Broad and visionary. Commentary on Allen Kent (1977) Information Science.

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Marcia J. Bates

Professor Emerita Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Email: mjbates@ucla.edu

As I write, we are commemorating Allen Kent's long and productive life (1921-2014), after his recent death (Williams, 2014). He was a pioneer in many aspects of library and information science (LIS), and yet, as I read his 1977 article, there is not much in it that has become ancient, irrelevant history. The questions he discusses are still alive in our discipline in 2014, whether we call it LIS, information science, information studies, or an "iSchool education."

Allen Kent was a manager, professor, researcher, teacher, an editor. It was this last function that I know best, because, as Editor-in-Chief (with Mary N. Maack as Co-Editor), of the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences, 3rd* Ed., published in 2010, I became very familiar with his work as Chief Editor of the first edition of that same encyclopedia. I reviewed every volume and article of the earlier edition, which, with updates to the original 33-volume encyclopedia, numbered a total of 73 volumes by the time the last volume was published in 2003, when the second edition was initiated under the Editorship of Miriam Drake.

His conception of the subject matter of LIS was very broad and visionary; so much so that we included 37 "ELIS Classics" in the third edition, that is, entries written for earlier editions that we felt should not be lost to current encyclopedia readers. These included articles as varied as the following:

- "Information Retrieval Experimentation" by pioneering information science researcher Jean Tague-Sutcliffe.
- "Private Presses and Fine Printing" by book expert Roderick Cave.
- "Automation of Library and Information Services in China to 1990" by Sharon Chien Lin—a rare English-language historical record of Chinese information history.
- "Library College: A Prototype for a Universal Higher Education" by Louis Shores. The library college was once a popular concept in academic librarianship that should not be lost to our current generation's understanding.

In addition, Kent was prescient in identifying an area of historical and social research in information that is still under-developed: the history and social development of whole disciplinary literatures, with articles titled "Economics Literature: History," "Business Literature: History," and so on.

Other entries drawn from his first edition addressed information technologies that are little discussed today, but which had important roles in the development of modern information technology: "Hypertext and Hypercard: Early Developments," "CD-ROM in Libraries" (updated to the present in the third edition by the original author), and "Word Processing: Early History."

The primary issue that Kent deals with

in his 1977 article is one that has run through the discourse of LIS during my entire experience of the field, continuing to today. This is the conflict/debate between libraries on the one hand and information technology on the other, a humanistic library science vs. a technical information science. I have seen librarians spit out the word "information" as though it were repellent, and I have seen technical types ignore anything coming from the library world out of the ignorant assumption that nothing librarians know has any relevance in the digital world of today. The debate is embodied in the common questions of his time that Kent raises in his article: "Do I really need to know how to program a computer?" "Is 'information science' content best taught in separate courses, or related to conventional library science courses?" (Kent, 1977, p. 134).

I am with Kent in feeling that our field is inherently a mixed one, drawing on technical, scientific, social scientific, and humanistic forms of knowledge. To do our jobs well, we draw on skills and cognitive styles in all those modes. This breadth of understanding is evident in his choices of entry topics in the original encyclopedia, and in his discussion in the *JEL* article. I think there will always be this tension in the information disciplines, because good management and good research and theory about the topics of interest in our field require minds of many different types. As I look back on a lifetime in the field, having heard these issues raised again and again, I feel, finally, that the debate is really a conflict between fundamentally different kinds of minds and hearts, analogous to C.P. Snow's classic "two cultures" of humanities and science.

The concerns about the human factors in library work and in information system interface design require the presence of people who understand people and care about making their lives work well when it comes to information needs and uses. Nothing excites children about books and reading like hearing a story told by a real human being in a real library. These factors are often not well understood by people with primarily technical talents. On the other hand, the staggering amounts of information needing processing today require technical skills that were inconceivable in 1950. Finding ingenious methods of information processing and selection requires high-level technical talent and sophistication. We need the best minds of all types.

People drawn to library and information work have always tended to be people with broad and varied interests. Not everyone has every talent, but we need collectively to integrate those talents together within our field to do the best job possible with the information, people, and information technology that is the subject matter of our discipline. Allen Kent was one of the early, wise contenders in this debate. He will be missed, and he leaves a magnificent legacy.

References

Williams. J. G. (2014). In memoriam: Allen Kent (1921–2014). *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 65(10): 2162–2163.