Disintermediation and education

Learned Information will be sponsoring Online Information 96, December 3–5, 1996, in London. The World Wide Web announcement and call for papers for Online Information 96 list a number of themes for the conference, among which are "The Future of Online," "Information as a Strategic Resource," "Consumer Online Services," "Digital Publishing," and "Disintermediation—The Human Factor" [1]. The disintermediation theme caught my eye. Further conference information about this theme declares that end users can conduct many searches for themselves by virtue of new software and simpler communication packages, and conference organizers pose two questions: Will intermediaries be disintermediated or will this mean an enhancement to their role? and, How can the profession continue to add value in an age of information access for all? Conference organizers suggested the following potential topics for paper submissions fitting this theme: becoming more proactive in identifying information needs; managing the end user; new retrieval methods, sources and dissemination techniques; improving efficiency and cost-effectiveness; and adding value. These topics sound pretty tame compared to the high-powered, seven-syllable theme concept, and could reasonably be expected to be topics presented at many information or library meetings. So what's all this fuss other than the rather sinister sound of this seventy-five-cent word? Is disintermediation the latest buzzword and marketing hype for the Internet conference circuit or should we be concerned?

Disintermediation means the elimination of intermediaries (or filters or middlemen) in various transactions. It has been claimed that in a governmental context information technologies can provide the means for citizens to bypass political parties, the press, and elected representatives who have traditionally served as information filters or intermediaries. In a commercial context technology allows the banking industry, for example, to offer automatic teller machine service and electronic banking services via home computer, eliminating the need for face-to-face transactions at a teller window. In the Internet context, disintermediation has been used to describe how the Internet allows a company to develop closer, more one-to-one relationships with customers without the need for middlemen or distributors [2–3]. In a library context the term has most often been used to mean the elimination of mediated online searching in special libraries and the resultant reduction of full-time employees. White has written extensively about the issues raised by end-user searching in the library world, most recently in an opinion piece in Special Libraries [4]. Quint notes that librarians are not strangers to disintermediation and points to the examples of the Uncover document delivery service built with the cooperation of "warehouse" libraries and the Online Computer Library Center shared cataloging enterprise [5]. Another library context in which the concept figures is the interface between technologists and the library community. In a keynote speech at Digital Libraries '94, Peters used the term to describe a tendency by some in the computer science community to exclude publishers, libraries, and other information stakeholders from the ongoing development of the digital library either in favor of no mediation and no structure or in the production of elegant computer solutions that are not effective for end users [6]. The optimal digital library in our future will require the close collaboration of technologists and librarians, but Peters sees a natural impediment to be overcome in the tool-centered, time-to-market technologists' view of the world, versus the user-centered, quality-to-market view of the library community. A final example of disintermediation is related to our own library user communities, who often believe that libraries will become obsolete since the Internet will solve all of their information discovery and access problems efficiently and effectively and at no cost. Media hype reinforces this belief as does the popular press. A case in point is an otherwise excellent article in a recent issue of The Atlantic Monthly in which the author reviews the current state of Internet disorganization and describes ongoing projects at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab and elsewhere to address the problem, with no mention of library projects or the past activities of libraries in the organization of knowledge [7]. Readers of this article would have no idea of the depth and breadth of library involvement in Internet and Web issues or in the digital library research arena.

Should we be concerned about disintermediation? Yes, the potential for marginalization of our clinical and research libraries is too great as we move into an increasingly digital library world. There are a variety of coping strategies, but probably none as important as the education of health sciences librarians who must navigate in an increasingly complex electronic world. This issue of the Bulletin highlights an important collaboration between the Medical Library Association and the National Library of Medicine (NLM), which resulted in a series of NLM planning grants aimed at the education...
of health sciences librarians. I urge you to read the project descriptions contained in this issue and reflect on these new directions. Will the measures described move the profession in the right direction?

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References