

Letters

Editor's Note: *Over eighty letters were received in response to the March editorial entitled "Can Academic Librarians Afford College & Research Libraries?" The sentiments of those who responded were ones of disbelief, shock, and anger. The respondents urged that the ACRL publications program be left intact. As several pointed out, the publications remain one of the few tangible benefits of ACRL to many members. Because of the present restriction on journal pages, we are publishing only a selection of the letters. The sentiments expressed in them are typical of those expressed by others. It was indeed gratifying that so many people took the time and trouble to respond.*

To the Editor:

Just a note in answer to your editorial in the May issue of *CRL*. May I state, honestly and frankly, that *CRL* is the *only* journal in the library field that has almost consistently been worth not only reading, but keeping. I frankly discard *American Libraries*, *Library Journal*, and *WLJ* after a year, but *CRL* I keep for five.

Were *CRL* no longer available as part of my ALA dues (maybe I should deduct \$5.00 and send it directly to *CRL*), I doubt if what ALA gives me would any longer be worth it.

Robert S. Taylor
Director of the Library Center
Hampshire College
Amherst, Massachusetts

To the Editor:

Please consider this letter in strong support of your editorial "Can Academic Librarians Afford College & Research Libraries?" My membership in ALA and particularly in the section of ACRL is enhanced exceedingly by this publication. I consider it the most valuable professional publication which I receive.

I sympathize with ALA's effort to reduce

operating costs and keep membership dues from escalating. However, this is not the direction to go in cutting expenses. Personally, I would question joining ALA those years that I am unable to attend the convention if *CRL* ceases publication. This is a strong statement and it is not meant to mean that other activities of ALA are unimportant. It means that academic librarians value *CRL*. I would be extremely unhappy if it ceased publication.

Mrs. Ronald C. Turner
Acting Head Librarian
Whitworth College
Spokane, Washington

To the Editor:

As a recent member of the library profession, I am disturbed to hear that ALA is considering terminating *CRL* and *CRL News*—two journals I consider very worthwhile—in favor of incorporating them into who knows what.

I had to save my pennies to join ALA this year, and I did so only so I could support such publications as yours. If all I receive for my money is some chaotic publication such as *American Libraries*, I will not be a member next year.

John Cosgriff
Chemistry-Biology Librarian
California Institute of Technology
Pasadena

To the Editor:

I was appalled to read that the ALA is considering the abolition of *CRL*. The only consolation I have found in paying the absurdly high ALA dues has been the existence of *CRL*. It is by far and away the most important publication for the academic librarian.

The present "budget stringencies" of ALA are clearly self-generated. It is probably true that all nonprofit organizations of any size and age (including libraries) tend to be run to serve the interests of manage-

ment. This is true to the point of being bizarre in the ALA. There always seems to be money for an increasingly costly secretariat, but never enough for programs of demonstrated utility to the membership. It reminds one of the many poverty programs which have greatly enriched the social science apparatus but have done little indeed for the poor.

I suspect that the vast majority of academic librarians feel as I do and will join in protesting this latest assault on the membership.

Robert F. Munn
Director of Libraries
West Virginia University
Morgantown

To the Editor:

I am astonished and horrified by the COPES and ALA Publishing Board even contemplating the abolition of divisional newsletters. Better to abolish *American Libraries!* The primary reason I belong to ALA is to receive *CRL* and *RQ*. A drain on the ALA—what utter nonsense. I think you make it clear that we are supporting the ALA and not vice versa and I hope that many other angry librarians write you to offer their support and to make it clear to the ALA that it will receive support from its membership only so long as it continues to *serve* its divisions because it is the divisions which provide the membership with the most directly relevant and useful services and publications. The ALA is obviously suffering from a rash of bureaucracy and the appropriate remedial action should be taken.

(Mrs.) Elizabeth Silvester
Head, Reference Department
McGill University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

To the Editor:

Every year when I get my renewal notice from the American Library Association, I seriously debate the desirability of paying my dues for the tripe I receive in my issues of *American Libraries*. Upon reflecting for a few moments, I have always decided that I must pay up again because I want to support the College and Research Library section. As far as I am concerned, *CRL* is the

only publication from ALA with very much relevance to college librarianship.

I would be in favor of college, university, and research library people organizing an association outside the scope of ALA rather than submit to assimilation of our journal into some other publication.

I certainly would not hesitate to drop my membership in ALA should we lose our only effective voice.

Shannon J. Henderson
Associate Librarian
Arkansas Polytechnic College
Russellville

To the Editor:

I must admit I'm always surprised at my own naiveté about the way in which organizations are run. Your editorial in the March *CRL* astounds me. I have been told many times that the publications of the American Library Association are very expensive to support and are, probably, the major item which continually increases our dues. However, I have always assumed that this meant the publications are supported in addition to the dollar amount indicated on the membership form each year. If you aren't getting my \$5.00 for *CRL*, why the hell not?

I am, in general, dissatisfied enough with the Association to consider getting out. Cancellation of *CRL* and other Association publications would probably be the straw that breaks this camel's back. If it does happen, I suggest that you use your present position to try to establish *CRL* as an independent publication either self-supporting or supported with a base of funds from research libraries and then maintain it as self-supporting after it is underway.

Let me know what, if anything, I can do.

W. David Laird, Jr.
Associate Director for
Technical Services
University of Utah
Salt Lake City

To the Editor:

Your recent article in *CRL* astounded us at Knox College. It makes one lose faith in our professional organization, ALA, to learn that the money supposedly allocated to our journal is not really going there.

The most important benefit which I re-

ceive from my ALA membership at the present time is the divisional publications. I would seriously consider dropping my membership if these journals were consolidated, especially if they follow the format of *American Libraries*. I have ceased reading that journal; it reminds me of *Colliers* when it "updated" its format shortly before it became defunct. I sincerely hope we can continue publishing *CRL*.

Louise A. Jencks
Cataloger
Knox College Library
Galesburg, Illinois

To the Editor:

Manifold compliments on your editorial in the March issue of *CRL*! It is beautifully written and the point well made.

As a member of ACRL, I am responding to your invitation for comment. It would be doing the library profession a great disservice to do away with *CRL*. Those of us in academic libraries rely on *CRL*, *LRTS*, and *JOLA* for substantive information concerning current issues, projects, and research in our field. *American Libraries*, while interesting and newsy, is far from being the important resource tool that the divisional journals are.

Is it possible, if your editorial arouses enough response, that ALA might restructure the budgeting of publications in order to allow self-support? If this does not happen and divisional publications are abolished, doesn't it seem reasonable to you that dues should be reduced by five dollars?

Susan K. Martin
Systems Librarian
Harvard College Library
Cambridge, Massachusetts

To the Editor:

Keep *CRL* and *CRL News*. As a librarian, I rely on them heavily to keep abreast of contemporary developments in academic librarianship.

Your editorial implies that ACRL is subsidizing ALA with \$47,000. I'm in favor of ACRL having the total \$60,000. That is what I understood was happening to the \$5.00 designated in my membership for ACRL.

Consolidation of journals can be cost-effective, but not less costly, if the proper coverage is continued. Otherwise, someone will be neglected.

Bernard C. Rink
Librarian
Northwestern Michigan College
Traverse City

To the Editor:

In reply to your editorial in the March issue of *CRL* I would like to express my hope that *CRL* continue as a divisional journal. As director of a college library I find it extremely worthwhile, which is more than I can honestly say for *American Libraries*. What sort of interdivisional publication could so well meet our needs—a combination of *LRTS* and *CRL*? I'd prefer to get only *CRL* and not *American Libraries* if I had the choice.

Ann M. Carper
Director of the Library
Elizabethtown College
Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania

To the Editor:

About a year ago I wrote someone in reply to a request for an expression of opinion to the effect that I felt that ALA had long since failed the academic library and that I would like to see ACRL become a separate organization with its own dues and its own convention. I have been a member of ALA since 1937 but your editorial convinces me that I should find some other organization until I can be a member of ACRL without paying these exorbitant dues to ALA.

I note that ACRL provides about one-third of ALA's membership and I would guess a probably greater percentage of its dues and, in my judgment anyway, gets little in return.

O. M. Hovde
Librarian
Luther College
Decorah, Iowa

To the Editor:

This letter is to express my undivided support for the continuation of *CRL* and *CRL News*.

It is absurd that COPES and the Pub-

lishing Board should consider the abolition of divisional publications when they are money makers and also do a tremendous job serving the academic interests.

CRL is a fine publication that has reached new peaks under your able leadership. You should be commended for a job consistently well done.

Peter Spyers-Duran
 Director of Libraries
 Florida Atlantic University
 Boca Raton

To the Editor:

Your editorial in the March issue of *CRL* emphasized the unfairness of the ALA publishing board in connection with the publishing of *CRL*.

I feel that *CRL* and *CRL News* both should continue to be published. Academic librarians need this forum, especially in view of the fact that most of the ALA publications do not worry about our professional problems and at the ALA meetings academic librarians and librarians are rarely mentioned.

I hope that sooner or later the unhealthy situation [concerning reorganization plans of the Planning Committee and the Board of Directors] that has developed will be changed, and that academic librarians will have an autonomous or independent organization which will properly represent them.

Dr. S. Szilassy
 Director of the Library
 University of Tampa
 Tampa, Florida

To the Editor:

Your editorial in the March 1971 *CRL* about the possible demise of *CRL* is shocking! Of all library literature it is the one journal I refer to more than any other when I am looking for facts or experience to back up administrative decisions. It is an indispensable vehicle for communication among academic libraries, and I for one protest loudly even at the thought of its not being continued by ALA.

No better illustration of the value of *CRL* is the latest (March 1971) issue. Four of the five articles are so cogent to the problems that are on my desk right now. I hope, for goodness sakes (and for the

sake of academic librarianship), that you get an overwhelming response to your editorial. Whereas I have been somewhat neutral on the prospect of ACRL going its own independent way, the proposal to stop publishing *CRL* would place me solidly in the camp of independence. We simply must keep our journal going!

Ralph H. Hopp
 University Librarian
 University of Minnesota
 Wilson Library, Minneapolis

HAYES AND MASON ON AUTOMATION . . .

August 29, 1967

Dr. Robert M. Hayes, Director
 Institute of Library Research
 University of California
 Los Angeles, California

Dear Bob:

I am much interested in your criteria of evaluating university collections and your numerical application of it to our campus statistics. There are some things about the criteria that I do not completely understand.

1. In your list of Nominal Values the fourth from the bottom indicates "Res. Facility." Does this mean *Research Facility*, and if so, what constitutes a research facility?

2. You state that the criteria are additive, not duplicative, and I am not quite sure what you mean by these two terms.

3. In your list of Nominal Values, you specify both titles and volumes in different categories. Do you have a formula that you apply to the number of titles to convert them to volumes? Would $1.25 \times$ volumes be reasonable? My thinking is prompted by the fact that many universities do not have separate statistics for the number of titles they own, but nearly everyone has an idea of the number of volumes they own.

4. In your application of the criteria to Hofstra you had a large number for Historical Growth. Since this factor is not included in your Nominal Values, I wonder how you compute it. In the kind of evaluation our committee is talking about it will be a sizable factor in computations. I should be glad to have your usually penetrating comments on these points.

Bob Blackburn in his comment on the

EFL draft of the Position paper urged the provision of additional space in the computer complex beyond that which you described for the purpose of housing computer equipment for conversion from one stage to another, and for standby computer equipment. He indicated that librarians who had used computer techniques for some time have been concerned with the need for standby equipment to carry on procedures during down time. I wonder if you have run into this need to date? If to the already high cost of computer equipment we must add additional high costs for standby equipment, it certainly will slow down the rate of application of the computer to library techniques even more than now. I wonder if joint-use, standby equipment is not possible at least within limited areas? I should be happy to have your comments on this problem.

All of us watch with great interest the development of your institute and look with considerable envy at the university system that is wealthy enough to launch you.

*Cordially,
Ellsworth Mason
Director of Library Services
Hofstra University
Hempstead, Long Island
New York*

September 1, 1967

Dear Ellsworth,

Your comments requesting amplification of the criteria I sent to you are all well taken, and each epitomizes at least one of the problems one faces in using such criteria. Let me handle each in turn.

1. "Res. Facility" does indeed stand for *Research Facility* and is intended to cover all administrative entities established for "organized research" (as contrasted with individual faculty research), viz., those "institutes," "laboratories," "centers," etc., established to administer grants and contracts in specific subject areas. There are probably 100 such institutes in the University of California today (the Institute of Government and Public Affairs, the Brain Research Institute, the Institute of Library Research, the Law-Science Research Center, the African Studies Center, etc.). They place an immense burden on library resources. The problem is how to measure it. Alternatives

would be "Number of Grants and Contracts" or "Number of nonfaculty research staff," etc.

2. "Additive, not duplicative" means the following: If I have a doctoral program, I want 12,000 volumes no matter how many students or how many faculty I may have. Thus, if w_1 is the number of volumes for factor i , and n_i is the size of academic program for that factor, the total number of volumes would be:

$$N = n_1w_1 + n_2w_2 + \dots + n_kw_k.$$

That is what additive means. Duplicative would mean that there was overlap among criteria and, for example:

$$N = n_1w_1 \text{ or } N = n_2w_2 \text{ or } N = n_kw_k$$

(i.e., the total number of volumes might be expressed as, for example, 100 volumes per student, or 50,000 per doctoral program, etc.)

3. Replace all use of "titles" by "volumes." The version I sent you apparently was copied from an early copy when I had not yet resolved the problem you raise, viz., libraries can't tell how many titles they own. Don't use a conversion of any kind from titles to volumes. Simply replace. The problem of course is more than simply the difficulty in knowing a number; it's one of appropriate measures for different purposes. (Parenthetically, "volumes" is intended to cover *all* bound volumes, including bound serials. I have no present means of accommodating microforms, unbound serials, newspapers, etc.)

4. Historical growth is the result of that apparently innocuous "2 percent per year" annual growth. For some reason people never seem to appreciate the real effect of "exponential growth" (which 2 percent per year represents). First, let me comment as to its purpose and what it is intended to do. Even if a campus were to have a completely stable academic program—no growth in students, in faculty, in number of degrees, etc.—the library would still need to grow simply to keep up with the publications in the fields of *present* academic interest on campus. New bound volumes of the relevant serials must be added; new books in the field are written; old books must be replaced; etc. What is that growth in stable fields? I estimate that, on the average, it's

about 2 percent per year. Second, what is the effect of 2 percent per year? Well, assume you have 100,000 volumes and no growth in academic program. Then presumably only the 2 percent growth would be operative. In ten years, you would add 23,000 volumes and in twenty years, nearly 50,000 volumes. Of course, when this growth rate is *added* to a growth in academic programs, the effects are much greater.

5. Your final comment, relating to Bob Blackburn's suggestion that standby equipment be included in planning is an important one. On the one hand, libraries are *operational* agencies and cannot afford to be brought to a screeching halt because equipment is nonoperative. On the other hand, the economics of equipment in libraries is so marginal anyway that the added burden of nonproductive standby equipment would virtually eliminate it from economic consideration. My answer is a relatively unpopular one, but I am convinced that it is the only viable one. The library system of machine utilization must be designed to include the facility for machine independent operation as a normal part of the day-to-day procedures. In this way, the library can continue functions in pretty much its normal way even if the machinery is down. As far as "joint-use, standby" facilities are concerned, I am very dubious, unless they are also used as an integral part of day-to-day procedures. However, there is always the necessity of identifying compatible installations in use in the near vicinity which are willing to provide "second-shift" time to you. That's a different matter from "joint-use standby," however, at least as I would interpret your meaning.

Sincerely yours,
Bob

December 29, 1967

Dear Bob:

We seem to be at the point of getting an IBM 1790 as a gift, used, but still quite good. I wonder if ownership of a computer changes radically their economics of computerizing library operations.

If it would, the problem of replacement would remain, and I wonder how long is the effective life of such a computer.

Many thanks for any information you may be able to give us.

Sincerely yours,
Ellsworth

January 5, 1968

Dear Ellsworth:

What a pleasure to hear from you! And particularly with the news that you are getting an IBM computer as a gift. (You list IBM 790 with an inked "one" to produce IBM 1790, and I'm not sure what it is, since I don't recognize either number. Is it an IBM 7090?) I assume that you are referring to the *university*, when you say "we," and not the library itself.

Now you have posed two questions.

1. Does the availability of the computer (for free, or effectively so) radically change the economics of computerizing library operations?

2. How soon might the library be faced with the necessity of changing its operation again, if and when the computer is changed?

First, I would suspect that the availability of the computer would have a negligible effect upon the economics of computerization of libraries. There are several reasons for this opinion: (1) The computer costs for library clerical operations are probably small anyway and even reducing them to zero won't have a determining effect. (2) The computer itself usually represents only a part of the operating expense of a computer installation (operating personnel, peripheral equipment, etc., all would constitute continuing costs). (3) The costs for "system development" (i.e., systems analysis and evaluation, programming, conversion, check-out, etc.) represent the overwhelming factor in the library's decision; these are costs incurred independent of whether the equipment itself is free. (4) Another issue in the decision is not an economic one as such, although it has very significant economic consequences—viz., what is the basis for availability of the computer? Remember, the library is an operational agency and must be guaranteed scheduled, ready, and continuing access. (5) Which brings me to the economic implications of the noncomputer issues in computerization. Mechanization of library clerical processes will involve significant

changes in library processes and methods of operation for the library staff itself. Their costs become the dominating economic issue. They are dependent on the fact that the computer is free only to the extent that one may be able to put more of the burden on the computer than one would normally be able to afford.

All of which says that the decision to "computerize library operations" is affected by free computer time only in a negligible way.

Second, the rate of obsolescence of computers is something fascinating to behold, and I am not at all convinced that it is realistic. Each new generation of computers has been more capable and has provided more "computing power for the dollar" than the previous ones (and by orders of magnitude, not just by minor amounts). But it has also created a great number of problems in conversion to the new computer. For those, like the library or the university's administration, with an *operational* use of the computer, the likelihood is that the problems in converting to a new generation of computers are greater than the hypothetical improvement in efficiency would warrant. (Recall that the computer itself represents only a small issue in comparison with other costs.) As a result, for them obsolescence is of minor importance and the possibility of "using a better computer" is less likely to affect the decision to change. Unfortunately, however, in the university the bulk of computer utilization is not operational but ad hoc. For such use, the expansion in capability and computing power per dollar weighs very heavily. Since the ad hoc users are likely to control the decision as to whether to change a computer, I would anticipate a rapid rate of obsolescence.

To say it another way—the effective life of a computer is virtually unlimited (although there will in time be a deterioration in its performance reliability), and therefore computers don't become worn out. And they don't become obsolete very rapidly. But they do become obsolescent, in the sense that something better can replace them. The problem you will be faced with is that you are probably going to be dependent upon someone's else decision as to when the computer needs to be replaced.

I've probably said more than you wanted to hear, but I'll be interested in learning how you proceed.

Sincerely yours,
Bob

January 17, 1968

Dear Bob:

Your letter of January 5 provided a totally complete and concise answer to my inquiry, the likes of which I would be grateful to receive from everyone of whom I ask questions. The machine is an IBM 7090.

Let me place this inquiry: How does the library world begin to move toward standardized programs to computerize library methods that will provide the basic results to anyone willing to accept the program package? Systems development seems to involve tailor-made analysis in minute detail of the progression of methods presently in use in a library, including some improvements, and then programming the computer to perform them.

Supposing we were to forget about interim methods and not care how they were done so long as terminal actions result—that is, a book would reach the shelves with cards-pockets-labels, cards, would end up in the catalog (or entries in a print-out catalog), etc.

If one library would program to achieve these results, why could not any other library with the same computer accept the same program to achieve the same ends, disregarding the middle? The variables in terms of ends are not great, whereas the variations in programs seem to be total. Given this cost relief, I should imagine that computerization of library methods would be possible for many more libraries than now use them.

Sincerely yours,
Ellsworth

January 24, 1968

Dear Ellsworth:

Your letter of 17 January 1968 raises what has been perhaps the most frustrating issue in my work over the past five years, and more. In principle, there seems to be little doubt that a "packaged program" will widely serve the library community. The

frustration for me comes from my own inability to bring it to reality.

Why? There seems to be a number of hurdles to be overcome.

1. *Packaged programs* have only recently become recognized as useful in the computing community itself. There is little glamour in their development, and as a result, most of the really good programmers have concentrated on the development of "programming languages" (such as Fortran, COBOL, and PL/1) and "operating systems" (which manage the computer itself, particularly when it must handle a variety of programs and a number of users).

2. *The Computer Configuration* is an overriding consideration in the actual creation of a packaged program. Therefore, since installations available to individual libraries differ radically, it is not clear that a large number of libraries will really be able to use a packaged program developed for a particular machine configuration.

3. *The Changes in computer configuration* make obsolete any packaged program which has been operational. This effect has been particularly devastating over the last two years, with the change-over from IBM 1401 and 1410 to IBM 360/30 and 360/40 and from IBM 7090 to IBM 360/50. Whereas there were well-proven programs operational on the earlier machines, they suddenly became nearly worthless with the new ones. During the past two years, this effect has been amplified as the 360 installations themselves have undergone a succession of changes—in both hardware and "operating system."

4. *The operating procedures*, as I pointed out in my earlier letter, represent the really significant issue as far as the library itself is concerned. Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to separate the design of the computer program from the design of the library's operating procedures. This is why computer people invoke the magic of "total system design" in which the program and the procedures are tied together. One could conceive of a package which included standardized procedures as well as standardized computer operations, but that's where the rub comes. The effects on the library itself are now the predominant issue. To illustrate: a package for serial control depends upon the procedure for serial

check-in; This differs so radically from library to library that it is virtually impossible to standardize.

5. *There are legitimate differences* among libraries and their operating procedures—size, policies on service, type of institution, etc.—which appear to preclude any standardization of procedure. As a result, one must think in terms of a set of packages, or perhaps a set of "modules," which provide subcapabilities and can be put together in different combinations to form the desired set of packages. But this multiplies the task of development—either by the number of different packages or by the greater work of defining appropriate modules.

6. *The "Not-Invented-Here" Syndrome* seems to be ever present, and minor differences, to which presumably one could adjust, are used as reasons for separate development.

7. *The need for Library Systems Analysis* is present anyway because of the cost considerations in the library, which are much larger than simply those of mechanization. So perhaps the NIH syndrome is not bad, anyway.

Despite all of this, I am personally convinced that packaged programs are the answer, and we are continuing to pursue the analysis of what they should do and of how they should be developed. I look forward to your own reactions.

Sincerely yours,
Bob

MORE ON MASON . . .

To the Editor:

I find Ellsworth Mason's paper, "The Great Gas Bubble Prick't," in the May 1971 issue of *CRL* an unfortunate addition to the library literature.

An analogy became unmistakable to me while reading the paper, namely the picture of a youngster with hands and face smeared with chocolate frosting looking innocently at his mother, pointing to his brother's face at the kitchen window, and saying, "But mommy, he made me do it." I find credibility difficult for Mason's statements that librarians exhibit "command and critical brilliance" in daily library operations and apply "intellect and managerial methods" in li-

brary practice, if I am asked simultaneously to believe that librarians have been "lemmings" with respect to library automation. Though individuals do not behave with 100 percent consistency, the amount of behavioral difference given by Mason suggests that one of the descriptions is closer to the usual pattern with his evidence pointing strongly to the latter.

Mason forgets, in his illustration of the delivery of a Continental automobile that, if the purchaser doesn't know how to drive, mere delivery won't permit the purchaser to use the hardware for transport purposes (unless he has a chauffeur). Continuing the analogy of the automobile, use of it involves greater expense and greater personal and environmental hazards than use of the horse and buggy. It also provides a different mode of transportation. Its wide acceptance appears to suggest that pros and cons have been weighed in favor while, simultaneously, efforts are made to reduce negative aspects of its use.

Though Mason furnishes few specific facts to support his generalizations, knowledge of library automation experience permits me to accept what he has said as phenomena that can and have occurred. However, the appearance of scholarship conveyed by footnotes that are woefully lacking in authoritativeness I find deplorable. I would have expected my students to support the "Truths" from data in the automation literature. Mason sets a poor example, both for students and his peers.

The salutary aspect of Mason's paper is that it enables librarians and library educators to have a better understanding of the knowledge, skills, and managerial capabilities that are needed by members of the profession. If a whipping boy must be found for librarians' dilemmas, he is less likely the computer and more likely the growing desire of librarians to streamline their operations and provide active rather than passive information services. Judgmental errors made in library automation projects are symptomatic growing pains. They can be learned from if analyzed maturely.

Rowena Swanson
Professor
Graduate School of Librarianship
University of Denver
Denver, Colorado

To the Editor:

The most perceptive and entertaining paper that I have had the pleasure of reading in a long time was that of Ellsworth Mason in the May issue of *CRL*. Someone to point out the cost problems of computer use and the pitfalls of automation has long been needed. Let us hope that Mason's warning cause those who have not yet ventured into the computer water to have second thoughts and those who have already been scalded to re-evaluate their costs before they pour more money down the drain.

Richard A. Davis
Assistant Librarian
The John Crerar Library
Chicago, Illinois

To the Editor:

Thank you for the bitter, literate, incisive, derisive, funny, and very, very good article by Ellsworth Mason, "The Great Gas Bubble Prick't," in the May 1971 issue.

Clyde King
James M. Milne Library
State University College
Oneonta, New York

To the Editor:

The Gentleman of Quality is to be commended for his virtuoso performance with the English language. Buried deep within his florid rhetoric there are even little dabs of truth here and there. After all, a fair-minded evaluation of the computer must admit to *some* failures, but let us not confuse wishful thinking with fact.

The effect of our Gentleman's tirade against computers has not been to puncture a bubble; rather, he has built a balloon, filled it with hot air, and gone on a trip of fancy—such a contrast with a related article by Ellsworth Mason in the May 15 issue of the *Library Journal*! That article, titled "Along the Academic Way," is a highly rational, carefully considered statement of several major problems facing academic libraries (automation being only one of these problems). But "The Great Gas Bubble . . ." is an emotional outburst unbecoming to any man, least of all a Gentleman, especially one of Quality.

There are good reasons to question the

automation of a library. After all, what is to be gained by mechanizing an existing process *without examining the underlying assumptions?*² For example, if one simply automates a 3x5 card the result is still a 3x5 card. Successful automation is preceded by a rigorous questioning of all assumptions, procedures, and methods. Only then is the path clear to think about automating.

The computer is a tool. As with all tools, a requisite for productive use of the computer is that one fully comprehend what it can do and what it cannot do. A simple tool is limited in its applications and requires scant direction to be effective. A complex tool can be used for a greater number of applications but requires a greater number of directions. The computer, an extremely complex tool, can be applied toward an almost infinite variety of applications because it can be programmed in as many ways. To suggest that the computer should be programmed in advance of manufacture is to miss the point of the computer altogether.

So-called computer failures do occur, but they are by no means universal. Most are human failures: witness the saying "Garbage in, garbage out," or the Programmer's Lament, "The computer always does what I tell it to do—damn it!" The real culprits are the inept programmers hired by the vague employers who can't (or won't) say what they want the computer to do.

The economics of automation is a complex picture. Only rarely can manual and automated processes or their costs be *directly* compared, for very often the magnitude of leverage and range of services are substantially altered. A bona fide cost comparison not only examines the before and after costs (along with before and after services) but *also* the cost and effect of duplicating the automated services (including all of the by-products) by hand. Of course, such comparisons are properly made in advance as well as after the fact.

There is important work to be done in the automation of libraries and information services. One reason that the results have been sometimes disappointing is that we are dealing with words—language. A principal key to future work lies in the field of linguistics. As we improve our understanding of how words work, we can build more

efficient, more effective, and more rapid means of controlling information.

Larry Auld

Head, Technical Services

Oregon State University Library
Corvallis

To the Editor,

When I was told some weeks ago that a comment which questioned the effectiveness of library automation had appeared on the cover of the *Library Journal* I was pleased. The computer has been an essential element of my teaching, writing, research, and other work for nearly twenty-five years, and I have been appalled by the intellectual corruption and the waste of funds that I have seen in ill-conceived and dismally mismanaged automation projects, in a variety of fields; and by the drivel that has been promulgated as so-called computer science. I have felt, however, that reasoned criticism of such matters was regarded as bad form, or perhaps just nonconformist and therefore irrelevant (like criticizing the Vietnam war until a few years ago). "Computerization regardless" was the accepted dogma, and as such could not be assailed simply by reasoned argument.

I was pleased, therefore, to hear that an influential journal had given prominence to a questioning of this dogma by a librarian—Mr. Mason—and even more pleased to hear that he had published an extensive critical article in *College & Research Libraries*. I have read the article several times. I think that many of Mason's specific criticisms of the absurdity of individual projects, the abandon with which they were launched, and the irrationality with which they are being escalated may well be valid. I think that a great service has been done if his article leads to reasoned critical analysis of present projects by more people, and to reasoned analysis of future plans. But allowing the possibility that some or perhaps all of the projects that Mason visited are as bad as his scatological allusions suggest, I am bothered by its overall tone.

It is the recourse to dogma in professional matters that alarms me far more than the dogma's specific content, when I hear unsound computational projects "justified" on the grounds that "computerization is essentially good," just as when I hear unsound elementary math textbooks "justified"

on the grounds that "the child must be taught at the earliest age that sets are the theme that unifies all mathematics."

It would be oversimplistic to blame the ills of professional life on a conformist requirement for administrators to pander to current dogma in order to maintain credibility, or to suggest that this just happens in the U.S.A. today. I think it is a serious problem, however, and the dangers inherent in the party line approach are in no way changed or mitigated when some of the clichés happen to get reversed. I am worried that Mason's article may have just this impact, providing a pseudo axiom "computerization is *inherently* nonbeneficial" to axe and to block work of potential merit as indiscriminately as patent absurdity has been launched and adulated in the past.

There are several questionable points of technical detail in Mason's article that could contribute to such a switch, and I would like therefore to comment on these in my role as a technician, particularly since he advocates the use of reason and decries recourse to dogma.

Mason states that "the computer is not subject to reasonable surveillance at any level of operation." He says this is "a fact" (footnote 5), and explains that it is "inherent in the occult nature of the computer." Since I associate the word "occult" with the supernatural, I was just a little worried that Mason had succumbed to the belief that spindling, folding, and otherwise mutilating IBM cards is discouraged in deference to the laws of sympathetic magic. I do take exception his remark, however, even with the use of "occult" to mean hidden, concealed, secret, communicated only to the initiated, not apprehensible to the mind, recondite, mysterious, unexplained, etc. The behavior of the computer is deterministic—inexorably, relentlessly, inhumanly deterministic—and it is documented extensively and, at times, quite intelligibly too. I believe the computer can be immensely beneficial, that reasonable surveillance at every level of operation, though often difficult, is possible, that many of the people who work with computers do metaphorically get away with murder, and that they are largely responsible for the myth that Mason is citing as fact. I think that society will really benefit from the computer when administrators assume the necessary control,

as I and others have discussed at various times in the past.^o Proclaiming this to be impossible is a profound disservice to those who are trying to raise the standards of computer use and education.

Mason is convinced that "the high costs of computerization make it unfeasible for library operations." He quotes Veaner: "The old idea that an automated system could be operated at a new lower cost than a manual system is dead, indeed." I cannot accept the failure of appallingly expensive efforts to automate some library work as proof that no library work may ever be automated inexpensively and advantageously, since I have seen modest efforts to automate other types of work succeed alongside grandiose disasters. I hope that future proposals for library automation will be reviewed in a way that allows inexpensive studies to be made which note the causes of past fiascos and avoid their repetition. It would be sad if such efforts were blocked by the acceptance of a myth that all computer studies require vast funds, or a myth that automation is inherently and inevitably more costly if not downright disastrous.

Mason believes that computerization "will become increasingly expensive in the future." He states "a computer operation is incapable of becoming stabilized" and speaks of "the agonies, dislocations and setbacks involved" in a change of computer generations, "with no assurance that the same level of result can be achieved." Later he speaks of "the agonies of programming, reprogramming . . . deception by computer experts. . . ." Mason states "computer experts laughed when I suggested economy as a motive for adopting the computer." He states as "absolutely false" the possibility of "economies in future programming by having programs convertible to later generation computers." He says "all the library computerators I questioned agree that transferability of programs is completely un-

^o See, for example, the introduction in the author's book *Computer Programming in English* (Harcourt Brace & World, 1969) and his chapter, "Computer Hardware and Software for Librarians," in the Proceedings of the 1970 Conference on Collaborative Library Systems Development (to be published by the MIT Press later this year). The supervision of programming, the achievement of *flexibility*, the dangers of overselling new technologies, and many of the problems of computer typesetting that were ignored and which helped get the field a bad name are discussed in the author's book, *Computer Typesetting—Experiments and Prospects* (MIT Press, 1965).

feasible at present and in the future." I disagree categorically with every one of these statements, and I connect them with attitudes toward computing that are particularly rife around some university installations. Over the years I have moved programs from IBM 704 to 709 to 7090 to 7094, from a PDP6 to an RCA Spectra 70-45, back to an IBM 7094 and then to a 360-50; in the last two years I have been running programs in parallel in installations of several different models of IBM 360; I have moved programs back and forth across the Atlantic, and onto XDS and CDC and UNIVAC machines, and even onto some English computers; I have carried on while central processing units were changed and operating systems upgraded; and this has been completely nontraumatic, at least in the commercially operated service bureaux in which the programs have been processed. I wish I could say the same of all the university installations with which I have dealt.

It is possible for a crew of systems programmers to keep an installation in a state of constant upheaval quite unnecessarily, and in particular without the slightest change of hardware or software by the manufacturer. I have seen computer center staff force users out of compatibility with other installations in matters that are completely standard for reasons that seem to range from downright incompetence, to an arrogant desire to exert control over other people's work, to regarding the computer as a toy for their personal amusement and a vehicle for practical jokes that verge on the malicious. A bad workman often blames his tools, and "genius type" programmers in applications groups at times do their bit also to contribute to the agonies that Mason describes.

Mason confuses sharing a computer (I share the local public library with other readers) with time-sharing (but we do not try reading the same book concurrently). The cost of on-line consoles is quite irrelevant to the cost reduction of batch processed work on a powerful computer that other people use for batch processing as well. As regards Mason's comments on rising personnel costs, it is true that programmers are included in the present upward drift of salaries, and it is true that a

powerful machine requires a lot of work to justify its presence, and in consequence a large number of user personnel may be running jobs on it. It is the programming effort per application, however, that should be considered, and the ease of writing and debugging programs has been increased considerably by recent hardware and software developments which have permitted a considerable increase in the cost effectiveness of the time of applications programmers.

Mason refers to the Emperor's New Clothes at the end of his article. I tell my students every semester to bear it in mind whatever the cloth is supposed to be. The plot of the Alchemist has been replayed quite a few times on the computational scene, too, and category J in Stith Thompson's classification of folktale motifs (from "Absurd disregard of facts" to "The easy problem made hard") includes prototypes of several computer situations that Mason mentions, and more beside. But they could apply to unreasoned indiscriminate axing also.

I think that Mason may have been a little harsh on university administrators and the computer industry. Perhaps I am somewhat naive, but I think that the wish "to do good" plays a major role in many administrative decisions by people who may be pressured and given misinformation. As far as the pressuring itself is concerned, the age of the grey flannel suit in the ivory tower may be on the wane, but the salesmen employed by the manufacturers would have been for nought without the husksters on the faculty. Using a computer may dramatize the cost of charlatanism, but is not a prerequisite. To what extent are situations Mason describes so eloquently being recast now with other "new technologies" as backdrops, and for that matter has professional and public life been free of faddism hitherto?

Mason's article will doubtless bring library automation under wider scrutiny, and may bring wider recognition to the projects that deserve it, as well as a curtailment of same causes of waste.

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