Mom and Me: 
A Difference in Information Values

By Wayne Wiegand

She called me in early 1992 and wanted to know if I’d come to Manitowoc to help her buy a new car. Mom had never bought one before; Dad had always taken care of that, but he died in 1986 and this purchase would be the largest financial transaction she ever made. “Of course I’ll come,” I said.

She also told me that her best friend had recently purchased a Buick from the local dealer, and that the salesman had given her friend a substantial discount and had even thrown in four free floor mats. I listened patiently, but thought to myself that somehow I’d turn this experience into a lesson in prudent information-seeking behavior that would tap valuable library collections and services. (Except for her church library—where she periodically checked out Jannette Oke novels—Mom didn’t use libraries very much.)

Mom had been blue-collar all her life. She and Dad moved into a 780-square-foot home three months after I was born 32 years ago, and she’s lived there ever since. In today’s market I suppose it’s worth $35,000. She lives entirely on Social Security and a bit of interest from several small CDs she and Dad managed to sock away in the last years of his life; she has no debts. She was baptized, confirmed, married, and will be buried by the same church that also provides her with most of her community, her values, and the information she needs to make sense of the world around her.

Although I was born into that culture, as of 1992 I had moved far from it philosophically. By that time I was on the library school faculty at the University of Wisconsin/Madison and married to a law professor. Together we grossed $120,000 a year, and had managed to get all three of our children through good colleges without piling up any debt. We owned real estate valued at $250,000, two new vehicles, and more books than we could possibly read in a lifetime. We were very comfortable within an academic culture that provided us with our community, our values, and the information we needed to make sense of the world around us.

I arrived at Mom’s house early Friday evening and over dinner she told me her priorities for a new car: automatic transmission, four doors, air conditioning, AM-FM stereo-cassette tape player, whitewall tires, and a dark color. She had about $12,000 to spend (one of her CDs was about to mature) plus a 1984 Chrysler to trade. Always the teacher, I suggested that she determine our itinerary for the next day, but that between visits to dealers we go to the Manitowoc Public Library to check out consumer information—especially the latest issue of Consumer Reports that evaluated new cars.

Mom agreed, but seemed confused. Dad had never gone to the library when he bought cars, nor had any of her friends. But I was confident. I figured all I’d have to do was lay the solid, well-researched information out there for her to see, and inevitably she would make the “right” decision.

Test driving information power

Our first visit was to the local Buick dealer three blocks away, where her best friend had recently purchased a Century. I deliberately kept my mouth shut while Mom talked to the salesman. We picked a white Century off the lot for a test spin. Out on the road Mom said she felt real comfortable behind the wheel, liked how it

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Eight years after weighing her librarian son's considered automotive opinions, Wayne Wiegand's mom, Germaine, is still glad she put her money where her personal information economy was.

handled, and asked me if I was comfortable as a passenger. "Yeah, pretty nice," I said.

When we returned, the salesman was waiting. "How'd you like it?" he asked. "Very nice," Mom responded, adding that she really preferred a car that was wine-colored. The salesman said that would be no problem, and then led both of us into his little office to discuss cost. He started from the manufacturer's suggested retail price, calculated in the options Mom wanted, identified an amount he'd give her for her Chrysler, then added in his personal discount before showing her the resulting figure—right around $12,000.

Mom looked at me, then back at him and asked, "And will you also throw in a set of four floor mats like you did for my friend?" The salesman agreed.

At this point I got a bit worried. I reminded Mom this was just our first stop among several Manitowoc car dealers that day, and for her benefit I played my trump card with the salesman. I said that of course we would be checking the Century against recent repair records in Consumer Reports.

His face turned ashen. "You have to keep in mind our commitment to service the cars we sell," he offered feebly. But Mom didn't catch my question, or the salesman's response; I suspect she was still thinking about scoring those four free floor mats.

I decided our next stop ought to be the Manitowoc Public Library, where I showed Mom how to search for consumer information on anything from automobiles to vacuum cleaners. My strategy was to conclude with Consumer Reports. "Look here, Mom," I said. "The Buick Century doesn't fare well against several others. For $12,000 plus your Chrysler, statistics show you can get a more reliable new vehicle if you buy a Ford Taurus or Mazda 626." She listened, but did not comment.

Next stop was the Ford dealer, where Mom test drove a Taurus. After we got out on the road I asked her what she thought. She liked it, she said, but it didn't handle, sound, or look as good as the Buick. Most especially, she worried about how she would get home and back when she needed to get it serviced; the Ford dealer was two miles from her house.

We returned to the lot after a brief ride. Mom never even asked the salesman about price or trade-in, and as we crawled back into her car she told me she really didn't want to visit the local Mazda dealer. "Why?" I asked. Two reasons, she responded. First, Mazda was not an American car; Dad always bought American cars, and so had all of her friends. Second, the Mazda lot was located in a "rough" neighborhood, and Mom worried about vandalism if she had to leave her new car there overnight.

When I left for home later that day, Mom still hadn't made up her mind. But I have to admit that, as I drove out of town, I found myself a little angry that she hadn't valued the information in Consumer Reports as highly as I did. A week later, she called to say she had bought a wine-colored Buick. I congratulated her on buying such a pretty car.

What Mother knows best

I thought a lot about that experience, trying to figure out why Mom and I valued the same information so differently. Then I read Barbara Herrnstein Smith's Contingencies of Values (Harvard University Press, 1988), and I had an epiphany.

Smith notes that everyone has a "personal economy" comprised of a set of values that determines an individual's "needs, interests and resources." She further argues that the values themselves are "radically" contingent on a variety of factors unique to each person's life.

If Smith is right, I thought to myself, couldn't one also have a "personal information economy," in which certain kinds of information are valued differently because personal values themselves are radically contingent on multiple factors unique to each person's life?

Perhaps Mom and I simply had a different information economy, I theorized. Indeed, as I've watched her with her Buick over the years, I've come to believe that she actually made the best decision for herself—much better than one l
would have made for her. Her friends are always complimenting her on how nice the Century rides and looks (especially when parked in front of the church Sunday morning), and on numerous occasions she has told me how much she appreciates the short journey to the Buick dealership.

The lesson I had wanted to deliver to my “less informed” mother in 1992 had instead been delivered to me.

**Life reflects libraries**

The lesson has lingered. Ever since, I’ve also been thinking about how the concept of a “personal information economy” can help solve some of the dilemmas facing contemporary librarianship:

- First, the concept allows us to broaden our definition of “information” to include the input people receive from TV, computers, their neighbors, schools, churches, governments, friends, and families, as well as from the music, film, art, and printed materials libraries have been making available for generations.

- Second, it encourages us to look at “information” less as a “commodity” with absolute properties easily manipulated by machines, and more as a social construct that will allow us—without being prescriptive—to identify differences in the information needs and uses of unique cultural groups.

- Third, personal information economies are democratic to the core. While conceding that all people need information, the concept recognizes that at different times in their lives different people need different kinds of information in different formats—information that they then utilize according to their own unique circumstances to make sense of the world around them. Oftentimes these different needs can be understood only by taking into consideration the gender, class, age, race, ethnicity, creed, and sexual orientation of the individual.

In other words, the concept of a personal information economy does not prioritize one human being’s value system over another’s, nor does it value one kind of information need over another.

- Fourth, the concept itself respects the ability of people to determine for themselves the value of the information they seek or come in contact with.

- Fifth, fitting library and information studies into a campus model of a personal information economy not only links us to the computer science, MIS, and biotechnology departments currently enjoying favor nationwide, but also to the “information professionals” working in (among many other disciplines) history, art, English, communications, education, sociology, and African-American, women’s, and gay and lesbian studies. Those academics are also endeavoring to analyze and understand values, in particular information economies; realizing this fact affords the library community opportunities to build campus partnerships that can counter some of the bottom-line thinking of legislators and higher-education administrators currently salivating at the trough of a high-tech money line.

- Finally, we can use the concept of a personal information economy to locate the library in the life of the user rather than the user in the life of the library, as UW/Madison library school professor Doug Zweizig has been advocating for more than a quarter century. In doing so, we might develop a better understanding of the role the library actually plays in contemporary American society before we chain it to dubious scenarios some evangelists of newer information technologies trumpet as certainties.

**Diversity in the driver’s seat**

A little less than a generation ago, a number of humanities scholars began to shift their focus from culture as text to culture as agency and practice. As a result, much of today’s discourse in humanities disciplines is over how people use the cultural forms of their own choosing to appropriate unique meanings that they then apply to their own lives. My own study of the 20th-century history of library and information studies suggests we did not follow suit.

Instead, in the 1980s we shifted our focus from culture as text to information as text, and then generally allowed the new technologies to construct parameters around the field we now call “information” studies. And because that field defines “information” so narrowly, we have not participated much in broader debates about how different people use different information differently to make sense of their worlds.

That’s unfortunate, and unfairly limiting to the future of our professional practice.

As we stand at the beginning of the 21st century, I’d like to challenge my colleagues in the Association for Library and Information Studies Education, the American Society for Information Science, the Special Libraries Association, and ALA to expand their horizons and consider applying the “personal information economy” concept on the professional practice we are crafting.

My mother, my daughter (an “information professional” in the Research Triangle earning nearly twice my salary), and my granddaughter (an 8-year-old much “into” the computer resources and books she gets from her local library) have information economies every bit as important and functional to them as mine is to me. To what extent will the library of the future accommodate their needs in comparison to mine? Would an analysis of age, gender, race, wealth, and sexual orientation demonstrate that our professional practice favors some personal information economies at the expense of others?

At the very least, we owe it to ourselves and our patrons to engage in the debate. The alternatives are to follow the lead of those who want to structure a professional agenda around providing the kinds of information tied mostly to newer technologies, continue to overlook and undervalue the cultural forms that libraries already make available to millions of people, and ignore opportunities to expand our thinking about priorities for librarianship’s future. Those alternatives are unacceptably narrow.