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A Look at Libraries: Don't Touch

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DON’T TOUCH

The Tech World of Books

By Cory Wade

Will High-Tech Fever Work Against Literacy?

Although fewer than half a dozen campuses in the United States have chosen such an extreme path, Santa Clara University has recently dismantled its conventional library system and replaced it with an ARM, or Automated Retrieval Mechanism. Despite strongly voiced objections from faculty, staff, and students, the University elected to close the stacks, thus permanently precluding the fruitful and enjoyable option of browsing.

Under the high-tech format, prospective borrowers will request specific titles to be retrieved from the closed corridors by a robot. Instead of a library where visitors see and physically handle the books, Santa Clara University will provide a robotic arm programmed to locate items by barcode number. Readers will never enter the area where the books physically reside. They will therefore never experience the delight of removing from the shelf a volume whose contents— and very existence— were unknown to them until they walked among the stacks.

With the ARM system, neither borrowers nor staff members will enter the domain of the books. Only the robotic arm will remove the volumes from their compressed housing. The eric isolation of books from humans might, sadly, serve as a metaphor for the nightmarish consequences of inverted priorities.

What could be the rationale for the adoption of such a high-tech plan on a Jesuit campus where contemplative, humanistic values have traditionally been fostered? During the debate surrounding the ARM, one argument which was offered in support of robot retrieval was that "warehousehousing books" had become too expensive. Is the use of the word "warehouse" in any way synonymous with library? Will literacy improve with a facility where people cannot even explore the shelves directly? Will students read more as a result of having to fill out a card every time they want to examine a book?

As a concerned academic in Silicov Valley, I would gladly send you via conventional mail an excellent library book about the hazards of high-tech seduction. Unfortunately, the title which I had in mind could not be found by the ARM: the volume had slipped to the floor, and the robotic eye could not see it lying there, a few inches out of the range of view.

Perhaps we have become a little myopic. Perhaps it is time to rethink, not reboot. Perhaps we need a new pantheon.

Perhaps we need to unplug.