# Remembrance

*Calvin N. Mooers, a pioneer of information science and the 1978 ASIS Award of Merit recipient, passed away in December of 1994. At the upcoming ASIS Annual Meeting in Baltimore, Special Interest Groups/History and Foundations of Information Science (HFIS) and Education (ED) will present a pre-conference session entitled* History of Information Science: Reminiscences and Assessments, *on Sunday, October 20, 1:00-5:00 p.m.* **Charlotte Mooers,** *Calvin's wife and the daughter of ASIS founder Watson Davis, is one of the scheduled participants. The following article by Calvin Mooers, originally presented in 1959, is published here as a prelude to that session, a reminder of Calvin's sense of humor and as a tribute to the man who mentored and befriended many ASIS members.*

# Mooers' Law *or* Why Some Retrieval Systems Are Used and Others Are Not

*Remarks by Calvin N. Mooers during a panel discussion at the Annual Meeting of the American Documentation Institute at Lehigh University, Pennsylvania, October 24, 1959*

Some critical remarks about retrieval systems—and the environment in which they are used—would seem to be in order at this point. We are all aware that some retrieval systems, although technically rather poor, nevertheless receive intensive use, while other systems, sometimes technically very much better, receive very little customer use. Why is this?

I should like to explain this situation by advancing for your consideration a principle or law of behavior which I believe governs the use of retrieval systems. We have all heard of "Parkinson's Law" governing some of the more preposterous features of the exponential growth in size of government activities. In analogy, we might call the following principle "Mooers' Law" for retrieval systems.

We have all seen reports describing retrieval systems which can perform more efficiently, search more rapidly, operate on larger collections and so on. However, as we furnish our customers more and better retrieval system performance, can we be assured that they will

make any greater use of the systems? In my estimation, the answer is "no."

It is my considered opinion, from long experience, that our customers will continue to be reluctant to use information systems—however well devised—so long as one feature of our present intellectual and engineering cli-



mate prevails. This feature—and its-prevalence is all too commonplace in many companies, laboratories and agencies—is that for many people it is more painful and troublesome to have information than for them not to have

it. For people in such a situation, we can expect that they will tend to avoid using a retrieval system which is efficient at putting information into their hands. This contradictory principle can be stated:

**MOOERS' Law:** An information retrieval system will tend *not* to be used whenever it is more painful and troublesome for a customer to have information than for him not to have it.

If this law is true—and I believe that it is—this is indeed a pessimistic and even a cynical conclusion. In the building and planning of our information handling and retrieving systems, we have tended to believe implicitly, and to assume throughout, that having information easily available was always a good thing, and that all people who had access to an information system would want to use the system to get the information. It is now my suggestion that many people may not want information, and that they will avoid using a system precisely *because* it gives them information. I shall now try to justify my assertions.

Having information *is* painful and troublesome. We all have experienced this. If you have information, you must first read it, which is not always easy. You must then try to understand it. To

do this, you may have to think about it. The information may require you to make decisions about it or other information. The decisions may require action in the way of a troublesome program of work, or trips or painful interviews. Understanding the information may show that your work was wrong, or that your boss was wrong, or may show that your work was needless. Having information, you must be careful not to lose it. If nothing else, information piles up on your desk—unread. It is a nuisance to have it come to you. It is uncomfortable to have to do anything about it. Finally, if you do try to use the information properly, you may be accused of puttering instead of working. Then in the end, the incorporation of the information into the work you do may often not be noticed or appreciated. Work saved is seldom recognized. Work done—even in duplication—is well paid and rewarded.

Thus not having and not using information can often lead to less trouble and pain than having and using it. Let

me explain this further. In many work environments, the penalties for not being diligent in the finding and use of information are minor, if they exist at all. In fact, such lack of diligence tends often to be rewarded. The man who does not fuss with information is seen at his bench, plainly at work, getting the job done. Approval goes to projects where things are happening. One must be courageous or imprudent, or both, to point out from the literature that a current laboratory project which has had an expensive history and full backing of the management was futile from the outset. At a desk, an author of a technical report, by not making a prior literature search, and by omitting citations to earlier work, can prepare his reports so much faster, with the additional advantage that people will think the ideas presented were new and were his own. Unlike a meeting I attended in England, at engineering meetings in this country it is not considered quite proper for a member of the audience to get up and to give out in plain lan-

guage the citation and facts showing the lack of content or novelty in a paper.

Where rewards, instead of punishment, go with *not* using information, we can expect that any information retrieval system will be used only with reluctance. On the other hand, there are situations where the diligent finding and use of information is stressed and rewarded, and where failure to find or to use information is severely punished. In such places, we can expect retrieval systems to be actively used and we can expect pressure from the information users themselves for better systems. This turns out to be true in practice.

*These comments are excerpted with modifications from the report* Information Retrieval Selection Study, Part II: Seven System Models, *by Calvin N. Mooers, Zator Company, 140½ Mt. Auburn Street, Cambridge 38, MA, to be published as ZTB No. 133, Part II; Report No. RADC-TR-59-173l contract AF 30(602)-1900.*