

Libraries: Standing at the Wrong Platform, Waiting for the Wrong Train?

Libraries have taken some major hits over the past few months, again raising questions about how or whether libraries will survive a constantly shifting information landscape. The announcement by the University of Texas regarding the digitalization of its undergraduate library—moving books out—received strong media attention and was used by the press to take the image of the “empty library” to a new level.¹ Moreover, Google’s plan to digitize key library collections has added fuel to predictions that libraries will be rendered obsolete in our increasingly digital world.

However, questions concerning the role of libraries, or whether libraries are even needed in a digital world, are not exactly new or earth-shattering. Almost thirty years ago, F. W. Lancaster raised these same questions in a wonderful essay titled “Whither Libraries? or, Wither Libraries.”² Since then, the literature has continued to be filled with articles asking similar questions.

Like Mark Twain, who said “the reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated,” libraries have continued to operate very effectively despite these predictions. What is quite incredible is that even with thirty years of technological advances, libraries remain relatively unchanged. Yes, library spaces have incorporated coffee shops and computers, but anyone who walks into a library building today will be struck by how little anything else has changed.

As libraries have confronted waves of technological advancements, the implicit assumption has remained that the traditional values and structures of librarian-

ship would continue to serve as anchors in a sea of change. Today’s online catalog has expanded in scope and range but still preserves the underlying structure of yesterday’s card catalog, in the form of MARC records. Collections have rapidly expanded into digital formats, and the methods for accessing these digital collections have evolved, but the relationship between collections, consumers, and the library as mediator remains. In addition, libraries are still organized much as they were thirty years ago. Although job titles have changed, the basic divisions of public-versus-technical services, and professional librarians versus clerical and paraprofessionals, remain—often bearing more resemblance to a medieval caste system than to a modern, agile organization.

And yet, like the perfect storm, the intrusion of the Web may alter libraries in ways far different from those of past technological changes. Already the Web is affecting the very core areas of library services: (1) collections, (2) preservation, and (3) reference.

Let’s look first at *collections*—the heart and soul of a library. From the perspective of information-seekers, collections are now Web sites, created by individuals, publishers, and commercial aggregators. These sites often serve as information hubs, assuming the role of librarians by directing visitors to information on specific topics or interest areas.

Moreover, the commercial aggregation of information resources on the Web has greatly decreased the flexibility that libraries have in making decisions about subscriptions to individual electronic journals and databases. Increasingly,

these decisions are less about individual journals and titles and more about getting the most titles for the fewest bucks by contracting with large aggregators of electronic materials. As Paul Kobulnicky pointed out in his E-Content article in *EDUCAUSE Review*, libraries are increasingly concentrating their energies on the “big deal” kind of subscription—essentially buying “collections” of electronic material put together by others, an all-or-nothing proposition.³ For most libraries, subscribing to electronic publications is becoming an exercise in negotiation and purchasing rather than a process of making choices about collections. This service is quickly becoming so commoditized that the role of the library is simply becoming that of a purchasing agent acting on behalf of its community.

If more collections are “owned” by commercial aggregators residing in various remote locations, the question of stewardship and *preservation* of materials becomes critical. Traditionally, it has been the role of libraries to preserve our intellectual heritage. As more of that heritage becomes digitalized and deposited in the hands of “private” owners, doesn’t this beg the question of how to ensure that the information continues to exist even if the information provider goes out of business?

Many believe that the only way to ensure that our digital heritage is preserved is for libraries, either collectively or individually, to keep duplicate copies of all digital material—even if copies are also readily available from commercial sites. An alternative approach is to create policies to preserve this material regardless of where it resides physically. In much the

same manner as we carve out historic districts and preserve cemeteries, we could develop policies that would lead to the preservation of key digital materials.

Regardless of whether digital materials increasingly reside on commercial Web sites, the next question involves the role of librarians. Shouldn't librarians play a key role in evaluating and determining the quality of these new information hubs? Won't librarians still be needed to help people navigate through these sites and separate the wheat from the chaff? Indeed, librarians may continue to serve this function. But a competing model seems to be gaining

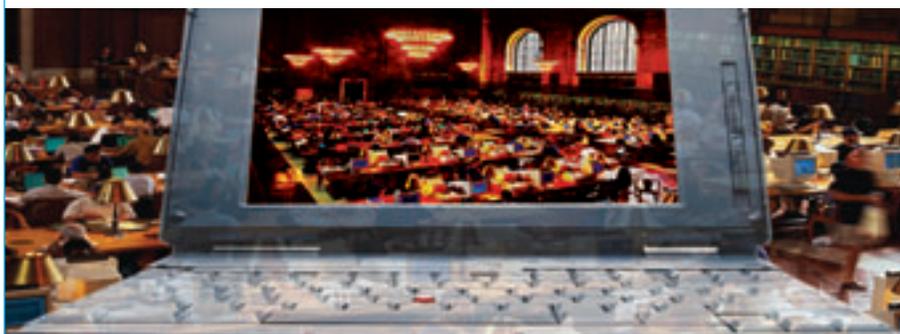


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ground. The Amazon.com model, which uses peer reviews by individuals and panels of experts, might supersede librarians in providing this quality-control function. This seems especially likely when one considers how easy it is for Web sites to provide such reviews and/or endorsements and how much of a competitive incentive these sites have for doing so.

The Web has also changed the role of the library as a repository for traditional print collections. Books in both print and electronic format are becoming widely and easily (although not necessarily cheaply) available. It is no longer unusual to hear about people who prefer to buy a book online and have it delivered right to their door, instead of walking across campus to check out the same book from the campus library. Although these "Amazoners" may still be the exception rather than the rule, in today's world of expedited electronic tracking and worldwide delivery, it seems only natural that we should begin to expect direct delivery of print material from anywhere, to anywhere. Yet libraries have been slow to react to these changes. Cumbersome interlibrary loan procedures are still the norm. Unless libraries develop and ex-

pand services that provide patrons a way of directly and quickly accessing a broad range of print materials, worldwide, with a mouse-click, more and more people will begin to pay for services from Amazon.com or Google Print.

Finally, in addition to the core areas of collections and preservation, libraries have traditionally been the community problem solver, the *reference* source. When Baby Boomers were in school and had questions, their teachers sent them to the local librarian. This isn't the case anymore. Even the reference function of libraries is facing increasing challenges from the Web. Google has become the most widely

used tool for addressing all sorts of questions. Whether to settle a bet or to answer a research question, Google and Google Scholar are often the sources of first choice. Beyond Google, a growing number of information services will provide expert answers to almost any question.

Many libraries have tried to match these challenges by providing new online reference services. But it is not clear whether these redesigned services can compete with the rapidly growing commercial services available on the Web. Economies of scale may give commercial sites the advantage of greater access to more in-depth expertise, enabling them to gear their services to a broad range of specialized needs. It is not hard to imagine a scenario in which colleges and universities will shift their resources to pay for a national information service customized to the needs of the individual institution rather than support their own local library reference service.

In response to the Web, many libraries, individually and/or collectively, have started to create their own information hubs—*digital repositories*—using the intellectual content of their institutions. Unfortunately, many of these repositories

are built on traditional methods of information organization rather than on the new information-dissemination models evolving on the Web. Potential contributors to and users of these repositories are finding the organization and metadata tag systems imposed by libraries far too cumbersome. Moreover, in designing many of these new digital repositories, libraries have largely ignored the important role that people play. Most library digital repository initiatives are designed to serve only as gateways to documents and artifacts. Few are designed to serve as true information hubs, providing users access to both relevant information and experts.

As the Web continues to develop and expand, creating a vast array of information hubs, the question to be asked is: Will libraries be key nodes on this information network? If history is a guide, the answer is "maybe." Yes, libraries have adapted and have incorporated new technologies and media in the past while also managing to remain, to a large extent, loyal to centuries-old practices and approaches. This may no longer be possible in an information world dominated by the Web. Libraries could someday find themselves in the same situation as daily train commuters. Just because the train schedule remains the same for thirty years doesn't mean that hapless commuters might not one day find themselves standing on the wrong platform, waiting for the wrong train, unaware that there was a schedule shift in their world order.

Notes

1. Katherine S. Mangan, "Packing Up the Books," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 1, 2005, <<http://chronicle.com/prm/weekly/v51/i43/43a02701.htm>>.
2. F. Wilfrid Lancaster, "Whither Libraries? or, Wither Libraries," *College and Research Libraries*, vol. 39 (1978): 345–57.
3. Paul Kobulnicky, "Pork Bellies and Silk Purses," *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 39, no. 3 (May/June 2004), <<http://www.educause.edu/er/erm04/erm043.asp>>.

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