Who Will Lead the Unsuspecting Lemmings Over the Cliff?

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Abstract

The study and report by the Benton Foundation relies heavily on information supplied by the general public, which has already shown in previous contacts its total inability to select among alternatives, to rank order, and to relate desires to funding options. This information is then compared to recommendations made by representatives of organizations identified as library "leaders." However, the report confuses leadership with management authority and ignores the fact that managers and leaders have different and frequently contradictory priorities. Finally, this article argues that any meaningful strategy must come directly from the analysis and professional judgment of librarians unfettered by what outsiders might consider desirable or reasonable, and suggests ways in which such a strategy might be developed.

A study examining the prospects for our profession's future as we prepare for the next millennium is certainly welcome and very much needed, particularly when it is undertaken by the prestigious Benton Foundation and funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, both groups which have shown their interest in, and support for, the concerns of this profession. That the profession of librarianship faces an uncertain and perhaps even frightening future can hardly be doubted. Declines in support for public library and academic library activities, reductions in both staffing (particularly professional staffing) and funding, a decline in an insistence on the professional degree in hiring, and lack of support for continuing

education—these are just a few examples. Other indicators of decline include the closing of many of the most prestigious institutions which prepared our future professionals (and without future professionals we become a dying breed), and the continuing trivialization of what we are and what we do by all branches of the media (e.g., the annual return of "It's a Wonderful Life" in which, in the absence of faith, something horrible like becoming a spinster librarian could happen). In the last few years, this trend has been aggravated by slick television ads for computer hardware and systems manufacturers which inform us that going to the library is no longer necessary since all information is "easily" and "rapidly" accessible on the system we are about to purchase. Finally, one needs only ride on airplanes a few times to discover the discomfort and puzzlement brought on by learning that one's companion for the next few hours actually teaches and researches in the profession of librarianship. These are simply random examples of problems in public perception and public support of which we are all aware. A study leading to a new and assertive strategy would be very welcome.

The first suggestion that this report is going to be disappointing comes from its very title, because *Buildings, Books, and Bytes,* while certainly a catchy title, is as much an example of trivialization as those cited above. Buildings, printed material, and computer access to information in other than printed form are merely tools for the carrying out of our mission and responsibility, if indeed we can ever decide what that is, rather than wait for others to tell us. Buildings, for example, are a necessary means to an end but never an end in themselves. Inadequate physical facilities make it difficult or impossible for librarians to do their jobs; adequate buildings at least increase the potential. In speaking at the dedication of a new public library in Findlay, Ohio, this writer congratulated the assembled civic officials and Chamber of Commerce representatives on making such a good start, but then asked them if they had considered how they now wanted to use this new opportunity to enhance public library service for the citizens, and what additional funding they were considering for access and staff. They were surprised at my comments, because they assumed that in building a new structure they had completed their task. Perhaps the most garish recent example comes from the city of San Francisco, where a new $134 million library has been completed without any thought to additional professional staffing. This is more than a waste; it is a danger, because the citizens of San Francisco now think they have supported their public library, when in reality they have perhaps only improved their skyline.

Books and bytes, as the report calls them rather simplistically, are also not the issue, but rather only among the options which allow librarians to bring more and better needed information and knowledge to the citizens of the community. Those options have always been subject to

change and will continue to change. None of us recall what concern and anguish might have arisen when printed books began to appear next to manuscripts in libraries, but there was undoubtedly fear that libraries would now be spoiled forever. We do know that the introduction of type-writers and their use in preparing previously handwritten catalog cards caused much alarm.

If people think that changing the mix between printed books and computer access somehow "changes" what libraries are supposed to do, then that conception is both wrong and simplistic. When it appears in the opinions of the general public, this is not surprising because the public has always been initially suspicious of significant change as an attack on tradition and comfort. There was a similar outcry at the introduction of automobiles and the fact that they would frighten horses. Public nega-tive reaction is temporary, provided that there is professional leadership from those qualified, through education and study, to know. What is significant in the introduction of computers in libraries is the fact that, when added to more traditional (which only means earlier) formats, they allow for far greater access to information than had previously been pos-sible. In other words, all libraries, including small and geographically isolated ones, now become windows to the world's knowledge. That is the good news, but there are three pieces of potentially bad news, al-though the bad news is trivial by comparison. The first piece of bad news is that all of this will produce access to tremendous quantities of informa-tion, and that this will require filters. As syndicated management guru Tom Peters has noted, "a flood of information can be the enemy of intel-ligence." Expanded information access will require gatekeepers and evalu-ators. The second piece of news, which stems from the first, is that all of this will require a great many more professional librarians, because this is the most cost effective alternative. The third, of course, is that funding for libraries will have to increase dramatically. However, there is no ac-ceptable alternative, because the alternative is stupidity and particularly stupidity while others are getting smart.

The issue of concern is not buildings, books, or computers; it is pro-fessionals to shape and manage the institutions we now call libraries. But what we call them does not really matter. What happens there is what does matter. The key issue of professionals is certainly never addressed by the general public in this survey, which never mentions librarians but only libraries. Indeed, there is evidence that they confuse librarians not only with the clerks who do important work in our institutions but even with the people who work in bookstores. That is not surprising and there-fore not really disappointing, although the medical profession would never allow such confusion in responsibility to remain. What is disappointing is that the importance of professional librarians as the crucial element in addressing this problem is never addressed in the study title and content

or by the presumed "leaders" whose only reference is to the fact that somehow librarians will "have to change."

It is perhaps time to review the definition of a profession and the roles of professionals to see whether we qualify or even want to qualify. The issue is certainly not assured within, let alone outside, the field. Also, as will be noted later, a number of library educators at prestigious universities have suggested that educational programs must distance themselves from the "field" of librarianship to avoid being swamped in the undertow. However, it is the premise of this article that we are and should be a profession, and that indeed the problems we face in the next century can only be addressed by the leadership of a profession which informs the general and political public of what it has no reason to know. That, of course, is what doctors and lawyers do but also what plumbers and garage mechanics do. It is, for this writer, the crucial issue in all of our consideration, and it is totally ignored in the report.

Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed. (1994) tells us, in part, that a profession is "a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation." A slightly different but similar definition is provided by Andrew Abbott (1988), who argues that the tasks of professions are human problems amenable to expert service. Professions compete for existing and newly emerging problem jurisdictions; they work to retain jurisdiction over their problems, to change or extend their jurisdiction, or to preempt the jurisdiction of other professionals. It is easy to see how Abbott's point relates to our own field. Increasingly, our jurisdiction has been taken over by the computer and business fields which understand, even if we do not, the value of the territories called information and knowledge. It is hard to see how any study, and this study in particular, could hope to produce useful information for librarians without dealing with issues of professionalism and issues of territorial jurisdictions. But then the study hardly discusses librarians at all, and the general public being surveyed never talks about them. The emphasis is on libraries, but libraries are places which contain things. They have no innate value of their own, they are only what their professionals make of them.

The survey of the general public continues to tell us nothing more than what such attempts to quiz our users have always told us. This is not their fault because we continue to empower them without explaining the options and choices. We have seen in two White House Conferences that the general public wants everything, that it is not willing to prioritize, and that it does not want to talk about higher taxes. The first White House Conference in 1979 ended with over 100 unranked and uncosted recommendations, and such a wish list is politically unmanageable even if some in power might want to implement some of it. Of course, both this and the succeeding White House Conference assured their irrelevancy

by insisting that the individuals being asked to decide first prove that they understood neither library issues nor library problems.

Thus these respondents indicate that they really want everything, and what they personally may not use is still also an acceptable addition. Thus, they want nice buildings, they want books (presumably the ones mentioned by Oprah Winfrey and also the classics), and they want computer access. Those with children, not surprisingly, want computer services, and there is general support for having the library play a role as a safe haven for latchkey children and adults who are functionally illiterate. We are told that senior citizens have a high regard for public libraries, but they were not asked why either they or their fellow senior citizens, as a group, consistently vote against all public funding initiatives, including those for libraries. Respondents had no objection to the role of librarians as pathfinders and guides, although some were surprised at such a role. That may be explained by the realization that some respondents don't even know who librarians are, as compared not only to the clerks in our own libraries but also to the employees in book stores.

What can we make of such a range of responses, which espouse the value of everything and the cost of nothing? Very little if anything. The report suggests that there is optimism in the finding that a great majority of the public is "willing" to spend more in support of libraries, but that response cannot be believed. Support in the abstract is worth nothing, and the elected and appointed politicians understand quite clearly that there is greater safety in lower taxes than in better libraries. Even this last statement can be understood from the response that is, for this writer, the most depressing of all. Despite cuts in budget, in staffing, in services, and in hours of opening, the public is not distressed. It thinks libraries are "wonderful." Politicians know what that means. It means it is safe to cut the budget of libraries again. Police protection, on the other hand, is not "wonderful," and that budget must be enhanced. Nor are garbage collection and pothole repair considered wonderful. Money goes not to where people are happy but where they are unhappy. We have done a singularly incompetent job in making our users unhappy and angry, but this is never mentioned.

If library patrons can have their answers easily explained away, what of the responses of those individuals whom the report calls "leaders?" They are never identified as individuals, but they represent the institutions named by the Kellogg Foundation as Information Systems Management Grantees. This list of eighteen organizations includes professional societies, major universities, large public libraries, and major library education programs. The spokespersons who represented these institutions are not identified by name, but it can be assumed that they are in high positions of administrative responsibility. That makes them managers, but does it make them leaders?

Perhaps as individuals they are leaders, but certainly not as a group, and it can be argued that successful managers, who have already achieved posts of high prestige and high salary, are particularly unlikely to expose themselves to the risks that leadership entails. The political process provides the most obvious example. Historians are now reaching the conclusion that the last United States president who was a leader was Harry Truman. Truman, we will recall, fired General Douglas MacArthur for usurping powers that belonged to the Chief Executive, although he knew that this would expose him to a storm of protest. He could, at worst, have assigned this task to an unlucky cabinet official and let that individual take the blame, but Truman fired MacArthur personally. We have seen examples of the other approach often since that time, most directly embodied in the decision by loyal staffers to "protect the President," presumably even from his own improper act. Most recently we have begun to confuse the style of individuals who tell us eloquent things with leadership. However, before they take any public stand they receive polls that tell them what the public wants to be told. That is not leadership.

The point of this digression is to explain why major officials, in professional society, elective office, and in the executive corner offices of major public and academic libraries, can hardly be expected to be leaders and risk takers. They have already achieved what they sought to achieve; why would they now want to antagonize those who elected them, or the university president, or the mayor? None of this then is their fault. The fault is with the study methodology which confuses leaders with important people. Important people tend to become more conservative because they have more to lose. In selecting the Kellogg Foundation grantees, the Benton Foundation researchers may have made what was for them a safe and perhaps politically expedient choice, but they have destroyed the ability to compare responses from the two disparate groups because, to a large extent, this second group says exactly what it knows the first group expects it to say.

Even with all of this explanation, there is one piece of unforgivable mischief. After stating in their public responses what they were expected to say—that libraries would continue to do everything and more even in the face of declining staffs and budgets—some of the participants then respond privately that what they had said publicly might in fact not be possible. It is unfair to brand such a double standard as hypocritical, but is this what any field (the report does not describe a profession, only "libraries") has the right to expect from its "leaders?" Management writers have understood for a long time that the characters of managers, who tend to be bureaucratic, and leaders, who tend to be impatient of organizational structure, are not only different but in large part contradictory. Cosgrove's 1988 analysis in *Campus Activities Programming* was then related to our field in an article (White, 1990), but it may be that the officials in

the Kellogg and Benton Foundations do not read our literature. They can, however, identify top level managers. That part is easy.

The Kellogg and Benton Foundations are certainly correct in their sense of timing, because it is essential that librarians make some decisions about their future directions. Two possible roads beckon to us. The first is outlined by Peter Drucker, who in 1993 postulated that the most exciting future profession would be that of knowledge workers. This is because knowledge workers will do what is essential, and yet what the general public (and even corporate management and academia) will be unwilling and unable to do for themselves—unwilling because information is a means to an end and not an end in itself. This is particularly true in the working environment where individuals are judged by what they accomplish and not by how much time they spend looking for things. That realization will dawn even on the present population of 18 to 24 year olds who, quite typically for their age, are incapable of admitting any weaknesses. As these individuals enter the "real" world of the workplace, they will quickly learn that their managers are not impressed with how much time they spend online, particularly in chat rooms.

Drucker (1993) is undoubtedly correct in his prediction, but what is not known is whether the future knowledge workers will be librarians or others who can see the power base and the economic opportunity. Certainly a new commercial sector identified by the British journal *The Economist* (1993) as the meatware industry (meatware being the human beings who use the hardware and software on our behalf) falls into that category, and it has been identified as one of the hottest future growth industries. The question is not whether or not there will be meatware or knowledge workers, but whether librarians will be a part of this process. There are two things against us. The first is the public assumption that we are neither interested nor capable (although we certainly are better prepared for this work than any other field), the second is our own reluctance or perhaps lack of confidence, as indicated in this study through the reactions of our "leaders."

The second possible road is described in the daily national newspaper *USA Today*, which lists ten occupations (Kelly, 1996) for which the paper sees no future. These include telephone operator, bank teller, and librarian. The connection is obvious. These are three groups of people who, in the opinion of the newspaper, do clerical and routine work that computers can do more effectively. To some extent we still have choices but, as noted by John Barlow (1994), we will most certainly be relegated to *USA Today*'s perceived future for us if we insist that our business is containers of information rather than the content of those containers. Computers can manipulate containers far better than we can.

What then do the designated "leaders" see as our future? According to the report, they perceive the library's role (not even the librarian's

role) as trusted guides, coaches, and path finders. If this does not send a shiver of excited anticipation down the spines of the reader, it is not surprising. A self-selected role in these areas, particularly at a time of downsizing and a fierce competition for funds, appears totally suicidal. This writer cannot imagine a U.S. president, governor, mayor, academic administrator, or corporate executive calling a news conference to announce that one of the higher priorities for his or her administration is the selection and nurturing of guides, coaches, and path finders. If we want to chart a unique professional role for the profession of librarianship, it must be by creating the unique jurisdiction about which Abbott writes so forcefully, without mentioning librarians (nor, of course, does Drucker). Only *USA Today* finds us worthy of specific identification. Our argument must be that what we do either uniquely or at least better and more cost effectively than anyone else is crucial, and that therefore we must be empowered to do it. Most directly, we must attack the absurd notion (certainly in management terms) that what librarians do has a cost, while what end-users do is free.

Another way of describing these options might be in terms of the animal kingdom. Archilochus observed that "the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one great thing" (7th century BC). Do we want to be the equivalent of hedgehogs, or rather, instead of foxes, guides, coaches, and path finders to the knowledge of foxes? Another alternative is posed, even if starkly, by library educators Nancy Van House and Stuart Sutton (1996). They suggest, although they are writing about library education and not librarianship, that we are likely to go the way of the panda: cute, well loved, coddled, and nearing extinction. It is these deans and other educators who also suggest that library education programs must distance themselves from libraries in order to survive. The intent of the Kellogg and Benton Foundations is commendable, but if they really want to come up with a document that this profession can use as a plan, they need to start over. First, they need to stop asking library users what they think. We already know what they think, and that unranked and uncosted wish list cannot be fashioned into any sort of strategy. Besides, why should we keep asking people who obviously don't know? Have we no confidence in our own expertise and our own judgment?

Second, they need to convene a conference of real leaders and potential leaders and not just of high level managers. Potential leaders in our field do exist but, unless we encourage and support them, we may stone them to death, because leaders are not always comforting or popular. The foundations might begin with some students in our library education programs who chose this career not because they wanted to emulate present librarians, but because they were certain that there must be a better way. Such students have to be identified early, before the bureaucracy of the library workplace, particularly in the demand that they be

pleasant members of the mediocracy-driven "team," drives them to si-
lence or to leaving the field. The foundations might also seek individuals
who, as public, academic, and state library directors, have been censured,
and perhaps even fired, for daring to suggest that librarians know more
about planning and managing libraries than nonlibrarians. In both cases
we have lost sight of the general management principle that good subor-
dinates make far more trouble than bad ones, but they are worth it. In all
fairness, it may not occur to professors of business administration that
this applies to librarians.

For a third group of potential leaders, the foundations might look to
working professional librarians, particularly reference librarians, who are
frustrated by administrative policies that keep them from providing proper
and adequate reference service, because administrators insist on pretend-
ing that the now decimated staff is still "adequate." These librarians may
also be frustrated by the fact that much of what little time they have is
spent in answering the routine and directional questions that clerks could
easily answer, except that: (1) there are not enough clerks so the profes-
sionals become clerks; or (2) the patrons cannot tell who is a profes-
sional librarian, who is a clerk, who is a student, and who is a volunteer.

There are no guarantees, but a group of these free-spirited thinkers,
unfettered by the realizations of their management bosses of what is or is
not "reasonable" or "possible," might even come up with something we
can use as a battle plan. And a battle plan is exactly what it must be.

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