

Rationalizing the Intake of Information

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The scholar, the administrator, and the manager are adrift on a sea of information. They must live from it without being swamped. An elaborate, mechanized service to fill individual "prescriptions" for different types of information will be technically feasible in the near future.

The gentle lady who gives you your library book may soon be as rare as "pop and mom's" corner grocery store. The reason is the same; just as the chain stores and supermarket have taken over food supply and distribution functions, new forms of organization may soon supplant the traditional library system and the library search techniques used by present-day scholars and librarians. The movement toward new concepts of librarianship and intellectual services is presently chaotic and dependent upon technicians and cyberneticians, so that its ultimate human meanings are not being closely examined. Most discussions of such developments as MT (machine translation) and IT (information retrieval) are couched in term of data-storage banks, documents, communications mathematics, etc., rather than in terms of the all-too-human intellectuals who would be employing them. However, the human meanings and services are immanent in these new complexes.

Many people are paid well to find access to our minds. Unfortunately their messages are largely irrelevant to our individual needs and wants. Even the best disciplined and efficient of inner monitors, however, cannot protect us adequately or guide us surely. We need not speak of graphic displays, of television, or of the daily newspapers. Consider only the messages carried by the 60 billion pieces of mail delivered yearly by the U.S. Post Office, the several thousand new book titles each year, the 100,000 titles in print, the millions in libraries, and the 15,000 periodicals. Then remember how many people cannot or will not read, and consider finally the two million souls whose business is consuming symbols, that they may emit other symbols and give orders and ad-

vice. Here lies the problem of the intake of the intelligentsia and the true problems of the librarian in the centuries to come.

The scholar—as the epitome of the mind-worker—has a certain amount of time and wants certain materials to fill it. He has needs that are produced by his values and goals, which are subject to long- and short-run change. Some needs are vocational and specialized. Others range out into fiction and aesthetics, philosophy and current events. The quality of material for consumption varies with his social role: for an advisor to a mayor one type of material is needed, and another for a psychological theoretician.

The intensity of consumption is an important factor; the range of consumption is another. The educated man who is intellectually specialized wants to scan with maximum completeness and economy the full range of raw data and theory in his special area, and he wants a closer look at those that he might need most. He wants them in a separable format and, if in another language, he wants them translated. The specialized intellectual also wants general information on subjects related to his field, and finally, he has some general cultural needs.

What would this man and his institutional supporters pay for such services? If he and a half-million of his fellows paid \$1,000 a year, as they could and should, the basis would be laid for the capitalization of a large new industry to provide the full range of contemplated services. It would have a corps of prescription consultants to aid persons in prescribing their mental diet, a publications search staff, world-wide library connections, reproduction facilities, and mailing machinery.

Each week the subscriber would receive a packet of published materials. These would contain items that he himself had prescribed, after consultation with friends and experts. Items would come from a vast facility commanding books old and new, journals, encyclopedic fact (from vast data storage banks), abstracts, commentaries, annotations, and news. The subscriber may wish material from several fields: the history of art, psychology of learning, kinship systems research, and general news of events concerning a certain group. All these wishes would constitute his prescription and would be coded along with the prescriptions of thousands of other persons. The elements of these prescriptions would flow largely automatically from inventories and production facilities. The subscriber would be entitled to a quota of special requests without extra charge, perhaps radioing his proposition from his study to the center via communications satellites circling the world. And as his needs changed he would revise his prescription.

For all of this, the intellectual does not have to change many habits and may indeed be able to indulge a few of his long-standing ambitions to restore some of the contemplation and self-control of ancient intellectuals to his life. He needs a better set of intake skills. He might have to acquire the skills to operate a receiving system—viewing, tape-recording, scanning, indexing, prescribing, and communicating instruments. Above all, he needs something he should

have already—the ability to read in several gears. (Too many intellectuals still believe, with the illiterate, that anything in print is as precious as the Bible and should be read that way, or not at all.)

What objections might there be to such a system? The intellectual will not be deprived of “freedom,” unless all change of habit is a deprivation. The incidence of newspaper narcosis would decline, and the best plants would be converted to serve him better. He might miss browsing in stacks and bookstores, because an adequate storage and selection master system would make much activities as out-dated as plowing behind a horse. (A few excellent bookstores might be maintained for those with traditional tastes in recreation.) A more important possible objection is that the specialist is already aware of all that is occurring in his field. But if this is so, we cannot explain the fact that the greatest efforts toward mechanical servicing of intellectual intake are occurring in precisely those areas of intellectual work that are most specialized—chemistry, biology, and physics.

The screening, selection, and provision of the appropriate kinds of mental nourishment for a man's position, work, and goals in life is one of the key technical problems of man's existence—like providing food and shelter. If it could be mechanized, thus freeing him for other productive work and for the more full and contemplative enjoyment of life, it should be endorsed and abetted.