# Introduction

## HERBERT GOLDHOR

THE VARIOUS ISSUES OF *LIBRARY TRENDS* are usually concerned with the past and/or the present circumstances of a given topic in an attempt to understand and to explain the developments that have taken place. This issue is somewhat different in that its main focus is on the future in an attempt to perceive what is likely to happen rather than to analyze what has already taken place.

In November 1996, the Benton Foundation in Washington, DC, published a report, *Buildings, Books, and Bytes: Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age.* For the convenience of readers, the full text of the report has been reproduced at the end of this issue of *Library Trends,* with the kind agreement of the Benton Foundation. The study on which this report is based was commissioned by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation which has given substantial funds over the years to help libraries cope with the problems of computerization. It was the opinion of the Publications Committee of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science that this report by the Benton Foundation is of sufficient importance that an issue of *Library Trends* should be devoted to it.

Following the usual procedure, an issue editor was selected, and consultations were held to choose the persons who would be invited to contribute their views on the report and (as they saw fit) on the likely future of libraries, especially public libraries, in the coming digital age. We were able to secure the cooperation of many of the names which were initially selected; where we failed was to get substantial input from people who are computer experts and not librarians—such people are likely to

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have a point of view different from that of librarians on the central issues
of the Benton Foundation report. In reviewing the articles in this issue of
*Library Trends*, the editor is satisfied that a wide array of responses to the
report have been presented and that most of the major issues arising
from the study have been addressed.

There remain only a few personal observations of this writer, based
on almost sixty years of association with libraries. I can remember when
hand-stamping of circulation cards was standard practice, when typing of
catalog cards was considered high tech, and when interlibrary loan was a
highly unusual favor to be granted only to faculty engaged in research.
The reader of today can readily imagine the vast distances which have
been covered in these and other regards in the last few decades, and
almost always because of the use of computers. Let no one doubt the
ability and will of librarians to adjust to changed circumstances and to
utilize new technology. And let no one doubt that circumstances and
technology will change again in the future, and maybe even more than in
the past.

Will libraries in the future consist mainly of computer files and not
of books? No one can be sure but, as things stand now, over 50,000 new
titles are being published each year in this country alone, not far from
the record high total of about 57,000 titles in 1987. It helps to look at the
past in this regard. The future of the book has been pronounced dim so
many times in the last century that we are well advised to be skeptical of
this latest threat; the bicycle craze of the late nineteenth century, the rise
of motion pictures, then of radio, and then of television—all were pre-
dicted to be the death knell of books and reading. Against this is the fact
that the circulation of American public libraries is today at an all-time
high.

One final consideration involves the widespread development of bib-
liographic databases which were seen as making unnecessary the services
of a reference librarian. In fact, what has happened is that most scientists
have no interest in keeping up to date with the various protocols of and
improved access tools to the computer files, and usually prefer to rely on
the librarian to produce what they need. And today the Internet is said to
have (almost) everything that is to be found in books but the lack of
standard subject headings, and the fact that almost anyone can put al-
most anything in means that finding just what you want and knowing
whether it is correct or not are not easy tasks. What the Internet needs is
the organizing skills of some good librarians.

The motto in the computer industry is "If it works, it is obsolete."
The tremendous advances in computer science and in their practical ap-
plication should make all librarians cautious in saying that they can re-
main vital and not become relics of the past. It is hoped that the readers

of this issue will find herein some of the guidelines that need to be observed in coping with the vast changes sure to come in the future.

Because those invited to contribute were asked to "critique" the report, it is not surprising that most of the authors are quite critical of it, and some vehemently so, although all seem to agree that it is useful as at least a thought-provoking document. While some of the authors in this issue deal primarily with methodological problems that they see in the study, others focus on the interpretations and conclusions, with methodology as a secondary issue.

Bryce Allen and Douglas Zweizig, whose strengths include statistics and research design, both deal heavily with methodological weaknesses in the study. Allen finds it seriously flawed, not so much in the collection of the data as in how it was interpreted. Zweizig claims that the methodology is "naïve." Moreover, the conclusions presented are simplistic because they ignore important "externalities" such as the fact that the provision of high quality information to the individual may, in the long run, benefit society as a whole. Making it more difficult for the individual to get needed information—for example, by increasing costs or complexity of access—reduces benefits to all.

Michael Gorman's main criticism is that the study tells us the obvious. It deals with questions for which answers are already known. He, more than the other authors, believes that libraries, in more or less their present form, are not threatened—either by technology or by competition from other institutions. He deplores the fact that the library leaders involved in the study seem to want to impose their vision of the library of the future on the users of libraries even though no evidence exists that library users share that vision.

Charles McClure and John Bertot agree with Gorman that not much in the report is new. Moreover, it offers very little guidance on what libraries need to do as the resources they deal with become increasingly electronic. It is not clear, they claim, what the intended audience for the report really is. Since it tells knowledgeable librarians little that is new, perhaps it is more suitable for reading by those outside the profession. They also have problems with the methodology underlying the study that agree substantially with those of Allen and Zweizig.

William Birdsall, while he considers the report to be a worthy addition to the literature on the role of the public library, judges its primary assumption—that it is technology that threatens public libraries—to be erroneous. It is not the technology itself that is the threat but a "technology ideology" that is associated with broader public policy issues involving increasing government deregulation and decreasing government support for public services.

Maurice Line, who presents a British perspective, agrees that the focus on the impact of technology is too narrow. There are broader issues,

such as the increasing globalization of society, that may have significant impacts on the library, but these are not addressed in the report. Also not addressed significantly are certain new opportunities presented by the technology, such as the expanded role that libraries could perform in supporting lifelong learning.

One of the points made by Herbert White is that the library "leaders" participating in the study are not necessarily leaders at all. A well-established manager is unlikely to be a real leader because he or she may not be willing to take risks, as true leadership requires. He is also critical of the whole report, beginning with its title, because it focuses on "concretes"—books, buildings, and computers—instead of the more important human resources. Why focus on libraries rather than librarians?

Glen Holt is very critical of the focus group component of the study on the grounds that the group involved is quite atypical of public library communities in general. Quite different results have been obtained in the community served by the St. Louis Public Library. Using the report as a springboard, he presents his own views on the challenges facing public libraries today. In his opinion, the study does not go far enough toward informing us on the needs of library users and the priorities for libraries. A new *Public Library Inquiry* is required.

Kathleen de la Peña McCook agrees in many ways with Holt. Since the opinions reported in the study were collected from very unrepresentative samples, the United States depicted in the report is just not the United States in which most citizens live. Her discussion throughout implies that the study is elitist, giving little direct attention to large segments of the community that are, in some way, disadvantaged. Moreover, the present mood of society is not one of anxiety, as the report suggests, but one of expectation.

Richard Sweeney offers no particular objections to the methodology of the study but believes that its conclusions and interpretations reflect a dangerous complacency. If public libraries are to survive, they must give users much more than they expect, not merely try to meet present expectations. The report fails to address this.

Andrew Odlyzko is the only contributor who is not in the library field. It is interesting to find, then, that he is least critical of the report. On the other hand, it is clear that he is the contributor who believes most strongly in the inevitility that print on paper will be completely replaced by electronics. So, probably, he has least confidence that libraries will continue to exist, at least in anything approaching their present form. The articles of Odlyzko and Gorman represent opposite extremes of views on the future.

Finally, Leigh Estabrook, who played a prominent role in the study and the preparation of the report, responds to the critics. It is for the reader to judge whether or not she is persuasive in her defense of the methodology and conclusions of the study.