

staffs. I do not intend to suggest that we should not pursue some of these projects, although we must make our choices carefully. Artificial intelligence is not going to solve many problems for us in the next

five to ten years, and it is difficult to predict its impact over thirty years. Our tasks will not be easy, and we will not reach our goals as quickly as we might wish.

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## The future of reference III: Another response

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While I found Pat Molholt's presentation entertaining and challenging, I would like to remind everyone that we are talking about the concept of libraries in the context of universities where, if I can paraphrase, we practice the willing suspension of profit and loss in the hope of having an effect on people's lives, to transmit understanding through teaching, and to inquire into the nature of things. The university is not McDonald's, Chevron, or IBM, and though there is a mythology of the university, described by Anne Woodsworth, Pat Molholt, et al. in their 1989 article as "in mission, character, and organizational structure . . . essentially a medieval institution,"<sup>1</sup> and that mythology may have been deeply altered by big professions, big sports, big research, big government, and big enrollments, I believe it is too soon to replace the library, the so-called heart of the mythical university, with a Jarvik-7.

In spite of Pat Molholt's subtle efforts to downplay the significance and usefulness of print collections while skillfully persuading us of the allure and irresistible vitality of artificial intelligence (AI) systems, the fact is that no matter what technological mix we end up being able to afford in university libraries, the key to the information future is human-based services delivered by a sufficient number of people who care and people who hustle to get the job done right the first time.

At the 1978 LITA Conference on Closing the Card Catalog, Hugh Atkinson, then of Ohio State, also spoke about walls—he predicted that online library catalog systems would destroy traditional physical and social work patterns in libraries, in effect allowing workers and work to be distributed in a way that would unify library departments at the same time that it increased their autonomy and

improved services.<sup>2</sup> Atkinson described these work groups as "tribes" of about a dozen people. In effect, this amounts to a reinvigoration of the branch library concept (something that has in fact happened) where, rather than splitting off and compartmentalizing print from electronic systems, collection development from technical services, or reference from administration, these necessary segments of an information delivery system are integrated around the mutual online catalog files now available to us. Meanwhile we in branch libraries, who wear all these hats, can ply our trade where it counts—footsteps away from our customers.

I'd like to remind everyone that all the hullaballoo about access over acquisition is the sad outgrowth of physical and fiscal exigency, and that the yearning for global interconnectivity is just another run at the same old wish to have everything close at hand. Yet, access without delivery is suicide. To illustrate that, let me ask you to substitute the term "microform" for "AI" in the access provision model. We already provide lots of access on microform, but people confound us by refusing to accept it. Why? Because we refuse to put muscle behind delivery. In order to save money most libraries offer too few printers, printers that are poorly designed, that cost too much when they do work, and that generally give a lousy product.

The costs of real AI systems, with serious access and delivery potential, would destroy us, so we will settle for what we can afford—something between that old magic eight-ball toy and a thought policeman—all the while asking ourselves why no one is ever satisfied.

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<sup>1</sup>Anne Woodsworth et al., "The Model Research Library: Planning for the Future," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 15 (July 1989): 132-138.

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<sup>2</sup>Hugh C. Atkinson, "The Impact of Closing the Catalog on Library Organization," in *Closing the Catalog: Proceedings of the 1978 and 1979 Library and Information Technology Association Institutes*, ed. by D.K. Gopen and B. Juergens (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1980): 123-133.

Those of us who work in branch “tribes” in today’s online catalog environment get to see our service capabilities with all the pride and anxiety of the small-business person—up close and personal through the eyes of the students and faculty whose education and research we either help or hinder. It ain’t always pretty, but it works. Anything we do to revolutionize our business had better work at least as well, and provide at least comparable value.

A classic marketing paper written by Theodore Levitt in the early 1960s called “Marketing Myopia”<sup>3</sup> describes the demise of the American railroads through the loss of understanding that railroads were in the transportation business. Owning a great collection, or having access to a great collection, is still only the product. The business we are in is consultation, facilitation, and organization. Those of us who work in branch libraries are not allowed to forget what our business is; it walks right into our offices all day long, and we use whatever technology best suits the occasion—one that works.

The online catalog environment has forced the branch library “tribe” to acknowledge to a greater degree what kinds of responsibilities and obligations accompany our greater autonomy and our renewed sense of purpose. We are learning to take a more committed role in developing policies and procedures as we become closer partners in a unified information delivery system made possible by the online catalog environment. We also know that the special nature of the university plays a critical role in establishing standards by which our measure is taken.

We know, for instance, that while universities may in fact be corporate entities with corporate aspirations and corporate values in some quarters, universities in the U.S. still bear the mantle of their medieval heritage. Universities are not prepared to accept pure entrepreneurial signals from academic libraries any more than they are prepared to actually hire the athletes—the old mythology is too potent and there is no suitable alternative.

The rhythm of university life is not yet the rhythm of new product development. The ambiguity of change on campus is genuine, but the concept of the university is still governed by the requirement of reflection. The same is true of university libraries, and we must remember that what makes us different from a military base or a factory is our dedication, not to novelty or power, not to control or success, but to carrying forward our collective “external memory” by teaching and inquiring into the nature of things. This is properly a human task,

carried out by people and for people, not done to people at the expense of people.

We must also take precautions to comprehend the survivability and social consequence of new technologies. We must remember that printing and copying are not ordinary technologies. They have always had to thrive in spite of vigorous political efforts to control or suppress them, even today as eastern bloc nations begin to repeal their registration laws for typewriters, copiers, and printing presses, and the hunger for ready access to print and photocopy technology in those nations is still seriously underestimated. In order to move away from print we must be assured we can carry the good into the merely new.

Printing was not invented deliberately because the scriptorium monks ate too much and used too many candles. Nevertheless, once developed it was as intellectually compelling as gunpowder. Like gunpowder, its influence will not fade quickly from our lives just because a new product gives a bigger bang. Libraries predate both printing and universities, and someday could postdate them as well, since universities could just as easily be disembodied by electronic technologies as libraries. The library and the university will certainly live on as “log-on concepts” if nothing else, but I find it hard to imagine either one without a place to go to and a person to see there.

I hope we are not forced to disembody the library (or the university) either architecturally or intellectually merely for the sake of cost control or to aggrandize an information power base. People require human-based services to negotiate the complexities of print collections, and people will require all of this expertise and much more in order to fully exploit the potential of newer storage and retrieval methods in a complex mixture of systems and formats.

If this turns out to be too great a social cost, if it becomes necessary to eject these institutions and the people that embody them into the “ether-net” to save them, I believe it bodes ill for our society, for our culture, and for our very self-understanding.

### **Which northeastern colony came first?**

If your answer to that question is Plymouth, you are wrong, according to the New York State Library. The first colony was New Netherland, established on October 11, 1614, and encompassing the land area from Quebec to Delaware Bay. The records of that pre-English colony are being translated from 17th-century Dutch by Charles Gehring in a project supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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<sup>3</sup>Theodore Levitt, “Marketing Myopia,” *Harvard Business Review* 38 (July-August 1960): 45–56.