



A Fate Worse Than Death?

As an ex-reference librarian turned 'computer salesman selling online systems to libraries', I feel I must take issue with some of the points raised in Russ Elwin's letter (*InCite* 8 July, 1983) and Barrie Mitcheson's reply.

I spent many happy years as a reference librarian, but always found it frustrating that all I could do in that role was to lead people to the appropriate tools and show them how to use them - the hack work of sifting through the indexes and finding the documents cited was left to the individual who required the information. I felt then, as now, that this was a waste of human resources, that there is little virtue in people

with subject expertise finding their own information, that such expertise should be used in evaluating and using the information. It is the information specialist's job to find that information quickly and efficiently as possible. Once upon a time, before the information explosion really exploded, this was indeed the function of a reference librarian - to create bibliographies and to provide the full-text backup. The advent of online searching gave us the tool whereby we could once again fulfil this responsibility.

I take exception to both Mr Elwin's and Mr Mitcheson's implied views that to be a salesperson of online systems is an alternative to professional librarianship and that it is a Fate Worse Than Death. On the contrary, I have found in my four years in this role considerable professional satisfaction and no loss of personal integrity. I see no incompatibility in mastering the fascinating art of librarianship and using those skills to work in the area of online information retrieval. It is not an either-or-situation - without my professional qualifications and experience I would find it very difficult to perform my job well.

I would venture to say that librarians have an increasingly important role to play as the provision of online services proliferate. Of course there are those who will not use a librarian but will search the systems services themselves, just as there are many who are quite capable of using a traditional library with no assistance from a librarian, but when professional assistance is required (ie. a detailed knowledge of many sources of information) then even those independent souls will seek it from those best qualified to provide it. Certainly I have trained and will continue to train non-librarians in the use of online techniques, but the bulk of my business comes from libraries, and the bulk of users are professional librarians whose jobs are not threatened but enhanced by such skills. Librarians must make use of the new technologies, not fear them.

Certainly there are fewer jobs available for trained librarians than there once were, but whether this is the result of introducing online services is a moot point. Could it not perhaps be the general economic recession? Could it perhaps be the oversupply of librarians competing for the same number of jobs? I would be very surprised to find a

chief librarian making such a cut and dried choice between the provision of online services or the hiring of new staff.

I should also like to correct a couple of errors of fact in Mr Elwin's letter. Firstly, the provision of online services is not a once-only cost, it is an ongoing one, just like the provision of a collection of books or periodicals. The great difference here is that one pays only for what one uses, not for the eventual possibility that someone one day may wish to use a particular book or periodical article. One is also not paying for the storage of physical items. Secondly, Mr Elwin was allegedly told that 'it would not be long before the owners of microcomputers will have access to the databanks'. Such access has been possible for some years now. The providers of online services are well aware of this, and are now creating software to maximise the benefits of the marriage between online systems based on mainframes and the use of microcomputers to access and manipulate the information contained in them.

I have often pondered over my possible return to the world of traditional librarianship, missing as I do the joys of working with a large collection of real books and people with real questions I can help to answer. However computers have created a job for me which I enjoy immensely, and I believe that in my current role I have a great deal more to contribute to the development of my profession than would be possible by retreating to the admittedly comfortable and relatively secure world of a single library. Mr Elwin could do a lot worse than become a salesman, but should view it as an entirely valid extension of the profession of librarianship, not an alternative.

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