

Reviews

Batt, Christopher

Information technology in public libraries. 5th ed.,

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The reason why anyone who is interested in the use of IT in public libraries should read this book is that in an admirably concise and readable style its author analyzes and summarizes the present situation in the UK, and formulates interesting views of what the future might entail. When one adds that the volume is backed by a comprehensive survey of all public library authorities in the UK, and includes observations and trends that have been emerging from similar surveys conducted every two years since the first edition in 1985, then you have a goldmine of information. All this is contained in a remarkably compact volume.

In common with previous editions the book is divided into two distinct parts - first a set of chapters dealing with specific IT systems and their involvement in public library functions, and second, a list of sources, a set of appendices and the questionnaire. This means that it is possible to look at the survey results independently from the comment and analysis, turning only to the chapters as appropriate. I would not recommend that the reader follows this approach. To do so would be to neglect the author's lucid and authoritative comments concerning the development of, for example, the Library Management System and the increasing dominance of PCs in all aspects of public library work. One would also miss very sensible comments he makes concerning the requirement to keep in mind at all times what the point of IT is about - in delivering and enhancing the service to the customer.

For the researcher there is much of value to be gained from analyzing the data collected by questionnaire. Those who are sceptical of the value of the questionnaire approach may reflect on the fact that this particular survey has always achieved a 100% rate of return and this edition is no exception. The trends uncovered show that the use of IT in libraries has steadily been increasing. The evidence shows that more and more staff use IT in some way to perform their duties. In some ways the data does not surprise; most people today would expect to encounter IT in their work. The really interesting areas for research are now likely to be in the areas of impact upon the customer. Consider for example, how many libraries provide their customers with access to IT based services, and in what way? Batt expresses concern with regard to library authorities that as yet do not appear to have taken steps to automate even the basic housekeeping activities. This would appear to be

an area worth further investigation, along with which kind of IT services are being considered, and perhaps more interestingly, which ones are being rejected and on what grounds. With the continued government support for the involvement of the private sector, and the outcomes of studies such as the DNH/Aslib Review, there is a likelihood that the future growth of IT in libraries will be about the provision of networked services to the public. Sometimes libraries themselves will provide these services, but increasingly it will be done in partnership with other organizations, including the private sector.⁽¹⁾ These areas, both from the perspective of the library provider, and the customer offer fertile ground for further study and research.

It is difficult to criticize what I believe is an excellent reference, and outstanding commentary on the use of IT in public libraries. Nevertheless, I would like to see some clearer means of depicting the results of some of the answers to the questionnaire. I found it quite difficult to tie in the text assessment on what kinds of IT strategy public library authorities were following with the data contained in the relevant appendix. I am also not too sure what to make of the author's "future scenario", which is reproduced from a Comedia discussion paper.⁽²⁾ His intention is to entertain and provoke reaction; both laudable, but I am less sure of its place within the overall context of the book. Having said that, one of the nice things about the volume is its readability, and the impression that it is written in a very spontaneous manner, (as the author comments some parts of the book were written en route to conferences), and I should not want this aspect to go in favour of a drier but dull exposition. In conclusion, I think both researchers and newcomers to the public library scene will find useful the hard facts and succinct summaries available in this volume. In this way the book is particularly pleasing, and I look forward to the next edition.

References

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Grotzinger, Laurel, A., Carmichael, James, V. & Maack, Mary Niles.

Women's work: vision and change in librarianship.

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This collection of three papers from the University of Illinois Library School is an attempt to reevaluate and, to some extent, reclaim the past for women librarians and library educators. Library 'herstory' remains a small and mainly North American phenomenon. As in other academic disciplines, this approach is an attempt to redress the imbalance in the history of the profession in favour of women whose significant accomplishments and influence on librarianship are largely

ignored despite female numerical dominance. As Hildebrand⁽¹⁾ states, "Library history has been, therefore, largely a history *of men*, often directors of large libraries, *by men*".

In the UK, professional and academic writing around the theme of women in the library and information professions has tended to concentrate on issues of pay and promotion equity, and although this focus on current working conditions is essential, there is a danger that women are treated solely as a problem. That is not to suggest that these crucial issues of equality should be ignored or swept under the carpet. However, alongside their consideration there also needs to be an acknowledgement of the enormous contribution of women to the profession both currently and in its formative stages.

In the UK, Burrington⁽²⁾ provides a useful starting point with her life histories of women who have succeeded in the library field. These accounts of role models could provide inspiration for young aspiring female librarians, but this is only part of the picture, concentrating on the achievements of a small number of exceptional women who have got where there are today by operating on male terms. Thus, in Burrington's sketches, "women are seen as excellent only in comparison to men"⁽³⁾. In contrast, this collection explores the overall contribution of early twentieth century female library pioneers. It asks what we can learn from the philosophy and practices of previous generations and focuses on the particular value that these women, and indeed all women librarians of this period, brought to librarianship in the US.

The opening paper in this collection by Laurel Grotzinger, entitled "Invisible, indestructible network: women and the diffusion of librarianship at the turn of the century", is an exploration of a national interpersonal and professional network which served the newly educated women graduating from the first library education programs. According to Grotzinger, this powerful early network assisted individual women's personal progress and had a significant positive impact on the development of libraries in the United States.

Grotzinger describes a multi-faceted network composed of formal, hierarchical, vertical and horizontal relationships; social connections; professional contacts through the numerous associations and organizations the women belonged to; and mentoring links that ensured they had a strong influence over subsequent generations. The prominent position of women in the newly established library schools guaranteed that there was a powerful professional network of women library educators who had strong links with those they had educated and who subsequently practised in the field, many of whom they had recommended for their positions.

To illustrate the pervasiveness and significant impact of the network, Grotzinger traces the progress and experiences of the protegees and colleagues of Katherine Sharp, the head of the first mid-western library school of whom Melville Dewey famously said, "The best man in America is a woman, and she is in the next room." Here, Grotzinger gives a detailed account of social and educational relationships, professional influence, academic collaboration, role modelling and generational mentoring which enabled women to take charge of the development of libraries throughout the US.

Grotzinger adds that the teaching staff of the emergent library schools was "purposefully inbred" and that "placement was extraordinarily controlled" by the female networkers, but that these strategies were necessary and could be justified in the face of a male dominated and structured society. The power and even mere existence of this female network does seem extraordinary from

today's perspective when women are condemned as 'unclubbable' and old boys' networks dominate many professions. Instead of trying to break down these barriers or 'play the game' according to male rules, perhaps the answer for women in the library and information professions today is to follow the example of these female library pioneers and establish our own network to promote and nurture female talent.

The second paper in this collection, "Southerners in the North and northerners in the South: the impact of the Library School of the University of Illinois on southern librarianship" by Carmichael does not, at first sight, fit so obviously into the theme of the history of women in librarianship. In fact, although the first director of the Illinois school was Katherine Sharp, and the Carnegie library school at Atlanta which is also discussed was exclusively female, this paper is essentially an exploration of the experiences of graduates of the Illinois school when they took up positions in the Southern USA, with a section on 'gender' thrown in for good measure towards the end. Having said that, many of the graduates whose histories Carmichael details are female and taking into account the comments I make above, an exploration of the everyday experiences of all women, not just the "achievers", is essential if we are to value the work of female librarians who have been the backbone of libraries and contributed enormously to their success.

This paper reports a painstaking piece of research which aimed to identify and document the progress and experiences of Illinois graduates who worked in the South. Of all librarians in the south 93.1% were female, but 17% of the chief positions were held by men, an early indicator of the shape of things to come on both sides of the Atlantic. Despite the establishment of a library school in the south, many of the top positions in southern libraries were filled by northern educated librarians who were considered of higher academic standard.

Carmichael gives a fascinating insight into both the working and social conditions in the south USA of the early twentieth century. Graduates of Illinois remained in contact with their alma mater, leaving a written record of their impressions, detailing progress and setbacks at work and the hardships of their situations. Many northern graduates found working conditions "primitive", the summer heat unbearable, and the social, economic and political environment trying.

The issue of gender politics was also frequently raised. Southern salaries lagged far behind those of the North, with the result that there were few male contenders for jobs in the south. In an attempt to change this situation, southern libraries often went out of their way to try to recruit men to the top positions, justifying this by the widely held view that men had inherent administrative capabilities. Although this demand for men was not exclusively a southern preoccupation, women did find it hard to succeed in the south "because of a Southern prejudice against women as department heads". Alongside the female network described by Grotzinger, there was, according to Carmichael, a similar "good old boy" network of ex-Illinois male graduates which also effectively limited the openings for females in certain areas. However, attitudes and southern mores were a far greater barrier to women's advancement in the south. Nevertheless, a number of northern graduates did manage to cross the intangible social and political, as well as physical borders to the south and become leaders and "missionaries" who irreversibly transformed southern library services.

In her paper, Grotzinger notes that, at the time, women were criticized for being tied to trivial concerns and routine mechanisms. She disputes this and in the final paper of this collection Mary Niles Maack also takes the women's side by giving an account of "Women as visionaries, mentors, and agents of change".

Maack describes the gradual diminution of women's status in the profession by exploring female progress and influence over three periods. In the first, 1887-1923, she asserts that women played founding and leadership roles. This diminished during the second period which lasted from 1924 to 1950 as library schools moved into universities. In the final period, from 1951 to the present, the trend of declining influence within the profession continued as librarians were increasingly given faculty status. Maack traces the cause of women's weakening sway to their lack of doctorates, vital to success in the university environment.

Despite the loss of formal recognition and status, Maack argues that female librarians and library educators continued to play the very important mentoring and inspirational roles described by Grotzinger. The "invisible indestructible network" continued to operate even though, on the face of it, female influence was in decline. Thus, although the profession was becoming increasingly "masculinized" Maack found evidence of an enduring, intergenerational network of mentoring that originated at library school.

To bring the study up-to-date, Maack gathered information on attitudes and values from today's generation of library educators. Using focus groups and telephone interviews she found that role models and mentors were considered crucial as agents of inspiration, encouragement to move in new directions, and for support. Maack reminds us that we should all make a conscious effort to help younger women as a duty, and also that we should be aware of the enormous rewards this relationship can bring.

The feminization hypothesis blames women for the low status and relatively low pay of the profession and proposes that if women dominate an area of work, that field or discipline will be undervalued and its progress will be hindered⁽⁴⁾. In an attempt to abandon the female identity of librarianship and raise its status, members of the profession have turned to science in the belief that information science carries with it the status (and masculinity) of a "hard" subject. In doing so, however, the profession is in danger of losing touch with its service values. This collection gives a strong reminder of where the roots of modern librarianship lie, ie. with, as Maack puts it, "a strong cultural, educational and social mission", and also that women made, and continue to make, a vital contribution to the establishment and development of that vision and to the practice of librarianship.

References

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