

RIGHT NOW

interest Blier, since she finds it valuable to consider "colonialism as a creative force—Africans appropriating things from Europe and the Americas." She compares "Western alchemy, the pseudo-science that preceded chemistry" to "African alchemy like *bocio*: a way to bring about knowledge of the world." Adds Blier: "The hard-and-fast division between Europe and Africa should be softened. Before the Industrial Revolution, Africa and Europe were similar in many ways."
—Wilson Wanene

Librarians at the Gate

How to find one's way in an ocean of information? Sometimes it helps to hire a professional navigator.

In his much-touted 1983 novel *Neuromancer*, science fiction writer William Gibson envisioned a future world economy strapped to the bulwark of electronic information. Multinational cartels hoarded precious stores of data in massive virtual libraries while knavish "data cowboys" peddled their skills at "jacking into the matrix" to extract information for the highest black-market bidder.

That vision may sound less far-fetched today than it did in 1983. But 10 years before that, Alice Sizer Warner '50 and a partner co-founded a company in Lexington, Massachusetts, called Warner-Eddison Associates, one of the earliest entrants in a now-booming brand of entrepreneurship: information brokering.

Their timing was propitious. The 1970s saw the early rumblings of the so-called information explosion, when publishers started turning out new mate-

rial in record volume and began experimenting with electronic media. Warner-Eddison capitalized on the confusion by helping corporate clients wade through the expanding morass to fill their research needs, practicing a kind of mercenary librarianship.

For example, the head of a specialty retail chain wanted to know whether anyone else had thought of marketing a particular combination of products together in one store. "I knocked myself out doing database searches, contacting government agencies—even the Israeli Army, at one point," Warner recalls. "Finally I came back to the client's office and draped my research results all around the place. He didn't want to see any of it. All he cared about was the answer to his question: 'No.'"

Brokers often charge thousands of dollars for seemingly straightforward research projects. In one now-legendary instance, a \$2 government document provided the keystone for a research report that ultimately carried a \$30,000 price tag. Most brokers enjoy less dramatic results, but they know that given the current anarchic state of the information economy, market forces work in their favor. "People who make it in business have come to realize how much they depend on this kind of information," says Warner. "That's especially true in large companies, where they realize that the cost of acquiring that information is usually marginal compared to the benefit."

There are no accurate statistics on the size of the brokerage industry. But there are at least 1,500 information brokerages currently doing business nationwide, up from just over 300 in 1984. Many learned the business from Warner, who now spends much of her time teaching classes and seminars in how to set up an information brokerage.

One former student, Charlene Cunniffe '77, now runs a successful information brokerage in Nashville, Tennessee. Cunniffe has peddled her research skills to everyone from attorneys trying to dig

up dirt on a corporate opponent to a certain defense contractor (whose name she can't reveal). "During the Gulf war, I fielded some rather pointed questions from this company having to do with the atmospheric effects of oil fires," she recalls. "One month later—what do you know?—the Kuwaiti oil fields were on fire. But that was rare; usually, I never find out what happens to the information after it leaves my hands."

The Gale Directory of Online Databases—an

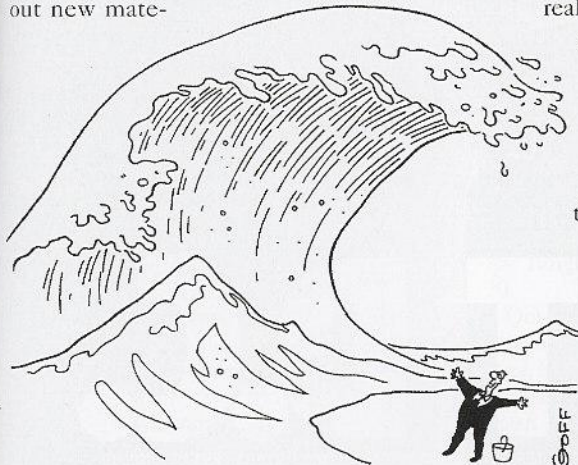
information brokers' Baedeker—lists over five thousand research databases (up from three hundred in 1979), including such rarefied fare as the Tasmanian Case Law Database, Drilling Analysis Data On-Line, and Yritysfaktat (containing information on the four thousand largest companies in Finland). Add to that mix thousands of similarly niche-marketed information products in CD-ROM and other formats—including that old dog, print—and the sum is a virtual Babel.

"The trick," says Warner, "is knowing which screw to put your screwdriver in." That trick takes practice: brokers have to master arcane search-and-retrieval languages for each different system, understand the syndetic twists of logic that govern the organization of data, and know what particular types of information a given database will yield. Neophytes enter these cyber-minefields at their own risk.

Speaking of neophytes, some information clients are starting to provide their employees with access to the online databases. But Warner doubts that most executives will have the time or inclination to master the complexities of the information brokers' trade. "Do-it-yourself research is kind of like practicing home medicine," she says. "It may cure what ails you, but in the long run you'd better know when you need to see a specialist."
—Alex Wright



Pioneering information broker Alice Warner.



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