

Preface

The future of library services arouses both excitement and unease. With the coming of on-line library catalogs, technical changes that have been taking place in the back rooms of libraries for several years suddenly become much more apparent to everyone. The on-line library catalog is probably the most sophisticated computer system of any type in routine, direct use by the general public. Some kind of dramatic change in library service is already afoot. On-line bibliographic (and other) databases have been available for several years and, as personal computers and telecommunications have become so much more widespread, the idea of "electronic libraries" becomes less implausible. There are sweeping assertions about an emerging "information society" and reports of complex maneuverings within an "information industry" that includes computer firms, phone companies, publishers, "information providers," and diverse others. Meanwhile there is clear evidence that public, school, and university libraries are in some distress as public sector undertakings with substantial appetites for book funds, new buildings, staff, and, now, new technology, in circumstances of severe budgetary constraint.

There is, of course, a massive, specialized literature on library technology, but it is primarily concerned with how to make things work now (or soon) and is of little direct benefit to those who should be worrying about how library services might or should evolve over the next ten years.

Consider the public library trustee, the faculty library committee member, or the librarian charged with developing a strategic plan for a library's development or facing the major investment that a new library building would require. What could be said that might explain how library services have been changing and how they seem likely to change in the future? What could be provided as background reading and as a basis for discussion? There is a gap between the technical details of today's computer problems and blue-sky predictions of distant electronic information futures. What might help fill that gap? What might be said that could be relevant to strategic planning in, say, the five- to ten-year range?

Any attempt to explain the past and to predict change is foolhardy. In this case the importance of the issues seemed worth the effort and the risk. If the account presented here does no more than to provoke better accounts by others, we would all benefit. This book draws on years as a user of several libraries, some years as a librarian, and other years as an educator of future librarians. However, it derives most directly from a close involvement in discussions concerning the plans, policies, and long-term future development of the libraries of the nine campuses of the University of California during 1983 to 1987 and from subsequent reflection on the issues that emerged.

Technological change is only one influence on institutions. There are also cultural changes, changes in political and social values, economic changes, and changes in what is known and understood. The discussion in this book concentrates on the long-term effects of technological change on library services because they are significant and because they

appear to be more predictable than changes from other causes. Bits and pieces of what is predicted here do not require a crystal ball as they are already happening.

I have benefited greatly from the ideas and help of many people, especially Edwin B. Brownrigg, Michael Gorman, Rolf Høyer, Gary S. Lawrence, Clifford A. Lynch, Stephen R. Salmon, and Raynard C. Swank, but they should not be blamed for deficiencies in what follows.