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Op Ed — Letterhead, the Wilderness, and Google

by **Jonathan D. Lauer** (Library Director, Messiah College, Box 3002, One College Avenue, Grantham, PA 17027; Phone: 717-796-1; Fax: 717-691-6042) <jlauer@messiah.edu>

A colleague of mine, speaking recently of the unrelenting crush of technological adoption today's wired library faces, lamented that "a change doesn't have to be an improvement; it just has to be a change." That comment, of course, minimizes the wonders of the digital world and the marvel of the Internet, but it also contains a good bit of truth. Our brave new digital world, for all its advantages and advances comes with drawbacks. Or to look at it another way, we may be paying a high price for our obsessive reliance on the Internet and our fascination with new information technologies. Like the savvy realtor when the 2007 real estate prices soared or the cautious stock broker when the Dow topped 14,000, we may need to take a close look at the way things really are. They may be less rosy than they seem, less marvelous than they appear.

A fresh sense of loss came to me last week when I started cleaning out my file drawers. I will soon be closer to 60 than 55, so I figure it can't hurt to travel a little lighter, whether or not I retire in my current post. Over more than 30 years, I have accumulated correspondence from hundreds of colleagues and friends; for roughly half of my career, all that communication came to me on institutional or individual letterhead through what is now disparagingly labeled snail mail.

I noticed two things as I pitched reams of paper into a recycling bin: 1) the wealth and variety of the graphic design and 2) the delightful tactility of the correspondence. Some things I still can't bear to let go: A note I received from **Lawrence Clark Powell** in 1984, just a few lines scrawled on a half sheet of 25% cotton bond; a post card from **Peggy Sullivan**; treasured missives from **Katherine Paterson**, handwritten on note cards bearing a line drawing of her Vermont cottage. I have a few letters from **Richard Hume Werking** — one from **Trinity University**, others declaring his more recent allegiance to the Department of the Navy. **Michael Gorman** wrote from **Fresno State** and **Bill Moffett** from **Oberlin**. Maybe in some other distant pack rats' files are my epistles of yesteryear. Are they from **Hardin-Simmons University** or **Wheaton College**? Perhaps **Aurora University** or **Houghton College**?

Logos come in all colors: bold reds, vibrant purples, regal blues. Paper may be white, off-white, buff, or shades of

tan and grey. Fountains pens, ballpoints, pencils, manual typewriters, and **IBM Selectrics** all leave their distinctive marks and indentations. Telltale signs of correction ribbon, white-out, and type overs, cross-outs and write overs all herald the humanity of the sender.

Am I merely nostalgic? Was the world really any less harried and my schedule less full 15 years ago? Maybe, but I doubt it. Rather I think my feeling of *Weltschmerz* goes deeper. I think what I am missing in the communication I receive today in all its wired forms is two-fold. I miss beauty and I resist the myth of disembodiment.

First, beauty. So we have come a long way from the days of the dot matrix printer. Still, no number of available fonts and print colors, no functionality that enables me to impose my college's logo on a **Word** document, no state of the art printer can replace the variety of letterhead design, often with discernable watermarks, sometimes on 100% cotton bond paper, and the substantiality of the ink (or lead) on paper that constituted the everyday correspondence of my early adulthood. Feel the indentation of the print on paper. Hold the page to the light to discern the watermark. Find the percentage of cotton bond in the paper. Enjoy the fanciful marks of the illegible signature or admire the one written in perfect **Palmer** method penmanship.

Now the myth of disembodiment. For all our dazzling, high-tech connection, we are still embodied persons living now at a particular place. We are not *in* cyberspace, *on*

Facebook, or *occupying Second Life*, except in a virtual sense. And virtual is virtual, just that — "existing in essence or effect though not in actual fact." We live and

move and have our being in flesh and blood, in bones and sinew. I am here now in Grantham, Pennsylvania as I write this. Yesterday I strolled over to pick up my weekly share of the **Messiah College Community Garden**. Tonight my aging **Peugeot** 12-speed road bike will transport me up the long, steady grade of Bumble Bee Hollow Rd., through Bowman's Village to my development, Bowman's Hill. You are there, wherever you are, now as you read these lines. Letters admit these truths, affirm them, demonstrate them in a tactile format that comes over land and time to me where I am now. Email, texting, tweeting, and poking suggest a disembodied existence, where

geographic distance, time, and space no longer matter, but it is an illusion, a trick, a virtuality. Of course these are days of miracle and wonder, as **Paul Simon** reminded us years ago. Of course we have gained much through these new electronic media. Of course science and engineering, making all these means of communication and data storage and retrieval possible are wonderful, as my **DIALOG** instructor enthused in 1981 when I learned the mysteries of mediated database searching. But hear **Eric Schmidt**, **Google** CEO. His conclusion in this spring's commencement address at the **University of Pennsylvania** includes this stark admonition: "Turn off your computer. You're actually going to have to turn off your phone and discover all that is human around us. Nothing beats holding the hand of your grandchild as he walks his first steps" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 20, 2009). And isn't that the point? We must be awake to the price we might pay by succumbing to an "always on/always on you" world, to borrow a phrase from **MIT** technology scholar, **Sherry Turkle**. When our wired environment becomes more than a tool, its burdensome ubiquity risks denigrating our very humanity. We do well to heed the wisdom of **Joni Mitchell's** observation from "Both Sides Now," "...Something's lost, but something's gained in living every day." My concern is that the sum total of the technological gains not obscure the profound treasure of participating bodily and consciously in the here and now.

In 1960, **Wallace Stegner** wrote his now famous "Wilderness Letter." Here is a trenchant excerpt:

Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed; if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and plastic cigarette cases; if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear air and dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence, so that never again will Americans be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste. And so that never again can we have the chance to see ourselves single, separate, vertical and individual in the world, part of the environment of trees and rocks and soil, brother to the other animals, part of the natural

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Three Cheers for the Google Books Project!

by **Bob Holley** (Professor, Library & Information Science Program, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202; Phone: 313-577-4021; Fax: 313-577-7563) <aa3805@wayne.edu>

I'd compare the **Google Books Project** to efforts to settle the American West in the 19th century. If I'm remembering my history correctly, the railroads received massive land grants from the government but would make money from these grants only if they sold the land to settlers. The railroads then convinced settlers to migrate to the Great Plains, often through over-optimistic descriptions. The railroads may have profited unfairly from the government largess and may have even bribed some government officials to do so, but the government achieved its objective of populating the plains.

In the same fashion, **Google** may be setting itself up to gain exorbitant future profits, may be trampling on authors rights, may be eliminating future competitors, and may be guilty of wholesale copyright violations; but **Google** is getting the job done. I don't see any competitors even on the distant horizon. What other entity has the goal of digitizing human knowledge? Libraries, of course, but they don't have the money and certainly can't expect sufficient grant funding from the federal government that has enough problems with the current economy. If I were a **Google** stockholder, I might even ask questions at the next annual meeting because this investment is a risky bet that may take many years to valorize.

I haven't yet read any comparisons between **Google Books** and the creation of numerous major microform sets from the 1950s to the

1980s. (My **Google** search suggests that none exists.) The vendors selected various projects of greater or lesser importance, found the items to film, produced the film/fiche/micro-opaque copies, and sent their salespeople out to pitch the sets to the academic library community. I am almost certain that the libraries that provided the items for filming received some benefits from the filming, at the minimum, a free copy of the set. While this filming didn't involve the legal complexities of the current operation since virtually all the materials weren't covered by copyright partly because many publishers filmed materials included in retrospective bibliographies of older publications but also because the reach of copyright didn't extend as far into the past as it does today. Other companies could have created competing versions of the same product. Imagine this taunt: "Our version of *Early English Books* is better than your version of *Early English Books*." The companies, of course, didn't compete because such duplication wasn't economically viable.

Perhaps I'm naïve, but I don't see the need for a competing project. As I said above, I certainly haven't identified any other corporation that would undertake it. If librarians have created registers of microform masters to avoid duplication in preservation microfilming, why is it so important to duplicate digital versions? If the settlement is finally signed and passes Department of Justice scrutiny, **Google**

might be willing to look at creative ways to increase sales by making available subsets of the digital archives for specific purposes. I could see some use in identifying, just as an example, *Core Resources in Political Science*. Subject experts in the field would select the titles. A library could buy them in the same way that they used to buy major microform sets. **Google** might create the sets itself or might license such sales to third parties. Finally, I don't see any reason why companies or individuals couldn't produce bibliographies based upon the **Google** holdings to be used by libraries for specific acquisitions purposes. I don't think that doing so would violate copyright in the slightest way.

I've thought over this issue for nearly a month. Unlike some others, I see mainly advantages. One million public domain books from **Google Books** are now available on the **Sony eBook Store**. **Amazon** is offering for sale around 400,000 books in more than 200 languages from the **University of Michigan's** digital archives. I believe that these concrete accomplishments outweigh any theoretical objections.

Three cheers for the **Google Books Project!** 🍷

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world and competent to belong in it. Without any remaining wilderness we are committed wholly, without chance for even momentary reflection and rest, to a headlong drive into our technological termite-life, the Brave New World of a completely man-controlled environment. We need wilderness preserved — as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds — because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed. The reminder and the reassurance that it is still there is good for our spiritual health even if we never once in ten years set foot in it. It is good for us when we are young, because of the incomparable sanity it can bring briefly, as vacation and rest, into our insane lives. It is important to us when we are old simply because it is there — important, that is, simply as an idea (**Stegner** "Wilderness Letter").

So what have letterhead and the wilderness to do with each other? Precisely this: They possess inherent beauty and demonstrate placed, grounded reality. They are substantive and here and now. They appeal to all our senses. They contribute to our sense of humanity. We would miss them if they vanish entirely. We would miss one another should cyberspace ever become our only home. 🍷

What's in a Name?

by **Steven Shapiro** (Electronic Resources Librarian, Montclair State University) <shapiros@mail.montclair.edu>

What's in a Name? Quite a bit when you're talking about a database or electronic resource. A database's name could be potentially revealing or, oftentimes, confusing. I'm embarrassed to admit it but when we used to subscribe to **Gale's Expanded Academic ASAP**, I often got it confused with **EBSCO's Academic Search Premier**. Perhaps it was because they were both billed as general all-purpose databases with the word "Academic" in their title as well as the fact that **Academic Search Premiers** initials, **ASP**, were similar to **ASAP**. I was very happy when we upgraded from **Expanded Academic ASAP** to **Gale's Academic Onefile** (which we later canceled). I found myself no longer confusing the **EBSCO** and **Gale** databases. On the other hand, I can only imagine what our patrons thought. **Academic Search Premier**, **Expanded Academic ASAP**, and **Academic Onefile** must sound like a stream of nondescript gobbledygook.

I recently had a discussion with a colleague regarding the **Emerald** database (aka **Emerald Insight**) which includes journal content from **Emerald Publishing**. It is not obvious from the name that it includes a substantial amount of material related to management. I don't think it would be unfair for someone to assume that the database is devoted to Irish Studies. That is why we refer to the database as **Emerald Management** on our Website. The downside to this strategy is that, of course, there are other subject areas covered in **Emerald** like Information Technology which are not reflected in the name. As a corrective, we list **Emerald** under the subject heading Computer Science on our database page (along with Business/Economics).

As librarians we are supposed to direct our users to the most appropriate resources related to their research or topic. We do not do our users a favor by listing

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