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INFORMATION AS A COMMODITY

by Helena R. Costa, Cataloger, John Carter Brown Library

"Information as a commodity" is one of the latest catch phrases used in the field of library science in an effort to justify or to refute the question: "Are libraries really free?" Such a simple question should deserve a simple answer, but this is not the case. To the contrary, this simple question tends to produce more questions which are far more complex and even provocative: "Is information a commodity?" "Can you measure information effectively?" "Can you put a price on information?" "Should libraries market information services?"

To answer the first question: "Is information a commodity?," we must look for definitions. According to Cooper in "The Structure and Future of the Information Economy," one of the first persons to consider information as a commodity was Fritz Machlup in The Production and Distribution of Knowledge in the United States. For the first time, the scope of a "knowledge industry" was defined as including education, research and development, communications, information machines, and information services. Through this work, Machlup achieved his goal of "arriving at an important concept and quantifying the size" of the knowledge industry.¹

In 1977, Marc Uri Porat presented a different approach, calling it information activity. He defines information as "data that have been organized and communicated," while information activity "includes all the resources

consumed in producing, processing and distributing information goods and services."²

Cooper explains that Porat's contribution was "to refine the concept and to develop a comprehensive methodology for analysis of its size." In comparing these two leaders of information economy, we must consider that they each studied different aspects of the subject. While Machlup came up with a definition of information economy, Porat succeeded in measuring the size of information economy.³

If we consider, then, information as an "industry" with its own "economy," and if we go a step further and loosely define a commodity as something that can be bought or sold, then, conceivably, information is a commodity. However, this implies that information is a thing, that it is a tangible object. This is far from the truth, since information is an intellectual process, an intangible product.

Substantiating this belief, Jose-Marie Griffiths, in "The Value of Information," lists several non-commodity aspects of information developed by Flowerdew & Whitehead:

*When obtaining information, it cannot be assumed that the whole price is a measure of the value of that information to the purchaser.

*There is no obvious measure of a unit of information.

*Information is mainly an investment good although it has consumption aspects. In other words, information is usually acquired for use with other information for decision making and other tasks. Thus, it becomes part of the resource from which decisions can be made. In some instances, however, information is consumed for its own sake (e.g., for leisure purposes).

*A priori knowledge of the value of the information sought is incomplete.

*A priori knowledge of the uses for the information is incomplete.

*Benefits and costs may not be fully obtained and borne by the consumer and producer.

*The individual who decides whether or not to use an information service is not necessarily the one who is affected by that decision.⁴

These opposing viewpoints add to the ambiguity of the nature of information and information services which, in turn, makes measurement very difficult and which begs the next question: "Can you measure information effectively?"

According to Richard Orr, in "Measuring the Goodness of Library Services," there are two schools of thought concerning the measurement of library services. One school believes that "Some of the major benefits derived from libraries are not measurable" since "each library is unique and should be assessed in the context of its own particular history, constraints, users, and environment." Conversely, the other school feels that it is possible "to measure objectively the goodness of most, if not all, library services;" that "imperfect measures can be useful if their limitations are appreciated;" and that "quantitative measures offer great promise as aids in obtaining proper support for libraries and in achieving better services at an acceptable cost."⁵

Orr maintains that the measurement of information, as it pertains to library service, has two basic aspects reflected in the questions: "How good is the service?" and

"How much good does it do?" The first question represents quality, and the second, value; or, effectiveness and benefit, as they are also known in information science. The ultimate criterion for assessing the quality of a service is its capability for meeting the user needs it is intended to serve, and that the value of a service must ultimately be judged in terms of the beneficial effects accruing from its use as viewed by those who sustain the costs.⁶

Girffiths believes the problems of measuring information services objectively are attributed to: (1) the nature of information and derived products and services, (2) the integration relationship between information and knowledge, (3) the subjective characteristics of value, and (4) the ambiguity of viewpoint from which to measure value.⁷

This brings us to the problem which has been facing libraries for years; and that is to transform information into a concrete item. We are able to retrieve information from various sources: books, periodicals, manuscripts, microforms, databases, and so on; but can we really say that these objects are information? A major obstacle in the collection of meaningful data concerning information has been this difficulty of distinguishing between information and the information product or service that provided the information. With this in mind, we proceed to the next question, "Can you put a price on information?"

Michael Buckland, in "Toward an Economic Theory of the Library," recognizes the fact that, unlike a business firm intended to make profit by selling products, a library is a non-profit organization which makes services available. Groups of similar firms constitute an industry; most librarians would resent being regarded as part of an industry.⁸

While the goals of most libraries are not directly economic, the possibility of charging user fees has become a reality in some libraries and unsatisfactory contortions are required to put a price on information. Aris is careful to distinguish between "units of appraisal" and "units of account." He argues that a monetary unit should be used only to allow comparison, not to allow detailed accounting. Aris emphasizes that

"there is no harm in adding apples to oranges so long as one is entirely clear what one is doing and is careful to call the answer fruit."⁹

Does the imposition of user fees deter library use? Perhaps so. In the past, patrons have received library services free, and this has become an established, historical given. However, due to the current financial troubles of most libraries, I believe that charging a fee for some of the more expensive services, such as online searching, is a rational, if not moral, solution. Fees could be scaled so that most students would receive free access while profit-making organizations would be charged the highest rates. A public library's charging the well-educated professional for highly specialized services does not conflict with its role as provider of free information to the general public.

A person does not usually spend money without expecting something in return. In the case of the library, the information the patron receives may not produce an immediate benefit. If this information is free, the patron gives little or no thought to the matter; however, when a price is involved, he or she is much more sensitive to the benefit derived from this information.¹⁰

Griffiths feels that one approach in determining the value of information is in terms of the time saved by researchers and their willingness to purchase an information service. This only reveals, however, that the patron values the information at that price or more. It is the maximum sum that the patron would pay that is required to measure this economic benefit.¹¹

Unfortunately, the economics of information and uncertainty are of course inseparable; the latter being merely a reflection of the former.¹² What is lacking is a standardization for costing information systems and services. Libraries need a uniform methodology and set of definitions that can be applied to information, giving them access to accurate and reliable cost data.¹³

A positive approach to the problem of user fees would be marketing. As libraries move towards the future, offering more varied and sophisticated services, they should make the general public aware of their role, what they offer, and how valuable it is. For the first time, libraries must react and meet the competition from telecommunications head-on. Libraries must change their role from dormant

collections of books to dynamic sources of information.

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people

DEBORAH BARCHI recently was named Director of the Hope Library in Scituate. She replaces **DIANA CARDOSO** who is Librarian at the Department of Corrections.

ROBERT R. BELLEROSE recently was named Assistant Director/Supervisor of Reference at Lincoln Public Library.

CORRIE MARSH was appointed Head Acquisitions Librarian at Brown University last October.

JANE STAFFIER is the new Acquisitions Librarian at the U.S. Naval War College in Newport.

bulletin board

- The RILA Spring Business Meeting will be held May 22, at Cranston Public Library, 1 PM. Following the business meeting a panel discussion will be held on fees for services in public libraries.

- The Legislative Reception was held this year on April 1, at the State House Senate Lounge. Approximately 35 legislators and 35 librarians attended this lobbying effort. The legislators received RILA bookbags, notepads, pencils, and bookmarks.

As an added feature to the program, the first annual recognition award for leadership, support, and promotion of library and library services was presented by the Rhode Island Advisory Board of Library Commissioners. Joan Ress Reeves, Chair of COLA, received the award for her distinguished service and indefatigable work as a library advocate, trustee, and friend of libraries. The award was presented by Representative Mary McMahon, Chair of the Advisory Board of Library Commissioners.

Roberta Cairns, RILA President, then thanked everyone for coming to the reception, especially in a year when RILA has no legislation before either House. The lobbying effort was deemed a success by all who attended.

- The New England Library Association sponsored Counterparts 1986 on March 31st at the Framingham Public Library. Thirty four elected officials and committee chairpersons attended from the six New England state

associations and the New England Library Association. Rhode Island was represented by Roberta Cairns, Debra Cohen, Judy Bell, Anne Toll, Linda Walton, and Jacqueline Toy.

The attendees were addressed by Mr. Leon Haller, a Cambridge, Massachusetts financial planner and author of Financial Resource Management for Non-Profit Organizations (Prentice-Hall, 1982). He offered helpful advice on how to approach a budget in terms of the activities it finances (i.e. as a planning document), and he answered some nitty-gritty questions on financial planning and grantsmanship. The afternoon session was devoted to sharing problems and solutions common to our associations.

- The Rhode Island Library Film Cooperative (RILFC) initiated Same-Day Loan Service on April 1st. Although the RILFC suggests that member libraries encourage film borrowers to book films as much in advance of their show dates as possible, the improved service was initiated to give last minute borrowers the opportunity to select titles without any time restrictions. Users of this service may select up to three titles.

- "Is There a Rhode Island Style?" is the topic of an upcoming humanities program series that will take place in various libraries across the state thanks to an \$82,657 grant award to the Rhode Island Department of State Library Services from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Humanist scholars will speak on the men and women who have enriched Rhode Island through their impact on politics, industries, arts, and crafts. Topics of the lectures include: Rhode Island architecture and the decorative arts, politics, printing, and the role of women in the history of the State.

The project begins with "A Question of Style," a slide lecture by Baruch D. Kirschenbaum, Professor of Art History at Rhode Island School of Design, at Cranston Public Library, May 7 at 7:30 PM. A reception for series scholars and the public will follow. Other May programs include: "The Browns as Builders: Five Generations of Architectural Patronage," May 12 at the Rochambeau Branch of the Providence Public Library (7PM) and May 22 at Newport Public Library (7PM) and "Colonial Silversmiths: Masters of Simplicity," May

14 at Kingston Free Library (7:30 PM) and May 28 at Middletown Public Library (7:30 PM). All programs are free of charge.

- Conservation Management for Libraries and Archives (LS439) will be offered this summer at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College. The class will meet Tuesday and Thursday mornings from 9AM to 12 noon, beginning June 24th. This basic course will provide participants with the fundamentals of preventative conservation. For more information call the school at 617-738-2264 or write the Director of Admissions, Simmons College, GSLIS, 300 The Fenway, Boston, MA 02115.

- Elinor Hashim, Chairperson of the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science and current Program Director for Special Libraries at OCLC, Inc., will speak on "Special Libraries and Networks," at the Annual Business Meeting of the Rhode Island Chapter, Special Libraries Association (see Calendar).

- Nancy Menaldi-Scanlan reported the following: On March 11th the 13th annual RIEMA Conference was held at CCRI Lincoln to address the issue of "Why is the Role of the Library-Media Specialist Changing?" Dr. Glenn Cook, the keynote speaker, opened the day with an enthusiastic (if a bit esoteric) multi-media "lesson" on the history of communications. Participants then chose from over twenty different workshops on subjects ranging from the latest computer technology to ways of coping with a reduced staff. As always, the problem was one of too much to see/hear without enough time to do so.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the day was the closing administrator's forum, which featured panelists from all walks of the educational and political world in a lively discussion on the problems of library-media services: how to elicit administrative and political support, the need for qualified full-time professionals in school library-media positions, and the overall purpose and promise of the library-media center. No problems were solved, but one couldn't help walking away with a strong sense of the need for and hopes of those who practice our profession in the schools.

- The Providence Journal/RILA Book Fair was held March 16-19 at Rhode Island College. Local authors lectured and read excerpts from their books during the evening sessions, and

storytellers entertained students in grades K-6 on Monday and Tuesday mornings. Twenty exhibitors from the local book-selling community displayed and sold their wares. The ProJo Database was also on display. RILA hopes to be actively involved in planning the Book Fair next year in conjunction with the Providence Journal.

NOMINATIONS

We are seeking nominations for the following 1987 RILA officers:

Vice-President/President Elect
Secretary
Treasurer
Member-at-Large
NELA Councilor (2 year appointment)

Contact Annalee Bundy, Nominating Chair, with your recommendations (521-7722).

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World and Its People

A new edition of the highly regarded Marshall Cavendish encyclopedia *World and Its People* will be available in May 1986.

Accurate and current information is vital in a reference work of this kind. A team of editors has been at work for some time checking and where necessary updating all the statistics in this new edition.

An essential geographic reference work, *World and Its People* belongs in all school and public libraries. No other illustrated geographical encyclopedia on its level is as comprehensive. All areas of geography are covered, including the physical, economic, social and theoretical aspects of this science.

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FEATURES NEEDED

The Publications Committee is seeking feature articles for the RILA BULLETIN. Articles should be four double-spaced typed pages. Anyone interested in writing a feature or in submitting a feature should contact Norman Desmarais at 865-2241 (Phillips Memorial Library, Providence College).

EXECUTIVE BOARD AND COMMITTEES REPORT

The Ad Hoc Committee for the Study of Rhode Island Library Services announced that they began discussing/seeking funding for the study

The Ad Hoc Committee on Library Lending announced the Attorney General's Opinion on charging for lending of videocassettes. (See Opinion on page 7.) The Committee still plans to investigate lending policies further. It was announced that a forum to discuss fees for lending will be held at the Spring Business Meeting, May 22.

Judith Stokes, representing the CRIARL Serials Subcommittee, announced that they are seeking funding to establish a serials database in a standardized format under strict quality control. CRIARL asked RILA to write a letter in support of this grant. The Executive Board voted unanimously to support CRIARL's Serials Project and Grant.

Bruce Daniels represented RILA for Legislative Day in Washington, D.C., April 8th.

A Constitutional change has been proposed for the RILA Constitution, and will be voted on at the Spring Business meeting. Article 5, Sec. 2D would be changed so the starting date of new officers would be immediately following the Annual Business Meeting at the Conference rather than waiting for the new Fiscal Year which is January 1.

RILA voted to support Comparable Worth/Pay Equity for Rhode Island State Employees. A steering committee headed by Beverly Lambert will assist with the endorsement of this legislation. Anyone interested in lobbying for this legislation should contact Beverly at the Tiverton Public Library.

The RILA Executive Board agreed to have 1,000 notepads printed with the RILA logo. The notepads will be available for purchase beginning at the Spring Business Meeting. Cost for notepads will be one for \$1.00 or two for \$1.50.

The Executive Board also agreed to pay \$30 to have PR materials available at the ALA Conference. The PR materials will be at the Chapter Relations Booth. Contact Carol K. DiPrete at the Roger Williams College Library for more information.

Letter to the Editor


Dear Linda:

The new look of the RILA Bulletin is refreshing and for the most part, it does a good job keeping us abreast of R.I. library information. However, it is with great concern I write to you about the article by David Carlson in the latest RILA Bulletin.

It would seem to me that authors purporting to know everything about a topic such as in this article, would at least indicate their affiliation and background. Also, there are no footnotes or indications that Mr. Carlson consulted anyone knowledgeable about automated systems in Rhode Island or why decisions were made. If this is a personal opinion piece, it should be clearly stated as being such, but as the lead article in this issue, it is not labeled as such. Mr. Carlson made some rather strong statements.

I realize you have a difficult task to come up with material, but the quality of articles and the source of information is important if a publication is to have credibility. Perhaps we can see better documentation in the future.

Annalee M. Bundy, Director
Providence Public Library
March 27, 1986



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ATTORNEY GENERAL'S OPINION ON FEES FOR VIDEOCASSETTES

Arlene Violet, Attorney General

This is in response to your request for an opinion from the Attorney General as to whether it is appropriate for free public libraries to charge rental fees for the use of videocassettes by library cardholders.

Rhode Island General Law 29-14-1 et seq. (1982 Reenactment) provides for the establishment of free public libraries in the State. The statute requires any city or town who establishes such a library to elect a Board of Trustees. R.I.G.L. 29-4-5 (1982 Reenactment). The powers and duties of these trustees are described in R.I.G.L. 29-4-6:

29-4-6. Powers and duties of trustees. - The aforesaid trustees shall take possession of said library, and shall thereafter be the legal guardians and custodians of the same. They shall provide suitable rooms for the library, arrange for the proper care of the same, choose one (1) or more competent persons as librarians and fix their compensation, and make all needful rules and regulations for the government of the library and the use of the books; provided, that no fee for the use of the books shall ever be exacted. (Emphasis added)

Clearly, this section of the statute evinces an intent by the General Assembly that trustees are only vested with these powers if no fee for the use of the books is exacted from cardholders. The fact that persons in the State be permitted to borrow books, free of charge, is the basic premise upon which this statute was designed. The free library system in Rhode Island has long provided for the social and intellectual development of its citizens without discriminating on a rate charging basis.

With technological growth and development has come the evolution of new forms of communication; including microfilm, microfiche, audiovisual equipment and materials, sound recording, magnetic and other tapes. Free public libraries, keeping pace with these developments, now have many of these materials in their possession. In fact, the General Assembly itself has recognized the wide variety of materials that libraries now possess in R.I.G.L. 11-44-15 (1981 Reenactment). This statute relates to the theft and destruction of library materials and provides:

11-44-15. Injuring or destroying books and other property of libraries. - (b.) the terms "book or other library property" as used in this chapter shall include any book, plate, picture, photograph, engraving, painting, drawing, map, newspaper, magazine, pamphlet, broadside, manuscript, document, letter, public record, equipment, microform, sound recording, audiovisual materials in any format, magnetic or other tapes, electronic data processing records, artifacts, or other documentary, written, or printed material, regardless of physical form or characteristics, belonging to, on loan to, or otherwise in the custody of any library, museum, repository of public or other records institution.

In order to keep pace with the technological developments of our century, while being mindful the original purposes of establishing the free public library system, it is the opinion of the Attorney General that it is inappropriate for free public libraries to charge rental fees for videocassettes.



RILA will be holding an open forum to discuss government relations June 2, Barrington Public Library, 9:30 AM.

jobline

The Rhode Island Library Association has established a minimum recommended salary of \$18,250 for a full-time beginning librarian in 1986.

ARCHIVIST: for the Christine Dunlap Farnham Archives at Brown University. Temporary, two-year position with the possibility of becoming permanent. Responsible for the development of collection development policies, acquisition and preservation of documents relating to the history of women at Brown University, of Brown alumnae, and of women in Rhode Island. Requirements: graduate work in a field of the humanities, with work or publications in women's history; an MLS degree from an ALA accredited library school, or equivalent experience; experience or training in archival management; knowledge of computers; experience with oral history techniques; excellent verbal and written communications skills; ability to write grant proposals and work on fund-raising projects. Appointment range: \$20,053-25,497, based upon experience. Interested candidates should send letter of application, resume and names of three references to Norma Beach, Personnel Office, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912. In order to insure consideration, applications should be received by June 13, 1986. Brown University is an Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Employer.

ASSISTANT ACQUISITIONS LIBRARIAN: responsible for assisting Head of Acquisitions in bibliographic and financial management of all monograph and serial acquisitions. Primary responsibility-serials control. Participates in collection development and related faculty/professional activities. Qualifications: ALA accredited master's degree; reading knowledge of Modern European language; ability to communicate complex verbal and written instruction effectively; familiarity with automated library systems; and ability to fulfill faculty requirements for promotion and tenure. Preferred: 2 year's professional level acquisitions experience and knowledge of automated serials control systems. Appointment at rank of Instructor or Assistant Professor (minimum 2 year's professional experience), 12 month contract, standard benefits. Submit a letter of application, resume and names/address of 3 references to: William T. O'Malley, Chair, Technical Services Department, THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND, P.O. Box 357, Kingston, RI 02881-0357. AA/EOE.

INSTRUCTOR (REFERENCE/LIBRARIAN) IN THE HUMANITIES: temporary--July 1, 1986 to January 1, 1987. Salary \$7,500. Qualifications: MLS from an ALA accredited institution; reference experience in an academic/research library. Preferred: undergraduate degree in the humanities; online data base searching and bibliographic instruction experience; modern foreign language. Submit a letter of application, resume and names/addresses of three

references to: Margaret J. Keefe, Chair, Public Services Department, THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND, P.O. Box 357, Kingston, RI, 02881-0357. Deadline for applications, May 15, 1986. AA/EOE.

SUBSTITUTE LIBRARY MEDIA SPECIALIST: Woonsocket Public School System. Must be certified as Teacher of Library Science by the Rhode Island Department of Education. Salary \$40 per day. Application available from: Louise R. Leveillee, Coordinator of Media Services, 108 High Street, Woonsocket, RI 02895 (401) 762-4440.

PROJECT COORDINATOR: part-time, June 1986 through February 1987. Performs duties to implement the RICH grant, "Reading Rhode Island." Responsible for overall administration, coordination, promotion, budget administration, and evaluation of the project. Call Margaret Shea, DSLS, 277-2726, by May 14.

RILA Personnel Committee's "Registry of Potential Job-sharers" can be purchased for \$1.00. Contact Margaret Gardner (401) 521-2827 to receive a copy or to be added to the listing.

calendar

MAY 12 - Young Adult Round Table, "Biographies," Barrington Public Library, 9:30 AM.

MAY 13 - Rhode Island Chapter/Special Libraries Association Annual Business Meeting, Brown University Faculty Club, 6:30 PM.

MAY 14 - "The Big Apple ALA-mode: getting the most out of ALA". Speakers: Elizabeth Futas, Carol DiPrete, and Barbara Cohen. Cranston Public Library, 7:30 PM.

MAY 15 - RILA Personnel Committee Personnel Seminar, "Communication in Organizations," presented by John Shibley, Cranston Public Library, 7:30-9:30 PM.

MAY 19 - Annual Meeting of the Friends of Providence Public Library--Rochambeau Branch at Rochambeau Branch, 7:30 PM. Guest Speaker, Nancy Barr, Culinary Expert and Assistant to Julia Child.

MAY 21 - Reference Roundtable, "Education and Careers." Contact: Kathy Page, Providence Public Library, 521-8728.

MAY 22 - RILA Spring Business Meeting, Cranston Public Library, 1PM.

JUNE 7-12 - Special Libraries Association Annual Conference, Boston, Massachusetts.

JUNE 28 - JULY 3 - American Library Association Annual Conference, New York, NY.

The RILA BULLETIN is published 10 times per year by the Rhode Island Library Association. Managing Editor: Linda Walton, Butler Hospital, 345 Blackstone Blvd., Providence, RI 02906 (456-3869); Feature Editor: Norman Desmarais, Providence College, Phillips Memorial Library, Providence, RI 02918 (865-2241); News Editor: Frank Iacono, DSLS, 95 Davis Street, Providence, RI 02908 (277-2726); Technical Editors: Debra Cohen and Veronica Thomas, East Providence Public Library, 41 Grove Avenue, East Providence, RI 02914 (434-2453); Jobline: Sheila Carlson, DSLS, 95 Davis Street, Providence, RI 02908 (277-2726); Advertising: Deborah O'Hara, 157 Briarwood Avenue, Middletown, RI 02840. Subscriptions: free to members; \$12/year in U.S.; \$20/year foreign. Deadlines: 1st of the month for features and 15th of the month for everything else. Features limited to four typed double-spaced pages and must be signed by author. Advertising: \$100 full page; \$50 half page; \$30 quarter page; \$10 business card size. Change of address: members contact the Membership Committee Chair and subscriptions contact the Managing Editor. Send claims to Managing Editor. For further information contact the appropriate Editor. Printing by First Financial Printers, Inc., Lincoln, RI (333-4811). Z673R52; LC 57-26438; ISSN 0146-8685.

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