Letters

Whither Libraries?

To the Editor:

I read Lancaster's article "Whither Libraries? or, Wither Libraries" (*C&RL*, Sept. 1978) with a sense of marvel mingled with horrid fascination at the possible demise of libraries as we know them around the year 2000. Indeed, he writes vividly of the "paperless," i.e., electronic communication and storage, system which is unfolding before our eyes and warns us that we ignore this phenomenon at our peril. If we do not move with the flow, libraries risk being relegated to the dustbin of history.

But was it with a sense of relief or despair that I read about something that is, or rather is not, happening in Germany? In the October 29 edition of the *Boston Globe* there appeared an article about an electronic law enforcement network in Germany with 1,300 terminals installed at police stations throughout the country. Huge data bases containing a plethora of information about individual people, their lives and habits, can be tapped in an instant at the remote terminals, enabling the police to track down terrorists with an efficiency that, in the words of the reporter, the Gestapo would have envied. However, the system so far is a total failure. What the Germans call "Captain Computer" has failed to catch, or even lead the police on the trail of, a single terrorist. Credit for those who have been caught must go to "Lieutenant Luck," that is, alert citizens recognizing a face in a café or on a beach.

To my mind, this phenomenon, entirely analogous or not, puts a big dent in the communications utopia Lancaster projects for the information community. Billions of "bits" in a computer, retrievable by programs of marvelous intricacy, are no match for the serendipitous faculty of the human brain—ask any researcher how he or she does his or her business. Lancaster may be right, but only up to a point. So long as the process of people helping people gets the job done, libraries will be around.—*Edmund G. Hamann, College Librarian, Suffolk University, Boston, Massachusetts.*

To the Editor:

In his article on the future of print in libraries, Lancaster deals exclusively with scientific material—and material, at that, of a highly specialized nature. Indeed, one paragraph sums up the situation: "The science journal . . . is more archival than current. . . ."

But certainly not all articles in science journals should be buried in computers. The computer can take off much of the strain by absorbing the purely archival and leave a place in the journal for the reflective. We may then return to the proper function of the journal—selecting for consideration that which should be thought about and which may represent an intermediate step to final presentation of a thought-out idea—the book.

No part of Lancaster's article addresses the original purpose of the journal and the book. In the humanities as well as the sciences, the problem is a serious one. For pure research problems the microfilming of theses was a great advance. If computers can improve their function, they will take much pressure off the publications in the humanities. Thus the enormously expensive but invaluable scholarly editions of our great authors could be put in some form of easily reproducible text, while the selections from the great authors could be published in the traditional form. That is an example of what I believe to be the future of publishing and of books and journals, and of their noble repositories.

May I end by objecting slightly to Lancaster's "hectoring" tone? Librarians are not denser nor more hide-bound than the rest of the world; indeed, their history is quite the opposite—and continues to be. That they may be skeptical of yet another "scien-

tific solution" to all the problems is historically justifiable. And the use of economics jargon—"labor intensive" and "productivity"—is a little suspect. These great systems have a tendency to be "capital intensive." Any reading of *Business Week* will tell us that there is, these days, rather less capital than labor going around. And in a wrestling match, the human brain will still floor any computer.—*Gabriel Austin, Wittenborn and Company, New York.*

Classification and Indexing

To the Editor:

It is not my normal practice to comment on reviews, but I feel that I must break this rule with regard to the final sentence of Elizabeth Snapp's otherwise very fair critique of my book *Classification and Indexing Practice* (*C&RL*, Sept. 1978, p.422–23). Snapp writes: "Moreover, one might suggest that Derek Austin deserves more than a footnote citation as the author of a couple of the 'several descriptions of the [PRECIS] system.' "

But my book is an account of classification and indexing *practice*, not a summary of the major contributions of key figures in indexing. I was concerned to show how PRECIS is *used* and the couple of citations are (in my view) the most important of the very many writings by Derek Austin. One might just as well argue that Coates, Bliss, Dewey, Ranganathan, and many others deserve more attention than I have given them.

Two of my colleagues have suggested that Snapp is trying to form a Derek Austin admiration society, and I would be one of the first to join such a society. My main purpose in writing this letter is to assure Snapp that I am second to none in my admiration of Austin. She—and your readers—may not know that my interest in PRECIS is such that I have recently completed a survey of indexers' reactions to the system, which involved interviewing many practitioners in Britain as well as a few Canadian users. I am hoping to follow it up with a survey of user reactions.—*K. G. B. Bakewell, Principal Lecturer, Department of Library and Information Studies, Liverpool Polytechnic.*

Response

To the Editor:

K. G. B. Bakewell rather consistently identifies by name in the text either the founder or the individual most responsible for the development of various major systems chosen for inclusion in his *Classification and Indexing Practice*. To consider only the names Bakewell mentions in his letter, among various possible examples, textual statements in his book include the following: "In 1960 E. J. Coates published the most significant book to date on subject cataloguing. Two years later he put some of his ideas into practice when he became the first editor of *British Technology Index*" (p. 152). "Henry Evelyn Bliss spent almost half a century perfecting his Bibliographic Classification" (p.76). "A true pioneer in the field, Dewey . . . " (p.13). "In British Libraries chain indexing remains a popular method of facilitating retrieval via a classified catalogue. Introduced by Ranganathan as an integral part of his Colon Classification and popularized by BNB between 1950 and 1970 . . . " (p.144).

It was against this background that I regarded it as appropriate to mention briefly Bakewell's complete omission, in a work that I had as a whole reviewed favorably, of Derek Austin's name from his textual discussion of PRECIS. I shall not speculate as to why Bakewell regarded it as relevant to mention a work that he had written on indexers' reactions to PRECIS and his projected survey of user reactions in a letter defending his complete omission of Derek Austin's name from his textual discussion of PRECIS.

The sentence in my review had the quite modest purpose of suggesting for the consideration of the author what seemed an unfortunate oversight, and one that might be readily remedied in any later edition of a work identified in the preface as intended for the use, among others, of students, nothing so grand as the establishment of a society. I do, however, agree with another reviewer who recently wrote in the pages of this journal (*C&RL*, Nov. 1977, p.550) that "PRECIS, . . . developed by Derek Austin and his associates at the British National Bibliography, is probably the most impor-

tant innovation in indexing since coordinate indexing was developed . . . "; and if the admirers of Derek Austin should ever gather, I would not be embarrassed to assemble with them.—*Elizabeth Snapp, Instructor in Library Science and Assistant to the Dean of the Graduate School, Texas Woman's University, Denton.*

Slide/Tape vs. Library Tour

To the Editor:

The Baldwin-Rudolph article entitled "The Comparative Effectiveness of a Slide/Tape Show and a Library Tour" (*C&RL*, Jan. 1979, p.31–35) indicates some discrepancy between their study and a similar one conducted by Frank F. Kuo. Several things could account for those discrepancies. An effective message can be garbled by a defective use of its medium, and conversely an ineffective message will remain ineffective whatever the medium. I do not know what comparisons might be made between the tape/slide presentations used in the two studies regarding quality and effectiveness. Nor do I know what comparisons might be made between the effectiveness of the tour leaders used in each one. A carefully controlled study using a wide sampling, perhaps in several libraries, giving careful attention to the effective use of the respective media would be very interesting.

Whatever accounts for the discrepancies between the Baldwin-Rudolph and the Kuo studies, however, one thing is readily apparent. The studies show that the slide/tape presentation is either (*a*) more effective than a tour or (*b*) nearly as effective as a tour. This being the case, and with the pressures on staff time being what they are in most libraries, and with all of us being obligated in these times to realize all possible savings in staff time and/or funds, it would seem that both studies indicate sufficient effectiveness for slide/tape to make it a desirable and viable alternative to the library tour. The great advantage of the slide/tape (or other "automated" presentation) is in fact that it reduces staff loads significantly. If that reduction can be effected with no greater loss in learning effectiveness than that shown in the Baldwin-Rudolph study, it would appear to be a most desirable course to follow. If, on the other hand, the Kuo study is the more accurate, the argument for adopting some such presentation becomes even stronger.—*John M. Robson, Director of Library Services, Southwest State University, Marshall, Minnesota.*