PERSPECTIVES

Are Libraries an Endangered Species?

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hen is the last time you stepped into your institution’s library? A few weeks ago my son asked me to get him some books from the undergraduate library, and this stirred in me the desire to learn more about the current status of libraries. It is obvious that our “libraries” are moving from dedicated, stand-alone buildings into our computers and becoming portable. Are these changes helping or hurting our traditional libraries? Are libraries running the risk of becoming extinct?

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics offers some interesting insights with respect to global public library usage. It seems that North Americans borrow only 0.7 books per person per year. The rest of the world fares only slightly better with 1.2 books per person, perhaps reflecting the fact that many countries are underserved and have fewer libraries. What is clear is that printed circulation in libraries worldwide is consistently decreasing as time goes by. If books borrowed are a measure of library usage, it seems that libraries in Western and Eastern Europe, Japan, the Middle East, as well as those in Russia are much more active than those in the Americas. Unfortunately, poor regions such as Africa show the lowest rate of borrowed books, reflecting a higher rate of illiteracy and a lack of libraries. Library usage may also be inferred by the amount of subject searching in their catalogs, which is also decreasing. Gate counts at libraries are down as people prefer to access their materials through the Web.

I will review what I think are some of the main characteristics of academic libraries and try to describe what is happening to them.

Budgets and Collections. Increasingly limited budgets have led to libraries canceling more journal subscriptions. This is particularly true of independent subscriptions (such as AJNR) and not of huge packaged ones that include some extremely valuable journals accompanied by literally hundreds of less valuable ones. Thus, if a library wants a subscription for a very prestigious journal, it must buy a package that includes many that perhaps are not even needed or ever requested. When a print subscription is cancelled a library retains previous materials and their usage continues, but when an electronic subscription is cancelled, previous collections are often no longer available. This forces libraries to continue subscribing. Electronic publication has not decreased acquisition costs as initially expected. In reality, the cost of monographs per volume has increased from 60% to nearly 100% since only 2007. These data were published on October 2009 by the American Library Association and were obtained from 1533 academic libraries. A different article analyzed the change in cost of 111 medical journals over a 25-year period and concludes that the “unprecedented rise in prices negatively affects the purchasing power of libraries.” The specialty of radiology is no different from others as publication monopolies control the costs of most imaging-related journals, determining their price.

Staff and Equipment. The numbers of staff in libraries are decreasing and this may reflect the fact that younger genera-

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data seem to indicate that most researchers are generally satisfied with results obtained from only one of these services. The term “deep Web” refers to high-quality Internet contents that are not immediately obvious without specific browsers. The contents of the deep Web are growing at a much faster pace than those of the surface Web. Brightplanet is a Website that “ harvests, federates and normalizes regardless of source language, document encoding, format, or storage mechanism these data and provides qualified, relevant data for analysts, analytic technologies and data enrichment technologies.”

Unlike the information found in libraries, data from the deep Web are not indexed and not accessible by using popular search engines. If one uses only standard Web searches, most information contained in books, journal databases, and other scholarly materials will be missed. Fortunately for many of us, larger academic medical libraries nowadays offer most of the content in digital formats accessible from our computers.

The concept of a virtual library has received mixed attention. The WWW Virtual Library (http://vlib.org) is the oldest voluntarily supported catalog that contains sections ranging from law and medicine to less common topics such as Chinese and Japanese Art to Egyptology. ITT Technical Institute offers different degrees (including one on health information technology services), and because it has more than 100 campuses in the United States, it houses its library electronically (http://itt-tech.edu). The states of Alabama and Kentucky host online libraries that contain basic books (including several encyclopedias) and magazine and journal collections that may interest the general public and help students (www.avl.lib.al.us and www.kyvl.org). Florida State University offers a mathematics-only on-line library (www.math.fsu.edu/Science). The University of Pittsburgh began digitizing its collection in 1998 and their system now hosts 70 collections (www.library.pitt.edu). These are just some of the virtual library offerings that can be found on the Web. Libraries are no longer only for warehousing books but are becoming gathering places for the virtual community.

It is obvious that the ways in which we access music, radio, cinema, and television have changed more in the last 10 years than in the last 100. A few days ago I told a radiology resident that I needed to go to the library and search the meaning of a word in a dictionary and she looked at me as if I lived in a different world. I guess she was right, as I went to my office and found the same dictionary on-line, saving me a trip to the library.

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M. Castillo
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