It has been noted for some time that significant, even epochal, shifts are occurring in the socio-economic structures of the United States. Debate has centered on whether we are approaching, or have already entered, an entirely new historical era — post-industrial, post-modern, even post-capitalist — or whether corporate capitalism is simply evolving toward the next phase of its development. However one interprets the technological and economic developments of recent years it is clear that central to these changes is the increasing economic importance of knowledge and information. As Daniel Bell, one of the early and most influential theorists of post-industrialism, put it: "Broadly speaking, if industrial society is based on machine technology, post-industrial society is shaped by an intellectual technology. And if capital and labor are the major structural features of industrial society, information and knowledge are those of post-industrial society." ¹

The emergence of information as a vital economic resource can be traced to the period after World War II which saw an explosion in the generation of scientific and technical information accompanied by the development of computers capable of processing this new flood of data. This same period witnessed the growth of private corporations into enormous transnational entities which became increasingly dependent on the rapid organization and flow of information for their global operations. Given these developments it is not surprising that a private information industry quickly emerged to capitalize on the commercial potential in the processing and distribution of data. ²

The extent to which informational activity has transformed the American economy has been striking. By 1956 white-collar workers in service/information professions outnumbered blue-collar industrial workers for the first time and the service sector eventually surpassed manufacturing and agriculture as the central economic sector. By the late 1960's informational activities were responsible for 46 percent of the national income and with the widespread
computerization of the 1970's those in the "primary" information sector (computer manufacturing, telecommunications, mass media, advertising, publishing, accounting, education, research and development etc.) alone accounted for 30 percent of the national economy. While some have maintained that these developments represent a transition to a post-industrial, post-modern epoch which transcends the capitalist era, I would argue that the fundamental features of capitalism (commodity production for profit, wage labor, elite control of economic surplus, market relations etc.) have remained firmly in place and will continue so for the foreseeable future. The production, organization, and dissemination of information has taken on an unprecedented socio-economic importance, but it has done so within the paradigm of corporate capitalism and under the imperatives of private profit and corporate hegemony.

However, information and the technology used for its processing have had a profound enough economic and cultural impact to justify the view that a new configuration of advanced capitalism is developing. Among the characteristics of this new phase of capitalist development is an increasing commercialization and control of areas of life which had previously been relatively free from market relations or in which pockets of relative autonomy had been preserved. Herbert Schiller, Ben Bagdikian and others have documented how transnational corporations have infiltrated education, the arts, entertainment and the news media resulting in cultural homogenization and conformity. Most of the world's important newspapers, magazines, books, movies, recordings, and broadcast stations have come under the control of a handful of huge corporations with the result that profitability and ideological conformity are becoming the sole criteria for cultural production.

 Until recently the public library was one of the few remaining cultural-informational spheres which existed largely outside of the all-encompassing web of market relations. While never adequately fulfilled, the traditional library mission of collecting a wide range of the world's knowledge and making it freely and equally accessible to all who seek it has been a model of democratic values in action. However, the growing economic prominence of information and the dependence on costly new information technology has generated forces which threaten to undermine the ideal of knowledge as a public good. In the approving words of a senior information technol-
ogy scientist at AT&T Bell Laboratories, "information has progressed from intrinsic knowledge to a commodity that is actively produced, marketed, and sold.... Marketplace forces, rather than individual needs drive the development and introduction of new information products."

As transnational corporations have increasingly come to rely on vast banks of data for their global operations and a sophisticated new technology has been developed to more efficiently manipulate that data, private companies have positioned themselves to profit from these trends. By 1989 the revenues of the electronic information industry had reached $7.5 billion and are expected to exceed $19 billion by 1994. Not surprisingly these information companies have been aggressively promoting the idea that information is a commodity that can be bought and sold for a profit. This idea runs directly counter to long-cherished library principles and has grave social and political implications.

As the private information industry has grown in wealth and influence it has had a significant impact on public policy. The Reagan years resulted in a series of legislative acts and executive orders which converted the profit-seeking objectives of the private information sector into national policy. The first and perhaps most far-reaching of these legislative actions has been the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 which authorized the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to set federal information policy. The OMB has used this authority to dramatically restrict and privatize government information. In 1985 the Office provided a general policy framework in the form of Circular A-130 which urged federal agencies to place "maximum feasible reliance" on the private sector for the dissemination of information. The thrust of federal policy during the last decade has been to allow the information industry to appropriate large portions of the huge and valuable national stock of information (which the public has paid to have produced) so it can be repackaged and sold at a profit.

Since the raison d'etre of the information industry, as of its corporate clientele, is the relentless pursuit of profit its attempts to privatize public information should come as no surprise. Neither should the government's acquiescence in these areas given the ideological orientation of the Reagan and Bush administrations. What is dismaying is that this has happened with so little public
discussion and that librarians, with some exceptions,\textsuperscript{8} have been so docile in the face of this trampling on their principles. In fact an entrepreneurial mentality has been allowed to seep into the profession and prominent library spokespersons have been trumpeting the need for fees for services and other market mechanisms which threaten to erode fundamental library values.\textsuperscript{9}

In our eagerness to embrace costly new developments in information technology librarians are allowing corporate interests to redefine information as a commodity while we occupy ourselves with matters of technical efficiency. We are in danger of succumbing to a purely instrumental mentality whereby the means of technique and efficiency override the ends which they should properly be serving, namely free and equal public access to a wide range of information and knowledge. We have failed to recognize the extent to which technological innovations carry with them new types of social relations. Libraries have uncritically hooked into database search technology, for instance, without appreciating the impact this would have on their traditional social role. The reliance of libraries on private database vendors (whose profit-driven motives and conception of information are obviously very different from that of libraries) and the imposition of user fees to cover the costs of the new technology express contradictions which cut to the core of the profession's commitment to information and knowledge as a public good.

Many of librarianship's leading representatives, instead of reinforcing that commitment and exploring strategies for its defense, instead lament the fact that our public service traditions "inhibit us from making the kind of innovation that is needed to compete [in the] marketplace" and advocate the implementation of "new entrepreneurially oriented management structures."\textsuperscript{10} Where we might expect our professional journals to provide critical commentary and debate, instead we are served elaborate rationalizations for librarianship's accomodation to market imperatives.\textsuperscript{11} It is clear that the profession is in dire need of analysis and critique from a perspective that regards the library's vital social role as worthy of defense. The commercialization of information is the overriding issue in librarianship today and one which the progressive elements in the profession should devote ourselves to with all the powers of analysis and activism we can muster. We must develop a critical discourse of
librarianship adequate for the demystification and explication of the issues involving the infiltration of market imperatives into our profession. Such a discourse would provide us with a language and analytical framework with which to critique the promotion, both within and without the library profession, of information as a commodity. It would enable us to cut through the rhetoric which rationalizes the introduction of market mechanisms as the only way for libraries to compete in an entrepreneurial society by making plain the anti-democratic and inegalitarian implications of such ideas. We must also penetrate the ostensible value-neutrality of attempts to reduce library issues requiring political debate and activism to matters of technological innovation, efficiency and expertise.

Ultimately, a truly radical and thoroughgoing critical analysis requires placing information issues in a broad social context by demonstrating how the commodification of information is part of the corporate colonization of increasingly large portions of cultural and social life and thus establishing the theoretical basis for coalitions with progressive forces in education, media, and the arts. We must find ways to resist corporate domination of the cultural-information sphere and devise strategies to directly intervene in the development of an “information society” in ways which would further democratic empowerment and social solidarity rather than private wealth and privilege.

Increasingly in this country the rich and diverse sphere of images, ideas, and information necessary for a healthy democratic culture is being reduced to a flat uni-dimensional plane dominated by commercial values and ideological conformity. With the growing economic prominence of information has come the encroachment of corporate capitalism into the public information realm and a concomitant distortion of information issues and policies to serve private interests. Libraries are in the vortex of these developments and their response—whether acquiescence, accommodation, or resistance—will have an impact not only on the future of the profession, but on the future of democracy as well.
Notes

7. Schiller, *Culture, Inc.*, pp.82-85.
8. To its credit the library community reacted with appropriate outrage to OMB’s recently proposed amendment to Circular A-130 which would have privileged the private sector in the electronic dissemination of federal information. The protests of librarians and public interest groups forced OMB to retract its proposal. However, librarians have not been sufficiently organized or mobilized to prevent currently pending information policy legislation from reflecting the interests of the private information industry. For an objective and up-to-date overview of the current issues surrounding the politics of government information see *Federal Information in the Electronic Age: Policy Issues for the 1990’s*, (Washington D.C.: Bureau of National Affairs, 1990. Toby McIntosh, principal author.)