

The future of reference IV: A response

by Nancy Elder

To set the stage I would like to consider "When does the future start?" For modern academic libraries I would propose that the future began about five or six years ago when our financial circumstances began to change drastically.

Ms. Eaton's comments bring to our attention some interesting ideas regarding the forces which will shape the library of the future. I would like to focus particularly on her thought that "economic forces will shape the future library more than either user needs or evolving information technology." First I will review the scenario she has set from a different perspective, and then return to some of the implications of the economic forces that will be at work in our future.

Recall that Ms. Eaton has set a scene of evolving library services—not a transformation but a transition. I believe technological evolution will come to us as naturally as the printing press, open stacks, or photocopiers did. Certainly, we need to keep abreast of developments, install new equipment and services as they prove viable and cost-effective, and continue to examine new technology for its utility in libraries. So while I am as anxious as the next to have newer, niftier equipment, technology will arrive, and I with it, in its own good time.

We need to be open to change, ready to acquire new, relevant skills—but one perspective on these new services hints that they do not represent substantive change in the delivery of information. Let us consider the current "workstation." Think of it this way: Print material with a photocopier? This workstation together with various catalogs, indexes, and databases allows a user to identify, locate, and record the information of interest. If the station—"information station" is more relevant in the context of libraries—consists of a computer with modem, scanner, fax, printer, etc., the user will still be identifying, locating, and recording the information he needs.

So, if technology will pretty much arrive on its own accord, where should our energy be directed?

Let us return to the question of the economic forces which will be shaping our future.

Part of the transition process will be the decisions about the economics of the materials and access to them. What will the library pay for, and in what formats? What should the users pay for? What is baseline service? What is value-added service? Regardless of who pays, there must be greater concern for getting the full value from the materials we do acquire (through ownership or through "access").

How can reference librarians participate in this full-value process?

- Be open to new ideas and services; give up old preconceptions.
- Be ready to redefine reference service.
- View reference from a new perspective as technology changes.
- Give up the "but that's not my job" rationale.
- Adopt a "take a risk" approach.
- Consider services from the user's viewpoint.
- Don't assume we know what users need or want; find out for sure.
- Value the uniquely human skills: prototyping, flexibility, judgment, intuition, ability to recognize similarity, ability to make inferences.

We must find ways to add value to our services and our materials. As creativity consultant Roger Von Oech expressed it, we must give ourselves "a whack on the side of the head"¹ and open ourselves to creativity in library service.

In *Value-Added Processes in Information Systems*, Robert Taylor defines value-added activities in information systems as "those processes that produce, enhance, or otherwise strengthen the potential utility of messages in the system."² Taylor also describes 23 values for information systems. Looking more closely at a few of these gives us some ideas where we might begin to add value to our system. He divides the 23 values into six general categories: 1) ease of use, 2) noise reduction, 3) quality, 4) adaptability, 5) time savings, and 6) cost savings.

With that general framework, let's examine a few specific values and how we might add that value in the materials and services we provide. My idea here is to present a few ideas with the intention of getting you thinking creatively—remember that whack on the side of the head—about adding value: 1) do remote reference for documents CDs; 2) chapter/section analytics; 3) "reference notebook" field, for reference staff to add notes; 4) local title field, for distinctly local titles; 5) Center for Research Libraries records; 6) online journals project; 7) pointer in UTCAT from journals we own to relevant indexing tools; 8) reader levels: basic, undergraduate, advanced, professional; 9) treatment codes: popular, scholarly, applied, theoretical, pictorial, laboratory manual; 10) better options for downgrading from UTCAT; 11) function to identify newly acquired materials in UTCAT.

These are a few ideas for value-added services and options building on the existing infrastructure. As electronic delivery moves into the reference room, whether slowly or quickly, directly or indirectly, there will still be a sig-

nificant role for the librarian. As a service organization our role will evolve farther away from warehousing to a higher, more professional level of adding value to materials and services.

Let me leave you with an idea I discovered in a book on telecommunication systems. While the phrases runaway costs and cost overruns are familiar, think about runaway benefits or benefit overruns.³ Perhaps we can challenge ourselves for the "future of reference" to produce a benefit overrun by value added to our services and materials.

Notes

¹Roger Von Oech, *A Whack on the Side of the Head: How to Unlock Your Mind for Innovation* (New York: Warner Books, 1983).

²Robert S. Taylor, *Value-Added Processes in Information Systems* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1986), p. 203.

³J. L. King, J. L. and K. L. Kraemer, "Cost As a Social Impact of Information Technology" in N. L. Moss ed., *Telecommunications and Productivity* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978), p. 112.

The future of reference IV: A response

by Dennis Dillon

Nancy Eaton has given us one version of the future. Here is another.

In 1998, responding to pressure from librarians, academics, publishers, and the general public, Congress approves a one-line change to the tax code. Publishers will now be able to take substantial write-offs for every subscription and book sold to libraries. A \$1,000 journal now costs libraries \$29.95. Publishers hail the move as revitalizing the industry, universities praise it as saving scholarly communication, librarians rejoice because it means continued free access to information.

Why did this happen? Because libraries, like schools, hospitals, and roads are what economists refer to as social capital. They are all essential to the functioning of a modern democracy. If citizens want their schools, libraries, and roads improved, politicians will find the money or they won't get reelected. If there are

better ways to get information than from libraries, then libraries will get their budgets cut. If publishers, academics, and librarians truly believe that the scholarly communication process is breaking down then this is a societal problem requiring political attention. Will economics be the major determinate of the future library? Of course. When have they not? But it is librarians who will determine what the future library is like. Just as we have in the past, we will make the decision on the information mix and the information services that we will offer.

Will electronic publishing help us put the user and information together? Someday yes. Right now there are a few obstacles, but as Robert Weber has noted, "the chief problems are not technical but political. What is lacking at the moment is a broad consensus that this is the kind of technology infrastructure that would