just books (Press 2) or recent journal articles (Press 3) or something else (Press 4)?

User: 3

Screen: Please type the word(s) that best describe the subject.

User: Eggplants

Smart terminal: [Consults integrated CD-ROM index. Finds something and, therefore, does not consult remote or local online databases.]

Screen: Do you want EGGPLANTS (Press 1) or COOKERY (EGGPLANTS) (Press 2) or both (Press 3)?

User: 2

System: [Locates several articles. Takes the two most recent and matches them with the library's hard copy, microform, and videobank holdings]

Screen: Here are two recent articles:

—A fragrant stew of eggplant, potatoes and spices (includes recipe) by Marian Burros 10 col in. v139 The New York Times Feb 25 '90 sec 1 p47 col 1 *** AVAILABLE IN THIS LIBRARY ***

—Farm-fresh means fantastic! (recipes) by Betsy Freese il v87 Successful Farming May '89 p50 *** PRINTOUT AVAILABLE *** Would you like some more? (Press Y for Yes, N for No)

User: N

Screen: Would you like help with interpreting these entries? (Y = Yes N = No)

User: Y

Screen: The first is in column 1 of page 47 of section 1 of the February 25th 1990 issue of the New York Times. You may see the actual newspaper by asking at the Periodicals Desk (left of the Main Entrance on the first floor of this building). The second is on page 50 of the May 1989 issue of *Successful Farming*. It is illustrated. A printout of the article is available from the library's journal VideoBank. Do you want a printout? (Y = Yes, N = No)

User: Y

Screen: Printing

System: [Locates video image of article in computerized databank. Prints it out on high definition printer next to terminal.]

Screen: Thank you. Have a nice day!

The possibilities inherent in such advanced and multilevel interaction of systems are exciting and multifarious. Successful interactive interfaces for such complex systems will necessarily be the result of the work of teams of library automation experts, bibliographic experts, reference librarians, and library instruction librarians. It will be difficult to finance the construction and testing of early efforts in this direction. It is never easy to create new systems especially

when they are as new and complicated as those proposed here, but the rewards will be more than commensurate with the difficulty, and the resulting systems will constitute a major advance in library service.

MOOERS'S LAW AND DUCK SOUP

One of the principles that libraries and librarians ignore often and at their peril is encapsulated in Mooers's Law which may be paraphrased in this context as: No one will put more effort into the use of a system than the benefit she or he expects to derive from it. The whole basis of the BI-less library is in the idea that all library use should be made as easy as possible, which is, of course, to say that the library of the future must be far easier to use than is the library of the past and present. In order to achieve this we must be able to approach the wholesale re-evaluation of the library *from the user's point of view*. This author has been, for more than three decades, a committed Marxist (of the Groucho tendency). Thinking about the perfectibility of libraries and their systems and the process of making all of our collections and services available with little or no effort by the user brings to mind the most relevant Marxist analysis of such subjects. It occurs in *Duck Soup* when the immortal Groucho (as Rufus T. Firefly) is confronted with a complex report:

Minister of Finance: Your Excellency, here is the Treasury Department's report. I hope you'll find it clear.

Firefly: Clear? Huh! Why, a four year old child could understand this report. [Long pause as he studies it.] Run out and find me a four year old child. I can't make head or tail out of it.

The danger is, of course, that we will make systems that seem simple *to us* and will ignore the way the system appears to others. Send for a child of four!