

# Greatly exaggerated death of the library

By Arlene Rodda Quaratiello

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*Finding information via computers alone is not that easy*

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## Misleading media messages

As a librarian, there are a number of television commercials that irritate me. One is that Packard Bell ad that portrays libraries as "forbidding hostile places."<sup>1</sup> Another is a commercial in which a woman poses the following question to her computer: "How many rooms are in the Vatican?" The computer immediately responds with a video clip of a game show host asking this same question to three contestants, one of whom, to the delight of the woman at home, answers it correctly.

Librarians know that finding information is not as easy as these commercials and the media in general would lead one to believe. The promise of quick information might sell computers, but it's far from being a reality. One of the challenges academic librarians face is convincing impressionable students, who are bombarded with misleading messages, that the World Wide Web is not all it's cracked up to be, that it's not possible for them to do all their research in their dorm rooms even if they do have the best computers, and that the library is still a vital institution at the heart of the college campus.

## Desk Set: A more realistic picture

In contrast to current media images is one of my favorite movies, *Desk Set*, starring Katharine Hepburn as Bunny Watson, a librarian at a television station, and Spencer Tracy as Richard Sumner, a consultant who is hired to make the station more efficient by installing EMMARAC (Electro-Magnetic Memory And Research Arith-

metical Calculator). Although this movie was made 40 years ago, its themes are surprisingly relevant to the issues of information retrieval that concern us today, not only in academic libraries but in all libraries.

In the film's climactic scene, Sumner's assistant, Miss Warriner, has arrived to operate the newly installed Emmy (as the computer is affectionately nicknamed) while Bunny and her staff have just received pink slips. As the phone begins to ring, Bunny and the others, believing themselves fired, refuse to answer it, so Miss Warriner picks it up in frustration. The caller needs to know if the king of the African Watusi tribe drives a car. Miss Warriner types in the question "Does the king of the Watusis drive a car?" After emitting a series of dramatic "blips" and "boops," Emmy spits out reviews of a fictional adventure film about the Watusis, which hardly provide an answer to the question. Meanwhile, the phone keeps ringing, and neither Sumner nor Miss Warriner is able to answer any questions accurately. Bunny and her crew decide to strut their stuff, springing into action to answer every question without Emmy's help.

After a messenger delivers a pink slip to Sumner, and the president of the station calls to complain that he too has gotten one, it becomes apparent that another computer recently installed in the payroll department has malfunctioned, firing everyone by mistake. After reassuring the librarians that they haven't been fired, Sumner informs Bunny that Emmy was never intended to replace the library staff, but to assist them with tedious questions, allowing them more time to perform complex research. Bunny decides to give the computer a chance, asking, "How heavy is the earth?" to which Emmy replies, "With or without people?"

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Photo credit: Springer/Corbis-Bettmann

**Katharine Hepburn, reference librarian par excellence, challenges Spencer Tracy's computer in the *Desk Set*.**

### Technology as a tool

I appreciate *Desk Set* because, aside from its assertion that noncomputerized sources can sometimes be the best sources of information, it supports the idea that technology is merely a tool and cannot replace the expertise of librarians. Computers cannot think like human beings, who have the ability to pose questions in the appropriate context. To offer a real-life example, I tried to find information about *Desk Set* on the Web. My initial AltaVista search did not employ any advanced techniques so I retrieved useless ads for phones and desk organizers (I should have known better). When I used the search statement **+“desk set” +lang**, however, I found a small set of highly relevant sites because this search statement only retrieved those sites which contained both **desk set** (as a phrase) and **lang** (the last name of the director of the film).

The reality is that most students that I encounter rely on simple searches. They don't use Boolean logic. They probably don't realize that most Web search engines insert “or” between the words they enter. In general, they haven't got a clue that AltaVista searches the

complete text of sites while Lycos restricts its search to the most significant parts. Many don't know that searching the Web differs from searching a periodical index accessed via the Web. The media have given them the impression that computers are brilliant machines that will read their minds and give them exactly what they need with little effort on their part.

The reality is that computers are quite dumb; librarians are therefore indispensable as intermediaries. A recent *Boston Globe Magazine* article even referred to librarians as “the astronauts of cyberspace.”<sup>2</sup> I heartily agree. As the novelty of the Web begins to wear off and students realize that finding information is not as easy as ads for computers make it seem, I hope that they emerge from their dorm rooms and real-

ize that there will always be a need for libraries and librarians. Perhaps the information they need might even be found in a book!

### Notes

1. Edith McCormick, “Packard Bell's Scary Sell,” *American Libraries* 27, no. 11 (December 1996): 17.
2. John Yemma, “Navigators of the Net,” *Boston Globe*, 14 July 1996, Sunday Magazine, p.7. ■

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