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## Back Talk -- It's the Web, Stupid

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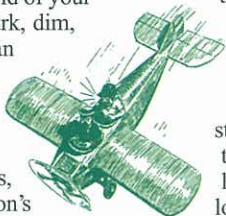
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# Back Talk — It's the Web, Stupid

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I am frequently fond of reminding myself and others, as stated by the now nearly forgotten **American Vice President Al Gore**, "It's the Web, stupid." That is, in our context, librarians don't get carried away thinking that your library defines the informational world of your user community. Whereas in the dark, dim, past (i.e., 40 years ago when I was an undergraduate) a student's information world might have been defined by two feet of paperbacks they owned, the few books they could borrow from their teachers and classmates, and mainly what was in their institution's library, today's student is just a few key-strokes away from millions of pages of information freely available on the Web.

A different implication of the "it's the Web, stupid" way of thinking is that unless your students and faculty can get to your library's digital resources via the open Web, they are all invisible. Since most of us are spending millions of dollars on this invisible content, this observation is a damning indictment of all of our efforts. To counter this vision of reality, some library and information professionals have decided that we need to put library content out on the Web for their students to find. They put their content, together with typical librarian-generated metadata (sounds more scientific than personal and corporate author, title and subject headings), out on the Web and get the major search engines to harvest it and hope the readers will take the bait and get turned back toward the library. The major example of this is **Open First Search**. **OCLC** has identified a huge selection of the most commonly held library books and put information about these books out on the Web to be harvested by **Google** and **Yahoo**. Statistics for this program, **Open First Search**, demonstrate that thousands of Web searchers looking for quick answers are clicking on this information about library books



along with the hundreds and thousands of items that they can click on after putting their subject in the search box. Time will tell whether this is truly a successful effort. The question is, will Web readers be happy to learn about a book and then take the time to go to their local library — or will they simply click to the next source that provides instant full text to be read and used?


Another twist to the "it's the Web, stupid" way of thinking is the thought that since a shared consortial catalogue can be accessed by the Web, local **OPAC's** can be trimmed down in size or perhaps even done away with. For example, if the shared catalogue allows author, title, subject and key word access, why should every individual library have and pay for its own **OPAC**? Similarly, if all members of the consortia can enter serials and monographic acquisitions information, or circulation data, on the shared catalogue, why should all the member libraries of the consortium maintain and pay for their own catalogues? Some might answer this question by simply noting that local practices differ so widely that each library would want their own catalogue. Yet many systems allow branch libraries to maintain differing practices and in any event — how much is such freedom worth?

This way of thinking, to some degree, is a return to a 35 year old vision of how the library world should operate. In 1972 the library at which I was then working joined **RLG**. The vision was that **RLG's** consortial catalogue could be used by the hyper informational hungry on member library campuses instead of their own catalogues. Acquisitions data for member libraries was even included in **RLIN**, the shared catalogue so that everyone could not only see what was in another accessible library, but what would be available in the future. Our ability to rely upon this shared catalogue, however, evapo-

rated with the dissolution of the major telephone utility over whose lines access to and from **RLIN** flowed.

There is some evidence that a library's Web pages do fulfill a useful function of simplifying access to commercial digital resources. This past weekend **Siaw Pae Kee**, at the **3rd Annual Library Leadership Institute** (<http://lib.hku.hk/leadership/2005.html>) sponsored by the **University of Hong Kong's** library, **Hong Kong's JULAC** library consortium, and the **University of Macau**, from **Elsevier** suggested that as high as 86% of those accessing *Science Direct* journals come in via libraries. This includes readers who originally came through the library and established short-cut URLs. This form of Web access is opposed to those who came in via search engines or other publishers or journal aggregators. On the other hand, the value of the open Web received support in the same talk when the speaker indicated that their research showed that libraries accounted for only about 12% of the direct referrals to specific full text articles with other sources like **PubMed**, **Cell Press**, **Cross Ref**, etc., accounting for the rest. Of course readers are fairly likely to have gone to these other resources via a library Web page — at least the first time. So, library Web pages and indexing/abstracting pages both are valuable.

At this same institute, where **NELINET's Arnold Hershon** was the featured speaker, the participants worked on a case study designed to force librarians from many provinces in China including Taiwan as well as the Philippines, Singapore, and Hong Kong to deal with the potential public service, collection development, cataloguing, staffing, collaborative, and staffing implications of the **Google Web** project to digitize millions of monographs and supposedly give them away to the world's Web readers. While space here does not permit going into all of their conclusions, they concluded that going from X volumes to X plus 7 million volumes would make a big difference in each of these areas of library work, indeed in some sectors really large transformations will be required. This is a super example of how much more important the Web is going to become in the information seeking habits of readers and the libraries that serve them.

Whether we accept or like the conclusion that "it's the Web, stupid" we must acknowledge that many believe that it is the medium through which our users access library and non library content, that it is about to receive a real boost in the form of millions of volumes of monographs previously available only in the largest academic libraries, and some very knowledgeable library and information professionals believe that the Web will seriously effect the nature of our local library computing programs. Hopefully, we have passed through the phase where we feel duty bound to spend more time pointing out the Web's weaknesses and are working to integrate it into our own programs to meet our user's informational needs. 

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