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Marking Time and Looking Ahead

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Communications advances have brought many changes in the library field

The Russian philosopher Gurdjieff used to train his students to stop at a moment's notice, freeze their positions, and think about what it was they were doing and thinking at that instant. Certainly years have that effect on us, and the last of the significant years is about to pass our way.

Like many people of my generation, I went to see the film 2001: A Space Odyssey in 1968 and came away feeling like I had been to space. There are millions of us who can't hear The Blue Danube without thinking of space stations. For years we wondered, "What will the world really be like in 2001? Will there still be an Earth? Will I still be here? Will people still drive in cars?" By now, as we mark the last few weeks of 2000, we can be pretty certain of the answers.

Between that screening of 2001: A Space Odyssey and the present, there have been many milestones for me as an information professional:

- 1976—I gave up reading science fiction books because I decided that real life was becoming more interesting than the stories.
- 1977—The library where I worked as a paraprofessional bought its first computer system. The titles and authors were entered by temporary workers. We were still cleaning up the mess 10 years later.
- 1984—Another famous year. After a week or two, nobody cared.
- 1985—I started working with microcomputers, developing an interest that continues to this day. That first machine ran on a pair of 5-inch drives. Memory and storage capacity were measured in kilobytes.
- 1989—I graduated from library school, and moved from Arizona to New York to take charge of a university's INNOPAC integrated system.
- 1996—I designed a web interface to the online catalog and put out my first, personal web page.
- 1997—I started teaching library school.
- 2000—Another significant year. I was among the writers who predicted that 2000 would bring only a few scattered problems that could be solved without much trouble.

And now here we are in the future, or at least the future that we talked about in the 1960s.

The Communications Revolution

There's a tendency in this line of work to look narrowly at the latest gadget or software solution: the new, faster computer chip that will halve your processing time, even as you're loading the latest XML-compatible software that uses up four times more memory than its predecessor. While we're waiting for the newest Pentium chip, or wondering if they're ever going to give up and call it a "Superchip," we lose sight of the fact that we're in the middle of the greatest communications revolution since the invention of the printing press. A friend of mine wanted to debate this point last year. He said, "The printing press started a revolution because it empowered people to get their ideas out." I trusted his case on my statement. The Internet has empowered everyone even those with extremely bad ideas to broadcast them to potentially hundreds of millions of people—instantly.

If you want to see what's really going on, you won't get much help from broadcast news. Because of the way such news is structured, only extreme or ironic cases are reported, so you find out about the pedophiles who are using the Internet to meet teenagers, the orders that don't come through on eBay, and the high-tech, start-up companies that go into the stratosphere and come down twice as fast. What you don't hear is that the communications revolution is starting to change every aspect of our lives—particularly those of librarians.

Ten years ago, a patron asking a question at the reference desk would immediately be led to a shelf of books. Now, the librarian is much more likely to reach for a web site. Just as there were milestones in my personal journey through this field, there were milestones in the library and information environment as a whole. Here are some of the major ones, in my estimation:

- In the 1960s, Ted Nelson coined the term "hypertext" to describe a system that linked bits of knowledge in the ways that people think, rather than in hierarchical groupings. If this all sounds familiar, it should. All that was lacking then was the technology to do this. Nelson is not exactly a proud parent of this idea, however. He thinks that authors should be paid when their material is posted on the web, and doesn't like the "something-for-nothing" attitudes. (See Figure 1.)

- During that same time period, Frederick Kilgour founded OCLC, which began as a project to create an electronic union catalog for the libraries in Ohio. It grew into a giant enterprise with records for more than 40 million works. OCLC essentially serves as a catalog of every book and recorded work of any significance to the Western world, with built-in capabilities to display data about publications everywhere else. OCLC has supplied records that display in OPACs the world over.

- In the mid-1990s, Yahoo! showed us how to catalog the web in the same way we do library books. Then it got so bogged down with requests that it became almost impossible to get a page in. This problem was solved later by the Open Directory Project (ODP; http://www.dmoz.org), which is staffed by thousands of volunteers. When you submit a site to ODP, it's looked at within a day or so, and often appears in the directory within the week. The directory's data is then used by other search engines. (See Figure 2.)

- In a subject dear to my heart, the Internet Movie Database (IMDB; http://www.imdb.com) went from being a grass-roots project by a few film buffs to an extremely comprehensive source of data about films from all over the world. It's now more complete in its listings than any single film-reference book I've ever seen. While our OPAC records usually list the director, key stars, and a few production notes about a film, IMDB can provide links to reviews, give you the tally of the film's box office receipts, and print the results of a poll taken from people who have seen the work. By putting in a link to an IMDB record from our OPACs, we're providing our users with the best of both worlds.
On Point Announces TLC Improvements

On Point, Inc. has announced that its TLC (Total Library Computerization) library automation software system has been updated with Instant Web Publishing (IWP), a revised MARC interface, and new end-user benefits.

Instant Web Publishing
According to the company, TLC is Web-ready with IWP when it's shipped. The only other thing needed to put a library catalog on the Web is a connection to the Internet and a copy of FileMaker Pro database software. The company has also added a second Web option for TLC—Web pages designed for use with FileMaker, Inc.'s Custom Web Publishing (CWP) feature. The result is that it will be easier to modify the appearance of a library's Web pages. The other advantage is that users can click on live links when they appear in the TLC catalog records that are retrieved on the Web. With IWP, Internet addresses or URLs were merely informational text that users could select and copy to open a Web page. Now that TLC offers CWP, any active URL can be clicked to go directly to the page referenced.

MARC Interface
TLC's MARC interface has a new look and also is easier to customize for downloaded MARC bibliographic records. The conversion program has itself been converted to a 32-bit Windows application. TLC has been a Windows/Macintosh solution since 1996, but the MARC interface remained a DOS program until now. Librarians will find initial set-up procedures facilitated by clickable buttons offering easy-to-understand selections.

According to the announcement, the company has added a second benefit to this program. TLC's ORDBRS module has a new program that imports fields extracted (continued on page 64)