Are Research Libraries Dying?


In the past, one of the resources that differentiated research universities from colleges and K-12 schools was the research library. Research universities had extensive (and expensive) research libraries, supported by acquisitions budgets that were often in excess of a million dollars a year.

The Internet is contributing to a massive change in information access that will empower K-12 schools and colleges. However, it may decrease the preeminence of research universities.

A Case Study

The University of Oregon (one of my employers) is a high quality research university with a large graduate program, a faculty that is highly successful in obtaining grants, and many departments that have high national rankings. It has a very large research library.

The University of Oregon recently completed a multimillion-dollar addition to its library facility. The fundraisers argued that the need was obvious and that the building project was long overdue. The "old" space was full to overflowing. Where would all of the new books and journals go? When you spend nearly $3.7 million a year for research journals, research monographs, and books, you quickly fill up a lot of shelf space!

However, as the building project was beginning, the library was in the process of cutting $350,000 a year from its periodicals budget and was continuing a slow but steady decrease in its book budget. Now, just a few years later, the University of Oregon is beginning a three-year effort to cut an additional $500,000 from its annual budget for periodicals. The book budget continues to decline.

The argument for the necessity of these cuts is both interesting and informative. At the time I was writing this editorial, a detailed analysis entitled "Series Cancellations and Library Budget Information" was available online at the UO Library Web site.

The analysis included a listing of all of the proposed periodicals to be cut in the first year of the three-year cutback process. The Web page also discussed the fact that many other universities are making similar cuts. Finally, it contained pointers to a number of learned discussions about online publishing of research journals and other scholarly publications.

From a financial point of view, the arguments are that the costs of research periodicals have continued to increase far more rapidly than the cost of living. In addition, public colleges and universities have not been very well funded in recent years, and there is every reason to believe that this will continue. Thus, there is a need to decrease the number of periodicals being purchased, both because their prices are going up and because many other demands exist for the money available. For example, it could be used for online services, CD-ROMs, computers, or faculty salaries.

As I read the analysis, I could not help but recall the statement by Marshall McLuhan that "The medium is the message." The Web-based presentation of the arguments for the budget cuts
and the underlying discussion of the research librarians changing world were presented in a mode that clearly showed the power of the medium. Technology is making research information available far more rapidly and in a far less costly manner than it is in traditional paper periodicals.

**Research Articles on the Web**

After I made my way through the arguments for the cuts, I began to browse some of the articles that discussed online research journals and other aspects of the changes that are occurring. You may enjoy checking out the New Horizons in Scholarly Communication Web site at http://www.ucsc.edu/scomm/.

With minimal time and effort, I browsed the titles of dozens of carefully selected articles and read several of them. They varied in age—the oldest was Vannevar Bush's 1945 article that is often cited as laying the scholarly foundations for the beginnings of hypermedia.

Several of the articles were updated versions of presentations that had been given before scholarly organizations in the current year. One that I found particularly interesting was "Evaluating Quality on the Net," a 1996 presentation by Hope N. Tillman, Director of Libraries at Babson College in Babson Park, Massachusetts. In this presentation, she discusses three general types of Web publications that might attract a person who uses a research library.

1. Vanity press literature. This is just like the self-publishing that used to be done either individually or with the aid of a "vanity press." Tillman says that the typical home page created by students falls in this category.

2. Gray literature. This includes pamphlets, preprints, technical reports, and other materials that have the appearance of scholarly literature but have not gone through a refereeing process.

3. Very scholarly literature. This category includes respected, refereed journals.

From a research librarian's point of view, items in the first category are very suspect, those in the second category are somewhat suspect, and those in the third category are viewed favorably.

A research librarian learns to distinguish among these three general categories of information. Tillman's article contains a detailed example of the type of analysis that a research librarian might use. Her main point is that we should use common sense in analyzing Web publications.

That is easy enough to say when you are a highly educated research librarian. The challenge to our educational system is to help students at all grade levels develop a similar type of common sense. Such common sense comes from a great deal of education, substantial practice analyzing multiple sources of information, and feedback from a person who has learned to think like a research librarian.

The "physical" research library is dying, and the "cyberspace" research library is emerging. Eventually the cyberspace research library will surpass and replace the traditional research library. All students need to learn how to be self-sufficient research librarians in cyberspace. Curriculum needs to change to reflect the growing access of information available to of all students.
Retrospective Comment 8/31/08

It has been almost 12 years since I wrote this editorial. It has been interesting to see the tremendous growth of the web and some of the problems it has brought to the “scholarly literature” field. For example, we now have the Wikipedia. It is somewhat scholarly—roughly on the same level of various other encyclopedias—but it clearly falls into the middle category of the three general classifications given.

Nowadays, essentially all of my writing falls into the same category. Moreover, I have started a Wiki, with address http://IAE-pedia.org. However, I have considerable confidence that my writings are contributing to the world of education and the goal of working to improve education.