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Academic Libraries After Print

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Academic Libraries After Print

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This article evolved from an analysis I did of two e-content surveys that eLibrary sponsored one in the spring of this year and another in the fall. There were two general implications concerning the future of academic libraries that I took away from the surveys that confirmed views I have held for some time. First, e-content will supplant print for academic libraries but the efficacy of the librarian will remain and probably increase long after the research value of the physical collection is relegated to historical significance. Second, the academic library function will not be outsourced. The three primary foci of the academic library will be acquisition, instruction, and publication.

Only the most stalwart believers in the primacy of paper distribution systems can at this point deny the probability of its disposition by electronic counterparts. Distribution of print information resources will likely slow to a drizzle at the point wireless Internet access becomes ubiquitous. The eclipse of paper distribution by electronic requires anytime-anywhere access to the Internet. The advancing merger of cellular and IP technologies driven by the promise of interactive marketing and distribution of goods and services will provide the mechanism for the distribution of information resources currently distributed physically. There are converging technologies and economic exigencies that mitigate in favor of this view. The appearance of Kindle by Amazon and Android by Google and T-Mobile are recent evidence of the progression. The promise of interactive marketing and distribution through a proliferation of constantly evolving Internet access devices along with all of the services and products that can be marketed through them is driving the development of the Internet toward this economic nirvana with ever accelerating energy.

The critical mass point for the change to electronic distribution is dependent upon the percentage of the target population that has wireless access to the Internet with devices suitable for reading documents. At the point of improved information access for all and portents of the demise of their profession.

It is my view that the fate of librarians who have been the keepers of the paper based distribution systems in higher education is not likely to be that of book museum curators. Most of the library operations associated with print resources will have electronic counterparts. Some remain but diminish — i.e., circulation scales down to authentication. Some expand — i.e., acquisitions, instruction, and publication. Librarians are likely to be engaged in intensified efforts to identify Internet based resources relevant to the specific needs of their institutions, to integrate information literacy comprehensively throughout the curriculum, and to develop content management systems to assist the academy in organizing and providing access to its own production of information.

**The dramatically rising volume and complexity of information resources distributed via the Internet necessitates change in the methods of mediation.**

**Acquisition**

Acquisition of resources have and will continue to shift from activities focused on purchasing and processing physical materials to those associated with providing access to electronic resources. The acquisition activities will be associated with coordinating access to procured electronic information as well as identifying curriculum relevant resources openly available through the Internet. Cooperative acquisition of electronic resources will extend the principle of a library as a shared resource. Cooperatives of electronic information resources may form as they serve the needs of their joint constituents regardless of where they reside geographically. The identity of any given library with respect to the source of funding for the cooperatively purchased access may eventually be a complex blend of different governmental and private agencies.

The services of librarians were required in the two dimensional world of print because of its volume and complexity over manuscript production. Librarians brought specialized mediation to the task of acquiring the increased volume of resources provided by the printing press. The environs of the electronic information sphere require the same interventions on the part of professionals albeit using the developing technologies of the evolving sphere of information and communication. The dramatically rising volume and complexity of information resources distributed via the Internet necessitates change in the methods of mediation. Google and search tools like it will handily assist in the provision of focused answers to surprisingly wide types of information needs. First, e-content will not systematically identify curriculum-relevant Internet resources for integrated use within the missions associated with

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institutions of higher education. The acquisi-
tion function of librarians will be engaged in
identifying the subset of information across
the spectrum provided over the Internet that
is relevant to the curricula of their particular
institutions.

It could be argued that the tools evolving on
the Internet to identify the subsets of informa-
tion relevant to an individual will also evolve
to automatically identify those that are relevant
for an institution. Conversely, it can be argued
that those tools, even for the individual, will
continue to require ongoing mediation and
decision making with respect to purchasing
options and constantly changing information
needs. The same mediation and decision
making processes will be required within the
institutions of higher education. The past ten
years of expanding cooperative purchasing
arrangements in the typical academic library
provides evidence. Universities purchase
resources from a growing list of vendors and
within a growing complexity of cooperative
relationships. The processes required in the
ongoing evaluation of those resources are also
expanding.

The acquisition role of the library profes-
sional extended into the electronic realm will
also have to accommodate an ever increasing
volume, diversity and complexity of open
source and freely available Internet-based
information resources. The expansion of the
electronic information sphere is accelerating
in both breath and depth. Commercial, cor-
porate, government, academic, organizational,
and personal sites are proliferating. Their
pages are not just simple, flat presentations
of pictures and words. Websites are employing
increasingly sophisticated content management
systems (CMS) that connect to increasingly
diverse and complex data sets. The informa-
tion sphere and the tools and systems for navigat-
ing and using it are multiplying. Many university
library Websites, as an example, currently
organize by program area hundreds of links to
information sources available without charge
over the Internet. These resources also require
the acquisition processes of discovery, evalu-
ation, and communication.

Instruction

The shift in information access because
of the Internet has increased the need for
instruction in the rapidly expanding global
information sphere. The days of a library tour
that centered on the catalog and how to find
things in the library are gone. Instruction in
and assistance with the use of continuously
evolving information resources will ascend in
importance in the academic library. Instruction
will increasingly become the focus of efforts
to systematically and comprehensively provide
information literacy instruction horizontally
and vertically throughout the curriculum. The
need for students and faculty to become more
information savvy in an increasingly infor-
mation dependent culture will be reflected in
the ongoing efforts of librarians to integrate
instruction in the use of relevant information
resources into the various academic programs.
Librarians will need to stay abreast of the
expanding content of the information infra-
structure as well as the continually evolving
electronic tools for accessing, organizing, and
using information.

Different views of appropriate basic informa-
tion literacy at the moment include instruc-
tion in the use of general eBook and e-journal
databases like ebrary and EBSCO Academic
Premier, an introduction to concepts of peer
review, evaluation of Internet information
resources, discussions of plagiarism and
copyright, instruction in citing resources, an
exploration of search strategies for different
research projects, the selection and use of
search engines, and the use of tools like Seri-
als Solutions and federated search engines.
The list is not comprehensive and continues to
grow as new information resources and tools
for accessing them proliferate.

The North Central Association
criterion for assessing library viability no longer focuses
on counting “staff members and the square
footage allocated to the library and to book
inventories.” Libraries “exist to support teach-
ing and learning. To make learning resources
an integral part of a student’s education, an
organization will have to invest in appropri-
ate materials and equipment and provide the
staff that can maintain these resources, train
students in their use, and provide assistance
when it is needed.”

The information literacy role also becomes
more central as evaluation and assessment of
learning outcomes associated with informa-
tion literacy become a more central concern
of accreditation.

The test for accreditation is no longer own-
ership. Instead, it evaluates the organization’s
understanding of what resources are needed for
effective learning and teaching and its creative
ways of linking faculty and students to the
resources and making sure they are used. Con-

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...education. In a more distant time frame, I believe that the function of librarians will move closer to the faculty and the curriculum. I see them as members of teams that design learning environments. As higher education integrates more thoroughly into the fabric of an information-centered economy, the demands of lifelong learning will restructure the higher education learning environments. Adaptations in the design of learning environments will be set in motion by the continually evolving technologies of teaching and learning as well as the technologies of the information and communication spheres. Specialists in creating learning environments and those focused on articulating relevant access to, knowledge of, and participation in the information sphere, I believe, will be working more intimately with faculty in the design and implementation of those environs.

Publishing

A growing percentage of libraries are participating in the distribution of e-content. While the efforts are fairly rudimentary, it is in my view likely that academic libraries will play an increasing role in e-publication for their institutions. As the administration of content management systems becomes more focused on facilitating peer review and research processes, the skill sets and propensities of librarians ascend in appropriateness to the task.

A modest majority (56%) of the librarians in the March ebrary survey reported that they were either currently digitizing content or actively considering it. (See ebrary’s Global eBook Survey, p.8.) Content management will become increasingly important for librarianship, particularly as libraries assume more of the publishing role for their communities. As the peer review processes evolve in the context of the Internet, the functions of publishing may be disassembled and absorbed by individuals within higher education — i.e., librarians, faculty, technicians, and editors.

A glimpse of the publication role of librarians can be approached through a view of the processes of peer review in the context of the changing information sphere. The peer review process, among its other functions, can be viewed broadly as a mechanism by which a community evolves a piecemeal consensus over its research findings. Librarians provide their expertise mostly in the access portion of the peer review processes. They acquire and provide access to research resources. The current role of librarians derived from the last major upheaval in the changes in the mechanisms of information distribution, which occurred as the products of the printing press proliferated across Europe. The increased volume of information gave rise to the current mechanisms of peer review that rely heavily on editors and their reviewers for the initial selection processes in the distribution chain. And they have relied on librarians for much of the acquisition and access part of the process.

While data and statistics play the central role in the peer review discussion, the process also relies on the character of the players in the review process — editors and reviewers. This influence can be beneficial in that it utilizes experience and reputation to sort through the volume of research that is presented. Experience may, however, harbor a bias that to some degree inhibits the optimal presentation of new research. It may exert an unnecessarily conservative influence. The status quo can obfuscate deviant breakthroughs. Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of the current system, the librarians affect peer review processes through the systems of selection, organization, and access they have evolved.

A future publication role for libraries may include configuring and maintaining content management systems for the facilitation of peer review processes. This is very speculative territory; however, the tension between the academic community and the current peer review/publishing model has a significant group of academics looking for alternatives. The responses in the ebrary survey indicate that libraries are cutting their teeth on a publishing role for their institutions even though the content at this juncture tends to be mostly special collections or materials for limited or internal distribution.

Conclusion

It is my view that librarians will be more in evidence and play a more integral role in academic as the operations of libraries transition into an e-distribution environment. As higher education expands its lifelong-learning mission through ever more innovative learning environments, librarians will likely have a part in integrating information literacy instruction into them. They will assist in identifying and providing access to the resources and tools supportive of research. As publishers for their institutions, they will configure and manage the content management systems used in peer review processes and supply the metadata for organization and access of the resources published by their institutions.

Sources


