

Week Thirteen Response

Conventional Libraries: A Digital Revolution

Everything is becoming integrated into the blanket term technology. From missile guidance to simple ball-and-ramp lab simulations in middle school, it seems that everything in our modern day is becoming *modern*. Our institutions of learning, namely libraries, should not be an exception. A push toward digital libraries in the past decade is slowly but surely changing how we picture and use libraries. The Perseus Digital Library is a European innovated system that is quickly branching across the world. Built on two goals, Perseus seeks how to best adapt and structure how information is presented for electronic environments. It seeks also to expand electronic information to best provide information “not only for scholars but for the widest possible audience.”

The two principles on which Perseus are based share strong ties to conventional libraries. All libraries, whether located in a building or microchip, seek first to amass as much information as possible. This information is then meticulously cataloged using some form of search interface. In conventional libraries, this search interface is either using the Dewey system or online search engines (i.e. Barton at MIT); Perseus and other digital libraries use similar online systems. The effectiveness and usability of these search systems delineate the philosophy of libraries: the vast amounts of knowledge must be easily used by everyone to best pique their intellectual inquiry. After all, libraries truly define the global concept of academic institutions.

While the search mechanism for libraries may be similar, Perseus and other digital libraries are innovative in how they present information. Perseus is constantly trying to advance the format of information to maximize both ease of use and learning. One example is the processing of photographs and other data for famous archeological sites to create 3-D models. Using Quick Time Virtual Reality (QTVR), users can do more than just passively observe or read about Greco-Roman structures of the cemeteries of Giza; users can walk through the sites and, with the advancement of technology, explore using all their senses the ruins of ancient cultures. Virtual reality applications of information found in conventional libraries clearly expands the value we take from using a library.

Another example of technology advancing how we utilize information is in metadata. Countless number of books is written in foreign languages; how can we best make these resources available to everyone? Metadata would offer specialized and automatic translation of much information otherwise inaccessible to users. Another unique use of metadata is comparing different editions and revisions of information. For example, there are many versions of classics written by Marlowe and Shakespeare. In conventional libraries, readers can only easily explore one edition at a time, not having the chance to appreciate the nuances between revisions. Another example is comparing different versions of The Bible; non-experts in Greek and Hebrew can analyze the differences in editions by comparing the hundreds of translations.

Another difference between information processing in digital and conventional libraries is the speed at which information goes out of date. Digital information can much better capture the lightening pace of information discovery. An example of this revisits current applications researched by Perseus and archeology. When scientists survey a site, the photos they take become dated practically with the click of the camera. By the time these photos are published in a book, the information may be useless. Digital

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libraries compensate for this time lag in conventional libraries. Digital pictures and Global Positioning System can give users constantly refreshed data.

With all the advances in technology and the emergence of the digital library, it is easy to assume the conventional library will be completely left behind. However, how do we define a library? If a library is a place where the public can search for information; a digital library is just another interface. On the other hand, if a library is defined by its ease of use and system search functions, the conventional library is antiquated. I believe that whether conventional libraries will survive lies somewhere in between these definitions. For such topics as classical literature, the actual information remains unchanged regardless of library. Shakespeare will always be Shakespeare. However, the applications of metadata offer a variety of options for users. For other disciplines such as archeology, information is often outdated if it were traditionally published. Ultimately, the future of the conventional library is not a battle against the digital world. Access to the World Wide Web revolutionized how users searched in a library building. It is just a matter of time before conventional libraries fuse with digital libraries to fulfill its ultimate purpose: to educate the public and inspire intellectual curiosity.

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Works Cited:

Crane, Gregory, et al. "The Symbiosis Between Content and Technology in the Perseus Digital Library." *Culture Interactive*, no. 2 (October 2000).