Letters

On-Line Bibliographic Services

To the Editor:

A couple of the articles in the July 1977 issue of *College & Research Libraries*, one about on-line searching and the other about one of the data bases available for such searching, stimulate these comments.

I was somewhat aghast at J. S. Kidd's article, "On-Line Bibliographic Services: Selected British Experiences." Although there are some good observations in it, the section on "The Decision to Subscribe" (p.288) seriously understates and misrepresents, I think, the scope of on-line searching and especially coverage of the social sciences. It seems to betray a lack of familiarity with this relatively new phenomenon in library service, at least as it's currently done in the United States. The unmentioned entrance of Bibliographic Retrieval Services (BRS) into this fast-developing area adds to this impression. The appearance in the same issue of Mark Judman's letter (p.334–35) on Kidd's earlier article helped to confirm my opinion. Judman's letter reflects the benefit of experience in providing on-line bibliographic search service.

In the longer run, Kidd's question, "Can you do something useful without the requester's intensive involvement?" is a good one. My answer is that a governing principle of reference service also applies here, namely, that if one can ask a good question—clearly stated, well-defined, unambiguous—and show that one knows what one is looking for and is likely to recognize it when found, then one can expect a good answer. Some of the points raised by Judman address this point and show how the principle is usually applied in interactive on-line searching. Computer people have produced a concise formulation to describe what happens when this principle is not followed: garbage in, garbage out.

Hermes D. Kreilkamp's "The National Agricultural Library's Data Base: AGRICOLA" seems to confuse the AGRICOLA data base, which covers approximately 1970 through the present and is used primarily as a periodical index, with NAL's catalog (p.298). One would not normally use AGRICOLA, for example, to find *titles* of serials at NAL. Also, in the last paragraph of the article (p.303) he erroneously attributes to the University of Pennsylvania a study done at The Pennsylvania State University. The point made in the sentence he quotes, however, speaks well to the question above: "Working together, the scientist and librarian are likely to be more efficient than either one alone.—*Charles G. Murphy, University Libraries, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park.*

Responses

To the Editor:

In one sense, Mr. Murphy's criticism is well taken, but he apparently forgets the normal delays between observation and report. The observations were made in the spring of 1975; the report appeared more than two years later. Scramble as I might, I could not keep up with the additions in scope in the form of new files, etc., that the on-line services have made and continue to make.

Murphy's reference to the Bibliographic Retrieval Services (BRS) is more of the same. More pointedly, it was not the part of the demonstration/test being conducted by the British at the time.

Finally, I must reemphasize that I think there is no real disagreement between myself, Judman, or Murphy. We all agree that on-line services are marvelous and that the best searches are likely to be those that involve an extensive transaction between the requester and the intermediary. Even the managers of these services admit, however, that such an ideal cannot be met often enough in practice. Most searches are done under less than ideal conditions. Thus, some exploration of the suboptimum seems

very much in order.—*J. S. Kidd, College of Library and Information Services, University of Maryland, College Park.*

To the Editor:

Thank you for forwarding me a copy of Mr. Murphy's letter. He is correct in detecting the errors on pages 298 and 303. The sentence on page 298 regarding the coverage of monographs and serials in AGRICOLA should have read: "all post-1970 monographs and selected serial citations from approximately 5,000 journals." Pre-1970 data are contained in NAL's *Dictionary Catalog* and the *Bibliography of Agriculture.—H. D. Kreilkamp, St. Joseph's College, Rensselaer, Indiana.*

Browsing

To the Editor:

Robert Greene's negative conclusions (in the July 1977 issue of *C&RL)* on the effectiveness of browsing are unwarranted by the evidence he presents. His table 4 (p.316) does show that books found through browsing tend to be less essential than those found through other means. But if one multiplies the number of books discovered times the mean value of those books (using the admittedly arbitrary numerical values he assigns), his table 4 would also show that browsing ranks *second* (not last) among all the methods when usefulness is considered. A revised table is presented below. Library administrators should continue to exercise caution when considering closed stacks, especially when the shelflist is not readily available to the public. The author and editor should be complimented for including the data readers need to draw their own conclusions.—*Joseph J. Lauer, Lockwood Memorial Library, State University of New York at Buffalo.*

REVISED TABLE

How Books Were Discovered	Numbers of Books	Mean Value of Books	Total Value of Books
References in publications	108	2.25	243
Browsing in the library	126	1.87	236
From library catalogs	98	2.12	208
From colleagues	38	2.26	86
From memory	21	2.23	47
ALL METHODS	391	2.09	817*

*Column does not add to same total because of rounding.

To the Editor:

As an avid browser, my interest was sparked by Robert Greene's "The Effectiveness of Browsing," but by the time I had finished, my interest had turned to irritation over the faulty interpretation of the data.

Although preliminary, the data are quite interesting; but in arranging it, Greene not only deprives it of all meaning but reveals an attitude that is discouraging to find in a librarian. In his summary table Greene divides all books checked out into "essential" and "not essential" categories, including all books that are "interesting," "useful," and "of no value" as nonessential. He finds that browsing produces a small share of the essential books and recommends the reevaluation of open stacks since the main argument for them is that they permit browsing.

Greene should have realized that, given that division, the results were inevitable. *Webster's* defines browsing as "look[ing] over . . . an aggregate of things casually, especially in search of something of interest." This is not the method most people would use when searching for an "essential" book. Thus the article merely says that people who aren't looking for essential books won't find them.

But more disturbing is the attitude that seems to lie behind this grouping, an attitude that groups an "interesting" or "useful" book with those that have "no value." I have checked out innumerable books as the result of browsing, and very few could be termed essential for the simple reason that they were on subjects I was encountering for the first time. But this is precisely what makes browsing so valuable—it can open up doors and broaden horizons, it can make one aware of topics never even heard of. I know that I have profited immensely from browsing, and I hate to see a librarian, of all people, disregard that experience. It is just what is needed in an era of increasing specialization.—*Owen Smith, Fresno, California.*

Response

To the Editor:

Thank you for the opportunity to reply to the critical comments of Mr. Smith and Mr. Lauer.

The purpose of my study was to show the relationship between the ways in which a book is discovered and its subsequent value to its borrower. The study was preliminary in that there were no data gathered to examine possible contaminating variables (such as the purpose for which a book was borrowed). I would not advocate closing library stacks or any other change from the status quo based on such a preliminary investigation. I do, however, advocate further study of the value of browsing and other ways of finding out about books based on the relationship established in this study.—*Robert J. Greene, Kennesaw College, Marietta, Georgia.*

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