Myths and Realities: The Library in the University

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Myths and Realities: 
The Library in the University*

STEPHEN FORD

I am pleased to have this opportunity to address what I believe to be the principal problems and prospects of libraries in universities, to dispel a few myths, and to reflect upon some realities, especially for the future.

Libraries have existed as institutions for at least twenty-six hundred years. The first known library, Ashurbanipal's in Nineveh in the seventh century B.C. did the same things libraries do today. It collected texts from around the world; it cataloged them and classified them by subject; it conserved the documents by recopying them; it used them to answer Ashurbanipal's reference questions; and it provided him and his staff with circulation privileges.

Libraries have been well-defined and stable organizations throughout recorded history. They have changed in size, clientele, subject specialization, technology and practices, but their fundamental nature has remained the same. When we speculate on the library of the future we should keep this long history in mind.

Grand Valley began an important venture this summer by computerizing an integrated, on-line library automation system. The primary purpose of this system is to provide library information electronically to the Eberhard Center, but it will have an impact on the library and the university greater than anything that has happened since the Zumberge building was occupied almost twenty years ago. During the coming year we will see parts of the system appear and by the beginning of the next fall semester we expect it to be completed. The system, called NOTIS by its developer, Northwestern University, is the library at Nineveh updated one more time.

The Grand Valley library will have an on-line catalog when the NOTIS system is completely installed. On-line catalogs call for a fundamental change in the way library users get access to information about their local library collection. New approaches, not limited to what catalog cards can provide, will be available, including keyword and Boolean searches. Another important effect remains to come. This is rooted in the increasing number of users with personal computers with the capacity to reach remote data bases. These users will have access to our on-line catalog and in time will be able to communicate with other useful computer-based files in the library or files which the library has contracted to serve its clients, as well as with the on-line catalogs of other university libraries.

*1988 Convocation Address
This new effort does not indicate any fundamental change in what the library does. The myth that the on-line system will change the nature of the library is false; the reality is that it will permit the library and the people who use it to do what they do now better and faster, and it will serve people who may be in locations remote from the library.

My next myth is that “The library is the heart of the university.” I am convinced that the real heart of the university is people as manifested in inquiring minds and learned and wise teachers. We must acknowledge, however, that in the modern university, students and teachers cannot function without their resources, especially the laboratory and the library. I would like to believe with Carlyle that “The true university...is a collection of books.” Books may be learned and wise teachers, but in the modern university we must acknowledge that books and other library materials share the space that is called the center of the university.

I want to consider the reality of the future of university libraries, a reality which may well contain some myths that we don’t yet know about. Much of the information that libraries traditionally have owned or provided access to has been deinstitutionalized and dematerialized. Sources have become interactive and susceptible to many permutations. Soon we will not have to go to the library to read a journal article. The individualized information access that we now have can be independent of institutional affiliations. We are or soon will be using work stations that can reach data from multiple sources. We no longer have to have huge data processing centers; we can instead use the automated office, the work station at home, and the wired campus. Compact disk technology already allows us to have large data bases on our desk tops.

With these new technologies it is clear we may have to alter our assumptions about libraries. Others have tried to make this alteration. The Hampshire College experiment, reported by Robert Taylor in his book The Making of a Library, attempted to have no physical library but an information center. The idea was ahead of the technology twenty years ago, but an important aspect in the failure of the experiment was the prevailing faculty attitude that a library must be a collection of materials. Today, faculties are different and technology has changed, but I believe there is still a strong proprietary stance from faculty regarding the library. As we meet the revolution in the way society produces, disseminates and consumes information, libraries and the faculties they serve will have to learn to deal more in information, less in books or bibliographic units.

For libraries, the critical issue becomes how they will control the management and distribution of the information, and if they can they will have to possess the necessary organization and permanence to do so. They are the best people to keep susceptible to the information, especially the students with their capacity to divide and classify, the almost new, the almost old, the almost literate, the almost illiterate, the almost asleep, and the almost awake. They can go to the library and read a book.

There are many myths for librarians to be aware of and fight. The Hampshire library experiment is one.

The technology that we are working with is beginning to reveal its true potential. New and exciting forms of information have emerged.

One needs only look back at the last twenty years to see the change of the information industry. The sources of research are no longer prices of books and library sources; prices of books and library sources are now the sources. Librarians have the unique ability to serve as gatekeepers in the university. Librarians can make a great change in the way society produces information, and the faculty they serve will have to learn to deal more in information, less in books or bibliographic units.
library does. It is false; the library does not do what they say they do; they are remote and uninterested.

We are convinced that a sharp and growing minds and the modern university...is a reality which we are destined to meet. We are unable to many of the possibilities of our normal article. We have undertaken of information that cannot reach data collection centers; we have done it with the wired campus and our desk.

We have notions about what we do. We have attempted to distribute of information to their constituents. Libraries may become brokers, but if they do so they will join a group of enterprises that neither owns nor physically possesses the commodity they offer to their clients. This could mean that someone else owns the source. We run the risk of settling ultimate ownership in profit making organizations and that would be a serious mistake. Society needs to be assured of permanence in its collection and maintenance of its records, and public institutions are the best places for that. Businesses must make a profit, can go bankrupt, and are susceptible to change by political and economic conditions. Daniel Boorstin, until recently the Librarian of Congress, says “Knowledge-institutions do not pay the kind of dividends that are reflected on the stock market. They are sometimes called ‘philanthropic’, which means that they profit nobody except everybody and their dividends go to the whole community.”

There is a danger that we will think the information revolution is a problem only for libraries. The Council on Library Resources, the principal think-tank for academic libraries, said in contemplating its own future:

There is a desperate need for a better definition and understanding of the new world of information, specifically as it will affect teaching and learning at all levels and in all settings and, more generally, as it will influence the public activities and private enterprises that are contiguous to education, scholarship, and research... Unless agreement is reached on the principles that will shape our information future, libraries and other institutions will be at risk and a kind of chaos is likely to constrain intellectual activity, nationally and internationally.

One reality I want to address is the reality of funding for university libraries. In the last fifteen years these libraries have had serious problems because their percentage of the university’s budget has been effectively frozen or has declined. The pressures of inflation for libraries have been far worse than for consumers in general. The prices of books and subscriptions have escalated well above the increases in other prices, for reasons that we are still unable to determine exactly. The effect, however, is easily stated, both for the small universities like Grand Valley and the giants like the University of Michigan: there is less money available for materials. This has been a great frustration for faculty members as well as librarians. The outlook for the future is not optimistic: library operating expenditures as a percentage of the university’s budget are likely to remain fixed; similarly the percentage of the library’s budget for acquisitions will stay the same while inflation continues to erode the acquisitions program. Consequently, university libraries will experience an ongoing decline in the number of books and journals acquired. Acknowledgment of this condition is depress-
ing and discouraging for many of us.

An option for ameliorating the financial condition of academic libraries lies in inter-institutional cooperation. In the last decade we have made important advances in resource sharing, and our newly-acquired on-line systems, particularly NOTIS in Michigan libraries, will make sharing easier. Now we need to move to complementary collection development that will prevent excessive duplication of holdings among libraries that freely loan and borrow materials. One of the greatest handicaps to interinstitutional collection development is faculty resistance. It is difficult for many faculty members to agree that material in accessible libraries is a workable substitute for ownership. We all must understand that the time has passed for building definitive collections of books and materials.

It is a myth to say that the library future is at hand when we consider the humanities. Scholars in the humanities have found important new opportunities in computer technology but not in on-line information services. These information data bases for the humanities exist but their use is often small because coverage is not very deep. There may be a reasonable number of files available, but there is a distinct lack of retrospective files; many are only a decade old. For scholars in history, fifty years of indexing is a minimum against which they can do their work. The problem is that on-line information systems require substantial initial funding and operating expenses. A discipline like history will not provide enough revenue for vendors of on-line services as do the hard sciences and business. Until they do or there is sufficient grant support it is unlikely that databases in the humanities will flourish.

Another myth is that information is knowledge. I think we all know better, but we often fall into the trap of confusing the two. In his *Gresham's Law: Knowledge or Information?* Daniel Boorstin reminds us of the distinction between knowledge and information, the importance of the distinction and the dangers of failing to recognize it... While knowledge is orderly and cumulative, information is random and miscellaneous. We are flooded by messages from the instant-everywhere in excruciating profusion. In our ironic twentieth century version of Gresham's law, information tends to drive knowledge out of circulation. The oldest, the established, the cumulative, is displaced by the most recent, the most problematic. The latest information on anything and everything is collected, diffused, received, stored and retrieved before anyone can discover whether the facts have meaning.

The myth most easily disposed of is that the book, the printed page, will disappear. This is a question on which we will waste no time. We will have books as long as
One of the greatest handicaps to inter-institutional collection development is faculty resistance

We have literature and we will have literature as long as our society endures. A quotation from Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* is appropriate here: "...the images of men's wits and knowledges remain in books, exempted from the wrong of time, and capable of perpetual renovation. Neither are they fitly to be called images, because they generate still, and cast their seeds in the minds of others, provoking and causing infinite actions and opinions in succeeding ages."

For the university and its library there is an issue which may seem so obvious as hardly to need separate mention: commitment to the protection and preservation of intellectual freedom. In libraries the principal issue of intellectual freedom is censorship: that is, efforts to ban, suppress, remove, label, or restrict materials. Freedom of the mind is basic to the functioning and maintenance of democracy and democracy assumes that educated, free individuals have the capacity to decide for themselves what they will and will not read. Additionally it assumes that effective government is possible only with the support of a thoroughly informed electorate. Censorship limits the ability to make choices in a free society and thereby violates intellectual freedom. The university library is seldom faced with the crude censorship threats that are leveled against other libraries. University librarians and faculty enjoy a great measure of freedom in higher education and might well take a more active role in protecting the acquisition and dissemination of controversial materials in other institutions. Particularly, they might join the cause of intellectual freedom in elementary and secondary schools and in local public libraries, giving that cause their active concern and support. We need to recognize that censorship in the schools could well jeopardize academic freedom in the university.

It is clear that the library in the university will undergo drastic changes in the next ten to twenty years. I don't agree with the most iconoclastic of the library prophets, F. W. Lancaster, of the University of Illinois, who says the library will be "disembodied" and "bypassed" by technological developments. It is likely that the library will change more than the university as information needs change radically in an altered information environment. I am confident that Ashurbanipal's library will continue its evolution to still more effective library service in the university.

For many of us, perhaps most of us, a library is more than a place to find information, answer questions and solve problems. It is an arena for individual intellectual exploration and discovery. We browse in it until we find previously unknown volumes that challenge the imagination, open new vistas, or lift the human spirit. We need to have guarantees we can preserve this arena along with the miracle of the information revolution.