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The Y Factor

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Maybe college and university administrators have had it right all the time—and librarians have been out of touch with reality. Is it possible that one of our most vocal causes has been a misguided one?

What I am talking about is the size of library budgets for the purchase of information resources. As colleges and universities experienced rapid growth following World War II, libraries shared in the largesse that resulted from increasing enrollments. New library buildings sprouted everywhere; budgets for learning resources expanded to fill the buildings. Life was good.

Since those flush days of the 1960s, however, librarians have been heard complaining (to anyone who would listen) that they must constantly do more with less. Stable budgets in the face of escalating serial prices and new technologies seem to be squeezing the life out of library operations, especially the purchase of books. With the advent of technology and the continuing production of learning resources in traditional formats, librarians discovered that there was no hope of keeping up with the pace of new information production. Consortial arrangements erupted across the landscape. Licensing (or renting) partially replaced purchase of materials. Librarians realized that the library was becoming less a storehouse of things owned than a gateway to things owned elsewhere.

When one moves from the general world of libraries and gazes across the Christian higher education landscape, the view seems even bleaker. There never have been flush days (although it is instructive to see how many Christian academic libraries were built in the 1960s). Many Christian libraries were

built on donations of books; they continue to depend on as many “freebies” as possible. One of the largest budget lines in some libraries is to purchase bookplates to insert into gifts. There is not enough money to buy sufficient learning resources—or pay the staff a decent salary. In the real

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world of welfare economics, many Christian libraries would qualify for food stamps.

The picture is a frustrating one for all librarians. There are so many opportunities in our modern world to place more information in the hands of library patrons, but there is so little money to do it. As we are all aware, the amount of paper publishing has not yet abated. At the same time, electronic bibliographic databases, electronic journals, and the Internet have expanded the volume of information that is available in our society. Libraries are key players in trying to exploit this explosion of access to information, and, in general, have lauded the expansive growth of the electronic information industry. More information must be a good thing. More information is what oils the wheels of democracy. More information is what fuels schools and the educational process. The information gospel loudly declares that libraries should provide as much information as they can to as many people as possible. Only insufficient budgets stand in the way of this brave new world.

Neil Postman, in *Technopoly*, questions this viewpoint. “Is it lack of information about how to grow food that keeps millions at starvation levels? Is it lack of information that brings soaring crime rates and physical decay

to our cities? Is it lack of information that leads to high divorce rates and keeps the beds of mental institutions filled to overflowing? The fact is, there are very few political, social, and especially personal problems that arise because of insufficient information.”

According to Postman, the information glut that society is experiencing is not a positive thing. He states: “Information is dangerous when it has no place to go, when there is no theory to which it

applies, no pattern in which it fits, when there is no higher purpose that it serves.” In other words, when it comes to information, more is not necessarily better.

David Shenk echoes Postman. In the book *Data Smog*, Shenk calls information overload something that befogs rather than enlightens the democratic process. Librarians may advocate increased access to information as the path to a better democracy, but Shenk brings a different perspective to the issue by stating: “After a steady series of breakthroughs in information technology, we are left with a citizenry that is certainly no more capable of supporting a healthy representative democracy than it was fifty years ago, and may well be less capable.” Modern society is buffeted by data noise. Those who try to get the public’s attention must use increasingly extreme measures to communicate their messages. There is more information for the citizenry but less logical debate and understanding.

Is it possible that intellectual freedom policies are opening the door for the bizarre and the sensational in place of the thoughtful and rational, and that what is needed is not more information but less? Historically, Shenk argues, the education process has reduced the flow of information to bite-size chunks. “Teachers and textbooks