The Midas Crisis: C&RL News in 2030

By Peter Lyman

What you may be reading about in 33 years

E *d note:* In conclusion of our year-long 30th anniversary celebration, *C&RL News* invited Peter Lyman to predict what academic libraries might be like in the year 2030. Here he shares with us his take on the changes in store for academic libraries and librarians over the next 30 years through *C&RL News* reports from the future.

News of the future

What will academic libraries and librarianship be like by the year 2030? Futurist predictions are notoriously wrong, revealing far more about the unquestioned assumptions of the present than about the future. In this spirit, as a way of thinking about our own assumptions, hopes, and fears, the reader is invited to consider the news of the future as it might appear in the pages of *C&RL News* over the next third of a century.

While reading the Web version of the *New York Times* this morning, there was a power surge, and for a few seconds I was connected to a strange three-dimensional signal called "*C&RL News* of the Future." I managed to print out the fragments that appear below, each followed by my own comments interpreting their meaning. The phrase "The Midas Crisis" occurs often in these fragments, apparently referring to the possibility that in the future both higher education and research libraries may starve while surrounded by the wealth of knowledge which we now call "the information revolution."

Fragment 1: What makes information useful?

June 2007. A national debate rages in *C&RL News* about whether BrokenWindows©, a new MacroHard® information product providing compulsory instantaneous access to all new information, represents the greatest advancement in the history of education or the end of civilization. Public opinion surveys reveal that users are becoming less informed because so much information is available it is impossible to actually find any answers. The American Council of Learned Societies is changing its name to the American Council of Invisible Colleges as scholarly disciplines become closed guilds, passing on techniques for ignoring new information from master to apprentice in secret ceremonies.

January 2017. C&RL News reports that the JCN Corporation has invented an advanced computer named Profound Indigo (PI) to process information and, through superior intelligence, actually answer questions. PI was designed to take the ultimate test of creative interpretation, answering all questions at an academic research library reference desk for an hour. Unfortunately, the Cyborg's eyes began to weep silicon tears after 35 minutes. Soon after, librarians began to be called Oracles and were given the exclusive right to wear robes of 32 bit colors, and honored as the only professionals able to bring order to the growing chaos of information. Pay scales for librarians, however, did not rise. Even librarians couldn't figure out why.

Comment: The Library of Babel?
Perhaps the predictions that the Web will be-

Peter Lyman is university librarian at the University of California, Berkeley;
e-mail: plyman@library.berkeley.edu

come the new Library of Alexandria will come true by the year 2030. And yet, as Borges observed in a definitive manner in 'The Library of Babel," "no reader ever needs or wants all human knowledge." If a library were to be infinite, using the library might seem like this Borges description: "There are official searchers, *inquisitors*. I have observed them carrying out their functions: they are always exhausted . . . no one expects to discover anything."[1] The Web is a library as it might be designed by writers, a place where everything can be published, but a real library must be designed for *readers*, a place where knowledge can be found. To understand the soul of a library, one must understand the way its *reader community* wants to learn, remember, and create knowledge. A library is not simply about information, whether books or computers, it is about learning.

Fragment 1 is about whether information is of any value if it cannot be used. What the librarian knows that the computer cannot know is *context*: librarians know that understanding the meaning of a question must precede finding answers to it.

Fragment 2: The Midas Crisis

January 2001. Market mechanisms have replaced all public institutions, including libraries, schools, and museums. In 2010, *C&RL News* reported that President Gates© dedicated the new NYPL CyberMall, Inc., located on the site of the old New York Public Library. Since the turn of the century, NYPL had again become a private lending library, known affectionately to thousands of school children as "Books R Us."

November 2020. In hindsight it is clear that higher education is best organized by private enterprise, thus colleges and universities have been quickly purchased by major corporations. Unnecessary assets were sold off, transforming college football into a professional sport, and campuses into education factories. Course sitcoms taught by na-

tionally famous teachers, such as Roseanne Barr, are sold through cable networks into the home market.

April 2030. C&RL News editorialized about "The Midas Crisis," for at the same time that technology was creating a renaissance of scientific discovery, knowledge was being privatized. Without schools and libraries, sharp new class divisions formed, based upon unequal access to the new wealth of knowledge.

Comment: The marketplace of ideas?

Perhaps information technologies will make possible a new kind of democratic society by 2030, based upon the recognition that access to information is a fundamental human and civil right. This would be the best of times for libraries, a time when information will have been recognized as a resource for developing a full sense of being a person; as a medium for membership in community; as a technology for transforming work from routine to creative experience; and making possible direct participation in the polity.

Yet, paradoxically, 2030 might also be the worst of times for libraries and librarians, an age in which information will have become a pure economic commodity, and in which the maintenance of a stable market system is the only public good. Fragment 2 describes a democratic society without a public realm; there are no public subsidies for the use of knowledge, rather value and price are based upon use and utility alone. The reader is conceived of as a consumer not as a citizen; as one seeking entertainment not education; and as an isolated individual not as a member of a community.

In a true golden age of knowledge, librarianship might be described as the management of the *currencies* which are the true wealth of all social groups—the currencies of knowledge which make possible social cohesion and progress. Culture has always been a currency of social life, providing a sense of shared values and history. But today, as Walter Wriston argues, knowledge, in the form of information, has become the primary currency of economic wealth: "The pursuit of wealth is now largely the pursuit of information, and the application of information to the means of production."[2]

The problem of the next 33 years will be to balance these two forms of social currency: one public, one private; one the currency of a gift

economy, the other of a market economy. A community is always a gift culture, even economic organizations are ultimately based upon trust.[3] But gift and market exchange are complementary, not opposites, for the formation of digital communities creates the possibility of new markets.

Innovation in the next 33 years will not be the product of intelligent machines, as Wriston predicts. The essence of innovation will be social, the application of information to the *mode* of production, that is, the transformation of the social relations in which we organize the economy and indeed all institutional life; this certainly includes academe and, by extension, academic research libraries.

Fragment 3: Back to the future

September 2025. Today England, the first and now the last nation state, joined Gowanda, the global electronic village, the next evolutionary stage of humankind's political organization. The British Library will merge with the Electronic Scriptorum, the Web-based union library. Intellectual property will henceforth be governed by barter; anyone using information must place something of equal worth into the global potlatch. All knowledge containers will henceforth be called "documents," and authors and publishers will be called scriveners. The word "information" henceforth will return to its traditional meaning in scholastic education: the use of books to place form into the mind.

Comment: The poetics of information policy

It is ironic that futurists must use feudal terminology to escape the heavy hand of industrialism, and even the language of technology—information, document, data—antedates the invention of print by centuries. But it is not an accident that the political rhetoric of the late 20th century uses industrial metaphors to describe digital communication, for they serve to justify the dominance of established economic interests over the new media. Using the "information highway" metaphor places political control of federal information policy in the Commerce Department because that is where interstate commerce was regulated. Notwithstanding, network communication in no way resembles the transportation of commodities across state lines. In a manufacturing economy, "copyright," literally regulation of the mechanical process of reproduction, governed the boundary between private and public property in information. But in digital documents the creation and reproduction of a text cannot be separated, since copying and sharing access is the essence of the technology. Finally, while "universal access" defines a standard of distributive justice for information access, unlike rural electrification or phone service, it is *public access to a common fund of knowledge* that is critical to the digital library, not access alone.

The poetics of libraries and information will not be found in visions of either the future or the past but in new words that describe how communities of readers actually create and use knowledge in the new media environments. If the poetics of government information policy use industrial and manufacturing metaphors, librarians will simply have to become poets to create a better future.

Fragment 4: Nomads in cyberspace

July 2015. Until today's announcement of The Nomad™ by QuadEye Systems of Sandpaper, California, personal software agents have intelligently searched the 'Net for information. The Nomad™ is a miracle of biotechnology, a synthesis of software and human DNA which gradually appropriates the personality of its owner. Nomad addicts sit glued to the 'Net endlessly, vicariously wandering the Web in search of entertainment and knowledge.

September 2019. In what has been dubbed the revolution of the Cybernauts, the Nomads threw off the rule of the Bods, as they call their human parasites. Protesting the social isolation and anomie which humans have created on the 'Net, the new tribe created the first public institution in cyberspace, a place they called The Libe.

Since the turn of the century, NYPL had again become a private lending library, known affectionately to thousands of school children as "Books R Us."

The equation of library materials with widgets and libraries with warehouses should have been enough to set the alarm bells ringing.

4) Intangible electronic documents owned and maintained by other agencies and available electronically for a fee or without payment.

It is evident that the first two categories are the likely first choice of most library users—they have the merit of being instantly available (in most cases) and free. They are also listed in the online catalog or, in the case of the second class, somewhere else in the library's integrated system. Increasingly, information about classes 3 and 4 is available in online systems through connections to databases as diverse as the OCLC online union catalog, Melvyl, CARL, ERIC, etc. Many systems are also giving their patrons easy access to the Web. Given the ready accessibility of these four concentric circles of library materials, the discussion of what constitutes a "collection" becomes somewhat metaphysical. From an accountant's point of view, a "collection" consists of items bought and paid for; from the librarian's and, most important, the library user's point of view, the "collection" is that universe of materials that is readily and freely available.

The keys to availability and the factors that make this new definition of collection possible are bibliographic control and preservation. Librarians have mastered the art of bibliographic control for the tangible objects they own and have built complex systems to make the whereabouts of those objects known. We have also made great strides in the preservation of fragile materials and, by virtue of our stewardship, have ensured that the recorded knowledge and information of the past and present will be available to future generations. Are we up to the challenge of extending that bibliographic control and preservation to electronic documents? I believe so, if we have the necessary determination, organization, and confidence. ∎

Comment: A place called cyberia

New nations express themselves first by writing a constitution, and then by founding a national library to define a national culture and literature. By 2030 new forms of community and modes of education will evolve, reflecting the increasing cultural diversity of civil society and new economic conditions. How will these new communal forms reinvent the library to manage their knowledge currencies—as a function or as a place, or both?

Cyberia, that is, the new social forms and communities which are taking shape within computer mediated communication,[4] may provide a home for a new kind of public place which might deserve to be called a library in this sociological sense. Even today there are promising experiments in network-based communities, including: the collaboratory experiments sponsored by the National Science Foundation; game spaces, such as Lambda Moo; Web pages, lists, and e-mail used as social glue by social movements such as Greenpeace.

New media might serve as a medium of public education as 18th-century art once did, art historian Barbara Stafford argues, but only if they are linked to "common rituals and public concerns."[5] This is precisely what libraries have done for print in creating public spaces, and by shaping collections that reflect community interests and concerns. This has yet to be done for digital information and cannot be accomplished by markets alone.

Notes

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," *Ficciones* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), 84.

2. Walter Wriston, *The Twilight of Sovereignty* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), xii.

3. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

4. Arturo Escobar, "Welcome to Cyberia," *Current Anthropology* 35 (June 1994), 211–31.

5. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment, Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 311. ∎