# Letters

To the Editor:

In the appropriate words of a current Dustin Hoffman flick, "Who Is John Corbin, And Why Is He Saying Those Terrible Things About Ellsworth Mason?," Corbin (*CRL* 32:316, July 1971) protests too much. He would present himself as a knight in technological armor and Mason as a throwback to the date-due stamp stone age, but the printout just doesn't read that way. The "diatribe-harangue" is found in Corbin's letter, not in Mason's recent articles on computer implementation failures in libraries (*CRL* 32:183–96, May 1971; *Library Journal* 96:1671–76, 15 May 1971). The emperor still wears no clothes. Saying that Mason "damns man himself" is really too much (speak for yourself, John). I really think mankind is faced with enough problems without worrying about the ultimate fate of the 360s and 914s in libraries (IBM, not Dewey). In Corbin's own words, "Any muddle, mess or mischief caused by the machine is a reflection and magnification of the man controlling it." Obviously Corbin felt reflected upon, and certainly his remarks were overly magnified by printing them in *CRL*.

Corbin implies that Mason's study was too limited. I had the impression that he was viewing the cream of the crop, or at least a representative sample from which conclusions could be drawn. True, Mason may have raked up a lot of muck, but only because it was knee-deep around him. And who, besides Corbin, will seriously question Mason's background and serious intent in approaching the Altar of Mechanistic Revelations? The only thing one "knows immediately" from Corbin's letter is that the "closed mind" belongs to him, not Mason, unless you consider the growing number of decision-makers in the library world who, on the basis of "limited knowledge and information," sell out to the pressures to conform to the Great Machine Con Game (cost analyses, anyone?).

Mason makes no pretense to having a "perfect library"; the Mason letter preceding Corbin's states, "Hofstra can match UBC's circulation rise, with a manual system that is not working to our satisfaction." If Corbin is so dedicated in his attempts to "cope with some of the technological problems" facing libraries, let him begin by getting his facts straight and avoid attacking people rather than issues.

The following lines on contemporary poetry (*Time* 98:68, 12 July 1971) may also be applied to the mechanical "mess" brought about by advocates of computerized libraries at any cost:

. . . its fanciers all too often react like ornithologists examining a duck. The thing walks like a duck, its primaries are all in place, and its admirers—makers of ducks in their turn—discourse appreciatively on the exquisite joinery of wing and socket, the ingenious solution to the problem of melding emphatic beak with awkward neck. What nobody seems to notice—or if they do, are too polite to remark—is that the goddam bird does not fly.

Well, if I read Mason correctly, he is telling us to shoot the bird, or at least restructure it. Or we could continue to duck the issue. He would not have us bow down before the "Golden Calf" of the computer; those so quick to kneel at the altar should expect to soil their knees from the excessive bull strewn about it. Corbin's letter is a prime example of what happens to those with "computer-right-or-wrong" mentalities; in the words of Mason, out fly their brains.

*Ron Carver*
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To the Editor:

This summer at the University of Buffalo's School of Information and Library Studies, I am beginning work toward an MLS. There is much concern here about the librarian's image and the need for her or him to develop some political sophistication and professional self-awareness. How pleasing it is therefore to read Ellsworth Mason's biting and witty article, "The Great Gas Bubble Prick't or, Computers Revealed . . ." in the May issue of *CRL*.

The specifics of whether or not Mason is making valid criticisms of the computer are something that will become clearer only as the future arrives. What is gratifying— and here I speak as a historian—is that the very publication of the article indicates that librarianship is a profession worth identifying with. Governments, and indeed civilizations, rise and fall much to the degree that critical awareness comes either from within or from without the group in question. The Pentagon papers indicate the self-deception of the administrations of recent presidents, and the most self-deluding of the chief executives have fallen the hardest.

Mason has clearly raised the ire of many librarians. He is an excellent writer and perhaps he is pushing his own image, i.e., attempting a bit of self-advertisement. Nonetheless, in presenting a strong case against computers and in stirring up controversy, he is promoting at least one of two things. Librarians may show their unworthiness for existence by avoiding real issues through unjust counteroffensives or they may face up to some hard issues by meeting Mason half-way and reevaluating their own actions and ideals.

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To the Editor:

Corbin's contention, in defense of the computer (*CRL* 32:316, July 1971) that man being fallible, the machine must be fallible, supports rather than refutes Mason's argument against unqualified acceptance of the computer for library use. Are we to spend the huge sums involved in setting up computer programs only to codify and perpetuate the results of man's intellectual limitations? Most of us have been laboring under the misconception that the enormous cost is justified because the systems will eventually eliminate human error. Now we are told that we need perfect people to insure that we will have perfect machines.

Technological problems are not the only ones facing libraries today. Cost problems are becoming far more serious, and not even the most ardent advocates of automation can claim that computers will reduce an organization's expenses, at least not for many years to come.

Also, isn't Corbin overreacting when he refers to the distinguished Mason's article as a "cutesy diatribe-harangue"? Somehow it seems he protests too much.

*(Mrs.) Constance M. Walker*
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To the Editor:

Messrs. Massman and Olson seem to be out of touch with today's world. They end their article on centralized book selection (*CRL* 32:271–79, July 1971) with the question, "Why not?" This is why not.

Automation, super-efficiency, mass conformity, robot-like jobs are not necessarily desirable. Their idea smacks of cold, lifeless authoritarianism: read exactly 7½ books a day, to the subject specialists; take it and like it, to the participating libraries. Reputed causes of unrest on campus are impersonality and authoritarianism. Messrs. Massman and Olson's plan would augment this.

Almost everyone will agree that collections are uneven and individual, but then, so are students and other people. This is not automatically an evil. If a particular book is outstanding in its field, it will be picked up sometime in some journal and get into some library. Great ideas and discoveries often occur almost simultaneously at different places to different people. Witness the race to discover DNA and to do the first human heart transplant, to name just two such events. Don't worry, they

won't be lost to the world.

The local faculty and librarians need to keep up with all current materials anyway, and each does it according to his interest and sense of responsibility about it. Centralized book selection would not eliminate this, but only frustrate their opinions.

Let's bear in mind Delbruck's principle of limited sloppiness, "You should be sloppy enough so that the unexpected happens, yet not so sloppy that you cannot figure out what happens after it has happened." (Eiduson, *B.T. Scientists, Their Psychological World,* Basic Books, 1962, p.126)

Automation is great for eliminating extremely dull, monotonous jobs, but let's keep individual judgment, personal responsibility, and just plain humanity in book selection.

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To the Editor:

I read rather with a sense of despair V. F. Massman and D. R. Olson's article "Book Selection: A National Plan For Small Academic Libraries"; here is an instance where two university librarians have recognized and acutely analyzed a central problem in the administration of smaller college libraries and then have proceeded logically to a totally fallacious solution. Possibly discussion of the assumptions underlying their proposal cannot be entirely in the spirit of dialog so entrenched in the professional literature now is an approach which appears to see the answer to all library problems in increased uniformity of procedures, centralization, mechanization, cost-analysis, specialized expertise, etc.

To be sure the problem of limited available time from qualified personnel and the chaotic coverage by the reviewing media of increasingly voluminous subject literatures present formidable obstacles to the organization of effective selection programs in the smaller libraries. But the answer is, in fact, not the surrender of responsibility but more and better qualified personnel who have broad subject capabilities and who see that they must make a sensitive

and systematic understanding of their clientele's literature requirements their business. Also, further improvements in the overall structure of the reviewing literature could be tremendously helpful. Say, for example, a journal complementary to *CHOICE* which would utilize volunteer subject specialists to survey both the scholarly and general reviewing media for titles of relevance to undergraduate collections, possibly with excerpts from the original reviews and a classification-rating scheme such as that used by *Science Books.*

In any case the authors seem to me to overestimate the relative importance in an undergraduate situation of an ultimate extension in the survey of reviewing literature as opposed to carefully planned and intelligent intension—the evaluation of relatively fewer titles by qualified local personnel. The fact is that the feverish pursuit of the total basic, core, balanced collection is pretty much of an illusion. There are not annually published 5,000 or 6,000 titles which are indispensable to a small college collection. A substantial proportion of these titles would be, in terms of any reasonable formulation of potential demand, of marginal or no value to any given undergraduate collection, whatever their intrinsic value. Neither can any but the smallest library afford to chase after the "balanced" collection to the extent of neglecting the development of current and retrospective strength along the differential lines of locally important ideas, themes, and events.

It is probable that the cost of the percentage of the 5,000 titles which would be effectively useless to any smaller college library would approximate the $16,000 the authors say would be saved by their scheme, not to mention the long-term costs of storage and maintenance of these titles and their supporting records. Anyway, one wonders who wants to aim at acquiring the same 50,000 titles over the next decade as everyone else?

Such blanket "selection" might be thought useful in at least two situations: the library is too poor to—or does not want to —implement even a minimally adequate selection program; or it is sufficiently affluent that it can afford to supplement current core-acquisition with very extensive supple-

mentary buying. In the first case, the library would seem to get what it deserved; in the second, it would, in many cases, be engaged in a relatively wasteful use of resources and, with larger book funds, would be duplicating the coverage of more comprehensive blanket order buying.

Meanwhile the librarian, or chief administrator, in such a situation may dabble in reference work, preside over the unpacking of the books, or perhaps just drop out of sight with his cost studies, slide rule, flow charts, etc. I would suggest that the centralization of what remains of substantive professional library work be carefully distinguished from supporting technical processes which should be rationalized and centralized and that book selection, properly understood, must remain at the local level.

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To the Editor:

The article by McGrath (*CRL*, July 1971) is interesting and I would like to add my experiences in measuring in-library use. The figures in the McGrath study showing in-house use are low for some reason or another. Very likely correlating the number of books found on tables with the number of books taken out is not going to give us the whole picture. There is, I suspect, a great many books and journals looked at in the stacks and reshelved by the user.

My reason for doubting low figures of in-library use are based on two surveys. Within one done in 1969 it was stated by the sample of 458 that they used 1,044 books and journals on-site while only borrowing 200 books.[1] If these figures are accurate, it appears that for every book charged out five books are used inside the library.

A second survey done in 1971 with a sample of 551 showed that the users consulted 3,085 books and journals in the library and borrowed out of the library 417 items.[2] This would then show for every book borrowed seven to eight items are used in the library.

These figures are of particular interest if thought of in the context of limiting library circulation policies. It looks like the majority of book and journal use occurs inside the library and perhaps by allowing books to leave the library this serves as a frustration to in-house users. Obviously some books need to be borrowed, but nevertheless, the fact of such high in-house usage may be a guidepost for future trends in circulation policies. With photocopiers increasingly involved in book and journal usage, the noncirculating academic library could be a possibility. With this in mind, seating for large numbers of students is a necessity in new buildings.

The nature of teaching and studying also is indicated by these studies. For a student to "use" seven books to every one taken out shows either a significant intellectual facility on the students part or perhaps a not very difficult or demanding assignment.

Needless to say, just what is "use" has yet to be answered. Is it a matter of the time spent over a book, or is it the volume of notes taken, or is it "use" if answers are found? Does use mean going beyond the title page or the table of contents? It would probably be interesting but exasperating to try to define library use.

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[1] John Lubans, Jr., "Users and Uses of the Rensselaer Library," *IATUL Proceedings* 4:49-57 (Dec. 1969).

[2] "Users and Uses of Norlin Library—Preliminary Report," 4 May 1971, 2 pages and tables (Boulder, Colo.: University of Colorado Libraries, 1971).