



University of Tennessee, Knoxville
**TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative
Exchange**

School of Information Sciences -- Faculty
Publications and Other Works

School of Information Sciences

5-1-2000

Online Goals Before There Was Online

Carol Tenopir
University of Tennessee - Knoxville

Follow this and additional works at: https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_infosciepubs



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tenopir, Carol, "Online Goals Before There Was Online" (2000). *School of Information Sciences -- Faculty Publications and Other Works*.

https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_infosciepubs/205

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Information Sciences at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Information Sciences -- Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.

Online Goals Before There Was Online

I WAS BROWSING through some really old issues of *LJ* recently. In the very first issue (September 1876), Melvil Dewey wrote in an article titled "The Profession":

The opinion has been largely prevalent that a librarian was a keeper only, and had done his full duty if he preserved the books from loss, and to a reasonable extent from the worms. There have been noble exceptions to this rule, but still it is a modern idea that librarians should do more than this.

This sounded vaguely familiar to me, so I searched online in full texts for any recent articles that included the phrase "keeper of books." There was more than one article, but this 1996 passage from a piece in *Daedalus* struck me because it could as easily have been written in 1896 or 1876:

...the profession of librarian as custodian and manipulator of information should constitute one of the most highly esteemed occupations in the coming century. The librarian will be a kind of "information engineer," not just a simple keeper of books, a classifier, or a teacher displaced from the classroom... Librarians, as information engineers with broad humanist backgrounds, must of necessity change their way of thinking if they are to meet the challenges of the [next] century." (*Daedalus*, Fall 1996, "Libraries, social inequality, and the challenge of the twenty-first century.")

I could draw one of two conclusions: either 1) we librarians are slow learners, or 2) many of the major goals of librarianship and library services are fundamental and change little over time.



Carol Tenopir
(ctenopir@utk.edu)
is Professor at the
School of Library
and Information
Science, University
of Tennessee at
Knoxville

I believe the latter is more accurate. Still, our paths to these goals and our chances of success are much changed with online technologies. Digital resources and telecommunications give us the best chance in decades to reexamine and achieve many of our fundamental goals.

Right information, right time

One fundamental goal of librarianship has been to provide access to the right information at the right time. Given the tremendous increase in the amount of information published, coupled with the increased costs of materials, this goal poses new challenges.

R.R. Bowker didn't anticipate technology 100 years ago when he articulated this in the January 1901 issue of *LJ*:

[the librarian]...will not only find the book for the reader but tell him in what book to find the information he seeks, or find for him any information contained in books.... If a book is not in his own library he will endeavor to borrow it from other libraries, far or near, for his reader.... The librarian is no longer a book-keeper, but a book-missionary. It is his duty to compel readers to come in. He stimulates demand by supply of books and facilities; his question is no longer how many books his library has on its shelves, but how many it circulates from its shelves.

Clearly today the types of materials the library provides has expanded beyond print-on-paper books. Our idea of where the materials or users should be to access library materials has expanded as well. In a sense, new technology allows us to play "information missionary" with more facility. We can reach our users wherever they may be hiding—their dormitories, their offices, or at home. With wireless technology, they may even be in their garden or at the beach. We can "compel" the reader to "enter" in virtual ways as well as physical. Links from bibliographic records to document delivery services, to publishers, or to our own digital full-text collections allow us to advance the concept of interlibrary loan.

Sometimes, however, in our rush to

provide more and more digital resources, we forget the first "right" in "the right information at the right time." We must not forget the old-fashioned ideal of the library as a place to help people find the best information.

We have become strangely hesitant to make our judgments known explicitly and publicly to end users—to state what specific resources or web sites are of the highest quality, carry the highest authority, or are the best in their fields to date. Those judgments based on expertise (and not just in *LJ* reviews but in our catalogs and indexes) are needed now more than ever. In an online world, these expert judgments could even be factored into relevance rankings, so the highest quality resources would appear at the top of a relevance ranked output.

Keepers of collections

Although we have long tried to shed the image of "mere" keepers of the book, my second goal for the future from the past is to remind us of our very important roles as "keepers." You may prefer to call it "preserver of the intellectual record," but whatever the term, we should take a lead role.

Again I turn to Melvil Dewey, who in 1901 said:

The rapid increase in annual publication is making it beyond the capacity of poor libraries to care for a large proportion of these books even if they were given to them. Even a poor man can buy a horse. The financial problem is his keep.

As the variety of media used for information provision increases, so does the complexity of saving it for the future. Even web sites we've cataloged and provided pointers to may not be available tomorrow. This represents not only a great waste of time but potentially a great loss of much of our intellectual record. Couple that with the job of preserving crumbling paper resources, and our goal of keepers/preservers is a challenging one indeed.

Again, current and future technologies provide us with a much better chance

ONLINE DATABASES

of meeting this goal than ever before. Large-scale cooperative digital preservation projects such as the Library of Congress's American Memory Project, or JSTOR's effort to preserve old journal volumes will save some vital materials. University and other research libraries must lead; few publishers can be expected to care as much. To reach this goal, librarians must practice triage—determining together which materials are most at risk and are most worth saving.

We also need to consider preservation when we make initial acquisitions decisions. Those materials that are currently important but have a short shelf life dictate a different access choice than those with lasting value. Some duplication (such as online and print) is justified for materials of high and lasting value, but online access from a sole source may suffice for others.

Personalizing service

The third goal from the past is providing personalized service. Bowker, Dewey, and other early library leaders thought the ultimate librarian knew every book in his collection and could match each patron with the right books.

I doubt this ideal was obtainable even back then, but with the proliferation of resources, the growth of cities and universities, and the increasing demands on librarians' time, it clearly has been unrealistic for decades.

In fact, this goal was largely forgotten for a long time after 1899. We concentrated on building collections, better generic finding tools for those collections, and bigger physical facilities. Between OPACs, indexes, pathfinders, and search engines, we've tried as best we can to inform individuals about the many resources they can now access, but there has been little personalization. Our subject terms and design interfaces aim at the greatest number of typical library users.

As inspiration for this goal I turn to a later thinker—Frederick Kilgour, the founder and longtime president of OCLC. Kilgour observed in an article in *Library Trends* in 1969:

As size of collection and user group enlarges, college libraries become monolithic arrangements of volumes, catalogs, and indexes. Ideally, books and journals should be arranged, cataloged, and indexed for an *individual* user, but as the number of users expands, it becomes increasingly difficult, and then impossible, to classify, catalog,

and index for individuals... this forced disregard of individual users yields an intractably monolithic arrangement of materials that is depersonalized.

Kilgour was ahead of his time when he said in this same article:

One major ultimate goal of computerization of college libraries must be the recapturing of humanization lost when libraries grew beyond the stage of having a staff of a single librarian familiar with all materials in the collection and able to interpret those materials personally for each user. To be sure, this goal may not be achieved until the end of the century, but it may not be achieved even then if it is not defined and established now.

Now past the end of the century, it is time to implement this long-neglected goal. Web services, notably My Yahoo and My Netscape, are ahead of most library systems. Some libraries are be-

The standards set by the pioneers of the last century are just as appropriate for this one

ginning to allow customization. North Carolina State's library catalog now has a "MyLibrary" option (my.lib.ncsu.edu), where frequent library users can create customized interfaces. This is a great start to achieving this long-forgotten goal. (See Roy Tennant, "Personalizing the Digital Library," *LJ* 7/99, p. 36,38.) All libraries will be challenged to create such personalized systems.

Librarians are educators

Librarians in all types of libraries today spend large amounts of time helping users navigate digital resources, improve search strategies, and evaluate content. Indirect help includes creating pathfinders, writing better Help screens, and providing links to tutorials. The role of librarian as educator is not a new one. Dewey in that first *LJ* issue recognized:

The time *was* when a library was very like a museum, and a librarian was a mouser in musty books, and visitors

look with curious eyes at ancient tomes and manuscripts. The time *is* when a library is a school, and the librarian is in the highest sense a teacher, and the visitor is a reader among the books as a workman among his tools.

Online resources allow us to turn much of the intermediary role over to the end user. Such resources intrigue patrons previously uninterested in the library, or who do not want to be bound by the library's physical walls. Technology both enables and requires librarians to be educators—patrons need instruction in techniques and, more importantly, in analysis and evaluation.

Librarians have always offered some level of instruction, via classes or materials. For a while, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, it was even fashionable to require a bibliographic instruction class at many colleges. Now information literacy should be required for all undergraduates. Information literacy would require students to identify resources, learn search and retrieval techniques, and discuss important ethical issues, such as intellectual property, privacy, and appropriate use.

Our pioneers set a high standard

These four goals—providing the right information in appropriate formats, keeping our intellectual record, creating personalized information services, and serving as educators—have been with us off and on for 150 years. I recommend rereading some of our pioneers. In the January 1901 issue of *LJ*, Bowker opined:

It is difficult to imagine that the next hundred years can do more, if so much, in invention within the library field as has been done in the past twenty-five years....

As Dewey said in the March 1901 issue of *LJ*:

To him whose vision is as keen looking forward as looking backward the magnificent results already accomplished [sic] are exceeded by the almost sure promise of the still better things which are soon to be.

For the 21st century our sights should be even higher.

[Based on a speech for the annual conference of the Librarians' Association, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, March 2000.]