

## Guest Editorial

# The Age of Information, the Age of Foolishness



When Don Riggs offered me the opportunity to write a guest editorial for *College & Research Libraries*, I began to reflect on the contrasts and paradoxes of the academic library contemporary scene. I briefly considered a series of “good news, bad news” vignettes or playing on the theme of my ACRL presidency, “Celebrating Our Successes, Confronting Our Challenges.” For a fleeting moment, I shamelessly considered borrowing the overused first line of *The Tale of Two Cities*. However, the second line is much more appropriate to our times (“It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness”). Far be it from me to attempt to improve on Dickens, but the reader might more readily agree that this is the age of “information” rather than “wisdom” (we librarians like to think we know the difference between the two). As for the age of “foolishness,” well, that is the point I want to make in this editorial.

In this age of information, librarians have done well in responding to the perhaps apocryphal faculty member who blurted out with exasperation, “I want what I want, when I want it, and where I want it! What is so difficult about doing that?” This faculty member now has access to a plethora of information right on his or her desktop, and the amount is growing daily. In fact, this faculty member, or at least some of his or her students, seems to assume at times that “Everything is now available on the Web and for free!” Welcome to the Age of Foolishness!

Access to electronic information is now so ubiquitous in higher education that this past summer an officer of a regional accreditation association sent a letter to academic library directors in his region

posing this question: Is a library an absolute prerequisite for a degree-granting institution of higher education, or is it, instead, an indicator of some increasing level of quality above an accepted minimum? I know this individual believes institutions of higher education need physical libraries and the question is being forced from elsewhere. Nevertheless, to my dismay, someone is asking what a few short years ago would have been an unthinkable question. Who might that be? Well, let me guess! Could it be the transregional virtual institutions? By now, most of us are familiar with those institutions that operate in several accrediting regions but maintain a physical plant only at their headquarters. Perhaps there is a genuine societal need for these institutions and some are sincerely trying to meet it. However, others are all too willing to make a profit over the confusion between becoming credentialed and becoming educated.

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It is indeed the Age of Foolishness!

Librarians have done well in other areas that have rewarded them with further confirmation that this is the Age of Foolishness. Ten years ago, I interviewed about forty chief academic officers in small colleges. Although these deans and provosts generally took a resource view of the library without expressing much support for, or under-

standing of, the library's educational role, they did express respect for the managerial capability of the library director and the service orientation of librarians. Largely, they expressed satisfaction with the library because it did not present any problems that threatened their jobs. We probably should treat this as good news and take some comfort wherever we can find it.

How are we rewarded? By more work and a diffusion of our leadership! In looking around for ways to solve the problems of the computer center, deans and presidents have noticed that the library is reasonably well managed and has a service orientation—and that the library also deals with digital information. As a result, they often have concluded, "Let's have the library director do it!" Using this logic, according to one unnamed librarian turned CIO with whom I recently had a conversation, "The library director should be in charge of the football scoreboard." Nevertheless, there need not be anything inherently wrong with putting the library director in charge of the computer center, or vice versa. In some situations, this works quite well—often to the benefit of the library. The library director sometimes assumes a seat on the institution's senior administrative cabinet and can speak for the library at a level not previously available. Better coordination and enhanced cooperation between these two units can sometimes result.

The element of foolishness enters into the equation when an institution merges the two units with visions of saving money and staff or, as one administrator cautiously stated it, "to realize some economies of scale." I could be missing something, but it is not readily obvious how combining a "black hole" with a "bottomless pit" will save money. Have we not yet learned that "computers" and "saving money" do not belong in the same sentence? Maybe we should program our grammar checkers to catch any evidence of such illogical thinking before it does more serious damage.

In addition, taking capable leadership

out of the library without replacing it may only result in two poorly led units. Just because a good library director may make the task look effortless from a distance, it does not mean directing a library is not without considerable effort. The poet Archibald MacLeish observed that Franklin Roosevelt, in persuading MacLeish to accept the position of librarian of Congress, gave him the impression that it could be run while shaving in the morning. MacLeish found it

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took a bit longer than that—as does running any library.

My conversations with library directors turned CIOs within a few minutes inevitably turn to the steep learning curve, the long hours, and the responsibilities they regretfully left behind in the library. I am not suggesting that, at least in the short term, they all regret their new challenges. But I am convinced that successful mergers largely occur because of talented, hardworking individuals who give 120 percent of their time and effort. They define by example the quip of the contemporary workplace that "exempt" employee means "exempt from having a life." It remains to be seen if these individuals can sustain the effort over the long term.

In addition, the unanswered question is, Can those remaining in the library without additional staff continue its pattern of service and good management? It is not as if there is nothing more for the library to accomplish; how many academic libraries are truly integrated into the curriculum? In our search for solutions to institutional problems, we should not overlook the need to have good people in the library to face our growing challenges.

In this age of information, we also are facing the challenge of not only retaining

capable librarians but also recruiting talented individuals into the profession. In fact, it appears we are having difficulty even recruiting people to teach the next generation of librarians. Although the value of those who can navigate the maze of information is sometimes lost in higher education, it is not lost on other, more lucrative, sectors of the economy. In agricultural parlance, "Someone is eating our seed corn!" Nevertheless, as if they did not provide sufficient impediment by removing capable leaders from the library or overburdening them, some administrators in higher education have taken actions that largely serve to demoralize those who remain in the library. Within the past few months, I have had several communications with academic library directors whose presidents or deans seek to remove or reduce elements of faculty status for the librarians. For whatever modest gains

(which are lost on me) that might accrue to an institution by removing or reducing opportunities for librarians to become involved in faculty governance (committee service) and to enhance their professional development (sabbaticals, access to research funds, etc.), the resulting demoralization of the librarians makes the actions appear ... well, you know ... foolish.

As the information grows, so apparently does the foolishness. Therefore, I propose, Charles Dickens notwithstanding, that we now live in an age with a dual name: The Age of Information, the Age of Foolishness. Academic librarians have many opportunities in this information age, but we also have many substantial challenges in this age of foolishness, some of which threaten the continuance of our profession. If we are not vigilant, we may not be the best generation of librarians, but the last.

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#### NOTES

1. Larry Hardesty, "The Bottomless Pit Revisited," *College & Research Libraries* 52 (May 1991): 219-29.

2. The most recent ACRL "Environmental Scan" reports that only thirty candidates submitted their vitas for the seventy-five jobs posted at the 1999 ALISE Conference placement service.