

## Not Even Wrong: Gorman on Google

by **Rick Anderson** (Director of Resource Acquisition, University of Nevada, Reno Libraries, 1664 N. Virginia Street, Reno, NV 89557; Phone: 775-784-6500 x.273; Fax: 775-784-1328) <rickand@unr.edu>

The physicist **Wolfgang Pauli** once famously dismissed a research paper as “not even wrong,” meaning that its content was not significant enough to dispute, or perhaps that its author had defined his target so poorly that to dispute it was impossible or not worth the effort. The phrase “not even wrong” kept ringing in my head as I read an opinion column written for the *Los Angeles Times* by ALA president-elect **Michael Gorman**. In this piece, **Dr. Gorman** takes considerable issue with **Google’s** nascent program of book digitization, one which the company is undertaking in cooperation with several large research libraries and which will make millions of scholarly books available online to the general public at no charge.

It is difficult to imagine the **ALA** — an organization that seeks to “ensure access to information for all” — registering public disapproval of a project that will make the content of millions of books accessible to anyone with Internet access. Making these books fully searchable and offering significant portions of them for free online viewing will result in a significant increase in the amount of scholarly information available to those not privileged with access to research libraries. **Google’s** project seems like one that an organization like the **ALA** would embrace. **Dr. Gorman** himself seems to have found it hard to object. While he felt that objection was necessary, he seemed to have trouble coming up with legitimate criticisms. Instead, he offers the following arguments — some of which are simply wrong, and others of which are not even well-defined or relevant enough to be wrong:

“Information isn’t knowledge.” (No, but information is the tool we use to transmit knowledge. If we want to increase the amount of knowledge in the world, we’re going to have to start by getting more and better information to more people.)

“The books in great libraries are much more than the sum of their parts.” (Well,

yes, and so are the books in not-so-great libraries. But the relevant question is this: given the choice between access to a book’s component parts and no access to the book at all, isn’t the former preferable to the latter?)

“Not many would choose to stare at a screen long enough to [read a book online].” (Isn’t having online access to the book better than having no access at all? Wouldn’t we librarians rather see more books made available to more people even if they are in a format that isn’t optimal for long-term reading?)

“Books in great libraries are designed to be read sequentially and cumulatively.” (Actually, most are designed to be read individually, and a great many books — collections, anthologies, etc. — are specifically designed to be read piecemeal.)

“The nub of the matter lies in the distinction between information and recorded knowledge.” (The “nub of the matter” lies in the difference between imperfect access and no access at all. The **Google** project would give imperfect access to many people for whom traditional libraries have offered no access at all.)

“(Google’s digitization project is a) solution in search of a problem.” (I would submit that **Google’s** digitization project is a solution to one of the central problems that the **ALA** identifies in its own mission statements: namely, that most people don’t have easy, affordable access to a rich collection of high-quality books.)

Libraries exist to solve a basic problem:

there’s more information out there than any individual can afford to buy and house. The perfect solution would be for everyone to have access to all information, and for it all to be organized in a way that permits quick, easy access to whatever particular chunk of information (be it an article, a birthdate, a journal issue or a book) one needs at a given moment. Unfortunately, that perfect solution

isn’t yet possible. In the spirit of compromise, communities have traditionally gotten together to buy, organize, and house copies of many books and magazines so that their patrons can take turns reading them. It’s been a pretty good model, and it has made lots of information available to people who otherwise would have had no access at all. Granted, the arrangement was kind of clumsy and inconvenient — not everyone had access to a library, and no library had everything you might want, and even if you could get to a library that had

what you wanted, you couldn’t be sure it would be available when you got there — but as a compromise it worked pretty well.

The problem is that many of us have fallen in love with the compromise model itself and allowed our world view to calcify around it. Now that a better model is emerging — a model that makes much more information available to many more people much more conveniently (and at much less cost) — we’re responding by pointing out how the model falls short of perfection. When others point out how much better it is than the current arrangement, we respond with resonant but empty slogans or, in some cases, snide dismissiveness.

For those who subscribe to this line of thinking, it appears that access to information is not what matters. What matters is that access be provided in a way that is most comfortable for librarians — and if the price of maintaining the library’s traditional position is keeping information away from the people, so be it. These folks portray themselves as noble defenders of the book, but what they really sound like are opponents of change.

If **Dr. Gorman** were an obscure young scientist adding one more paper to a crowded field of scientific writing, it probably wouldn’t be worth the effort to respond. However, as president-elect of the **American Library Association**, **Dr. Gorman** is set to become the official mouthpiece of our entire profession. If the **ALA’s** members really believe in their organization’s stated principles, then it’s imperative that they raise their voices in dissent from the views expressed by their president-elect. 

