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An internet skeptic

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An Internet Skeptic

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The area where the Internet has had the most immediate impact on my professional life has to be communication. Early in the Internet craze, I didn't like sending e-mail messages simply because none of the packages was particularly user-friendly, and the messages were not substantive. Now with some e-mail packages, sending messages is virtually a no-brainer. Unfortunately, we still have to endure more irrelevant and obtuse communiques than we endured in the pre-Internet past.

As a collection development librarian, I have received my share of these messages and self-aggrandizing notices of new publications. I worry that publishers' and authors' self-promotion via e-mail may evolve into an insufferable future trend, especially when I remember the amount of print mail my lone staff member recycles daily. I know where the delete key is, but what about the health of my wrist? And as I push my finger toward exhaustion sending inane and unwanted messages to the cyber-compost heap, I wonder, "Don't these people have some real work they need to be doing?"

There's an old and familiar adage that states, "The more things change, the more they stay the same." It was not so long ago that I filed away paper copies of memos I received. With the advent of e-mail, I thought, "Great, this should save a few trees, and the ever-growing paper monster that I constantly battle will disappear like dinosaurs and card catalogs." However, because my colleagues and I discuss many daily issues via e-mail, I find myself filing many messages and holding on to them longer than it would take for the Energizer Bunny to run down. I ponder whether I should keep a message in case an issue rears its beauty-challenged head and I have the one message that might provide clues to resolve a conflict or misunderstanding. I know some librarians print out e-mail messages and file them, but this behavior defeats the purpose of the paperless society. Perhaps what I was really envisioning and desiring was a memo-less society. Anyway, I continue to archive, albeit electronically, in anticipation of issues yet to be resolved. I am resigned to this reality: Just as my file cabinet, desk, and office, once ranneth over, so doeth my e-mail folders.

Communication via the Internet is not completely fraught with worthless or irrelevant information. As the head of collection development, I often find myself somewhat isolated from my peers because I don't have oodles, or even a handful, of in-house colleagues performing similar work—like a core group of catalogers or a ring of reference librarians. Access to listservs and electronic mail simply makes it easier to keep up with what's going on in the field of collection development. If necessary, I can obtain and give feedback on questions and concerns from folks who do work like I do. The Internet has also become a terrific means for publicizing collection development policies and procedures via the University of Oregon's home page. It proved itself invaluable in our recent serials cancellation project. The entire University community could view our proposed list of cancellations and immediately send us hate mail.

I think we all agree that communication is a vital component of all our jobs. Outside this realm, the Internet's effects on librarianship warrant continued cynical speculation. As I write this, the electronic availability of information continues to open the proverbial can of worms regarding collection development. Because many of us face a frigid fiscal reality where we are not able to acquire and archive as we have in the past, some of us look to the Internet as the net that will catch us as we step off —or leap—into the future.

In particular, the growing commercial presence on the Internet makes those worms writhe in gruesome new ways. First, if librarians don't select and order materials for their libraries, will some middle agent, even library users, squeeze us right off the screen of our 17-inch monitors? After all, in theory (and more often than not, in reality), library users will be able to locate useful information, order articles for document delivery, read books at their PCs, or publish their treatises directly on the Web—without ever consulting a librarian or our much-touted on-line catalogs. Secondly, since we would not necessarily be doing all the selecting, conceivably the jobs of collection development librarians will evolve into merely managing some of the access and licensing for products and services. Because end-users would do most of the direct selection themselves, the remaining librarians would be serving as wait people who assist while users choose from the Internet menu. An order of *Psych Abstracts* to accompany that *Medline* meal, ma'am?

Such a scenario raises obvious issues regarding fundamentals of librarianship. What is potentially bad about library users doing their own selection? What is potentially good? How will Internet-poor patrons afford access in the information-rich future? How much of what we think is information rich is really "fool's gold"? And in those cases where we still need to purchase hard copies, couldn't collection development librarians order materials directly from the Web? I apologize for striking fear in the hearts of acquisitions librarians out there, but if patrons are doing direct selection, then it seems likely that collection development librarians could engage in more direct purchasing. And while we are at it, why not purchase or outsource structured access to the Internet rather than depending on catalogers to do it or on OCLC to provide it—if you can fathom the demise of this titan?

Even were we to ignore the commercial presence— or threat—on the Internet, the constant barrage of new materials and new technological developments makes it difficult to keep up with our selection

options and to make timely and sound choices. This week we have access to citation indexes via a telnet session and the next week via three or four Web providers all with different interfaces. In the next year, who knows? Perhaps we will be able to plug our brains up to a computer and just suck up the necessary information like nutrients through an IV.

The availability of information will also prompt patrons to challenge us to consider providing access to resources that we might not have considered in paper—simply because they are so readily available via the Web. Remember this demand: "I want my MTV"? Finally, we have only begun to endure significant challenges to the access of information that some folks deem indecent or inappropriate, and I will not knowingly step into the quagmire of copyright issues. I suppose that now more than ever we should be able to change selection and acquisition policies as quickly as Superman changes in a nearby phone booth. We should also consider retaining the services of a talented lawyer who is savvy about intellectual property and can afford anti-quagmire shoes.

A lot of what I am discussing here comes down to issues of control, flexibility, authority and survival. What are we willing to let go of in terms of control? When are we willing to be flexible and to change? How can we maintain some authority? And because I am convinced that there will be some rather nasty results of this natural selection process, I have to ask: Who within the profession will survive if no one

hears you scream in cyberspace? I find that I don't have all the answers, or at least few that aren't cynical. But I sure as hell have my share of questions.

In the end, few librarians—with good reason—would be willing to admit what I am about to confess (perhaps courageously): I remain an informed skeptic regarding how well the Internet serves librarians now and will serve them in the future. Actually, we will probably end up serving it. Secretly, I also believe that not only will the Internet replace books, but also it will likely replace librarians and libraries—at least as we know them now. I wonder whether knowing this about me might change my status among other librarians and mar my image—sort of like those adults confessing to their relish of Frosted Flakes in that moronic cereal commercial. Who wants to be associated with the geeky stereotypes of librarians who loooooovvvvveee books, but fear and loathe computers? If anything, I live and work to alter that image not only in myself but in others. I understand that the fear of this familiar stereotype may very well be one possible reason so many of us cannon-balled into the bandwidth: because joining afforded an opportunity to be associated with a constantly evolving, perhaps flashier, focus of information technology. Despite my skepticism and cynicism, I do not deny that the Internet has and will continue to have an enormous positive

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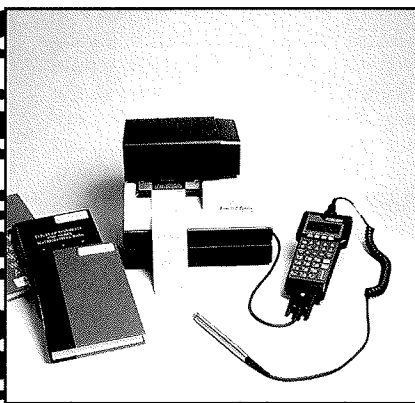
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All of this of course implies that students have access to the Internet. In our enthusiasm for this new medium, it is often easy to forget that this is not always the case. Eloise Greene, a participant in a distance program through Syracuse University, commented on a recent CRISTAL-ED listserv discussion: "One of the biggest challenges for my cohort was interconnective service. Most seem unable to connect to the Web, but all have electronic mail and some way of uploading/downloading files. For some it has been an unanticipated financial burden of $200 to $300 a month for the home connectivity charges" (Greene, 1995). Even in Oregon, where most areas have Internet service, access can be a problem. Several people in our program simply do not have the resources to purchase a home computer. They are therefore restricted to using Internet connections at libraries, which is not always convenient.

The Internet has not only changed the tangibles of course content and delivery, it also has helped lead to some fundamental changes in the way students approach their educational experience. We are no longer site-bound in our interactions. Students from different institutions can now connect with each other through listservs such as LIS-L (listserv@vmd.cso.uiuc.edu), a global discussion list of issues relating to library and information science students. Peer reviewed e-journals, such as the *Katharine Sharp Review*, edfu.lis.uiuc.edu/review, publish articles by library students. In addition, many schools post their syllabi on their Web pages. This allows students to gain a perspective on what is being taught in other schools. At times, it is even possible to read class lectures. All of these contribute to making library students better consumers of information.

Clearly, the Internet has made a profound impact on library education. Being a student while these rapid developments take place will no doubt help prepare us as we enter into the changing profession of library and information science. The students who are in library school now can be instrumental in the shaping of this new technology. I and many others like me find that to be a very exciting prospect. **Q**

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impact on the lives of library users. I am just not sure I like what the cards foretell about its eventual impact on my professional life, and I don't think the crystal ball is clear about the negative consequences for all librarians concerned. **Q**

Trapped

information access. Do we, for instance, want our OPAC terminals used by our customers to send and read their e-mail? The good news is that the problem won't be with us for long. By next Web year, we'll have a different challenge. **Q**

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