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## Op Ed -- I Don't Know What it Means, but it Can't Be a Good Thing

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# Op Ed — I Don't Know What it Means, But it Can't Be a Good Thing

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For over thirty years I've been traipsing all over the planet for various kinds of work that involve university libraries. **United Airlines** says I've traveled over 1.5 million miles with them, and that's not the only airline I've flown. Any day now I'm expecting **Holiday Inn** to name one of their new properties after me. It seems only fair. I cover all of the U.S. and Canada for **BioMed Central**, my current employer. In fact, I've covered this territory once before for another employer. As strange as it may seem, if the company is good and the work true (which is certainly the case now), I don't mind the travel. It can be challenging and, yes, sometimes lonely, but it is not such a bad way to make one's way through life.

One of the biggest challenges is trip planning. There is an art to putting together trips that make sense and are productive when dealing with large swaths of geography. Days' worth of time go into figuring out where to fly in and out of, whom to try to see and in what order, where to stay overnight and how to cover the distances in-between. In the old days, every seasoned rep had a good road atlas (my favorite has always been a **Rand McNally**), which one could consult without getting into an accident while cruising down the road at seventy miles an hour. Larger universities were pretty easy to spot, especially if they were close to freeways, but finding others could be a bit more daunting. Lots of smaller colleges are off on side streets in unfamiliar neighborhoods. Before the days of directions posted on websites and GPS's, finding a campus, securing parking and getting to the library could be tricky. Finding parking remains so.

The advent of the Internet helped. On virtually every college and university site were "Directions to Campus," frequently with diagrammatic maps one could print before departing on a sales trip. While it meant lugging around stacks of printed instructions, significant time and frustration were saved. Now I have a GPS, which is a godsend, in spite of the times it hiccups and delivers me somewhere not quite on target. Overall, it saves a ton of travel time. The first few times I traveled with my new GPS, I brought a road atlas with me too. It did not take long, though, to see that there was no need to do so. I still use my road atlas at home to plan out trips, but it remains there when I head to the airport.

Even with a GPS, I spend a lot of time on university websites. I still need to stay on top of which librarians are responsible

for areas that intersect my interests, especially now that I am meeting with folks other than those with whom I visited during my bookselling days. One of the great things about new work is meeting new people. I like that. I also have to find street addresses for my GPS to work. Websites are great for that kind of information.

In the old days, the most daunting thing about websites was finding where the library staff directory was hidden. Many buried them so deep within their pages that it made one wonder whether they were ashamed of the people who worked there. Now the staff listing is usually one of the options under the "About" tab on the library homepage. Now if I could only convince all libraries to list the job titles of each librarian they list in their staff lists, I'd be a happy guy.

In the last year I've encountered a disturbing trend when I go to university websites to gather my information. I can't find the library. Not that long ago, every home page had a number of tabs for Students, Visitors, Faculty, etc. Typically there would be added tabs or headings for Academics, Sports, and Admissions. Invariably, there was a tab titled "Library" or "Libraries" on the home page. The library, along with some other essential aspects of university life, was front and center for anyone who connected to the site. This is no longer true.

Now my quest involves figuring out where the university has hidden the library. (Perhaps we need a Where's Biblio cartoon character to make the task more entertaining.) Frequently, there are tabs labeled "Academics" and "Research" on university home pages. A case can be made for listing the library under either of those. Libraries support both Academics and Research. Maybe it should be listed under both. More often than I care to recount, though, the library tab is not to be found in either listing. If I keep at it, I sometimes find a library link at the bottom of the home page, listed in very small print next to the webmaster's email address. (The gulag of the home page. No one except a desperate sales rep would look down there.)

I do business at one particular major university in the U.S., so I won't name names. This university is a highly regarded research institute with nearly twenty (count them, twenty) libraries on its main campus. Yet, nowhere on its home page is there a single listing for any of the libraries, nor for any library under any dropdowns, which include "Academics," "Research," and "Student

Life." There isn't even a link at the bottom of the home page. In order to get to any library information, I first had to do a site search under "libraries," and then link to the library pages from internal **Google** results. How many visitors give up before then?

This trend troubles me on a number of different levels. The phrase "out of sight, out of mind" didn't come about by accident. When things are perceived to have less value, they are pushed aside. Once pushed aside, they become even more remote, because they are no longer in the field of vision. It is a downward cycle.

We all know that the role of libraries is changing as is that of the entire university. While university libraries interact with their collections and patrons in ways that are markedly different than just a few years ago, they are not irrelevant to the research and teaching that takes place on (and off) campus. Apparently, being relevant does not equate to being front-and-center in the consciousness of academe. If major universities perceive no problem hiding libraries underneath layers of their web pages, what does that say about the perception of their relevance on campus?

I don't know what disturbs me more, that libraries are disappearing from university home pages, or that no one seems to be fighting this trend. At those institutions where this is happening, do the libraries even know they have been relegated to "back page" status? Have they taken any steps to have that rectified? While I'd like to believe that the absence of libraries from these home pages is just a reflection of how little web designers use libraries, I think the problem goes much deeper than that. Designing a website involves lots of people representing all sorts of interests on campus. Everyone wants to know how their piece of the site will be presented. They have to provide information that will appear on each part of the site. Are we to understand that through the entire web development process, no one could carry a case that the libraries need to have a more prominent place on the site?

Libraries provide important, essential services to their universities. To function well, these libraries need to have strong budgets to build collections, hire and train staff, and maintain up-to-date technology. That kind of support comes from being perceived as providing value

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**From the Reference Desk**  
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along with his team of editors and contributors, has produced the type high-quality reference set long associated with **CQ Press**. While faculty, undergraduate majors, and graduates students will find this reference of particular value, lay readers will also benefit from the articles discussing key concepts and themes. The set is listed at \$800 which appears pricey, but it can be purchased via **Amazon** for \$592.49. Academic libraries supporting political science curriculums should have this title on their short list. This title is also available electronically, and pricing information is available at: <http://www.cqpress.com/product/Encyclopedia-of-Political-Science.html>.

(Interestingly, **Sage** is also planning an eight-volume set entitled the *International Encyclopedia of Political Science* for a September 2011 release, tentatively priced at \$990. It looks like political science scholars will soon have an embarrassment of riches.)

On the other hand, reference works on African American history already seem plentiful, so one might wonder about the need for another. However, **ABC-Clio's** new *Encyclopedia of African American History* (2010, 978-1851097692, \$295) attempts to fill the possible need for a moderately-priced introductory reference work that could have broad appeal to high school and public libraries as well as some academic libraries.

Editors **Leslie M. Alexander** and **Walter C. Rucker** have chosen to organize the set in four major sections with each section introduced by a 5,000-word essay that serves as a foundation to the following articles. The four sections include Atlantic African, American and European Backgrounds to Contact, Commerce, and Enslavement; Culture, Identity, and Community; Political Activity and Resistance to Oppression; and Political Activity, Migration, and Urbanization. Articles are arranged alphabetically within each section and total 650 essays throughout the set. The results are entries that range from the *Atlantic Slave Trade* and **Nat Turner** to *Jet Magazine* and **Oprah Winfrey** as well as those dealing with *Abolition* and the *Underground Railroad* to those discussing *Soul Food* and *Kwanzaa*. A reading of some of the essays reveals that one of the editor's stated goals has been met. They have produced entries that are "clear, uncomplicated, and decisive" as well as "jargon-free" and

"devoid of specialized and technical language." All of the articles have brief bibliographies of four to seven citations. As you might expect, finding aids becomes more essential when a set is divided into sections like this. In keeping with this, the editors include a list of each article found under the four section headings at the beginning of each volume. They also provide a Categorized Index for each section, which is followed by a general alphabetical index for the entire set in the final volume. However, "see references" seem confined to related articles within the sections, and there is apparently no linking of articles from section to section in the general index either. This works generally but poses problems in linking related articles section to section. All three volumes are illustrated with crisp black and white photos as well as period etchings.

The *Encyclopedia of African American History* is not meant to replace classics in the field like **Oxford University Press'** *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present: From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty-First Century* (2009, 978-0195167795, \$625) and its companion the *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1619-1895: From the Colonial Period to the Age of Frederick Douglass* (2006, 978-0195167771, \$495). However, this set provides valuable scholarly content at an affordable price and should find its way into high school libraries as well as public libraries, where it might have special appeal for branch collections. It could also be of interest to academic libraries looking for an updated supplement to similar but more comprehensive works like **Macmillan's** *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History* (2005, 978-0028658162, \$903) as well as those libraries wanting this type of encyclopedia in circulation. It is also available as an eBook, and you can call 800-368-6868 ext. 4 for pricing or by email: <suborder@abc-clio.com>.

**Greenwood** has published a specialized reference title that might be even more suitable for circulating collections. *Of the People, by the People, for the People: A Documentary Record of Voting Rights and Electoral Reform* (2010, 978-0-31338-551-3, \$180) is, as the subtitle indicates, a collection of primary sources that relate to voting rights and electoral reform. But more precisely, it is a collection of excerpts from relevant primary sources arranged chronologically with accompanying analysis that enables readers to trace the ongoing history of this essential aspect of our democracy.

The set consists of two volumes with the first covering the "foundations of modern franchise 1660-1959" and the second dealing with the subsequent electoral reform and extension of voting rights to African Americans and other minorities. The volumes are themselves further divided by chronological sections. The first volume covers the Colonial Period 1660-1775; Fledgling Democracy 1776-1828; Democracy Challenged 1829-1900 and Democracy Maturing 1900-1959. Volume II contains documents under headings like: the 1960s: Confirming the Franchise; 1970-1999: Refining the Franchise; 2000-2003 Reconsidering the Franchise; and 2004-2009: The Consequences of Reconsidering the Franchise. Given this arrangement, readers can start by tracing the early development of voting "qualifications" starting with state statutes like those in Connecticut, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania to their and other states' constitutions and then through the Articles of Confederation and U.S. Constitution. Further examination of the timeline embodied in these volumes indicates that in these early stages of our history (until the Civil War) most of the developments are seen in state documents. It is only after the Civil War that the Federal government dominates the discussion through constitutional amendments, decisions of the Supreme Court, and legislation passed by Congress.

While exploring the chronological arrangement of these two volumes gives readers a sense of the history, it requires examining the documents themselves and their accompanying analysis to trace the complicated twists and turns of this evolution and get the full story. This is not a straightforward progression. Federal action, whether through the courts or legislation, often reinforces restrictions and validates voting requirements. It is with the advent of the Warren Court in the turbulent 1960s where the focus shifts from discussions of voter qualifications to voting rights. The set provides support for this overview by reprinting the relevant text of specific documents, the date they were enacted or decided, their significance, and a very useful analysis placing them in context. The text is enhanced by selected tables, charts, and pictures, and there are sidebars providing supplemental information. In addition, there are useful finding aids including a general index and a Reader's Guide to Documents and Sidebars by category ranging from Black suffrage to Disputed Elections to Registration Requirements.

*Of the People, by the People, for the People* is focused on a fairly specific area of study but it is one that is essential for full understanding of American democracy and thus has application for students of both American history as well as politics. It also has obvious relevance for the study of election law and minority rights. The information and analysis this set provides is unique. It is a reference work that will find a welcome on both reference and circulation shelves in many academic libraries. It is also available as an eBook, and you can call 800-368-6868 ext. 4 for pricing or contact the publisher by email: <suborder@abc-clio.com>.

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to the whole campus. It is hard to believe that libraries are generating that value if they are not even able to appear in a prominent place on their universities' websites. The library was once the cornerstone of the university. If web pages are any indication, they now seem

to be about as important as the student health center and the campus parking office in the minds of their administrations. This isn't a death knell for libraries, but it certainly isn't anything positive. The canary in the coal mine dies if there's no air left in the environment. It also dies if no one remembers to feed it. I don't think the library canary is dead by any means, but it looks much thinner to me than is healthy. 🐦