

BOOK REVIEWS

Proceedings of the Conference on Interlibrary Communications and Information Networks, edited by Joseph Becker, sponsored by the American Library Association and the U.S. Office of Education, Bureau of Libraries and Educational Technology held at Airlie House, Warrenton, Virginia, September 28, 1970-October 2, 1970. Chicago: American Library Association, 1971. 347p

To see how rapidly the field of library networking and communications has moved in recent times, one need only try to review a conference on the subject some years after it was held. What was fresh, imaginative, innovative, or blue-sky has become accepted or gone beyond; errors in thinking or bad guesses as to the future have been shown up; and the blue sky has been divided into lower stratospheres and outer space for ease of working. Under these circumstances one can only review such proceedings as history.

The assumptions on which the conference was based were the traditional ones of librarians and information scientists—that access to information should be the right of anyone without regard to geographical or economic position, and that pooling of resources (here by networking operations) is one of the best ways to reach that goal. Since 1970 both of these assumptions have been questioned, but at the time of the conference there were no opposing voices.

The final conclusions, of course, were based on these assumptions. National systems were recommended, both governmental and private, with the establishment of a public corporation (such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting) as the central stimulator, coordinator, and regulator, to be served by input from a large number of groups. Funding, the attendees decided, should be pluralistic, from public, private, and foundation sources (are there any others?), but with the federal government bearing the largest burden of support. Since it is deemed desirable to give the widest chance for all individuals to use these networks, it was recommended that fee-for-service prices should be kept low through subventions of the telecommunications costs by libraries and information centers. And since new techniques and methods need to be learned, both education and research in the field must be strengthened and enlarged.

Since the basic components of networks of libraries and information centers was conceived as being:

1. Bibliographic access to media
2. Mediation of user request to information

3. Delivery of media to users

4. Education

traditional questions of bibliographic description, the most useful form of public services (including such things as interviewing requestors, seeking information on the existence of answers, locating the answers physically, providing them, evaluating them and obtaining feedback), as well as the best ways to set up networks were discussed at length. Moreover, since new technologies have sometimes been touted as the answer to many of these problems, a whole section on network technology was included. Such subjects as telecommunications, cable television, and computers were examined; here most of the recommendations still remain to be carried out.

The organization proposed for these networks again plowed old ground. The conferees felt that one should use the tremendous national and disciplinary resources already established (the Library of Congress, the National Library of Medicine, the National Agricultural Library, Chemical Abstracts, etc.); there should be a coordinating body to minimize duplication of effort and assure across-the-board coverage; the systems must be sold to legislators if public money is to be provided; and more research on the best networking operations is necessary.

Above all in almost every section of the report and in the Preface the then-new National Commission on Libraries and Information Science was referred to as the great savior. Together with requests for public money, it might be said, this was the thread binding all sections of the conference together.

Was this conference necessary? Could it have brought forth something more useful than the gentle spoof in Irwin Pizer's poem "Hiawatha's Network?" It was undoubtedly very inspiring for those at the conference—all 100 of them—who probably learned more over the cocktail glass and dinner plate than at the formal sessions, and who learned as they grappled with the difficulties of consensus-making. But need the proceedings have been published? Is everything ever said at a meeting always worth preserving? How about the concept of ephemera rather than total recall? Would not a short summary of the recommendations have sufficed?

Estelle Brodman