"Taking a Hard Look"
by Charles Anderson
[from a column originally published December, 1990*]

Last month I mentioned the "revenge" effect of technology. I realize now that this was an unfair characterization. It sounds as if I felt that technology had done something to us. Of course, technological developments aren't sentient (at least not yet), so whatever has happened because of technology is just a broader application of the old computer law of GIGO-Garbage In, Garbage Out. We humans really have to take all the blame and that includes the library profession.

I remember my childhood experiences of a public library. Although I'm sure I didn't know the word, it was a typical Carnegie library in a smallish suburb of a major city. My most vivid memories are of regularly going there by myself to check out four books. I don't remember now if that was a library, self, or parentally imposed limit. I was widely read, if not particularly discriminating. I read novels about wilderness heroes, ace pilots of the First World War, submariners of WWII, and John Carter of Barsoom. I had to buy ones of this last type—my public library didn't own the Burroughs novels. I also read about Toussaint L'Ouverture, hunting for dinosaur eggs in the Gobi desert, and collecting reptiles.

Oddly enough, I never remember consulting a card catalog. Browsing for something different each week was a high part of the joy of going to the library. Discovering a new author in this way and later going on to read other books by the same person made for an added treat. Using the library as a child was a very positive experience. I have only one negative memory from that period. It's a vivid recollection of a school librarian who required individual oral book reports. I sat in a low chair that was about forty feet below her desk and eye level. I remember reporting on *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, a book I really enjoyed, and being very embarrassed by her cross examination. She wanted to know what I thought that the title meant. Being widely read doesn't guarantee omniscience, and I lacked any idea of the distance represented by a league. So, I said that I guessed it meant how deep the Nautilus went. She made me feel stupid, and left me with an unfortunate perception of school librarians that stuck for some years. Another school librarian some grades later rewarded me with a copy of *Two Years Before the Mast* for a semester of diligent volunteer shelving and it helped to modify my attitude. I didn't even know there were such things as public librarians unless I thought they were the ones who checked out my books.

Mostly, I preferred public libraries because no one bothered me. I was free to walk down the aisles, pursuing whatever interested me. I didn't need a summer reading program to stimulate my interest in reading. I don't think such a program even existed. If it did, I probably would have been haunted by the memory of that pesky school librarian and been turned off by the idea. I enjoyed being outdoors during the summer as much as any child, but this didn't mean that reading interests got forgotten. How much closer can one get to heaven than to stretch out in a tree house on a warm summer afternoon with a copy of *Tarzan of the Apes*? Falling in love with books (a lasting love) seemed so natural that it is still hard to understand why so many people don't love reading. (By the way, I am not attacking summer reading programs so I hope that any children's librarians among the readers won't rush to take up arms!)

I do wonder if we've been misled by an entrancement with the whole "professionalism" debate and its concomitant love of technology. I suspect that an unspoken, even subconscious reason why so many librarians have rushed to implement new technology is from an intuitive feeling that the public would then finally recognize us as professionals because of our mastery of the Machine.

Maybe we are wrong in thinking that a) we can nurture a love of books in just about any child, and b) every adult in our community would be dying to use our services if they only knew about them. We accept these ideas as truisms, though. We are willing to spend thousands of dollars a year, even in small libraries, on automation, CD-ROMS, videos, compact discs, and all the other paraphernalia and technology of "modern" library service. Because of this, I can go into my local library, and, if none of the approximately 300 new novels on display pleases me, I can ask a librarian to check a computer that will tell me which other library in the area might own one of the remaining 2,100 hardcover novels published last year. Of course. [do have to know the title or author's name. And, somehow, I have to know that this service is available.

The library where I live has about 172,000 books and annual expenditures of approximately S1.5 million. That small library from my childhood had about 22, 000 books and spent $26,000 in a year. This is about a 5,600 percent difference in operating expenses between the two libraries over a four-year period. Comparing the amounts spent on salaries between the two locations shows an 8300 percent differential. The Consumer Price Index increased around 520 percent during the same period. Looking at the two libraries' circulations, I find that my current library checks om about 5.4 times as many books as did my old one to a population base that is about five times larger than that of the library of my childhood. The turnover rate (total circulation divided by volumes owned) at the old library was 5.I, and at my current local library it is about 3.5. Therefore, my library now has nearly eight times as many books that get about 30 percent less use than at my old library. This raises some interesting questions.

Is what the public is buying for all those extra dollars really used? Are the extra dollars going for things of lasting benefit—ones that users will remember after forty years; My old library spent 42 percent of its budget on salaries. My current library spends 62 percent. Besides obviously necessary higher salaries for staff, some of that extra allocation is most likeh needed to deal with all the technological innovations we now have.

I'm reminded that the United States Post Office spent $356 million in one year on office automation. Not only has the mail not gotten particularly better, but the Post Office had to hire additional staff to deal with the new technology. I read about the same amount now as I did forty years ago, while book publishing has grown enormously during those years. Why, then , is it now harder to find something I want to read at the library just by browsing the shelves? Now it's necessary to be constantly on the alert for likely titles in reviews and rush to get in a reserve.

It seems likely that technology, in part, has had some revenge effects in libraries. The public libraries of the 1940s and 1950s didn't have many choices in what to buy with their materials budgets. It wasn't until the I950s that microfilm offered an alternative way to spend money. Now the nation's public libraries are spending approximately 70 percent of their entire materials budgets on books and, of course, a library is lucky to be able to spend 15 percent of its total budget on library materials.

If "Reading Is Fundamental," why do we spend only about ten cents out of every public library dollar on something to read? Why is even a relatively small library willing to pay $40,000 or more a year to maintain access to a larger area bibliographic database? Is it because consulting the computer to learn that a library an hour and a half's drive away has a particular book is what excellent library service is all about? Is it because an Apple IIE computer is so much flashier and represents an easier way to hold some children's interest? Or because doing a $20 online database search really impresses a local business person? Surely, it must take real professionals to understand all this hardware, right?

Maybe this is too harsh a picture and comes from my being fortunate enough to live in an area with one of the most sophisticated and wealthy library systems in the country. I have to remind myself that 80 percent of the public libraries in this country serve populations of less than 25,000, and 62 percent have fewer than 10,000 residents; 45 percent are open less than forty hours a week.

It is likely that not all these places have embraced the full technological revolution. I suspect there are many smaller libraries still concentrating most of their dollars on providing books for readers. Will Manley's library in Tempe, Arizona seems to be such a place. There are even some public libraries that insist on spending their book dollars on a specialized set of print materials—those books that people want to read. This approach seems to work, even in spite of technology.

This column is about using technology, and I don't doubt there are valid uses of technology in libraries. It's difficult to imagine handling the volume of circulation that many libraries do without a computerized system. But how valuable is an online public access catalog in a public library? It can be a marvelous system, allowing full Boolean searching, cross references, serials listing, etc. Such a system will tell a patron not only if the library owns a copy of a particular item, but also if it is currently on the shelf. And there is about a 75 percent chance that the book truly is there when the computer says that it is. In the other 25 percent of the cases it may be waiting to be shelve,. lost, mis-shelved or on a table or staff member's desk. Or, if a library shares an online system with several other libraries, depending on the size of the individual library, the chances may be quite good that the book isn't even in that particular library. Is such an online system of major importance for users who come in for leisure time reading? Would a combination of a less sophisticated online circulation system for high volume traffic plus computerized access to the content of the collection through CDROM versions of the library catalog for users who need research capabilities be a better use of technological dollars?

CDROM indexes to magazine articles have become indispensable for many different types of patrons from consumers to business people to students. These products have been around long enough that the original cost of development should almost be recovered. The prices should begin to drop, becoming more competitive with print counterparts. I don't see this happening, though, because the vendors know that new technology has nearly infinite price elasticity. That is, libraries (and their patrons, of course) who have become hooked on the devices will pay whatever the system costs.

It is also usually a lot easier to get dollars for equipment out of funding bodies than it is to get money for people to help users cope with the equipment. The typical rationale for this is that people are ongoing costs while equipment is a onetime purchase. This is not really true with the kind of equipment that we buy today. We also need to factor in maintenance costs and hardware and software upgrades. There is also the opportunity cost–that unknown cost of not spending money in alternative ways for staffing or books, for example.

Harking back to the intent of this column, that is, using technology, it may seem as if I am advocating a slowing down of the rush to purchase new devices and systems which might be viewed as contradictory for a technology advocate. What I'm really urging is more support for groups like the Public Library Association's Technology in Public Libraries Committee, which has recently reorganized its subcommittees to cover such areas as those suggested by two new ones—Impact Evaluation and Technology Advocacy, and Technology Awareness and Assessment and wants to establish a firm place for new technology in the planning and role setting process. It won't hurt us, and it may help our users, if we put any discretionary dollars to use in the book budget while we take a good hard look at the real advantages of any new technological development.

Note: This article, as described in the above attribution, originally appeared in December, 1990. Comparing some of the statistics to the current day it appears that little has changed. I use a branch of a very large urban library system now in a very different locale than when this article was published. This library has 27 physical branches, a mobile library service and a large central library, which cost approximately $100 million to build and has 143 parking spaces underground. In 2013 system had a total book collection of 10,587,845 volumes which were checked out 2,201,966 times. This equals a turnover rate of 4.81—worse than that large Midwestern library system 24 years ago! This library, out of a total operating budget of $63,573,181 spent 77% on staff and 10% on materials (books and digital materials). These figures, if representative of the U.S., suggest not much has changed over time in terms of the spending by public libraries on reading material—at least in larger city libraries.