

## **“Ain’t What It Used To Be”: The Future of Academic Libraries**

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“The future ain’t what it used to be,” said Yogi Berra, the great baseball player and manager. The same statement could be said about academic libraries because we face a very different future from our past. Just as we look back at our predecessors, those ancient keepers of scrolls, and ponder the amazing distance between their lives and our global information world, so too will our successors look back at us and ponder how much the information world has changed.

But what will be different? We already know that technology has altered our collections, our services, and our buildings. Can the future be so very different? Indeed it can be and will be because as advanced as technology seems, it is still only in its infancy. Much more change will arrive in an endless incoming tide, making today’s technology and information environment quaint by comparison.

Yet while waves of change will come our way, one thing is certain and sure. The future of the academic library will be dependent upon the future of learning. As the premiere supporting service to learning, the library must chart its future in alignment with the direction of learning.

It is safe to assume that learning is moving into cyberspace, considering that many universities already are offering entire programs and degrees online or have many courses with an online element. In fact, many students and faculty expect an online learning environment.

Therefore, the paradigm for the future for academic libraries is the continual transition into cyberspace in order to keep pace with the transition of instruction into cyberspace.

How will that play out? To begin with, our eyes must be on our primary users—the faculty and the students—as they move further into an online environment. Importantly, as technology accelerates, faster even than we can imagine today, each generation will have a very different orientation than the generation that preceded it. There must be a continual feed of the users’ needs through assessment and environmental scanning.

As the students and faculty move into cyberspace, so will library personnel move their work into cyberspace. They will need expertise and ease within the electronic world. Most librarians in the future will work almost entirely online with users by embedding themselves skillfully into the online learning and research environment. Librarians must pay particular attention to virtual reality because of its power to transform the learning environment. The most successful librarians will be those who understand the user, information, and technology and the interface among the three.

The collection is already first out of the gate into the electronic world to support online learning. Books, journals, newspapers, government publications, media, and images are well on

their way to an all-electronic future. User expectations are very clear—they want all of our resources online, immediately available, easily searchable, twenty-four hours a day.

Let's look at an example right under our noses—e-books. Right now e-books are not as comfortable to read online, but even now we see substantial improvements in the reading devices. Eventually, the hindrances will be overcome. Then, e-books will accelerate in popularity, ending the 500-year domination of the printed book. Over time, the printed book, that beloved symbol of libraries and learning, largely will cease to be produced. In fact, new print resources will be too slow for electronically oriented users and will become a liability for any organization.

However, it is likely that we will not even have e-books, as we understand them now, in the future. Right now, e-books are largely physical books online. However, this approach does not take into effect the full power of technology. In fact, our classic library divisions by format will disappear. Text and media will merge. Works of fiction and nonfiction and scholarly journals will be filled with sound and moving images.

Collections will be further impacted by the changes in the publishing world. The fate of libraries has been closely tied to the fate of publishers. Libraries have always bought information and then made it available as a collective resource to our communities of users.

However, the publishing world is in turmoil. The electronic information world is challenging publishers to make a profit and remain viable. Publishers of all kinds of knowledge resources will continue to search for a successful merchandising model that is sustainable in the online environment. At the same time, universities are tiring of buying back their intellectual capital from the publishers and are developing new models to publish the scholarly work of faculty without the high cost. Freely available resources will also have an impact. The many public book digitization projects even now give access to vast resources for even the smallest of libraries. Last, the World Wide Web has broken down the traditional publishing role, as many organizations and individuals provide extensive and handy information. Libraries will be challenged to keep their eye on all of this in order to remain viable. Just as we watch our users—the knowledge consumers—so too we must watch the publishers—the knowledge suppliers.

The archival role of libraries will become more important. As Ray Bradbury once said, “Without libraries, what have we? We have no past and no future.” Libraries have few competitors in the archival world because archives are rarely commercially viable. Libraries will be under increasing pressure to digitize and make easily accessible the rare treasures built up in our special collections. However, increasingly libraries will go a step further and create extensive digital exhibitions that will be scholarly experiences to educate and inform the users.

Ironically, the preservation role of libraries will increase. The lifespan of digital resources is not yet known, so libraries must continue to preserve physical resources as a guarantee that important resources survive into the future.

The online catalog, already under fire for being too cumbersome, will be radically re-conceptualized. Two trends will take hold. First, users will expect a catalog that has the

capability to display full-text resources, sound and images. Second, libraries will collectively venture onto a single unified catalog easily accessible to search engines. Once that occurs, libraries will connect more and more, forming a vast national and eventually international library. This connection may have powerful consequences in terms of creating large buying consortiums and true cooperative collection development as the resources of other libraries are more fully displayed and accessible.

Academic librarians will continue their major role in helping the user to find information. The development of so much online information does not mean that students have equally developed their searching skills. In the domain of information seeking, librarians have always had four major roles. First, we have been filters, making selections from a large array of knowledge resources to support learning. Second, we have been navigators, guiding the user one by one through these resources. Third, we have been educators, teaching students the core skills of information literacy. Fourth, we have been information disseminators, assertively linking the user to resources. Consider that the body of knowledge within cyberspace will grow and grow eventually occupying a vast space. This will make our fourfold role more important than it has ever been. The dramatic increase in electronic information worldwide only increases the need for librarians.

Look for the role of librarians to branch out to include teaching even more about intellectual property and its dark side, plagiarism; to developing partnerships with K–12 schools to ensure that students are ready for the demands of scholarly information searching; and to transitioning from a focus on library services to an additional focus on developing the university's overall information strategies.

What about the future of our library buildings—those powerful symbols of knowledge, those storehouses of precious resources? Our buildings are already changing and will change even more. The role of our library buildings in storing the physical containers of knowledge, such as books, will minimize while the role of our library buildings in providing working and thinking space will maximize. The essential ingredients for any successful library in the future will include a robust technological infrastructure, areas for multimedia production, easily convertible and flexible space to accommodate change, extensive group study areas, a cozier ambiance, and a variety of private study stations to accommodate the different needs of learners. The interior design of the building must continue to be linked to the learning process. As the needs of students change, so will our buildings change also.

Will there be libraries in the future? Unless all knowledge is free, freely available, easily accessible, and easily searchable electronically, the answer is yes. Most certainly though, there is whitewater ahead. We will have to market the library more intensely as we fight for our space in the information universe.

Change within the library will continue to be evolutionary, not revolutionary. Some activities within the library will be enhanced and some will be reduced or eliminated. There will be redundancies in services and collections as we move from the physical world to the cyberspace world. Fortunately, there will be time to accommodate change and to adjust, but only

if we are nimble and flexible. We will have to be careful that we do not travel with too much baggage, weighted down by our bureaucracies and our established practices.

As Confucius said, “Study the past if you would divine the future.” The past of libraries was driven by the value that access to knowledge was vital for the success of society. Our past was value driven and so our future will be also.

Importantly, we must remember that the true value of thinking about the future lies in helping us to prepare and to plan for the transition to a continually changing new environment. However, no matter what level of preparation or planning we do, academic libraries will survive only if they provide services truly valuable to learning in its evolving environment.