

Guest Editorial

The Spirit of Networking: Beyond Information Resources

In some sense, networking is everywhere. It is a term which is used in a number of contexts to mean different things. As a result, the impact and import of its essential meaning are often missed in our social and professional discourse. In the space allowed I would like to focus on that essential meaning as it is manifested in several distinct areas of professional concern.

Today the most frequent context for the use of networking is in relation to the electronic connections that allow us to contact people and access information resources around the world. In the discourse I sense a certain boastfulness about the scope of the network and its ability to deliver unimaginable information resources. Often in those discussions the extensiveness of a Gopher's reach is held up as a major accomplishment, for example.

But are we networked with our customers? In other words, are we listening to our patron's wishes? When I talk to faculty and students they tell me they are drowning in information resources. What is needed is not *more* access but *better* access. Librarians need to find ways to help customers sift through the mountains of information.

In response to these patron needs there is a strong current of professional thinking within the information community that believes software design, database management techniques, and artificial intelligence will eventually solve these problems. I hear, for example, prognostications of custom-designed abstracting and altering services. I also see new indexing, abstracting, and alerting services being

created to address some of the problems of information overload. However, my sense is that these efforts contribute to the problem. New layers of access tools and new interfaces, while solving some access difficulties, add further confusion to an already bewildering amount of information and modes of access.

The trends I see in the electronic network world echo the approaches used in the world of print information: gather and organize as much information as possible and develop new access tools to help the patron locate information. I have no sense that these techniques will be any more effective in the electronic networking field than they are in the realm of print material.

It is my conviction that what our customers, both students and faculty, need in addition to better tools, is a better understanding of the organization of information and the fundamental techniques for accessing information. An important part of library service should be instruction in the use of information resources and access tools. The new electronic resources make such training even more critical and increase the complexity of the needed instruction.

Furthermore, this instruction, especially in the use of electronic resources, is not exclusively the responsibility of librarians. Because of the electronic changes, other information professionals, such as those in computer centers, must be involved. It is time for classroom faculty, librarians, and other information professionals to build on the work that each group has contributed separately—rarely in cooperation—to develop

a curriculum of information accessing skills that the educated of this country can use effectively. This curriculum must become an integral part of educational programs at all levels from elementary school through the doctorate and beyond. To achieve this response in an effective manner will require a heretofore unrealized effort towards cooperation among information professionals and classroom faculty at all levels of education.

While electronic networks become omnipresent in our professional lives and the information retrieval activities of all, there is another revolution occurring in our academic and research institutions; libraries are becoming enriched by diversity. More men are joining what remains a largely female profession, but salary discrepancies between the genders continue and women are less likely to be represented in upper management positions. There are more Afro-Americans, Hispanics and other minorities in the profession, but they are still underrepresented. These social conditions reflect realities in the larger society, which makes the solutions all the more difficult, but these facts do not excuse the present situation within the profession. We, as librarians, face the significant challenge of forming coalitions with other groups in order to see that our library institutions provide equitable employment opportunities for all and meet the information needs of the diverse populations we serve.

Our roles as professional academic and research librarians have been discussed many times. But rarely do I see much discussion of the academic and research librarians as independent individuals who have responsibilities for addressing these issues. What is, or will be, your role in improving employment equity for library staff? What are academic and research librarians doing to see that state legislatures, local school districts, and government units adequately address the needs of school and public libraries? With whom will you connect to solve these problems in our institutions and in our society?

The essential ingredient of the definition of networking that underlies all of the issues I have addressed above is the interconnectedness that ties us individually and as a profession to other persons and groups in our society. It is a truism to say that our welfare and our success in achieving the goals outlined above are directly related to our ability to connect with others. Yet far too often we act as though we can independently achieve our goals in spite of or over the objections of others. While most of us understand networking as "connecting," we must take it one step further. We must recognize the interdependent relationships that are involved. The failure to acknowledge that interdependence is a fundamental weakness in developing strategies to achieve our goals.

Perhaps one example from my experiences as a bibliographic instruction librarian will illustrate the point. I can develop a program to teach students the use of library resources and connect with faculty to tell them about the content of those resources. I can stress how valuable it is for students to learn to use the library. However, no matter how much publicity I create and how good the program might be, it will not be successful unless the instruction is integrated (i.e., interconnected) with course assignments that require library use to achieve the goals of the course. Unless the instruction program recognizes the dependence of our instructional efforts on the context of course assignments and the motivation and direction that context creates, our program is not successful. The same is true with all other aspects of our efforts. Gaining equity for women employees and ethnic minorities, serving the diversity of our customers, improving school and public libraries, and gaining political and societal support for libraries all involve a fundamental commitment to acknowledging and honoring the interrelatedness of our existence by building relationships with others. It is only through those relationships that we will truly achieve our professional goals.

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