

Guest Editorial

Let's Straighten Out the Misconceptions about Electronic Information



Like many of you, I am called upon from time to time to find resources for my children's "research" projects. The most recent project, for my twelve-year-old, was a paper about Poland, which called for specific bits of information—monthly temperature, currency, and other factual material. Jumping onto the Web, I found loads of information about Poland. I found out how to conduct commerce, where the good vacation sites are, and even this week's weather in Warsaw. I did *not* find, however, the information needed for the research paper. But it was easily located in the area handbook for Poland and the *Statesman's Year-Book*.

The World Wide Web reminds me of a swamp into which the unwary can almost instantly sink and get lost. There are no standards or quality control.

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There is no editorial intervention, no permanence, no guidance. Yes, there is a lot of "stuff" available, much of it interesting, but by and large it is there for self-serving purposes, not to provide factual, objective information. The best information, the really *useful* information, will continue to be gathered, created, and disseminated professionally—processes which will continue to cost money, both for nonprofit organizations and for commercial publishers.

Have you noticed that most of the relatively small amount of full-text, reliable material on the Web costs money, even though it is often of only marginal quality and usefulness?

A senior member of the Florida legislature recently informed me that my State University Library no longer needed any materials budget whatsoever, because Harvard has digitized its entire collection, and is making it available free of charge on the World Wide Web. If only that were true! I would love to see Harvard spend billions of dollars to negotiate with the holders of copyrights, do the labor involved in digitizing, and afford the bandwidth necessary to open its holdings up to the whole universe without charge. Common sense, of course, tells me that this will never happen. The reality is that foundations are spending millions to experiment with modest digitizing projects involving materials which are unique or out of copyright. Libraries, similarly, are digitizing specialty items, reserve collections, and other noncopyrighted materials that are not easily available in other formats. Such projects make availability much easier, but do not amount to the creation of electronic libraries. And publishers who are making "real" information available electronically are charging handsomely for it.

Electronic Books

What about electronic books? Doesn't Project Gutenberg place hundreds of texts out there free of charge? Yes, if you want to read a totally unauthorized

text dependent on the volunteer typing of well-meaning amateurs working from nonauthoritative originals. As a graduate student in English, I worked on several volumes of the Center for Editions of American Authors' edition of Emerson's *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, a project which called, among other things, for five separate proofreadings—two of them backwards, word by word and punctuation mark by punctuation mark—so that we would not be misled by the sense to gloss over the differences between the photocopy we were working from and the typescript. Any questions that arose and could not be easily settled using the photocopies were referred to the Houghton Library at Harvard where a librarian would have to look at the originals in the vault. Note that we worked from a copy of the original, not from a corrupted printed volume. Are these the kinds of authoritative texts which untrained volunteers type up late at night after a full day's work elsewhere? I think not. And when authoritative texts are eventually made available electronically, will they be offered free of charge? Not likely.

In my library just now, I picked up *The Poet's Odyssey: Joachim Du Bellay and the Antiquitez de Rome*, by George Hugo Tucker (Oxford: Clarendon Pr., 1990) which was lying on a photocopy machine. Someone had obviously used this volume within the last 24 hours, but it cannot be digitized (legally) by any library or volunteer group, and I doubt that Oxford will ever find it commercially viable to make this book available electronically. Indeed, most of the books we own will never be digitized, and even those modern volumes which were typeset electronically will not be commercially viable as electronic products in the foreseeable future. Yet we need to acquire them and make them available, or scholarship will, essentially, come to a halt.

Electronic Journals

What about electronic journals? A friend who recently became director of a major university library told me that as he arrived he discovered that the library had been put into the hands of the computer people for safekeeping, and they were within one week of cancelling every title to which the university subscribed on the grounds that it is all available electronically, so the money could better be spent on equipment and electronic access. But is it really all available electronically? Latest ARL information indicates that of the 100,000 most common journals, only 3,000 are available electronically, in any way. And, of course, those 3,000 would not be available cover to cover, in many cases, or would offer limited access in some other way. Can you imagine the chaos that would have ensued at this major research university had they actually cancelled all of their journals? Faculty would have gone ballistic. Actually, I wish that this had happened, because it would have made front-page news in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and been a much-needed dose of reality for many.

Increased Costs

Will all, or at least most, useful information become available electronically some day? Of course it will. Keep in mind, however, that such availability will most likely add to our costs, not decrease them. All available information indicates that electronic access will increase costs. Publishing is a business, and will remain one as we move into the electronic age. Even nonprofit organizations depend on "excess revenue" from publications to fund money-losing association activities, in addition to covering publications and paying their staff. It cannot be otherwise.

As individuals and as an association, we need to make these realities clear to the general public, to academic administrators, and to legislators. When

you hear nonsense spouted about everything being available on the Web, so that libraries are no longer necessary, speak up. Even when all information is available electronically, libraries will still be as necessary as they are now,

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and perform the same functions and more. Set people straight. Your professional future, and the future of librarianship, are in jeopardy if you allow such misconceptions to flourish. The recent Packard Bell ad depicting libraries in a negative light while promoting home computers as the answer is a perfect case in point. (The ad can be viewed online at <http://www.packardbell/ads96/television.html>.) ALA responded to this ad in several letters, but Packard Bell is still running it in prime time.

Remember that information, whether in print or in electronic form, will cost money, and libraries are the

medium and the catalyst for the transfer of this information to the general public. The legal and business communities in my area save millions of dollars every year because my library makes its expensive resources available to them without charge. We also support the millions of dollars of sponsored research conducted at my institution, which in turn results in new medicines, inventions, technology transfer, and economic development. It is essential to the economy, and to the maintenance of the intellectual health of this country, that our role be properly understood and valued.

Recently, a student asked me for help with a paper on Da Vinci's "Last Supper." He is very computer-literate, and pulled out some printouts from the Web. "There is a lot of interesting material on the Web, but I doubt that you could do your paper based on what you find there," I told him. "Yes, I have already discovered that," he said. We need to discover it too, and to be sure that our key constituent groups discover it also, before they do any irreparable damage to our ability to provide them with the information they need.

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