Afterword

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In a paper presented at a conference in Finland more than twenty years ago, I described a largely paperless, network-based communication system having many of the characteristics of those in place today within the Internet environment (Lancaster, 1976). This scenario was expanded in books published somewhat later (Lancaster, 1978, 1982), including one dealing largely with the role of the library and the librarian in an age of electronics.

These writings, and others appearing in the next several years, viewed the transition from paper-based to electronic-based communication as very largely desirable. Benefits were discussed but no major “disbenefits” were recognized.

As the transition actually occurred, however, I became less and less enthusiastic about the developments and implications and, eventually, downright hostile toward them. Some of my objections were discussed in papers presented at annual symposia held in Essen, Germany (Lancaster, 1991, 1993).

Of course, technology has brought many benefits to the world at large. It would be hard to imagine that we could live today without many of these. Technology has also been responsible for major improvements in industry, agriculture and, perhaps most importantly, health care. Nevertheless, some technologies bring problems that greatly offset the benefits. The automobile, for example, can be extraordinarily convenient, but it is responsible for destroying many of the most beautiful cities of the world.

Perhaps the most adverse outcome of contemporary technologies is that they are imposing a dehumanization effect on society. It is becoming
increasingly difficult to find a human being at the other end of a telephone line. A call, more often than not, reaches a computer or an answering machine. Worse, one is now getting an increasing number of calls from computers. Other examples of dehumanization include cash machines in place of bank clerks and television shop-at-home purchasing in place of visits to stores.

Because technology in the world at large has brought disbenefits as well as benefits, it is reasonable to assume that the same applies to the library situation. Unfortunately, too many librarians have been completely uncritical of information technologies. They have seemed mesmerized by the computer, seeing increasing automation almost as an end in itself rather than a means to achieve some desired objectives.

Librarians who should know much better continue to make wild claims that are completely unsupportable. For example, a report published in 1997 by the European Commission and entitled Public Libraries and the Information Society (Thorhauge et al., 1997) assures us that (italics added):

The ultimate goal [of libraries] in the context of the Information Society is to provide access to any type of information for anyone, at any time, anywhere. Technology can already provide the answers. . . . (Thorhauge et al., 1997, p. vii)

Really? What possible justification can they have for such a wild assertion? They apparently believe that, if a particular information item exists in an electronic database somewhere, it can easily be found. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In general, the library profession has greatly exaggerated the benefits of technology, especially in the area of subject access. Putting electronic databases in the hands of library users does not necessarily mean that they will be able to use them effectively. Transforming the card catalog into an electronic database, accessible online, does not in itself create a subject searching tool of much greater power. Merging several catalogs into one creates much larger databases that are even less useful for subject access than their individual components.

Unfortunately, many librarians seem to assume that more access means better access. This is not necessarily true. Studies of the users of information services, going back some thirty years or more, have consistently shown that what they really want is access to the information of highest quality. They want tools or people capable of separating the wheat from the chaff. They want quality filtering. The profession seems to have lost sight of this. How else can one explain the fact that so many librarians are head over heels in love with the Internet, a monster having no quality control of content whatsoever?

In its love affair with technology, the profession is losing sight of its professional ideals, of the ethic of public service. For example, one of the
contributions to the European Commission report referred to earlier (Thorhauge et al., 1997) gives a list of barriers to the enhancement of public libraries as follows: lack of information technology skills, insufficient training, uncertainty about strategy and choice of solutions, internal resistance to information technology products, general fear of change, lack of managerial skill, together with an environment of bureaucracy and static culture. A recent article in Library Journal (Tennant, 1999) from someone on the staff of a major academic library in the United States identifies nine “skills for the new millennium”—skills that, the author maintains, are needed to “create and manage digital library collections and services.” The skills are: imaging technologies, optical character recognition, markup languages, cataloging and metadata, indexing and database technology, user interface design, programming, Web technology, and project management.

These lists are both disturbing and depressing. Almost without exception, they deal with knowledge of technology and the ability to exploit it. But what about knowledge of users, of user needs and behavior, of interpersonal skills, of the ethics of public service? If these technological skills are really the most important ones needed by the modern librarian, we are indeed encouraging the complete dehumanization of libraries.

A similar phenomenon has occurred in our professional publishing. In the middle of the 1950s, the American Library Association published a second edition of a book entitled Patrons Are People (Wallace, 1956). Yes, we did care about people in those days; library users, as individuals rather than remote computer sites, were uppermost in our minds. How many years has it been since a librarian wrote a book about library users? The 1999 catalog of publications of the Library Association in London lists thirty-nine books under the category Information Technology but only four books under the category “Customer Needs.” The current publication list of the American Library Association shows a similar trend. In the same vein, it is now possible to attend a conference of libraries that sounds more like a conference of the computer industry. Indeed, one can attend such a conference without the words “user,” “patron,” or “customer” occurring at all.

The articles in this issue of Library Trends, when compared with those published in the 1989 issue on the subject, do suggest the emergence of a somewhat more critical attitude toward technology in general and the Internet in particular. It is noteworthy, however, that scholarly users of information (papers by Himmelfarb and Massey-Burzio), including library faculty as scholarly users (Zhang), seem more critical than librarians as providers of information technology.

It is encouraging to see any signs of a more critical attitude toward technology in the library profession. Nevertheless, I believe that technology has made us a complacent profession. As a library user (for more than
fifty years), I have observed a considerable decline in the service ideal among librarians, and I believe that the overemphasis on technology is largely to blame for this.

REFERENCES


