Editorial

Peggy Johnson

As I write this message from the editor, I am pondering the joy of juxtaposition. Today (March 19) is the first day of spring, yet I spent the morning shoveling eight inches of snow. In contrast, I just returned from ten days of glorious, warm, sunny weather in Arizona, where I admired cacti and the best wildflower display in decades. Both realities exist simultaneously—just like the realities we experience in libraries. Colleagues debate the virtues of ownership versus access, just-in-time versus just-in-case selection and acquisition, electronic versus print subscriptions, brief records versus full cataloging, approval plans versus title-by-title section, microform versus digital preservation, accepting copy cataloging as-is versus editing it, and so on. We hear about the digital library or the print-based library. Perhaps these are not either or choices, but choices we will reconsider and make again and again, depending on the situation. We would do better, perhaps, to think about these as juxtaposed, that is—placed side by side for comparison or contrast.

Librarians live and work in changing times. Our user communities and their expectations, institution and parent organization priorities, technical capacity, funding, and staffing all change, and we must respond as best we can. I find myself struggling with what I think is the best response and what is the most responsible, given available resources and the changing environment. Responsible management of resources, efficiency, expediency, accountability, and improved user service are the watchwords of the day. Sometimes what librarians think is best—based on their education and experience—may not be the right choice to make today.

On the other hand, we are aware that the choices that we make today live on after us. Choosing not to add an item to the collection usually means that it will not be part of the library that future generations' use. Opting not to use a particular descriptive field or to use it in a local manner may mean that future users will not find the item—or that a future automated system cannot index it properly. What formats will have the longest life or be the easiest and cheapest to reformat and repurpose? Are we wasting limited and valuable staff time creating descriptive records that will have little value to future generations? Have we created such elaborate and cumbersome integrated automated library systems that they will sink us in the process of making them work, before we deliver the products our users really want and need?

I wish I had the answers to these and other questions that challenge me. We should not see ourselves as making compromises because we have neither the time nor funds to do it right. The reality that challenges us is making responsible choices today about collections, cataloging, access, and preservation that will serve our users in the future. And I challenge you to find joy in making choices among the juxtaposed options!