

# **THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS**

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There is more information available today than at anytime before in history. And by tomorrow there will be even more; by next year there will be twice as much as today! Even rabbit pullulation pales by comparison with information production. But with all the information that is out there, it seems more difficult than ever before to get what you want, when you want it.

It appears, unfortunately, that most libraries and not-for-profit information-providing institutions, like museums, archives and other cultural entities, are suffering from the same problem: too much information, too little money. And, while technology has made some of the information morass more manageable, it has also magnified to the problem. For example, getting useful information from the ever-burgeoning Internet is like filtering a cesspool for nutrition.

What you see, more often than not, is that “as the infrastructure of the digital library [museum, archive, etc.] emerges, a range of trends is gradually leading to the disappearance of

human help in patron interactions.”<sup>iii</sup> Like pumping your own gasoline, we’ll all be soon pumping our own information, for “the logic [of digital resources], the pertinent concept is user self-sufficiency.”<sup>iii</sup> As the downsizing of our staffs and collections continues, we download more of our former services and substance to the end user.

The grand purpose, it would seem, is to make the end user “more self-sufficient in searching, retrieving, and evaluating information in a multitude of formats, and thus prepare them for a world where information and knowledge currently doubles every year and is expected to double every 73 days by the year 2020.”<sup>iv</sup> Now don’t get us wrong, we’re not against utilizing technology to make life better. Nor do we want to throw out the technological baby with the bath water, for it certainly can help us filter through the mountains of data and facts that are threatening to push an information fire hose down our throats when all we want is a cool, informing drink. To paraphrase Emerson, we either ride technology, or it will ride us.

No, the real problem is that information and its technologies have become Big Business (some of it truly Silicon Snake Oil Business). And Big Business’s agenda, naturally enough, has more to do with making money, the transfer of institutional information power, and the fear and loathing of diverse publications and information outside of its control. Content that hasn’t been legitimized by the commercial process, often in conjunction with the imprimatur of the corporate/research community, is one of the least discussed problems of the scholarly communication crisis. Serving the public diverse information through non-profit institutions is not high on the for-profit sector’s agenda because the information provided by non-profits often is

contrary to the world view promoted by the for-profit sector. Information control is Big Business!

An article in this February's Wall Street Journal says, "Scientists are increasingly supported by for-profit companies, but a new study shows that critical fact is seldom revealed in published research."<sup>v</sup> The article goes on to say, "The important person is the reader, and if the financial conflict might alter their perception of the validity of results, then the reader should have those conflicts revealed."<sup>vi</sup> But don't count on it happening soon. Powerful vested interests, in a Byzantine partnership with scientists, are packaging information mind-food for your thoughtless digestion.

Jim Davis, formerly the Western Regional Director for Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, puts it this way:

If information can't turn a profit, it won't be developed or stored, regardless of its social value. The president of commercial database vendor Dialog was quoted in 1986 as saying "We can't afford an investment in databases that are not going to earn their keep and pay back their development costs, he answered, "Humanities." [Davis goes on to say]...Pharmaceuticals (information products) comprise [even] a more dramatic example -- for instance, a 1991 World Health Organization report lamented the fact that development of new tuberculosis-fighting drugs all but stopped 25 years ago (even though three million die every year from the disease) because the drugs are "not a big profit maker."<sup>vii</sup>

And, in a recent article entitled "The Politics of Cultural Authority" Wayne Wiegand, professor at the University of Wisconsin/Madison School of Library and Information Studies, remarks upon this relationship between knowledge, as it is commercially packaged, and power. He says:

In the past 20 years or so an army of critical theorists ...have been questioning the whole concept of “objective” knowledge, and analyzing connections between power and the values assigned to knowledge in its different forms. What they have discovered is that knowledge in any form is never disinterested, never totally objective, and that a discernible link exists between power and the kinds of knowledge people consider most valuable. Because knowledge is never disinterested, powerful people with a vested interest in certain kinds of knowledge work hard to elevate that knowledge to a privileged position. There, they believe, it will have the best chance to influence everyone  
else.<sup>viii</sup>

What is important to gather from the above two quotes is that in the present milieu of “cultural authority,” librarians, curators, archivists are considered merely “handlers of information products,” having very little to do with determining the value of those products. The corporate structure that dominates the publishing industry and calls the research tune for a significant portion of the academy, especially in the sciences, is making it very clear that it does not want information handlers to evaluate content (i.e., select). It just wants us to buy its prepackaged and validated information—and pay (for you won’t have any money left for alternative materials once you have been provided with the profit-sector’s information)! Much censorship is really just a lack of money to buy alternatives. While research libraries would like to buy most of what the mainstream

commercial sci/tech publishers generate, especially the serial publications, they can't afford all of them, let alone alternative points of view!

But there are things that we can do, should do, to ameliorate this situation. While it is probably beyond our abilities to enter into the lists with the corporate power brokers to affect their continuous machinations to sell us bell-and-whistle baubles, submerging technologies, and ersatz Solyent Green wonder products, we can join together through cooperative ventures that cut across traditionally accepted barriers to pursue mutually beneficial partnerships. After all, we are really all here to serve the information user. If we combine our collections and services, in a rationalized way, we can provide more from less, but we will have to jettison some of our antediluvian attitudes.

And one of these outmoded concepts is that of the self-sufficient library, museum, archive or any other information-serving institution. The traditional research library goal, for example, of building and maintaining large, self-sufficient, collections is not only anachronistic, it is also economically unsound. The rapid emergence and evolution of electronic technologies finally make it feasible for information institutions to build on local strengths and yet to collaborate on information issues across geographical boundaries—and types of libraries! However, our pre-industrial mindset about ownership often cancels out our technical prowess.

As long as cultural information institutions rank themselves by the criteria of ownership (volumes and manuscripts held, artifacts owned, photos digitized, staff employed, and budgets

expended) and nothing else, they will continue to represent quantity not quality. "Build a large, monumental institution (preferably with lions and griffins guarding the front doors), fill it with materials, and they will come" has been the hallmark of much of the cultural information enterprise for generations. One of the reasons for this is mainly because it is simpler to amass quantities of things than it is to discriminate intelligently. Certainly it is less controversial and time consuming than essaying the worth of the content, not to mention substantially less expensive than thoughtful selection (and the concomitant cost of bibliographers)! It is "selected information," driven by a defined intellectual goal or vision that makes an information institution valuable—not the number of widgets housed within. We should not be ranking our institutions by the tonnage!

We are guilty of schooling several generations in the belief that their own library collections, if properly developed, could serve all the needs of their clientele locally -- with an occasional foray into interlibrary loan. The unfortunate result of this hubris, coupled with a long period of double-digit purchasing inflation and the simultaneous downsizing of budgets, is that most library collections are becoming more homogeneous as libraries are forced to satisfy core, local needs of demand first. (In other words, a good portion of everyone's acquisitions budget is consumed in sustaining subscriptions to Time magazine, TV GUIDE, U.S. News and World Report, etc.)

In the research libraries, ARL expenditure figures for library materials show again in 1997-98 that while libraries are spending more, they continue to get less. For much of the last two decades, libraries shifted expenditures from monographs to meet some of the demands of increasing serial prices. Data show that while libraries more than doubled expenditures for serials from 1986

to 1997, libraries purchased 6% fewer serial titles—not to mention the decline in monographic acquisitions (the number of monographs purchased by research libraries fell by 25%!).

In short, librarians have, of necessity, put their clientele on a core collection starvation diet, depriving them of those nutritious sources that used to distinguish one library from another, those materials that enable thinking outside the box of commercially purveyed pabulum. This fast-mind-food-collecting syndrome, the MacLibrary Syndrome, that focuses on the core at the expense of the periphery, is threatening information users with a severe case of content-deprived informational deficiency and resulting in less diverse scholarly research.

As has been indicated, we didn't get to this pitiful situation all by ourselves. Over the past 15 years, our budgets have been squeezed not only by funding cutbacks at our parent institutions, but also by inflation. At the same time, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of worldwide publications; and concurrently the impact and cost of technology on how we do business and the changing configurations in how we acquire resources for our collections (e.g., licensing agreements, consortial purchases, etc.) have significantly altered our daily operations. These realities have helped produce the very reasons for the homogeneity in our collections, and the excuses we give for their lack of diversity.

We may have, however, finally arrived at that crossroads where our self-aggrandized collecting provincialism is resulting in less information, rather than more, for our clientele. Approximately two percent of today's publishers account for 75% of U.S. titles produced. And the pricing and copyright practices of many of these commercial publishers have so constricted the flow

of diverse information that it is not an exaggeration to say that they, in effect, control the major research publishing venues.

In truth, there is an well-entrenched, global commercial monopoly on the distribution and approval of ideas, and we, as selectors, often contribute to its hegemony by our slothful collection habits. “Content,” too often, has become what our commercial enterprises define and distribute, and what we often unwittingly purchase – largely because few institutions any longer can afford to devote the number of staff hours required, or the money necessary to the time-consuming, professional job of evaluative selection! Again, it much easier to let the computer automatically renew our subscriptions, shuffle our artifacts—even if it is a lot of intellectual detritus, or let the patron slurp around the Internet where one can get lots of hits of unauthenticated bilge and dross. Somehow this is not consoling.

While we may make strong arguments that our shrinking budgets, the financial demands of supporting computer technology, and staff downsizing all have reduced the time and funds available for analyzing the worth of our current and retrospective acquisitions, it is equally true that we are not seeing the opportunities for positive change that lie before us--if we would only agree to communicate, cooperate, and collaborate!

While we ostensibly sing the song and talk the talk of hanging together, we, in fact, more often hang separately when it comes to resource sharing and cooperation.

As one wag recently observed, partnership is often another word for seeking funding from some outside agency. And once we get the money, we frequently go our own ways -- until the next funding proposal or consortial agreement promises something for nothing.

A recent Mellon Foundation Report makes it clear that the “viability of the traditional model of the library” is unlikely to meet the information needs of the emerging global village. Ann Okerson, in that Report, sums it up

In the face of this pricing crisis, libraries have responded essentially by redistributing their resources, a mode of response that cannot go on indefinitely. Instead there is a growing realization that no research institution can hope to sustain a self-sufficient collection into the indefinite future. Even before the “crisis,” libraries were actively collaborating and sharing resources. Under the circumstances described in the study, and even absent new technologies, libraries would have been led to pursue “without walls” philosophies energetically.<sup>ix</sup>

“Without walls,” however, means more than electronic access to virtual libraries, museums, and archives, it also means pursuing partnerships that provide gateways to other collections, sharing our staff—even sharing our buildings! It means enlarging our conceptions of collection development and shaping collections in concert with each other—even across geographical and political boundaries.

But our traditional attitudes about ownership must be overcome if we are to re-orient ourselves to the challenges and rewards of constructing complementary information resources that provide the depth of knowledge necessary for thorough research and that contain all the diverse materials our clientele need. Otherwise, we are going to continue to build boring, vanilla, cultural information institutions that are content-deficient, and unlikely to lead to a healthy and multicultural society of respectful dissent--not to mention a more democratic forum for the critical examination of ideas

Working in cultural information institutions is no longer for the faint of heart, and if we don't learn to work more cooperatively, we will be hung separately by an economic-political machine that is as relentless as it is blind. If we are going to see more clearly, we will have to envision and enact our future roles differently than in the past. If the traditional concept of creating and maintaining large self-sufficient collections of books, manuscripts and artifacts is not yet dead, it is only waiting on the arrival of the taxidermist for the coup de grace.

Our future lies in giving away our information institutions to our communities, in combining our resources and in facilitating and interpreting the cultural information dialogue. Paraphrasing Dylan Thomas, let us not go gently into the commercial info night, let us rage, rage, against the dying light of content, substance, and value. Vow that you will not be just an information handler of pre-packaged commercial pablum, engineered to reduce your communities to thoughtless, unexamined lives. The silent majority all live in graveyards!

Robert Archibald, president of the Missouri Historical Society, exhorts cultural institutions “to abandon the pedestals of authority that wall us off from those we serve and enter into the fray of discourse about important things in our communities.”<sup>x</sup> He argues that “history is not fact, that objects do not speak for themselves, that science is value-laden, that art is perspective, that technology is not neutral, that memory is not static, that there are no fixed canons, and hence...institutional claims of objectivity, authority, and truth [are] disingenuous.”<sup>xi</sup>

Counter the commercial information juggernaut with the principles of inclusion and collaboration. We can revitalize our non-profit cultural information centers if we understand that “successful collaboration requires shared vision, a shared plan, and shared resources. Unless this is agreed to at the outset, relationships will be difficult and the results one-sided “[For] successful collaborations build trust and relationships, magnify resources, and achieve results that exceed the separate capabilities of collaborating organizations.”<sup>xii</sup>

Archibald goes on to say that “We no longer ask isolated questions such as ‘What should we collect, conserve, exhibit, publish, research or what programs should we offer?’ These are strategies and resources. The questions we ask now are focused on what strategies and resources can best facilitate discussion of enduring community concerns.”<sup>xiii</sup>

As for technology, it can certainly assist us, especially in communicating and enacting our collaborations. Nevertheless, with all our new technology, the most recent study of interlibrary loan done by the Association of Research Libraries came to the conclusion that there has been no significant change during the last decade in the two-week turnaround time for getting books and

information between libraries, even though volume is up over 50%! And beware of those who assure you that there will be cost savings because of computerization. The research to date argues against such a sanguine, if not deceitful, view. Much to the chagrin of the computerholics, the overall productivity of U.S. industry during the past twenty years (except for a few high tech companies), a period of massive institutionalization of computer systems, has actually decreased slightly.

That the computer has changed how we work, however, cannot be denied. That it has encouraged constant reorganization, as we all hurry to fit in with the Machine's new bells and whistles (euphemistically called "re-tooling, or staff training"); that it now accounts for the most significant outlay of increasing expenditures in most organizations; that a burgeoning group of computer tenders and tweekers continues to grow; and that in some places information technology has become a substitute for individualized information service; this is all too true. Like the bank teller and the formerly ubiquitous gas station attendant, the knowledgeable, personal reference service provider (the information interpreter) has been replaced by a machine.

When the cost of technology decreases the money available for acquiring the astronomically increasing universe of publications; when copyright law becomes a barrier to the exchange of information and can be used as a monopolistic club to fend off competition; and when content is determined by "what the corporate/academic oligarchy sells"; the resulting vanilla research libraries and information institutions become a harbinger of the intellectual stagnation that will inevitably follow.

Neither information nor ideas are capable of (in)voluntary action. People, however, are, but without access to diverse information resources we will witness a less kind and less gentle society (not to mention, less democratic). Information does want to be free and like the brain drain prior to World War II, when thinkers flocked to the more liberal environment of the United States, ideas will seek new shelter if we do not treat them well.

Do not be surprised if the world wide web, that international information agora, does not spawn some entrepreneurial types who start selling information that is really useful and relevant to its clients “by the drink,” so to speak. We are already seeing at the Center for Research Libraries the rise of the “independent reader/scholar,” who, not affiliated with any institution, is hungrily searching the electronic fields of data in search of “content.” This global phenomenon has some far-reaching consequences for information institutions, and for society in general. As information professionals, as interpreters and guides to the information gateways, we should encourage a more discriminating use of information; that is our forte, and we should do all that we can to promote this aspect of our professional expertise. Interpreting information is the mark of professionalism.

The worldwide explosion of information works in our favor: almost everyone is now burping up information junk. There is data, data everywhere, but not a lot to think. As Sue Myburgh, a senior lecturer at the University of South Australia, notes in her essay on “information retrieval vs. data retrieval”:

This dichotomy is situated in the encounter that takes place  
between the information retrievalists, on the one hand, and the

data retrievalists, on the other; those who labor with qualitative research methods, as against those to whom quantitative research is all.

Put another way:

The field of information retrieval can be divided along the lines of its system-based and user-based concerns. While the system-based view is concerned with efficient search techniques to match query and document representation, the user-based view must account for the cognitive state of the searcher and the problem solving context.<sup>xiv</sup>

Both methods require sophisticated knowledge of the information universe, but the user-based one is a tailored process, as unique as the individual; or as the community that the information institution serves--and it is in this arena that most of us excel. This is our turf, our metier, our future. Forget the personal trainer, the personal banker, it's the personal information provider whom everyone will want! It's "content" that people will pay for, go to museums and archives to view, touch and learn from. And we are superbly placed to interpret and present information, making it meaningful and accessible to those who need it.

We don't just dispense information; that's what bookstores do. We educate by providing possible interpretations, by adding value—even by advocating. Certainly we must be sensitive and aware of the latest buzz, largely manufactured by today's increasingly yellow journalism, but we must also be professionally tuned to the underlying issues. And we must constantly customize our

limited resources through cooperative endeavors to the needs of our communities, realizing that “as the digital era explodes” our institutional walls, “the definition of community takes on worldwide dimensions.”<sup>xv</sup> We are really building one world library!

So let's not get caught up with the behemoth Publisher/Government/Research Complex or the computer engineers who, having lost sight of their objectives, redouble their efforts. They are already burying their heads in the information morass that they have unwittingly created. By the time they get it straightened out, we can be even further down the information road, doing what we do best: collecting, conserving, exhibiting, servicing and interpreting the complex information world.

This is not to say that we should not lobby for modifications to the present political/economic structure, to point out the fallacies of commercial information legerdemain, to educate our clientele about the intricacies and the vested interests of the Information Age, but we should be spending more time, the majority of our time, doing what we can do (evaluating, selecting and collaborating), should do, and, if done well, would ameliorate considerably the “crisis” we face -- not to mention the goodwill we would accrue with our users. Collaboration is not just a front for getting grants or making consortial purchases; it is not a buzzword, it's a life style (in many ways it's like marriage: love, honor and negotiate).

Collaborators don't care whose on top. Collaboration means “sharing” control -- sometimes even not being in control. And what is this craven need we seem to have for autonomy? And what

has it actually gotten us? A series of vanilla cultural information institutions with more technology and less staff.

While we don't know all the ways we can learn to share, we do know that we could do a lot more than we are doing -- and it's less expensive in the long run than the pernicious game we are playing now of "one-book upmanship." In a recent speech Tom Sanville urged libraries to cross-pollinate with other information institutions, to join together in groups like OhioLink (a state-sponsored collaboration of all types of information institutions) to realize the lowering of costs of the information unit.

It reminds me of that old parable about the various body parts arguing about which one is the most important one. They all are important and must work in harmony. And so should we! The sum of our parts is greater than any one of us. We are building one world cultural information resource and it's time we became conscious of this and moved with that purpose.

One of the greatest cultural resources, the Library of Congress (even though it is not a National Library), still makes major collecting decisions, like deciding no longer to collect comprehensively in certain areas, without alerting the rest of us in a timely manner. There are innumerable collections scattered across this country and the world that we have little or no knowledge of. There are magnificent collections rotting in basements, attics and closets that would enrich our national heritage and broaden the content that we could offer our clientele if we would only learn to work more closely together -- and select, even locally, less of the detritus belched up by the commercial publishers. With a little more cohesion (similar to ARL's SPARC initiative), we

could even influence these bottom-line commercial enterprises to provide what our clients really need, maybe even support some new publishers and information purveyors who were more in tune with content, society, and, heaven knows, civilization.

The ultimate objective of cooperative institutional information development and sharing is to maximize the materials to which our clientele, yours and mine, have access while minimizing local budget expenditures. Surely, this alone can serve as a blueprint for the journey we must embark upon if we are to hang together.

The best summation I can provide you is from an article in Information Technology and Libraries by Jordan M. Scepanski, Executive Director, Triangle Research Libraries Network:

Among the first steps that can be taken in re- thinking how service to the public is rendered is for librarians [curators, archivists and other cultural information providers] to assert their professional expertise. The obvious problems with information today is its overabundance. There is more of it than can be handled. Peter Lyman, of the University of California at Berkeley, has pointed out that libraries originally were created to deal with the problem of information scarcity; that is, to bring together in one place, for the use of the many, items that were few in number so that they could be shared. Now there is too much rather than too little. There also is too much of too little. That is, so much of the information that is overwhelming everyone is of poor quality or of little value. There is a lot that is of little consequence. If

the traditional library, then, was the answer to a paucity of information, the new [information specialist] is the solution to its plenitude. There has never been a more critical need for the talents of professionals who not only know how to find information, but how also to evaluate it. The role of the [information specialist] can no longer be one of pointing the way for the user, nor even of just teaching that user how to find what is needed. [We] must now teach both how to find what is needed and how to assess what is found. [We] are information experts, and that expertise extends beyond knowing where to look for things. [We] do know how to differentiate good data from bad, current information from that which is dated, reliable sources from those that are less so. And given the intense subject specializations of content experts – most especially faculty members at universities -- and their subsequently narrowly drawn knowledge of their fields, coupled with the extraordinary expansion of scholarship in every field, good librarians frequently know the literature of a given discipline better than many of its practitioners and teaching and research experts. To change, public service [information specialists] have to be recognized as information experts and accept that they are so. No longer can they, or society, heed that old admonition, drilled into so many in [professional] schools, that [we] don't make judgments about the information [we] help people find. If [we] don't make such judgments no one will, and

clients will be the worse for [our] timidity. [We] should return to the public librarian's approach of an earlier era, that of the "reader's advisor," the librarian whose knowledge of the disciplines and of [the] literature and of the reader's interest and needs allowed functioning as a guide and a counselor. [We] once again need to guide and counsel. [We] need to advise and to teach.<sup>xvi</sup>

It is time for us to re-dedicate ourselves to the value-added things we bring to the information arena, to facilitate the information gateways for our users, to collaborate across institutional and geographical boundaries, to share our dwindling resources and magnify them through cooperative strategies, to create an international conspectus for preserving the recorded knowledge of civilization, and to put our always limited funds toward our overarching visions.

Over the years it has become almost a cliché to urge people to "think globally, act locally." Could we possibly add a parenthetical addendum to "act locally (with global intent)"? After all, whether you realize it or not, we are building one library. And all of you are its bibliographers!

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ii Heckart, Ronald J. "Machine Help and Human Help in the Emerging Digital Library," *College & Research Libraries*, V. 59, no. 3 (May 1998), 250.

iii *Ibid.*

iv Bosseau, Don L. "Where Are We Now? Some Thoughts About Expansionism," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, V. 24, no. 5 (September 1998), 390.

v King, Ralph T. Jr., "Medical Journals Rarely Disclose Researchers' Ties," *Wall Street Journal* (February 2, 1999), p. B1.

vi *Ibid.*, p. B4.

vii Jim Davis. "The Incompatibility of Capitalism and Information," *Intertek*, V. 3.4 (1993), 19.

viii Wayne A. Wiegand. "The Politics of Cultural Authority," *American Libraries*, V. 29 (January 1998), 81.

ix Okerson, Ann, in *Synopsis to University Libraries and Scholarly Communication* by Anthony M. Cummings et al. (The Association of Research Libraries for the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, November 1992), p. xxii.

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<sup>x</sup> Archibald, Robert, "Narratives for a New Century," *Museum News*, V. 77, no. 6 (November/December 1998), 37.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>xiv</sup> Sue Myburgh, "The Clash of the Titans: Information Retrieval vs. Data Retrieval," in Information Imagineering: Meeting at the Interface, eds. Milton T. Wolf, Pat Ensor, and Mary Augusta Thomas (Chicago: American Library Association, 1998), pp. 53-54.

<sup>xv</sup> Hage, Christine Lind, "Books, Bytes, Buildings, and Bodies: Public Libraries in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *American Libraries*, V. 30, no. 1 (January 1999), 79.

<sup>xvi</sup> Jordan M. Scepanski. "Public Services in a Telecommuting World," Information Technology and Libraries, V. 15 (March 1966): 44.