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David D. Oberhelman
Oklahoma State University Library, davido@okstate.edu

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On Navigating Labyrinths and Webs: Print and the Internet as Institutions of Research

by David D. Oberhelman (Associate Professor, Humanities-Social Sciences Division, Oklahoma State University Library, 306 Edmon Low Library, Stillwater, OK 74078; Phone: 405-744-9773, 405-780-7260; Fax: 405-744-7579) <davido@okstate.edu>

I have decided to frame this reflection on the comparative value of the print world of books and journal articles, and the new world of Internet and pages on the World Wide Web as aids to research, around an account of a reference question I recently received from one of my colleagues at a small university. As the literature bibliographer at a large academic library, I am often called upon to assist my colleagues here as well as colleagues from other libraries with difficult questions in the Humanities that require rooting around in very obscure volumes. This reference librarian approached me with a request to locate a poem by the French writer Pierre de Ronsard, about a fourteenth-century Albanian freedom fighter named Gjerzi Kastrioti or Scanderbeg (the spelling of this title varies widely). The patron who had asked the question could not recall where he had read about this poem, but remembered several sources saying that Ronsard had written about the Albanian. He and the librarian had used what resources they had available at a small academic library, so they forwarded the request on to me for further investigation using the resources of a larger institution. As I plunged into a morass of Renaissance French literary research in an attempt to uncover the elusive Scanderbeg poem, I gained new insight into the differences between print and the Internet as information technologies, tools the scholar can manipulate to dig out the information they contain, but also as what I term institutions of research—tools that embody within them a set of rules and conventions governing how they are created, used and stand in relation to other types of information. I realized that researching this question in print and online had led me into two types of labyrinths in which the answer might be buried. In the process I concluded that the Internet, despite the robust possibilities it opens up for the access and generation of knowledge, continues to have limitations for in-depth research because of its lack of classification and documentation, the two ingredients that make the print world a more solidly constructed and more navigable maze than the unstable “web” of cyberspace.

My first impulse was to turn to the complete editions of Ronsard’s works and the standard critical sources for the study of Renaissance poetry, the print sources that form the basis of traditional literary scholarship. After consulting various reference works about French literature and looking through the contents of Ronsard’s Oeuvres (using the “proper” editions listed in the critical sources), I was completely unable to find any mention of an Albanian warrior amidst his numerous odes and occasional poems about well-known French historical figures. I then delved deeper into the stacks to look through books of criticism about the poet and his period but still turned up no clues after consulting most of the traditional sources for Ronsard studies. My trek through the critical sources did give me some possible clues in the form of references to other essays and tomes, so I dutifully followed those paths even though they offered no insight. Indexes of the journal literature on Ronsard such as the MLA Bibliography and the French XX Bibliography also yielded no leads. There were ample references to historical odes and poems about other unusual legendary figures such as Merlin, but Scanderbeg was not mentioned and even the footnotes in the articles I read were silent. At this point I changed tactics and started looking for historical accounts of Albania hoping to find a thread to grasp. Using various catalogs such as OCLC’s WorldCat and other comprehensive sources for cataloging and classifying the book world, I found only one book-length study of Scanderbeg’s life in English which luckily was in our local holdings. This book does list some artistic works inspired by the fighter such as a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (a piece that I easily found in his Complete Works), a brief account of his fortunes by Montaigne, and a number of operas written about him, but Ronsard’s name never appears.1 My research using print sources proved fruitless, and I had reached a dead end. Nonetheless, I felt confident that the lack of any references to that Scanderbeg poem in the well-researched books and articles I had consulted was a sign that the patron’s claim that multiple sources discussed the poem had been in error. If there had been such a poem by Ronsard, I reasoned, there would have been some hints, some breadcumbs sprinkled through the labyrinth of the printed word in the form of notes or bibliographic citations that would have pointed me in the right direction. The lack of evidence for a Ronsard poem thus became a reassurance because I was confident that all possible avenues of research using established book and journal sources had been exhausted.

Finally, with little hope for success, I turned to the labyrinth of the Web for answers using as a guide the search engine Google, the starting point for many research ventures nowadays among the undergraduate and even more advanced clients in my academic library. It was there that I stumbled upon the multiple sources the researcher had apparently used as his authority and also learned why the search had been so confusing for patron and librarian alike. After plugging in a search for “Scanderbeg” (using several variant spellings) and “Ronsard,” I received about fifteen promising hits. Suddenly encouraged by the number of Web pages linking the two names, I pulled up a page entitled the “Gjerzi Kastrioti-Scanderbeg” from the domain “Albanian.com,” a commercial informational site about the history and culture of Albania.

As I skimmed the page, I discovered the sentence that inspired the patron’s quest to find the poem: “Scanderbeg’s [sic] posthumous renown was by no means confined to his own country . . . . The sixteenth-century poet Ronsard wrote a poem about him and so did the nineteenth-century American poet Longfellow. Antonio Vivaldi, too, composed and opera entitled Scanderbeg.” The passage gives no title for the poem and there was no documentation to help the reader locate the poem. There is a brief bibliography at the end of this biographical essay, but it consists of only

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Libraries, Books, and . . .

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banish them. The state does not destroy our books; the university disjoins them. We place them in vaults or we displace them with Web stations, television studios or other “media rich” diversions. Through these and other powerful symbolic gestures, we say books are peripheral with less and less to offer our minds. But the scorn of books in the name of information access is Orwellian; it constricts access, constrains the mind and cheats our students.

In The End of Education, Postman argues that “technology is here or will be; we must use it because it is there; we will become the kind of people the technology requires us to be; and, whether we like it or not, we will remake our institutions to accommodate the technology. All of this must happen because it is good for us, but in any case, we have no choice.”20 We have become, in Thoreau’s words, the tools of our tools. But this is only because we act as if we do not have a choice. We do. If we want the book to have a future, we must not merely create one. We must also have the courage and take the time to guarantee it.

Endnotes

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that one book about Scanderberg that does not mention Ronsard and a generic Albanian
history book. The claim that Ronsard composed a poem about this Albanian leader is therefore
completely unsupported. Accordingly, I had to
look at some of the other sites that came up in
the Google search to see if they do a better job
of identifying the poem.

Much to my dismay, however, I found that
all the other pages in that set of results were
merely copies of the text of that Albanian.com
page without any additions or, except for one or
two cases, any credit given to the original site
hosting that biography. The biographical sketch
had even been translated into Albanian, German,
Italian and French without any changes (except
for one page which mistakenly labels Ronsard
a nineteenth-century poet). There were indeed
multiple sources testifying to the existence of
the Scanderberg poem, but they all repeat the
same text and offer no bibliographic support for
the claim that Ronsard had penned a
Scanderberg ode. The Web pages gave me no
assurance that Ronsard did in fact write a poem
about the Albanian warrior because all the pages
put forward the same statements without any
additional supporting evidence. All these dif-
ferent sources simply mirror each other and use
themselves as their sole authority with no ex-
ternal corroboration. I, like the patron who had
probably done the exact same search in Google

before me, found myself at an impasse in my
hunt for a path through the information sources.
Once again I was trapped in a labyrinth, only
time it felt more like a trick of smoke and
mirrors than a solidly constructed structure of
information the researcher had to navigate.

The problems I encountered using the Web
instead of print sources to research this tricky
question illustrate the differences between those
two institutions of research and why it is impor-
tant for both researchers and casual searchers
to exercise caution when going online. The
most fundamental distinction between print and
the Internet as formats of information with their
accompanying sets of rules and conventions for
how to use them is that the myriad works in the
print world stand in some knowable relationship
to each other, whereas the Internet sources,
because of their almost ephemeral nature, can
never have stable links to each other. In other
words, print sources refer back to each other
and are from the moment of their first appear-
ance placed in connection to works that came
before them and even to works that come after
them. This connection is what we call “colo-
cation,” the various classification systems cre-
ated to ensure that items stand next to similar
items both physically and intellectually. In
scholarly terms this connection takes the form
of citation and documentation, which guaran-
tees that new books and articles enter into the
ongoing discourse of academic fields (such as
French literature or Albanian history) and are
thus available for consultation. The ever-shift-
ing world of the Internet with its inherent lack
of permanence and scholarly discipline renders
all efforts to collocate and document informa-
tion sources an almost impossible task.

The metaphor of the labyrinth is one I have
used in describing my attempts to navigate
through multiple resources to answer the
Ronsard question, one which is fairly common
in literary discussions of libraries as archives of
human knowledge. Yet, as I mentioned, the lab-
yrinth of the library with its often-confusing pas-
sages and barriers is a solid structure that can
be learned and therefore conquered. In The
Name of the Rose the scholar and novelist
Umberto Eco goes into great detail sketching
out the misleading corridors of a medieval
Benedictine library designed to hide potentially
dangerous books from readers’ eyes. His im-
age of a library whose secrets are known only
to the librarian and his assistant and whose hold-
ings can literally kill those who pry into secrets
they should not know is one that captures the
sentiments of many library users. The fear of
all those dusty, dark tombs has led many to turn
to other sources such as the Internet. Yet the
library in Eco’s novel is one that does have a
basic order to it that the protagonist, a wily
English Franciscan sleuth, can eventually dis-
cover amid the apparent chaos. There is a ba-
sic classification scheme based on the geog-
raphy of the known world, and once the monk
discovers the principles governing how the
books are shelved, he can solve the mysteries
of both the library and the murders that have
occurred at the abbey.

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Books and articles cannot be published without their own “birth certificates”—signs that locate them in the world of printed information such as the author’s and publisher’s names, ISBNs, ISSNes and copyright information that establish their legitimacy and place in the universe of letters. Catalogers and indexers then decide what access terms and what index entries and allow researchers to know that they exist. The books and articles themselves must therefore pay homage to their forbearers by including footnotes, endnotes, references lists, and other conventions to document the sources of information their authors used in writing them. Much academic research is done by following the footnotes trail found at the bottom of pages, and now with the advent of citation indexes and other formal tools for capturing the content of notes, Citation-index searching has become a vital part of scholarly activity. The expectation within scholarly publishing is that every printed work needs to acknowledge its indebtedness to other printed works. Many books and articles do not live up to that expectation, but centuries of business practices and legal precedent have made it difficult for authors and publishers to quote without credit, or at the extreme, plagiarize from other works. This attention to documentation further enmeshes books and existence in a symbiotic relationship to each other. They depend on each other for their information and therefore construct their own genealogies of indebtedness to outside sources. This interdependence of print sources lends them credence and makes them reliable, if sometimes frustrating and complex, tools for a dedicated researcher to employ when examining difficult questions.

The Internet, as I learned while digging through hits on Google, throws almost all of the basic tenets of order and citation, and forms its own rules based on the philosophy of “cut and paste.” There are, I hasten to explain, many excellent, scholarly sites available on the Web today, and their number is increasing as the medium becomes more mature and established. But the vast majority of documents on the Web resemble the myriad Scanderberg biographical pages that have proliferated on servers across the globe. Most Web pages stand in isolation to other pages and frequently appear and disappear without leaving any proof that they ever existed, and that anonymity prevents the Web from achieving any semblance of order or regularity. Labyrinths such as the print world have boundaries and passages known at least to their builders. But the Web, true to its name, is an organic, dynamic medium which resists containment and hence is unknowable; there is no single spider or crawler capable of knowing all that is out there in cyberspace.

In his 1999 study of Internet search engines, Steve Lawrence estimates that no one search tool indexes more than about 20 percent of the World Wide Web; and that figure has to be even lower today, given the exponential explosion of the Web in the new millennium. Faced with such a vast amount of the unindexed sites on the Internet, no researcher can ever hope to grasp the structure of information on the Web, much less find a classification system that can organize it. Subject directories such as Yahoo! and other commercial and nonprofit directory sites offer very selective categories to classify the Web, but they miss even more pages than the search engines because they often rely on pages submitted by their creators or known to the indexers compiling the database. As a result, the Web remains an uncharted expanse of information orphaned from other sources. The pages of the Web remains just that, a more page divorced from any context that can give it meaning and importance. Indeed, the Scanderberg pages I found, the ones that Google happened to have in its database at that moment, came from an indiscriminate combination of commercial sites, personal pages, and international sites without any pattern or means to locate other related sites on the same topic that could confirm or amplify the statements about Ronsard.

Many of those pages have no doubt become dead links by now, and many others have undoubtedly been created or were created in the past and simply missed by the search engines. The print world would never allow over 80 percent of books or journal articles published to go undiscovered or unrecorded in some index, but the conventions of the Internet allow for such anarchy in its organization. Researchers can never rest assured that they have found all the information that might be out there if they rely only on the Internet and accordingly cannot judge the credibility of any assertions they encounter it that medium. The Web is always in flux, and that inherent instability prevents any researcher from ever reaching closure or an end to investigation.

The alienation of the Web extends to the lack of documentation within the pages themselves. The footnotes in the Scanderberg pages are perfunctory at best, and give no aid to the researcher. Moreover, the blatant plagiarism evident in those pages reflects a culture in which information is not cited, but cut from its home and pasted into a new document with little or no credit to the original source. The Internet is still developing its rules for acceptable scholarship, and the failure of countless Web pages to identify authors and to plunder information from other sources while paying lip service to copyright laws indicates the extent to which the online environment lags far behind print, both academically and ethically. Perhaps because the Internet is still for the most part a self-publishing forum in which the restrictions imposed by book and journal publishers can be circumvented, authors on the Web frequently border on intellectual piracy. Researchers suffer greatly because of this piracy, for they are ultimately unable to trust anything they read online. Despite the numerous instances of the Scanderberg biography on the Web, I now doubt more than ever the accuracy of what I read, and the climate of doubt the Internet thus engenders is detrimental in the extreme to any research venture.

In the end I was forced to tell my colleague that I believed that Ronsard did not write a Scanderberg poem and that the patron had been misled by Web pages that most likely gave faulty information (it could be that the author of the Scanderberg biography had conflated Montaigne with his contemporary Ronsard). I do leave open the possibility that I have overestimated the Web's capacity to mislead, but the evidence seems convincing enough to warrant further investigation. I am not the first to have raised concerns about the reliability of the Web, but I believe that the nature of the problem is such that it poses a serious threat to the academic enterprise at this time.
A Bookseller Views the Future of the Book

by Jim Presgraves (Bookworm and Silverfish, 401 Church Street, Rural Retreat, VA 24368, P.O. Box 639, Wytheville, VA 24382; Phone: 276-686-5813; Fax: 276-686-6636) <bookworm@naxx.com> (see http://www.bookwormandsilverfish.com/contact.htm for more)

This article will share a captivating bibliodote, discuss points of probable change in the book trade and identify points that probably won't change. It is important to know that the author speaks only from experience (catalogs issued since 1972) and not for any group. Readers are invited to supply additional ideas, take issue, extend congratulations or buy books, as listed at the end of the article.

Bibliodote: At 4:30 a.m. one recent August day a bulldozer finished covering some 200,000 books consigned to the landfill to clear their former home for a new purchaser. The former school had closed after the death of its founder, and the board had given the library to a new college and held it for two years, pending the new college's logistics, only to be told weeks before delivery of possession of the building, “We don’t have space, and we don’t have money to rent storage until we can build.” Board members called the writer who salvaged many of the better titles, but the rest were overcovered that August day. Crime? Well, the destroyed material did include many multi-volume serials (most now on CD-ROM or fiche), superceded editions, broken sets, etc. Crime? Well, who should be convicted? Board of the new school? Technologists who invented micro-compressive techniques? Board of the closed school? Publishers who began new editions before the previous edition has been shipped from the warehouse? Or was it one of those inevitables like the collapse of the WYE OAK?

I. Changes in the out-of-print Booksellers’ World, sometimes

-looked some source that would yield an answer to this quandary and could indeed prove that the Web pages are correct. If any reader of this article has some insight into this question, I would invite any leads. Nevertheless, I do stand by my assertions about the fundamental differences between the nature of print and the Internet as institutions of research. The labyrinth of print sources may be daunting to even experienced researchers, but it rests on a solid foundation that the ephemeral labyrinth of the Internet as yet cannot replicate.

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- poorly for the book-source pool, some institutions will be divesting low circulation, high maintenance or non-germane titles. Unfortunately, income from these sales will not flow to the bookstore; instead, these funds will go to escalating periodical costs, well-deserved salary increases and to repair the ravages of damned-fool shrink-funded boomeranging car-tax cuts.

E. Book format innovations see the generation of more titles in CD-ROMS (storage), talk- ing screens (visual substitute), and the writer's per mile—don't mess with my tapes!). Internet magazines, e-books and desk-top publishing (the writer has re-published over twenty titles). And the writer now offers a Web page catalog posting which created a 40 percent savings in catalog distribution costs. Take hope, however, for...books on paper best fill the needs of people who read them, store them, manufacture them, and sell them. And there is no evidence that I know of that proves there will be any change in the needs of the people who make and use books. Other forms have been tried and most have failed. "Next," "now," and "futuristic" technologies that meet the requirements of readers may surface in the future, but for now, books on paper do the job nicely, whether the book is being read at the beach, in a library, in school, or on a subway. It is the publishers and scientists who will change the future of the book—it is the readers and users of books. And so far, they are not inclined to any change.

F. Bookseller procedure changes are seen in the reduction of the number of catalogs issued by a dealer, a reduction in the number of dealers who issue catalogs and a reduction in the number of dealers with walk-in premises. Even auction houses are now paying consignors only 2/3 of the buyer's cost (when a 20 percent buyer's penalty is added to a $100 hammer price and the seller gets only $80, that $80 is clearly only 2/3 of the $120 paid by the buyer). Wouldn't it be nice for dealers if they could charge something per sale to recover the cost of a $3,500 booth at a national fair? And more book fair exhibitors report success is achieved only through sales to other dealers. "Coalition" fairs will become more prevalent (such as the Garage Fair and the Boston ABAA Fair).

II. Perhaps of equal interest to the changes seen in the book trade's future would be things that will probably remain the same, such as enemies of books, service to customers, pricing vectors, professional standards, legacy as tragedy, nomenclatural escalation and the need for appraisals.

- Continuing enemies of books may include using them as furnishing tools, as a source for prints and maps and revenge, as well as those who are ignorant and college development officers. The use of books as furniture has, does

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