Chapter XVII

Libraries on the Information Highway: Issues and Lessons Learned

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This book presented readers with numerous views, perspectives, and issues regarding the past, present and future of libraries, librarianship and the information profession in the networked environment. By reviewing the various chapters in this book, readers rapidly conclude that the information environment, particularly the digital information environment, requires a reconceptualization of the information creation, dissemination and consumption processes. Information professionals, and those relying on information professionals, are at an exciting and challenging point in their careers — the transition to the networked information resources and services environment. Meeting this challenge necessitates the resolution to numerous issues, several of which this chapter presents below.

SERVICES ENABLER

Clearly, the networked environment provides the opportunity to develop new services and provide access to those services on a global scale. For example, libraries can digitize special, rare or unique collections and make those collections available to the world — not just those individuals who walk into the building housing such collections — via the World Wide Web (Web). Other services include the creation of:

- Regional, statewide, or national network-based interlibrary loan systems;

• Virtual tours of collections and facilities;
• Online reference services;
• Online electronic books; and
• Online full-text databases that provide users with instant access to journal-based literature.

There are other services too numerous to mention here, but the above exemplify the expansion of services that the networked environment provides libraries.

These services, however, come at a price. As identified in ensuing sections, the ability to provide such services well has dramatic implications for library technology, physical and human infrastructure.

ACCESS EQUITY

The networked environment, on the one hand, has the capability to augment access to information resources through the vast reach of the Internet. On the other hand, digital access requires the availability of a technology infrastructure for users, libraries and nations. The chapters in this book point to the uneven development and use of networked resources by libraries and nations. Indeed, one could classify the libraries and nations as:

• Bleeding edge, for those on the experimental forefront of technology and application development and use;
• Leading edge, for those that are technologically sophisticated, but approach application and technology development incrementally;
• Grounded edge, for those that rely strictly upon true and tried technologies and applications; and
• Trailing edge, for those that use older technologies and applications.

The technology and application variance of libraries and nations is large and leads to substantial issues when libraries and nations attempt to participate in the global networked environment.

Due to a nation or library’s technology sophistication, users can be severely limited or substantially advantaged in their ability to gain access to the vast array of digital information resources. A report published by the United States Department of Commerce, National
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