

Op Ed — IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion)



What's Your Problem? (And What's Mine?)

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Academic libraries are in a tough situation, there's no question about it. We're beset on two sides, and it's almost as if the two sides had coordinated their attacks. From one side, attacking us with a gentle smile and a two-edged sword, is **Google**, which wasn't satisfied with being the single easiest and most effective ready-reference tool in the world. It has now become, effectively, the world's largest, most comprehensive, and easiest-to-use research library. I know, I know, it's not perfect: you can't display more than 20% of any in-copyright book (and much less than that if the book is still in print). And yes, **Google** is doing all this to make money, and no, giving people access to huge amounts of content doesn't do anything to ensure that they'll use it intelligently or even responsibly.

But you know what? For end users, **Google Book Search (GBS)** is an absolute godsend with virtually no downside. Can't download an entire book? That might matter more to our patrons if it weren't for the fact that they can *search* the entire book, and the vast majority of the use that library books get is selective anyway — very few books in a research library's collection get read from beginning to end. Instead, most of them are searched and read selectively — both of which functions are eminently possible with **GBS**, and are in fact far, far easier to do online than with a printed book. The end result is that, in most cases, an undergraduate student can write an entire ten-page research paper using only **GBS**, and can do so without sacrificing quality, because the quality of the books now available for full-text searching is so high. Nor does his professor need to know that he relied on the open Web for his research, because it doesn't matter — the open Web is now, thanks to **Google**, a full-text research library. Citing a book accessed via **GBS** is no different from citing that same book if it had been pulled from the library stacks. Granted, undergraduates writing brief papers are not the only people our libraries are meant to help — but they are a very large proportion of our client base.

So on one side, we have **Google** doing a substantial amount of what we have traditionally done, and doing it far better, at no cost to the user, and from the comfort of the user's own home (or phone), at whatever time is convenient to the user. You have only to look at **ARL's** circulation and reference statistics over the past decade to see that research libraries were

bleeding even before this attack, and the emergence of **GBS** will only erode our position further.

On our other flank, we're being attacked by another foe: a financial crisis that is making it dramatically harder for institutions of higher education to fund even their core services at the levels they need to. Colleges and universities are desperate to find savings, and their libraries are very, very fat targets. What makes us so? For one thing, libraries (unlike many academic departments) typically generate little or no revenue for their host institutions. Instead, we suck up revenue, and in huge amounts. Furthermore, if university administrators were to examine our practices closely, they might be shocked by the amount of waste they'd find. A very significant percentage of the books we buy are never used, and an even larger percentage are used so rarely that it would be difficult to justify our investment in them. Librarians sit at service desks where they are rarely asked questions that require their expertise. Careful, title-by-title acquisition decisions are made about books whose future value to the university is speculative at best, while the easy collection decisions are outsourced to vendors. We spend huge amounts of staff time tracking the frequency and monitoring the delivery of journals that no one reads, many of which will come whether we monitor them or not, and a good chunk of which will never come no matter how closely we monitor them. In a drastically straitened budget environment, it's important to recognize that this kind of waste has no counterpart in other areas of the university, and the tighter the university's funding gets, the more likely it is that this waste will be discovered and will prompt uncomfortable questions about how university funds are being spent in the library. At the same time that budget money is getting scarcer, journal prices continue to skyrocket and faculty members react to cancellations with outrage.

So this is our situation. We face:

1. stiff competition for our position as the key source of scholarly content and research tools on campus;
2. skyrocketing prices for the resources that we continue to purchase, combined with a radically tightening financial situation in which our sponsoring institutions have less and less money to spend on us.

The point of this piece is not, however, to suggest what we should do about those two threats. Instead, I want to warn us about a third danger, one that, if not heeded, could lead the other two dangers to metastasize and kill us quickly. It's the danger of not distinguishing between what is our (the library's) problem, and what is their (our stakeholders') problem.

The temptation, when faced with something like **GBS**, is to try to convince our stakeholders that it isn't the tremendous boon it appears to be, but is rather a problem — and, more particularly, that it is our *stakeholders'* problem and that the solution to that problem is a better understanding of the library. This temptation is what leads us to try to distract our stakeholders from the manifest blessings of **Google** and to focus on its downsides, even if we have to kind of make them up. Where end users are thrilled to see access to millions of books in full text, for example, we point out that they don't really have complete access to the full text — unlike in the library, where you can always count on us to let you read the entire book. Where end users see full-text searchability as a tremendous leap beyond crude indexes, we tell them that without carefully crafted subject headings they're likely to miss other, related titles. When end users point out **GBS's** convenience and speed of access, we point out **Google's** profit motive. When end users marvel at the quality of what they're able to find and read with little or no effort through **GBS**, we tell them (against all evidence) that **GBS** is a poor environment for the element of serendipity that would lead them, if they would only browse our stacks, to find books they didn't know they needed.

The cruel reality is that **Google Book Search's** profit motive, less-than-perfect completeness, and lack of organized metadata are of little concern to our patrons. They are mainly of concern to us, as librarians. As librarians, we value completeness and can't fathom why an end user would get excited about being given access to only 20% of a book. From our patrons' perspective, however, being able to *search* the entire content of a book often matters more than being able to *read* the entire book. For many of our patrons much of the time, the ability to zero in on a relevant chapter or even a few relevant pages is what counts. As librarians, we understand that a subject heading can lead you to a book that you might never find by means

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of keyword searching. Our patrons, however, would generally rather run the risk of missing a relevant title than go through the contortions that are necessary to use the library catalog, especially in the ways we think they should.

Our patrons may be dead wrong in all of these attitudes, and we librarians may be right. But being right will not save us from marginalization if our patrons decide the library is no longer relevant to their research agendas. If they believe wrongly that we're not relevant, the effect on us will be exactly the same as if they were right. **Google Book Search**, in other words, is our problem — not our patrons' problem.

A similar principle applies to funding. When faced with budget cuts and demands for increased service (or even maintenance of services at current levels), our temptation will be to respond to our host institutions by saying "Sorry, you can't have those services anymore because you're not giving us enough money." While that may seem like a perfectly reasonable response, it really doesn't matter whether it's reasonable or not — what matters is the effect it's likely to have on those who have to make

tremendously difficult funding decisions for the institution as a whole. Before responding in that way, we should look around at the academic departments on our campuses: are professors taking on heavier teaching loads? Are they cutting their travel budgets? Are they making do with fewer student employees? If so, we had better be very sure that the library is doing similar things before claiming that we can no longer afford to provide services that our patrons want. If a professor who has just cancelled a conference trip and taken on two additional sections of a freshman survey class sees librarians sitting for long lonely stretches behind deserted service desks (or, worse, taking hour-long coffee breaks in the student union), you can bet that there will be repercussions — and there should be.

Of course, sometimes budget cuts are deep enough that the library has no choice but to make cuts to some service areas. When this is the case, attitude and tone make a huge difference. Imagine this situation: the library budget has been cut by 10%, and at the same time the university administration is asking the library to stay open past midnight on weekdays. Here's the natural response: "You want us to be open past midnight? Fine. How much of our budget will you restore so we can hire more staff?" (Translation: "This is your problem,

not ours. When you figure out a solution, we'll be willing to try and implement it.") Here's a more effective response: "We would love to stay open past midnight; we know our students have wanted that for a long time. In order to make that work, we'll probably have to close earlier on weekend nights, or reduce service in another area in order to support the late-night shifts. Would that be an acceptable tradeoff?" (Translation: "Our goal is to do whatever we can to serve you well. We can't afford to do everything we'd like to do, but we're anxious to find a way to make this work.")

In the past, when times have gotten tough, libraries have been able to defend their budgets by appealing to the ways that we — and only we — could provide essential support to the teaching and research missions of our institutions. The current financial crisis has occurred in a completely different information environment, one in which many other players are fighting hard to supplant us in our traditional roles. We can no longer assume that the old arguments will still work. It's time for us to swallow our pride, roll up our sleeves, and start dealing with the fact that we have competition to beat — or, if we can't, start figuring out new ways of being essential to our institutions. A good way to start is by focusing on our stakeholders' problems rather than our own. 🌳