

College Libraries and a National Information Policy: Whistling in the Graveyard

An informal survey of college librarians on a national information policy indicated a variety of responses, ranging from lack of knowledge, indifference, and confusion to enthusiasm. Among concerns and fears expressed were the belief that national programs would be dominated by other parts of the information community, that larger bureaucracies would be developed, that regional and local cooperative plans might be subverted, that college librarians would be asked to play roles incompatible with their campus missions, and that they would be closed out from the benefits of national networking.

I AM PLEASED to offer some brief comments about the college librarian's perspective on the developing national information policy. In doing so, I feel obliged to let you in on a practical joke that was played on me here last night. The joke was not in very good taste—few practical jokes are—and I speak of it now, not only because someone obviously went to such great effort to perpetrate it, but because it expresses, albeit in a crude way, a concern that nagged me as I first began to consider my assignment.

I had been asked by the chairperson to determine, first of all, whether there was a college perspective—a set of attitudes among librarians serving mainly undergraduate institutions—that was distinct from that of the research libraries; and, secondly, if there were a college perspective, what bearing it might have on the academic librarian's role in shaping a national information pol-

icy. Thus charged, I set out to discover what expectations and anxieties were being aroused by the emergence of a national network.

I decided at the outset to go to as many practicing librarians as I could and invite them to share their concerns with me. And rather than speak mainly from our experiences in the Northeast, I determined to extend my inquiry into all fifty states if I could and direct it to both large and small colleges, both private and public institutions, and of the latter, both state and community-supported.

As it happened, I fell in about that time with a fellow up my way who fancies himself a futurist and who has found it amusing, when we meet, to ply me with his apocalyptic vision of the librarian's future—or rather the lack of it. You've been treated to it too, I know: how the book is becoming obsolete and how the academic library is about to go the way of the dodo and the passenger pigeon.

He dismissed my plan to poll other librarians on grounds of its sheer futility. College

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librarians are a doomed species, he contended, doubly dead because they are unwilling to grasp the reality of changes already underway and, for all their talk, incapable of genuinely intelligent efforts to anticipate the consequences.

Some weeks later, by which time I had pursued my inquiry with scores of colleagues in New York and had written nearly 300 college librarians across the country, my futurist acquaintance encountered me again and asked what I was learning. I told him that responses were only beginning to come in and, as much to put him off as anything, said that the only new information I had discovered so far had come from preparing a mailing list of head librarians, and that was that a disproportionately large number of college library directors were named *James!* (Incidentally, I must leave it to someone else to speculate why that should be true, as indeed it seems to be.)

My reference to directors only set him off again, for if he had a poor opinion of the librarian's capacity to prepare for the future, he professed to have even less regard for library directors as a class. "Don't you know," he argued, "they are too preoccupied with things like leaky roofs and church professors and staffing cuts to think about national issues? And as for their expectations of the future," he went on, "they are too wrapped up in day-to-day problems of survival to be of any help to you: half of them don't expect to be around in 1990, much less 2001. You're writing to people who have one foot in the ground."

I did assure him that the academic librarians I knew were not nearly so dead as all that. I did in fact make some effort to describe the ambitious efforts the profession is making to anticipate a full-scale "post-industrial, information society" and to convince him that we, too, had a futurist vision and were doing something about it.

But it was not a serious discussion anyway, just lighthearted banter over morning coffee. There would be no reason for recalling any of his remarks at all except that when I checked into my hotel last night, I found waiting for me a package containing what was obviously meant to be his last word on the subject. It was in fact written on a stone—a tombstone, no less. I brought

it over with me. On one side of this venerable slab you will find that it simply says "JAMES." On the other is penciled a familiar expression posed as a grudging question: "Not dead, but sleeping?"¹

As an epitaph for this generation of academic library leadership, or even as an appropriate question to raise with regard to the emerging network and the necessity of developing a national information policy, my acquaintance's joke surely misses the mark. And yet, there were times this spring when, I confess, a similar question had occurred to me. Let me characterize some of the responses to my inquiries in order to establish, if there is one, the college perspective.

INDIFFERENCE AND IGNORANCE

At the outset, I must say that a number of college librarians whom one might have expected to be concerned about the national network and national policy questions seem, for whatever reasons, to be to all appearances quite contentedly asleep—and maybe even dead. There were many who were obviously not familiar with the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science report or even with the much publicized six-point program drafted by the Kaser committee last year.²

There was evidence of indifference, as well as of the predictable preoccupation with local issues that clearly makes a discussion of national policies a luxury for many hard-pressed college librarians. And there were those colleagues who replied, in words something like this:

Sir: I have delayed responding to your questions in order to give our library faculty an opportunity to include their ideas. Unfortunately they have none. Yours truly, James Such & Such.

I even uncovered one or two correspondents capable of denouncing the very idea of a national network as "a wild dream" and a "new toy," and one who grumbled that it was too soon to talk of such things. But these, I must stress, represented only a tiny fraction of my sample.

CONFUSION

More importantly, there was considerable confusion. Partly, I think, this resulted from the ambiguity in the literature itself, and

the way in which discussion of the national information *program* of services and of the national *network* (whose task will be to deliver and coordinate that program) and of the national information *policy* (that will guide and inform the program) get all mixed together.

Some of my correspondents, no doubt because of the very way in which I posed my questions, were much readier to discuss the practical implications of networking and to speculate on the likely effects of the White House Conference than to get into the more theoretical and elusive issues of public policy. A great number of these writers were quite forceful, even eloquent, in articulating their expectations of the network—and their fears. Indeed, if the great majority of college librarians are not sleeping, it may be because they are too worried to sleep.

CONCERNS

First of all, they're worried about the White House Conference. They see it dominated by other parts of the information community, especially advocates for public and school library interests. They find their own priorities are often not reflected in the preliminary recommendations of the various governors' conferences—indeed, are being drowned in the clamor for funds raised by some of the more vocal participants. On balance, they foresee little good coming out of the same kind of conference held at the national level and possibly some harm.

Second, they're deeply mistrustful that we may wind up with yet greater bureaucracies to contend with, either in the centralized coordination of the network or in the proposed federal office of information policy. The specter of more red tape frankly horrifies them.

Moreover, many are apprehensive that the planners of the national network, especially as they address the need for a better document delivery system, may take steps that will subvert the successful operation of local and regional systems of cooperation long in the making. They argue that the application of the same emphasis on centralization and standardization that is admittedly vital to data base access, especially in the generation and retrieval of reliable bib-

liographic data, could be the ruination of existing cooperative loan programs. They want reassurance that the design of the national network will reflect the fundamental premise that its usefulness as a network must be measured by its usefulness to the individual library.

Not unlike their counterparts in the research and special libraries, the college librarians see themselves being asked to play roles basically incompatible with their campus missions. They foresee genuine and perhaps irreconcilable conflicts in attempting to serve both their own users and a wider community of information seekers. Many of them cannot quite see an equalizer in the increased access that may be made available to their own patrons.

Then, too, they're apprehensive about that catch phrase, "freedom of information." They do not take seriously the notion that access can be literally free—that is, without cost; and virtually none of them seems to have bought the idea, implicit in the ALA president's program, that the federal government could, should, or would pick up the tab for such costs.

The concern for cost, moreover, seems to manifest itself rather differently for the colleges than it does for larger academic libraries. There's a very widespread assumption, especially in the medium and small college libraries, that they will simply be closed out of the benefits of national networking. Although this is somewhat less true in the case of those who have had good experiences in regional networks or local consortia, there is the general impression, even in the case of units of state-supported college systems and inescapably in the case of community colleges and small, private colleges, that the smaller institutions are destined to remain have-nots; that they will have less, rather than greater, access to information as it becomes increasingly borne by electronic devices.

One community college librarian wrote, in a memorable literary *non sequitur*: "My feeling is that a national network is a Utopia reserved for the giants in the library world, and one to which the Lilliputians may never be admitted." This pessimism may not be well-founded, but it is real, and it is widespread.

Even in the larger undergraduate colleges, both public and private, there is a sense of this same foreboding. It most frequently expresses itself as a kind of alienation, a sense of isolation. I detected a readiness to be involved but a recognition that the college librarian somehow stands beyond the circle of key decision makers and does not know quite how to step inside.

ENTHUSIASM AND IMPATIENCE

I have been deliberately stressing some of the anxieties I encountered in the course of my project, including some anxieties that I myself do not share. I have done so because some of you seem not to be aware of them and because others of you will be encouraged to hear your worries voiced.

But I should go on to say that there was much in my study that was positive and encouraging. There was not only enthusiasm for the emergence of a national system of regional networks but an impatience to get on with the business of solving the problem of linkage and of seeing the overall architecture in place. Indeed I found in college librarians across the country a great reservoir of energy, good sense, and practical experience. I was gratified to see an eager-

ness to employ that experience for the benefit of the coming generation of librarians and "information scientists," as well as for patrons in the national community.

No, they are not dead—not even sleeping. But a disturbing number of college librarians apparently have reason to feel they are being treated as if they were, not only by uninformed laypersons, but by their colleagues in the research library, in the state library, in the governor's conference, and on national commissions.

How to respond to their anxieties, how to take advantage of their vitality, how to promote genuine involvement by college librarians in grappling with national policy issues—these should be leading concerns of ACRL in the coming year, before the White House Conference, as well as beyond.

REFERENCES

1. *Editor's note*: A photograph of the author with the tombstone appears in *American Libraries* 9:435 (July-Aug. 1978).
2. "Toward a Conceptual Foundation for a National Information Policy," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 52:545-49 (March 1978). Also published in *Information Hotline* 10:19-21 (May 1978).