

THE LIBRARY AND THE FUTURE†

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I would like to discuss briefly three trends that we are seeing emerge in my country, and that I've selected because they may be equally relevant to the libraries of the Republic of China. These are not long-range forecasts, but rather trends that are in progress now, and that I believe will be more and more evident in the next five years. So perhaps my talk should be titled "The Library and the Very Near Future"! In connection with that, I want to say that if any of you take exception to anything I say, I hope to meet and talk with as many of you as possible. I hope you will educate me as to what is happening in your libraries.

The trends I'd like to talk about are:

1. Life-long, or continuing, education for librarianship.
2. The increasing dependence of libraries on outside resources.
3. New roles for librarians in an information age.

I'd like to relate these trends, as appropriate, to the role of our professional organizations: the American Library Association and the Library Association of China.

The first trend, as I said in my inaugural address at Los Angeles, "is as old as librarianship, but it is surely more important than ever, and it must be addressed now for many reasons. Perhaps the most obvious and immediate reason is that it has impact on the viability of the role of the librarian in society:

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that is, will we be able to control, manage, and manipulate the current and emerging technology in communications, computers, and electronics so that it becomes an access enhancer rather than a barrier to knowledge and information for our clients.” And I cited Alfred North Whitehead who as early as 1926 observed, “The fixed person for the fixed duties who in older societies was such a godsend, in the future will be a public danger.”¹

As you may have heard, the U.S. has recently become very concerned about over-all quality of its public education system, and there is a growing awareness that we need to produce high school and college graduates who will be able to move from specialist roles and adapt to new careers over and over again.

A best-selling author in the U.S. currently is John Naisbett, and I understand his book *Megatrends* has been translated into Chinese, he says, “In the new information era, all the information professions will continue to grow for a long time. . . the computer will permeate the whole world of work. The rapid change ahead also means that you cannot expect to remain in the same job or profession for life, even if it is an information profession. The coming changes will force us to seek retraining again and again.”²

The annual workshops that the Library Association of China has sponsored are one way to update; these conferences are another. As I have said to the ALA membership, a professional association ought to do more, ought to experiment with new ways of providing continuing education — teleconferencing, packets of training materials for onsite workshops — ought to be part of an association’s publishing effort.

One of the things I said in my inaugural speech which is coming to pass is that ALA ought to take the leadership in organizing an international conference on continuing education. Since then we have submitted a proposal to the IFLA Board for a pre-conference at the 1985 IFLA conference in Chicago. This proposal *has* been approved so I have a small task force leaded by Dr. Russell Shank now working on the arrangements. Perhaps some of you will come to IFLA in 1985; we hope to

demonstrate some of the new technologies in teleconferencing, etc. Another area this group is working on is a plan to involve more younger librarians in international activities relating to the profession. As it is now, very often only the older and more affluent librarians are able to participate.

The second trend: our increasing dependence on outside resources. If libraries are to survive, we must begin to recognize and accept our increasing dependence on suppliers and support outside the library. This concept is hardly new, but there continues to be high resistance to it among all segments of the profession. There are notable exceptions, of course, but generally my observation is (in the United States) that resistance is least among academic and special librarians, high among public librarians, and school librarians and media specialists might best be described as apathetic. (I would be interested in knowing if this assessment is also true in the R.O.C.)

In spite of the fact that it is apparent to all of us that each year libraries are able to acquire less and less of what is published, we continue to attempt to build larger and larger collections. John Naisbett, the author I cited earlier, reminds us that "We have for the first time an economy based on a key resource that is not only renewable, but self-generating . . . running out of it is not a problem, but drowning in it is . . . Between 6000 and 7000 scientific articles are written each day . . . scientific information will soon increase by 40% per year because of new and more powerful information systems . . . We are drowning in information, but starved for knowledge."³ Scientists who are overwhelmed with technical data complain of information pollution and charge that it takes less time to do an experiment than to find out whether or not it has already been done.

Research at the University of Pittsburgh and elsewhere gives strong indication that there is fallacy in the argument that the larger the collection the more likely it is to provide access to what is needed. Some have postulated that there is a core of materials, perhaps 20%, which serves the majority of needs. Others have

speculated that 40% of the collection accounts for almost all of the use. Yet libraries are under constant pressure to build collections to increase the probability that a particular volume will be available when needed, even if by only one user.

Those who argue for larger and larger collections on the grounds that net-working and resource sharing are expensive are ignoring the reality that in today's fast-moving and competitive society, much information today may be stale tomorrow. "Sharing resources through networks is a must for both economic and intellectual reasons. It is impossible to be self-sufficient by claiming independence". As Dr. Margaret Fung has said in her recent book, *On Library and Information Science*. When we utilize the resources of other libraries, join with networks, subscribe to data bases, we do pay, but we pay for access to information/knowledge only when it is needed. This can be far more cost effective in the long run. The real issue may not be – should we become involved in multitype cooperation, but how do we decide which networks to join, and at what level?

Richard Daugherty, librarian at the University of Michigan, writing in the *Bookmark* says, "As one contemplates the future, it seems almost certain that the high costs of building construction, collection maintenance and preservation, and the provision of access to collections will together provide compelling justification for institutional cooperation. The cost of retaining traditional levels of local autonomy would require millions of dollars above and beyond normal operating costs in order to bring these problems under control."⁵

What planners in the United States are discovering is that the real success stories in multitype cooperation are found at the grass roots or local level, rather than grandiose schemes superimposed from the national level. Naturally it helps if there are fiscal incentives from national and local governments. The real difficulty we have is in educating local librarians to something that was readily apparent as far back as 1967 when Nelson did a study of U.S. public library systems and discovered, not too surprisingly,

that combining a group of weak libraries did not result in a strong system.

Citizens in local/small communities deserve and should have ready access to the totality of resources in the area, and potential access to the resources of the country and the world; but this will only happen if we librarians drastically change our old-fashioned ideas about collection development and resource sharing.

Finally, the third trend: new roles for librarians in the information age. My colleague, Professor Lancaster, who is here with us this week, has written far more eloquently than I ever could about the future of the librarian and the library, but I do have some thoughts. They relate to the need for librarians to have both a personal and collective understanding of who we are, of the importance of our work. Our own sense of self esteem is, in my view, a most important factor in how we relate to others. J. Michael Pemberton, writing in the *Tennessee Librarian*, has pointed out how quickly our perceptions of library and information services are changing and will change. "Most users of information services will be astounded and dismayed by the complexity of what is offered, and will need a great deal of advice and guidance — we can and will provide such advisory services even if we do not offer all of the information services in house."⁶ As I noted in the preface to the *1983 ALA Yearbook*, the past few years have not been particularly easy ones for librarianship. We have had a pervasive and growing uneasiness about who we are and what we as a profession are all about. It would be all too easy to succumb to the temptation of viewing ourselves as the victims of economic, political, or technological circumstance, when in fact the information age offers incredible opportunities for enhancement of our role and status.

In the late 1800's, about the time of Melville Dewey, only about 4% of the work force was deployed in information. By 1979 it was 46%, and today over half the work force is engaged in generating, processing, or distributing information. The real

question is, how does the library profession fit into all this? Let's remember who we are: we are the gatherers, the organizers, the disseminators, and the analyzers of information. We are also the custodians of and the guides to recorded knowledge—knowledge which is far less ephemeral and less transient than much of what passes for information in today's world.

The dilemma that librarians find themselves in today is the need to balance past functions with new ones, and continue to provide knowledge and information in familiar print formats as long as these formats are useful (which I personally believe will be for a long, long time). Libraries will be the one place where individuals can, at their own pace and in a secure environment, test and become familiar with microcomputers, the videodisc systems like Prestel, Telidon, and other technology as it emerges. Even for those who will be able to subscribe to and access data bases at home, the librarians' skills will be more important than ever in helping people pull out from vast quantities of data what is useful and relevant. I guess I do agree with Lancaster that the librarian will be, and is, much less dependent on an institutional setting than in the past but I also feel that we individual librarians- must remember that governments—tax payers will not find they will fund institutions (libraries).

In my program statement for the American Library Association this year, I've said that ALA will plan programs to improve the capabilities of librarians in providing access to information and in articulating this role to our various constituencies. We are focusing particularly on improving our financial support from both public and private sectors. We are developing training packets on private funding, training trainers from each of the 50 states, and will be holding workshops via teleconference from the Dallas meeting next June. The theme of the Dallas Conference is "Paths to Power." My friends, I believe real power comes from our own sense of self esteem and assurance about the importance of our work.

References

1. A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Mac-Millan, 1926), p. 282.
2. John Naisbett, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Touching Our Lives* (New York: Warner Books, 1982), p. 37.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
4. Margaret C. Fung, "Information Service of the American Academic Library in 2000," *On Library and Information Science* (Taipei: Student Books Co., 1982), p. 173.
5. Richard M. Daugherty, "New Strategies to Retain Old Traditions," *Bookmark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1982), p. 69.
6. J. Michael Pemberton, "The Library in an Information Society: Leader or Anachronism?" *Tennessee Librarian* 34 (Fall 1982): p. 24.