

Renaissance Matters

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Because Peter Schanck's paper¹ is so comprehensive in its discussion of the issues posed in the outline, my comments are framed largely in reaction to his paper. In several places, I also have referred to the list of environmental trends affecting academic law libraries that was published in the summer 1994 *ALL-SIS Newsletter*.² Specific references to other current sources that I found helpful are included in notes.

I. Issues

A. Staffing

I agree generally with Peter's comments about the likelihood of little or no growth in staff size and the consequent need for retraining and reallocation of duties. The need for librarians to have additional training in information technologies is increasingly noted in the literature,³ but, as is discussed below, it is hard to be precise about what kinds of training are appropriate.

B. Technology

I am less optimistic than Peter about the long-range effects of technological advances on what librarians have traditionally done and continue to do. I think that he is correct that, in the near-term, technology will transform the work now done in our libraries.⁴ I am less sanguine, however, that technological development and the spread of network information accessibility to the desktop will continue to support the need for expertise of the sort law librarians have traditionally provided. An

1. Peter Schanck, *Toward a Renaissance in Academic Law Librarianship*, in *A Renaissance in Law Librarianship* 47 (Richard A. Danner, ed. 1996).
2. *A Vision for the Academic Law Library*, *ALL-SIS Newsletter*, Summer 1994, at 12.
3. See, e.g., Tim Miller, *How to Become an Electronic Librarian*, *Information Today*, Feb. 1995, at 40,40.
4. Following Peter, I too hope that we will reach a point in academic libraries where each law school library does not have to devote staff resources to creating individual local catalog records for every book we purchase. Yet I am also concerned that overreliance on centralized cataloging databases and paraprofessional catalogers staff might encourage libraries to organize and classify collections without sufficient regard for the specialized needs of local law library users.

essential result of the expansion of networks and the decentralization of computing and information resources is the empowerment of end users.⁵ This will affect librarians and the services that they have traditionally provided in many of the same ways that it is affecting other "centralized" information resources.

I tend to think that technology will eventually (and faster than Peter projects) render many of the librarian's traditional functions superfluous to most legal researchers. Our traditional work in collection, organization, classification, identification, location, retrieval, and dissemination of information has always been undervalued by users. (Consider the vast literature in which librarians have argued (mostly to themselves) in support of their professional status.) Why would this work be better appreciated or understood in an era when research results can be obtained directly through a desktop terminal than when the researcher actually had to visit the library?

Librarians tend to argue (again, often largely to themselves) that the growing complexity of the information environment will continue to justify their role.⁶ It is easy for us to assume that end users, faced with a multitude of electronic sources and search engines, will turn to librarian intermediaries for all but simple and recreational searches. But, one need only briefly monitor the growing number of list-servs for law faculty and practicing attorneys to see the enthusiasm for directly accessible electronic sources, an utter lack of concern about complexity (and little about authenticity and accuracy), and virtually never any suggestion that someone seeking information should go to a library or to a librarian. Law librarians have long noted that students and others are quickly satisfied with any answers received through Lexis or Westlaw. Why would this tendency change as more end-user sources become directly available? If anything, we should expect these trends to become more pronounced as agent interfaces and technological developments improve end users' abilities to conduct effective searches.⁷

5. See generally, George Gilder, *Life after Television: The Coming Transformation of Media and American Life* (rev. ed. 1994); Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (1995). While one might argue specifics with the current prophets of the post-television and post-information ages, the trend toward decentralization of computing power is difficult to deny.
6. See, e.g., Jean Fisher & Susanne Bjorner, *Enabling Online End-User Searching: An Expanding Role for Librarians*, 85 *Special Libraries* 281, 282 (1994) (presenting the results of a survey "confirm[ing] what many librarians have felt at a gut level: End-user activity proves the professional's worth as the complexity and multiplicity of information sources becomes apparent to the non-professional.")
7. See, e.g., Nicholas Negroponte, *Less is More: Interface Agents as Digital Butlers*, *Wired*, June 1994, at 142, 142. See also *Cyberspace*, *Business Week*, Feb. 27, 1995, at 78, 79, for reports on the drive to develop software that will "collect information, organize it, and make it readily available."

C. Training/Education/Skills Requirements

Peter's comments on training and education are well-taken, particularly regarding the needs for staff to have a love of change and for organizations to be more fluid. I would emphasize that structural fluidity and cooperation must extend beyond the law library to embrace the rest of the law school and other institutions, as well. It will be increasingly important for library staff to understand and to buy into the mission and priorities of the law school itself, rather than to think of the library as an institution somehow apart from the law school. Cross-departmental teams dealing with information issues will become more common.

Skills in teaching and instruction, at the group and individual levels, and in the design of self-help assistance and instructional technologies will also become crucial as end-user searching becomes more important. Some writers have called upon librarians to embrace the growth of end-user research, and see themselves as facilitators and teachers of effective end-user searching. This will require not only attention to developing effective instructional skills in traditional settings, but the development of the technical skills needed to create self-help technologies to support users.⁸ Instruction and development of user-centered interface technologies may well be the future of the profession.

Peter notes, as do some published writings, that librarians need greater skills in information technologies. Yet, it is hard to state precisely what kinds of training are appropriate. What level of technical knowledge do librarians need to perform the roles that they envision for themselves? One article notes both that "a little understanding of data communications basics will go a long way," and that librarians should approach systems staff "from a position of strength, primed with detailed information about the services and platform requirements."⁹ Do librarians need to replicate the knowledge of the technologists? Or are different sets of skills (e.g., in information science) more appropriate? Should we be developing more knowledge of how people seek and use information, and more skills in designing user interfaces?

D. Parent Institutions

I refer to the list of trends in the ALL-SIS vision¹⁰ statement and have nothing to add to Peter's comments, other than to note again the need for fluid organizational structures throughout the law school.

8. See Miller, *supra* note 2 at 41, Fisher & Bjorner, *supra* note 4 at 282; Richard A. Danner, *From the Editor: Its the Network*, 86 *Law Libr. J.* 391, 397-98 (1994).
9. Miller, *supra* note 2, at 40.
10. *A Vision for the Academic Law Library*, *supra* note 1.

E. Information Resources

Here again, I generally agree with Peter's comments. It is difficult to foresee what role local selection and organization of electronic information resources will play in a networked environment. I am not sure that I agree entirely with Peter's characterization of the trend toward greater reliance on electronic sources,¹¹ but I would hope that selection of electronic resources at the local level will be based on some criteria additional to the currently fashionable "what's new?" and "what's cool?"

F. Public Services

I have little to add to my earlier comments, other than again to show a bit of skepticism over whether, in the long run, there will be much role for the law librarian as "navigator on the information highway." I have fewer doubts about the need for experts to play this role than I have about the likelihood that empowered end users will acknowledge it.

I agree with Peter's comments regarding marketing of services, but I would argue that such efforts should center on the services provided by the *law librarian* rather than those of the *library*. It will be difficult for users to think of the library other than as a place; as such, other than for specialized research, the idea of the library may have decreasing resonance for sophisticated end users of network resources. If the librarian is to continue to play a significant role serving legal researchers, it may be wise to look at assistance with library resources as but one of the services offered by the legal information specialist.

It will be increasingly necessary for legal information specialists to provide customized services tailored to the specific needs of users within their institution, rather than to develop collections of materials and services developed in anticipation of possible needs. The legal researchers who seek assistance are likely to have better knowledge of information sources and search techniques than in the past. Armed with this knowledge, they will more than likely take on the educated consumer's posture of "Don't tell me about your grass seed; tell me about my lawn." Too much emphasis on marketing the law library, rather than the skills of the law librarian, can lead to too much talk about grass seed and too little about solving specific individual needs.

(In this section of his paper, I am actually most intrigued by Peter's speculations on the possibilities for transformation of legal documents into postmodern texts.)¹²

11. Schanck, *supra* note 1, at 52-53.

12. Schanck, *supra* note 1, at 54.

G. Clientele

Peter comments on the clientele of public academic law libraries. I would expect that widespread and accessible means electronic communications will encourage private law schools to develop increasingly sophisticated communications and services for alumni and other stakeholders, and that the library will play a role in these developments, thereby broadening its clientele.

H. Information Providers

I have no comments additional to Peter's. I do think that, in the current and developing legal information environment, "vendor" is an outmoded term if it is intended to describe all providers of legal information. Non-commercial electronic legal information providers express puzzlement over law librarians' characterizations of them as vendors, and use the description as evidence of law librarians' failure to understand the changing environment.

II. Recommendations

Like Peter, I find myself with little to add in these sections that has not been said above. I would like to be able to present new ideas about how AALL educational programs and publications can be creative in this area, but I am not sure at bottom what things a professional association can do other than to improve the content of its offerings, make sure that its programming meets the emerging needs of the members, and take advantage of new technologies.

I would be stronger than Peter in expressing opposition to a rebirth of a certification program for law librarians. The issues facing us individually and as a profession are too large and too important for any of our energies to be consumed in consideration of this issue. I think that few outside our own field would consider certification as a law librarian to be a meaningful credential, and that many would consider an effort to promote it now to be simply an attempt at self preservation by a group doubtful of its future.