Afterword

F. W. LANCASTER

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. Never-
theless, 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

F. W. Lancaster, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign, 501 E. Daniel Street, Champaign, IL 61820

increasingly difficult to find a human being at the other end of a tele-
phone line. A call, more often than not, reaches a computer or an an-
swering 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 an-
> swers* . . . . (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 ben-
efits of technology, especially in the area of subject access. Putting elec-
tronic databases in the hands of library users does not necessarily mean
that they will be able to use them effectively. Transforming the card cata-
log 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 sub-
ject 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 informa-
tion 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, insuffi-
cient 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 main-
tains, are needed to "create and manage digital library collections and
services." The skills are: imaging technologies, optical character recogni-
tion, 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 ex-
ception, 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 publica-
tion 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" oc-
curring 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 technol-
ogy 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.

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