So You Thought Librarianship Was About Books!

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Abstract

Every library is modified by its users. Computers must be servants, not masters, and allowance must be made for obsolescence. Availability of useful information from the University of Cambridge is discussed.

I am an old-fashioned Librarian, and I still think on five-by-three cards! Every library is modified by its users, and its users are people, even if they are very odd, and can only communicate through computers. They know more and more about less and less, but are bewildered by human interaction and life outside their research. Sir Robert Ball spoke of:

> another professor who was deplorably ignorant of any subject outside his own. Going one day to a college library, he said to the clerk: "Would you direct me to some book which would explain to me clearly the difference between longitude and latitude, as there seems to be an unnecessary amount of complication about the matter!"
>
> W. Valentine Ball (1915)

Fashions change in libraries as well as clothes. At one time we were urged to have everything microfilmed to save space, but microforms are hard on the eyes, and nothing like as easy to copy as the ordinary printed page. Computers have wonderful resources, but must be servants rather than masters. For short-term storage of data they are excellent: loans; quick-finding and transmission, for example. Do readers actually go through the multitude of Newsletters which are now on-line? Those who are directly concerned will, but many another will not, yet they see a paper issue on display, and will glance through it.

Some data are needed for a long time, such as variable star records or library holdings; and data worked on ten years ago may now be quite impossible to re-use, or even to read again, because people forget, or do not face, the fact that the equipment may have an expected life of only five years before it needs to be replaced and everything updated. One paper here has given me great encouragement: "The Digitization of Historical Astronomical Literature" Corbin & Coletti (1995). Not all of us can have original Observatories' publications on our shelves, waiting to be used.

How many of you recognise an eighty-column punched card, or a reel of punched paper tape? The readers for these are few, and will be found mostly in museums. Every little twitch of improvement can move compatibility further apart. Can we afford to up-grade every four or five years? Rothenberg (1995) and Baker (1994) are both alarmed by the rush to destroy the old systems as soon as the new ones appear to be usable.

The University of Cambridge has many specialised libraries rather than an enormous central one, and a location list of Serials held in these scattered places is available through JANET and Internet lists and servers. A tremendous effort is being made to add books as well. The Institute of Astronomy's serials are all included, but the book list is still being worked on. The direct telnet address is: ul.cam.ac.uk.

An illustration from Vselennaya i My has a much more realistic view of the universe, showing Aquarius emptying his water over Pisces, who is biting a leg of Aries, who is butting Taurus, who is tossing one of the Gemini ... but, as David W. Dewhirst said in 1992: "There is a difference between an astronomical library and a Good Astronomical Library." and I am sure that we shall return home to make our Libraries even Better!

References

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[3] Corbin, B.G. and Coletti, D.J. (1995) Digitization of historical astronomical literature. LISA II, to be published in Vistas in Astronomy.

[4] Rothenberg, J. (1995) Ensuring the longevity of digital documents. Scientific American, 272(1) pp. 24-29

[5] ... (1993) ... Vselennaya i My, Moscow, 1 p. 101