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CHAPTER H

LAW 4: SAVE THE TIME OF THE READER
A PLEA FOR UNITED ACTION!

1. A Measure of Efficiency

In the one hundred years since Melvil Dewey and Charles Ammi Cutter were young librarians, we have erected a great many devices for bibliographic control. The studies I reviewed in earlier lectures are a few of the recent attempts to find whether these devices assist or prevent the reader's access to the documents he seeks. These studies have just scratched the surface of what we need to know about the match between a user's information needs and the systematic description of our information resources — the documents.

In communications research, they speak of the *gatekeeper function*. Library catalogues are a form of gate in the communication process between reader and book, and cataloguers and reference librarians are gatekeepers of a sort. By what criterion do we measure the performance of our task? I submit that the fourth Law of Library Science should be used. In constructing the catalogue and other library tools, do we save the time of the reader or do we add to the time he must spend before he can

put to use the information resources we have collected for his use? Many studies in libraries centre around increased efficiency of the library staff in performing certain functions, but very few are cost/effectiveness studies of the information seeker.

2 Making Students' Experience It

As a feeble attempt to make library science students aware of the need to evaluate our functions in this light, I usually require beginning students in cataloguing to chart their own path of information seeking from known information need to information satisfaction. They measure the steps and the minutes it takes to go from their study desk to an index or the library catalogue, to the book shelf or circulation desk, and finally to the book itself. It is usually a revelation to them when they add up the steps and can count their efforts in hundreds of feet, when they add up the minutes and can see that one such search took almost a half-hour! After this, they seem to take much more interest in "saving the time of the reader" and they also seem to have this law uppermost in their minds whenever we discuss anything which may set up hurdles for the user. For example, the establishment of main entry for corporate bodies or conference proceedings always bothers a new class in cataloguing because a comparison of the title page

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and the catalogue card shows very few common elements, oftentimes. They ask, "How can we continue to do this and still say we are saving the time of the reader who has a known item in mind?" Needless to say, I am at a loss for words on such occasions and quickly switch the subject to automated library catalogues where, I hope, we will have freer access to all the information we store.

3 Focus on the Reader

31 DESIGNING FOR BETTER USE

It is not an easy problem to solve. How can we measure our present efforts to save the time of the reader (and the staff) when the library is such a complex organisation and no one function can be changed without having a rippling effect throughout the organisation? We can begin at one obvious place, in my opinion. We can begin to concentrate on knowing more about the reader. This awareness will force us to design or redesign our information centres and libraries to facilitate their use. This new point of view (new for many) can effectively transform many libraries with no real modernisation effort such as automation being necessary. I have visited many public libraries in the United States, in large cities and small towns, and I always enter the building with the fourth law on my mind. I murmur to myself, "How does this library save

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the time of the reader?" By observing where the
information signs are, where the librarian sits,
where the card catalogue stands, where the book
return is located, how a reader signs out a book, and
how the catalogue user is aided in his search, I
can tell very easily if the library is enforcing the
fourth law. Equipment is not the only essential to
save the time of the reader. The spirit of willing-
ness to serve or to help the reader help himself is
more essential.

32   SUBJECTIVE TIME

More than the 'objective time', the 'subjective
time' of the reader is important. While waiting in
a queue to use a particular catalogue drawer, or to
get a book charged or discharged, although the
objective time may be only a couple of minutes, it
might appear as waiting for hours for the busy
reader. Even an additional minute he takes to find
the appropriate catalogue entry for his document
can increase his impatience and frustration. This
is true also of locating a document on the shelves
using the call number, etc. This subjective time
varies from reader to reader and even with one
and the same reader from one context to another.

4 Principle of Least Action

When I became interested in the use of compu-
ters for information storage and retrieval, I noticed

how easily this fourth law could be ignored even though increased efficiency was supposedly the objective of the system. Don Swanson said in the February 1966 issue of the *Bulletin of the atomic scientists* that "the design of any information service should be predicated on the assumption that its customers will exert minimal effort in order to receive its benefits." Users of such services, he said, operate under *the principle of least action.* If this be so, then we must take the user into account every day of our existence and be sure that every attempt is made to save his time as well as our own. The problem is one of organisation, not of computerisation. The conference on library and information networks in my country, which I spoke of in the first lecture (Chapter E, Sec 4) placed more importance on agreements to effect compatibility, combinability, and multiple use of records than on any other problem. We may consider it inefficient to type catalogue cards for the same book that was catalogued before in another library, but imagine the poor reader who must use several different bibliographical sources only to come up with a list of known items which he must now trace through several different libraries. Without union lists and greater cooperation between librarians and publishers of indexes, bibliographies, etc, we add enormous workloads to the users of our services.

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5 Standarisation and Simplification

I must apologise because I do not know too much about the efforts in India to save the time of the reader and the staff in your information centres, but when I surveyed efforts in the United States a few years ago, I had to conclude that there has been no concerted effort on the part of any group to be wholly or even partly in tune with anyone else in producing compatible tools, easily combinable for bibliographical reference work. Title abbreviations for serials, for example, differ in different reference works; libraries create union lists of serials with no aids to ease this problem. It is as if we were building railroads, each on a different gauge track so that no equipment or trains could pass from one company's tracks to another.

A research team from System Development Corporation painted even a blacker picture in their report to the US Federal Council for Science and Technology, Committee on Scientific and Technical Information:

"Unless someone with unusual foresight and influence establishes workable standardisation, the history of library coordination as a mechanisable system complex may be as turbulent as the history of higher-order computer languages has been. Unfortunately, the rush of library automa-

tion efforts could be so rapid that each installation, preoccupied with attaining its own internal efficiency, might not notice the incompatibilities of its formats, codes, etc, with those of other libraries unless strong efforts — such as those that a capping agency could exert — are made to coordinate these aspects of library automation" (22).

It is possible that the users of our tools and libraries may solve their problems in their own way, and we may not be called upon to help. But should we sit passively and wait to be called to help? I think not, if we adhere to the fourth law. Don Swanson suggests that information systems should provide for more digestion, summary, and packing down of knowledge, which will permit the library user to progress without floundering in the backlog of published information. He states categorically:

"Most present libraries and information systems wait to be used. A modern information system, however, should seek out its customers ... we infer that these systems will provide de-centralised service points and selective, direct, and continuous distribution of information to customers. Service in response to standing requests should be maximised, so that customer initiative can be minimised" (21).

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6 Points for Consideration

With such words to guide us, we must ask ourselves: Are we following the fourth law? More specifically we might ask: What are we doing to effect a positive plan to meet the following needs:

1   We need to stress a coordinated approach to information system and network development — from *origin* of information (author's manuscript to editor/publisher) to *use* of information (in library, research worker's office and the like).

2   We need to combine efforts and avoid *redo* of input operations (automatic typesetting for publisher; machine-readable cataloguing for library; data compilations in information centres).

3   We should follow the *principle of least action* in information systems for every library user.

4   We should follow the *principle of by-product data* generation in machine-generated data.

5   We must make *provision for combinability and flexibility* of information records.

7 Cooperation

71   WORK TOGETHER

For all these projects, we need to work together across state and national borders and across *library*

border. We need a unifying force — provided by some governmental authority or by our own professional zeal to accomplish our stated goals. Dr Ranganathan in his life-time of work, shows us the way, but now we collectively must do what one man tried to do single-handed forty years ago. Our task is more difficult because we do not have a unifying body-force he has. Can we strive for it? Let us share the ideas about how to begin.

72 HOLISTIC APPROACH

There is another sense in which united action or integrated effort is essential. The requirements and psychology of readers are complex; they are dynamic and changing. No single tool of the library — classification, cataloguing, reference service — can all by itself satisfy the varied demands of each of the readers. Only through an integrated use of the several tools can greater efficiency be achieved to the satisfaction of the Laws of Library Science. This is the right approach, the holistic approach.

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