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## The Value of the Container

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## ONLINE DATABASES

# The Value of the Container

By Carol Tenopir

WHY ALL THE FUSS ABOUT ELECTRONIC journals? That was the question raised by Michael Gorman, the outspoken president of the American Library Association (ALA), at a session on “Future of Libraries” at the recent Online Information Meeting in London. “What we want is articles,” said Gorman, calling the idea of putting them together in things called journals “irrelevant.”

“We don’t need e-journals,” said the controversial Gorman. Articles should be put together by “our interests, not the editor’s.” The real problem, according to Gorman, is that there is no viable economic model. “Buying all articles [including those no one reads] is not sustainable.”

The comments got me thinking about the containers in which we package information. When the entire text is digitized and searchable through various search engines, traditional containers might not matter anymore. The concept of a journal may not matter now that we have article e-print servers and institutional repositories.

### The value of journals

I conduct surveys to find out how faculty, students, and others use scholarly information. All find relevant scholarly articles by searching databases, the web, and e-print servers, but a journal often delivers value greater than the sum of its article parts. For current awareness, readers in many disciplines browse through entire print or electronic issues of journals. They select journals they trust, based on past experience and such factors as the journal’s affiliation, prestige, and reputation with scholars in their discipline. An issue devoted to a special topic or a bundled collection of related articles in a journal can guide readers to related material that they might not read otherwise.

Even when searching for articles on a specific topic, readers often find the journal title indicates its scope and qual-

ity. In health-related fields the stamp of peer review plus journal prestige is vital.

Electronic journals provide both the bundled, journal view and access to separate articles. Depending on their purpose (current awareness vs. research), readers use different means to find relevant material. Browsing, searching, citation linking, et al., serve different purposes, each using a different chunk of the information source. E-journals allow for any and all purposes. Both the

movies that are likely to appeal to huge audiences, but the world of online commerce provides a market for everything and a “store” in which to keep and display it. Increased access means increased use and increased use can lead to lower prices, even for niche market items. That is good news for everyone.

### Books by the tail

Amazon has already shown what online access can do for niche books. On

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container and its contents carry value. Yet articles are being read independent of journals more than ever.

### “The long tail”

The 80–20 rule of journal use is now more likely to be 80–30 (80 percent of use comes from 30 percent of the journals). Making journals more easily available increases their use. Nearly all articles in e-journal collections are read at least once in a year. Librarians have to decide if the incremental costs of providing “the long tail” of the remaining 70 percent of the articles for the occasional user is worth it. This concept of “the long tail” is now a hot topic. Chris Anderson, editor of *Wired* magazine, started a long tail blog ([longtail.typepad.com/the\\_long\\_tail](http://longtail.typepad.com/the_long_tail)). The long tail from the 80–20 (or 80–30) rule is familiar to librarians, but Anderson brings it into the mass market world. Electronic distribution provides what he calls “an entirely new economic model for the media and entertainment industries” and booksellers.

It allows idiosyncratic users to discover and purchase materials that are on the fringe. Bricks and mortar stores can only stock those books, music CDs, or

the other hand, Gorman called Google’s efforts to digitize library books “a mistake” and “an enormous waste of a large amount of money.” He believes that many of these books are old books that no one uses and, worse, that digitizing them reduces them to paragraphs or snippets. According to Gorman, “The reductionist philosophy says if reference books are good in digital form, then *War and Peace* will be—I just don’t believe this is true.” If Google BookSearch is just about locating print books, “there are already far better mechanisms to find books,” including union catalogs, AbeBooks, Amazon, and more.

The long tail should also apply to books: if people can find books easily online and get access to them easily, many books that never had an audience will be read by someone. The economic question remains: How much are we willing to pay to provide or obtain access to that long tail and how much is it worth? We need to know how much is lost when a reader stops at snippets of a book. We have to find out if some containers matter more than others.

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