A Year in Review

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A Year in Review

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Was this the year of the economy, e-content, vanishing eBooks, or of shelf-ready processing finally gaining the acceptance it deserves? It was probably all the above. The biggest story was the faltering U.S. economy and its effect on the stock market, state budgets, returns on endowments, and ultimately, funds available for purchasing books. But there were other stories as well:

E-content, other than eBooks, took a big bite out of library budgets and librarians’ time as they grappled with how to manage it. Copyright concerns and licensing models continue to give librarians sleepless nights.

eBooks had difficulty finding a sustainable business model and a format acceptable to the average reader. The eBook market is still looking for its product.

Increasingly, librarians are discovering that shelf-ready processing of books is an easy way to control costs and get books into the hands of readers quickly. Librarians are gaining the notice of university administrators as they demonstrate ways to improve service and save money.

In the end, it was a year like many in the recent past: lots of change, strained resources, and the prospect for more of the same.

The U.S. economy stumbled causing serious losses in the stock markets. The fall was not limited to dotcoms but affected the total market. During the historically long U.S. bull market, taxes on capital gains had become a significant source of tax revenue. Now, with fewer capital gains, tax receipts fell, undermining many state budgets and the budgets of universities and libraries as well. The lack of capital gains also affected those universities and libraries dependent on returns from their endowments. The tragedy of 9/11 only made the situation worse.

A longer term trend of purchasing more electronic resources also affected the year. Two recent studies, one of the findings of a Library Journal 2001 study and the other by the Primary Research Group (PRG), confirm the trend. An article in the September 5, 2002 Library Journal Academic News Wire states “… the study shows academic libraries are buying fewer books” and concluded there is “a major shift in library resources toward electronic resources and away from traditional print resources.”

This may be the reason that librarians surveyed for this article seemed concerned with issues around electronic resources while booksellers were concerned with books. Librarians talked about the need for tools that would help them systematically track negotiations, terms, adherence to contract terms, and access. The issues of functionality, linking, interlinking, and cross-searching are also of concern.

One bright spot, highlighted by Ann Okerson, of the Yale University Libraries, “… is the increasing numbers of publishers giving materials for free or very cheaply to all the residents of poor nations.” For more information checkout the “Developing Nations Initiatives” link at www.library.yale.edu/llicense/.

Electronic books stumbled last year as the early leaders found their business models and offerings searching for profitability. netLibrary ran out of cash before they could reach profitability. Early dotcom-type spending in an attempt to establish its brand, publisher reluctance to give them from list material and multi-user access kept libraries from purchasing. In markets outside the U.S., libraries complained that there was not enough local content and the existing content didn’t match local curriculum needs closely enough. OCLC stepped in to protect the investments libraries had already made and to try to insure this deserving technology would survive. Latest reports are that netLibrary is getting much better publisher cooperation, publishers are being paid promptly and a general positive feeling among many publishers about working with netLibrary.

Other companies tried as well, with Questia bursting into and out of the market. ebrary finally made an appearance and offered a business model interestingly different from netLibrary. ebrary supported a variety of payment options such as subscription, pay-per-view, pay-per article, copy/print, etc.

And publishers started making their titles available. Taylor & Francis, Kluwer, and Oxford University Press are all making titles available in a PDF format often through a variety of channels.

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<http://www.against-the-grain.com>
Acquiring Minds Want to Know — Digital Scholarship
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Digital Scholarship

A new form of scholarship has emerged in recent years named “digital scholarship.” I have seen it defined as online publishing or digitized material presented online, or, in other words, scholarship that appears in a digital form. However, a more compelling definition treats it as scholarship that depends entirely on being digital, i.e., it is created, carried out, and disseminated entirely digitally. In essence, it is not possible without digital technology.

This is an important distinction. Many scholarly materials can be converted to a digital format, and as desirable as that is, most of them function quite well without being digital. Scholarship that is dependent on being digital is different. It is often highly visual and visually oriented. It may contain text but may also be a study of text. It may combine many different data types, systems, and software. Often digital scholarship takes the form of stand-alone projects that are not integrated with other digital works. However, there may be nothing that prevents this from happening, rather, by being digital, the possibilities for collaboration, sharing, or re-purposing are enormous.

Digital scholarship has evolved as scholars began to realize the potential of digital technology to transform their work, both research and teaching. The results of digital scholarship are displayed and disseminated digitally, often through a specially developed Website. The results may never be published in a peer reviewed journal or in a scholarly monograph. Information about, or deriving from, the project, may be published. This change in publishing and dissemination of results is part of what makes digital scholarship so different from digitized scholarship.

Many good examples have come out of the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, a center at the University of Virginia that is housed in the library. Its goal is “to explore and expand the potential of information technology as a tool for humanities research. To that end, we provide our Fellows with consulting, technical support, applications programming, and networking publishing facilities. We also cultivate partnerships and participate in humanities computing initiatives with libraries, publishers, information technology companies, scholarly organizations, and others interested in the intersection of computers and cultural heritage.” (http://www.iath.virginia.edu)

One of their more famous projects is that of Edward L. Ayres, The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War. This ambitious work captures the experience of two different communities, one Northern and one Southern, throughout the Civil War. It was conceived as a hypermedia archive of newspapers, letters, diaries, photographs, maps, church records, population census, agricultural census, and military records. The site says that “Students can explore every dimension of the conflict and write their own histories, reconstructing the life stories of women, African Americans, farmers, politicians, soldiers, and families. The project is intended for secondary school’s community colleges, libraries, and universities.” (http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/chooseastart.html#story)

The Valley of the Shadow combines new and digitized sources to create a new work of scholarship. It gains part of its appeal and strength by melding teaching and research — an excellent example of how digital forms of scholarship can be developed.

Rush Miller, director of Hillman Library at the University of Pittsburgh, and a great champion of library efficiency through effective change management has this to say about his library’s experience in partnering with suppliers:

At the University Library System, University of Pittsburgh, we downsized our technical services department by more than 50%, and saved more than one million dollars, while increasing dramatically our throughput by using the shelf-ready vendor services. We are very pleased with the services we receive and recommend this approach to making technical services functions more cost effective for every academic library.

Was this the year of the economy, of content, of vanishing ebooks, or of shelf-ready processing finally becoming mainstream? Yes, but most of all it was a year of change. I suspect that will be the description for many years to come.

Endnotes
2. “Study shows academic libraries are buying fewer books.” Library Journal (Academic Newswire, Sept. 5, 2002.)