A Virtual Experience

By Joseph G. Reish
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Interim Dean, University Libraries

[On July 1, 2000, Dean Joe Reish accepted a special appointment to serve as the Interim Dean of the University Libraries. He assumed his “library” responsibilities at a critical juncture in the history of the Libraries at WMU. New Provost Fred Dobney had just arrived on the campus, and President Elson Floyd was concluding his second year at WMU. The Libraries needed a firm hand to direct major technological changes in the information world, and to maintain the electronic thrust of current systems and collections. Ten months later, Dean Reish reflects on his experiences as Dean of the University Libraries.]

As an undergraduate at George-town University, I worked in the main library at the circulation desk. Occasionally, I also shelved books, answered directional questions for patrons, and closed down the facilities. Washington, D.C., in the middle of the summer, in a non-air-conditioned, mid-nineteenth-century, neo-gothic edifice tested my smile and my public-service ethic. Today, my son is working in the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale. His chief duty is to ensure the running of a battalion of computers that makes up the backbone of a modern, automated library. He also answers the occasional question that a non-techi user might pose about access to on-line databases. At home in the humanities and sciences, my son, I trust, responds with a similar ready smile to mine and my public-service ethic. Today, my son is working in the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale. His chief duty is to ensure the running of a battalion of computers that makes up the backbone of a modern, automated library. He also answers the occasional question that a non-techi user might pose about access to on-line databases. At home in the humanities and sciences, my son, I trust, responds with a similar ready smile to mine and my public-service ethic. Today, my son is working in the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale. His chief duty is to ensure the running of a battalion of computers that makes up the backbone of a modern, automated library. He also answers the occasional question that a non-techi user might pose about access to on-line databases. At home in the humanities and sciences, my son, I trust, responds with a similar ready smile to mine and my public-service ethic.

When I assumed the position of Interim Dean of the University Libraries in July, 2000, I stepped back into a world that I only partially knew — and knew originally at a very different time. Of course, I could navigate around Waldo and the satellite libraries since I had gathered valuable information in each of them, at one time or another, for my teaching and research. Sure, I was familiar with the on-line catalog and comfortable with the electronic search engines and databases in my field of French cultural studies. After all, I had been a library employee and a library user for several decades. However, after comparing my son’s activities to mine, and exploring WMU’s behind the scenes situation, I also quickly realized that I had little sense of how the modern-day library had become an electronic Mecca, or, as once described, automated. From the acquisition of monographs and serials to the international cataloging of records; from the on-line WMU collection records (the catalog) and the multiple screens of the WWW home pages; from circulation and reserve records for millions of items to resource sharing of thousands more, the libraries are automated. The information collections in Waldo and the branches are electronically acquired, cataloged, referenced, circulated, and retrieved. Even 4,000,000 physical items, e.g., books, documents, media, are tracked from acquisition through cataloging through retrieval through circulation electronically.

Moreover, change is a constant in this electronic world. As I pen these words (on my laptop computer), the homepage of the Libraries’ catalog has assumed a new look and new touch options by utilizing the fifth (or is it the sixth) upgrade of Voyager since 1997. The Systems and Web Offices have again been working extended hours to bring this latest conversion to full implementation. Library faculty and staff will soon launch a sophisticated lab in the main library dedicated to the digitizing of visual images, archival materials, and manuscripts of special collections. All of this has been a fascinating new land to explore with helpful traveling companions these past months as I came to know something of the virtual library.

What has made these advancements in automation ever so more remarkable, I have learned, is the fact that the current academic librarians and support staff have reschooled themselves with only a few positions filled by people who formally studied the latest technologies. These folks of the University Libraries have personally invested in the modern technological revolution exemplified by our University library. In a sense, every one of them has
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had to learn the nature of contemporary information science, of browsers, servers, systems, and all that makes up the technological underpinnings of Web pages and on-line catalogs.

To assist in this ongoing transformation of staff once focused on printed books and ordinary media applications, the Libraries’ administration has continued this year to cover faculty and staff participation in conferences and workshops with both financial support and encouragement to achieve even more. For example, the Head of the Systems Office, Mary Ross, is a former cataloguer, once surrounded only by 3 by 5 cards, official codes, and books. Today, she is “ultra-tech.” Mary works through a PC to bring on-line each new version and all intervening modifications that appear on the screens of WestCat, our state-of-the-art, on-line catalog. The just retired Head of the Web Office, Helen Healy, said, “yes” to automation, the Internet, Web pages, and search engines at least a decade ago to help design and implement the first on-line library system at WMU. She became one of the first Internet librarians in the nation, and then webmaster of the Libraries’ first home pages.

The electronic library invites—and demands—that the faculty and staff confront new issues and problems head on. Assistant Dean for Resources Bettina Meyer is much concerned with emerging copyright interpretations and licensing agreements that have been radically impacted by Internet and WWW access. We gather information in an era where clicking on a Web screen can access protected information. However, legally obtaining the full text and/or reproducing what we find demands constant vigilance to protect the rights of the authors and publishers. None of the complex licensing agreements or extensive copyright review was a part of the Assistant Dean’s role only a few years ago. She, too, had to remake her role and learn new duties and assume new responsibilities.

During my tenure exploring Waldo and its branches, I have often had to learn new vocabulary to interact with my colleagues and to understand their plans for the future. While enjoying the benefits of extensive University resources allocated to update the technical infrastructure of library operations, the Director of Operational Services Regina Buckner found that she faces problems that never existed before. Most recently, she has had to weigh the advantages and limitations of rewiring the offices of the library personnel with the latest material on the market. Where once Regina and her colleagues spoke of “CAT5” with an occasional reference to “CAT5e,” there now has risen a “LEVEL7.” Each makes sense when one realizes that the wiring of Waldo, done over ten years ago, is out of date, and new installations need to serve the library for five to seven years when fiber optic cable will be “de rigueur.” Moreover, working closely with the Office of Information Technology, Waldo will become one of the first campus sites to be a “wireless” environment for the University-wide laptop initiative. The library space again is ready for the latest technological advances.

Turning from the infrastructure to the user needs, one key area is the expanded public service to faculty, staff, and students that serves to enhance the teaching and research mission of the University. In 1994, a new position was created to coordinate the “information literacy initiative” for the Libraries. Elaine Jayne is the current coordinator of all faculty and staff bibliographic/information instruction that demystifies access to the multitude of on-line databases, traditional books, and other resources available from the University Libraries. Our savvy information literacy specialists teach users to discriminate among the many collections and services that are offered at and through WMU. What Elaine and colleagues do for the local campus community, the Continuing Education Resources Librarian, Mae O’Neal, does for the growing network of users who study on-line and at the six regional centers. Mae and a soon to be hired additional faculty member in that office are necessary links between the distance learner and all of the collections of the University Libraries.

Before I leave these six examples, I must emphasize that the individuals just mentioned are only a small sample of the professionals who have transformed the University Libraries. Heads in every unit and branch have also made extraordinary "upgrades" in their skills and knowledge of technological applications. Without across the board efforts, the Libraries would not offer over 8,000 links and 3,700 files on its Website, or function as an academic library in a research university. Moreover, there is not a single individual among the 80 plus faculty and staff members who work in Waldo or the branches who has stood still during the information explosion and electronic revolution. Each has had to be at home in the "electronic" world of computer searching, computer applications, and a myriad of other "techniques" necessary to function when one’s major instrument for all activities is a sophisticated PC.

I, too, have learned much during my appointment as Interim Dean of the University Libraries. The faculty and staff are individually and collectively professional. The University Libraries has earned a national reputation for the quality of its on-line Web site and its comprehensive collection of electronic indexes and databases. The University Libraries has led in one initiative after another to provide significant access to numerous information resources needed by students, faculty, and staff. In addition, I have had an opportunity to learn, first hand, the unique role that each faculty and staff member plays in his or her unit and in the Libraries as a whole. I’ve also been privy to the challenges, satisfaction, and pride that all take in their University Libraries. I feel I have become a part of their social milieu, and have been privileged to assist in resolving problems. Finally, I have become a much more informed scholar traveler along the heavily traveled roads of the information highway. In a sense, I hope that I have become a real part of the University Libraries environment, service orientation, and a member of its virtual library.

The Master Key to Information

By Ellen Cha, Head, Cataloging/Processing

The Cataloging Department of the WMU Libraries lies behind a wall of shelves filled with multiple volumes of The National Union Catalog on the lower level of Waldo Library. However, don’t let this sequestered location fool you. What goes on behind the double doors is the heart and backbone of WestCat, the University Libraries’ online public access catalog! Two large rooms bustle with activities, both physical and mental, that create the master key to unlock access to the millions of recorded items found in Waldo and the four branches.

The pace of technological change in academic libraries during the past two decades, as well as the world of cataloging in general, has undergone dramatic shifts in the way that library catalogs are developed and organized. Cataloging has always been the main tool by which librarians have organized and managed access to their collections, whether recorded on clay tablets, papyrus, paper, or electronic circuitry. For the last two centuries, two basic principles provided a foundation for the catalog. First, each bibliographic item or series, regardless of format, is described uniquely, so that each item, e.g., printed book, CD-ROM, government document, map, slide, online journal or WWW site, cannot be mistaken for another, similar item. Second, different access points permit the user to search for the material’s objective features (e.g., author, title, etc.), and its contents by means of cross-references, subject headings, and classification codes (call numbers). In the past two centuries, book catalogs, and then card catalogs, offered a way for the user to search by author, title or official subject heading. Today’s sophisticated technology has replaced the majority of the card catalogs of the 20th century with online, usually Web-based, catalogs and indexes that offer all of the original access points and more. Right now, online catalogs offer searches in “fields” such as ISBN’s, publishers, keywords, title phrases, and others.

The task of constructing an academic library catalog relevant to a given collection and establishing accurate bibliographic control has always been difficult to achieve, and harder to maintain. Today, because of the ever-changing technology, and an expanded capability to search every facet of a descriptive record, the job of every staff member in WMU’s Cataloging/Processing Department has become more complex. And, of course, since the University Libraries’ collections or its access to information is no longer limited to physical volumes or other recorded formats, WestCat is open to an infinite number of directly-linked WWW sites and licensed databases—each “cataloged” for WMU users.

The experienced staff who work in this area are ultimately responsible for the actual catalog entry, assignment of a classification code, subject analysis, and the physical processing of library materials in all formats. This means that the Department oversees WMU’s online integrated Voyager system (known to users as WestCat), and assures that the online catalog has functionality, quality, and integrity. Few individuals know that this WMU unit has six work areas: Non-print Materials Cataloging, Print Materials Cataloging, Fast Cataloging, Pre-Cataloging Searching and Database Maintenance, Authority Control, and Physical processing. One faculty member heads the unit, and has the support of 13 staff members plus student assistants. In 1999-2000, these staff members added over 29,000 titles to the existing 1.7 million records in WestCat.

In the last few years, the Cataloging Department began to incorporate, in increasing numbers, the non-book acquisitions of the Libraries. The Department now handles cassette recordings, films, slides, videotapes, microforms, computer files, CD-ROMS, interactive multimedia, maps, atlases, Web pages, e-books and journals, and remotely accessible databases. The complex workflow of all kinds of materials necessitates a close and productive relationship with the Acquisition/Serials Department located adjacent to the cataloging and processing area. (See “Where Are the Periodicals?” in the Winter 2000 issue of Gatherings.)

As the formats of materials become more varied, complex, and intermingled, the catalog has undergone a revolutionary transformation. Where once users found a catalog that was a record of locally held resources, there now exists a gateway through which access is provided in multiple layers to materials accessible via the WWW. This has created its own unique challenge since the resource is not “owned” by the library, merely linked to it through the catalog. Unfortunately, Web sites may move from day to day, and URLs (Uniform Resource Locator[s]) change without notice. The content itself may be modified or increase or decrease significantly so that the catalog description no longer is accurate. In essence, the University Libraries has lost control over the entry for a WWW site that is found in WestCat.

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—authors, titles, keywords, URLs, publishers can change without any notice. As a result, what was correct yesterday becomes incorrect today.

Regardless, a past and continuing emphasis of the Libraries' bibliographic database is effective authority control. Complete, accurate bibliographic and item records are provided for materials held by the Libraries since complete access cannot be guaranteed unless access points (e.g., author, title, subject, etc.) are consistent, current, and correct throughout WestCat. As noted, with the addition of online links to sites, assuring that guarantee has become vastly more difficult. However, users are demanding such access, and the Catalog Department is responding as precisely as possible.

One timely example of the difficulty of providing authority control is found in the area of subject headings. Most searchers are not aware that official subject headings are suggested by the Library of Congress and used in common across all libraries. (Users are usually sent to keyword searching tools when they begin a search since such indexes use common language found in actual titles and descriptions.) The "real" subject heading is a powerful search tool, because all libraries use standardized terminology. Until recently, the official subject heading for books and other resources, originally describing Negroes or blacks, was AFRO-AMERICANS with appropriate subheadings or clarifications such as AFRO-AMERICANS—BIOGRAPHY or AFRO-AMERICAN TEACHERS. The change to AFRICAN AMERICAN as the official subject heading was made in December 2000—a change that required updating several thousand records in WestCat.

Some of the corrections could be initiated using a one-fell-swoop, automated global heading change feature that is built into our cataloging system, but this could be used only with the main heading. No longer phrase or subdivision could be corrected without a manual, in-house intervention so that AFRO-AMERICAN TEACHERS could become AFRICAN AMERICAN TEACHERS. Moreover, the word "AFRO-AMERICAN" was also embedded in other major headings such as UNITED STATES—HISTORY—CIVIL WAR, 1861-1865—AFRO-AMERICAN TROOPS. Traditional searches do not easily uncover text appearing far down the line in a subject-heading string. In this single example, the cataloging staff eventually located some 300 bibliographic records that required the substitution of AFRICAN AMERICAN for AFRO-AMERICAN. The bottom line is that without accurate and thorough authority control and database management, online library catalogs are not the useful, modern tool that they have the potential to be.

The University Libraries' WestCat is an amazing catalog or, if you will, search engine of the 21st century. This gateway links every searcher to a wide range of information resources including, at least: traditional holdings (books, periodicals, rare books, government documents, etc.); e-books and journals; images; sound recordings; course reserve materials; CD-ROMS; remotely accessible databases; and sites of the public WWW. The key to all of this information is held by the Cataloging Department that shapes and articulates the definition of WestCat for our user community. No matter how the nature of our collection and services changes, WestCat, in one form or another, the Libraries' online catalog, will remain the backbone and trusted companion to a world of information that is always there to support the educational, research, and public service mission of Western Michigan University.

The Trouble with the Library

By Allison Danforth

[Many students help to staff the Library Libraries. Allison Danforth is a senior majoring in English and Spanish. She has become a talented Central Reference aide who has also observed shrewdly and drawn some conclusions about the WMU Libraries.]

The patron enters the library to the sound of the heavy glass doors, crossed with steel, slamming behind him. He stands in the rotunda, feeling almost lost in the depths of a well, as three echoing stories of the library tower over him—topped by a glass dome. More steel bars across the dome (and dirty glass) cut the watery sunlight till it has no strength to warm the patron far below. Still, he forges ahead, and passes through the security gate that paradoxically has a sign that reads: "Welcome Students." If the patron glances back to the other set of gates, through which he will later escape, he is less welcomed by signs that warn: "Theft and Mutilation Will Be Prosecuted." "Will Be Prosecuted" is in red letters.

The patron, now made timid and self-conscious by the deathly quiet of the rotunda after the echoes of the banging doors have dissolved into silence, enters the belly of the library. Seeking help, he wends his way through the maze of computer stations, each with a patron staring into a glowing screen, to the reference desk hidden back and to the right of the main aisle. Behind a long, low, mahogany colored desk with a gray top reside the librarians who hold dominion over the four million books and other items that have been stamped as property of Western Michigan University—in purple ink.

Once at the desk, the only standup section is already taken, and the patron must get on his knees to see eye to eye with the librarian as she guides him through the research process. The woman skips from this page to that page of the Web-based catalog, clicking on this blue word and that button, and pointing out that he should take note of this, this, this, and that on page—all done so quickly, as she is flying from screen to screen, that he doesn't even know where she started. She is flinging words around as fast as she is clicking and typing away: online catalog, research resources, abstract, citation, microform, general stacks, circulation, and permanent reserve. On and on, words cascade over his unhearing ears and links flash by his unseen eyes. The librarian ends the crash course in research with a pleasant smile, a quick point at a two-sided, four-part map, and a gesture toward unknown locations: "Okay? Here's your call number. Come back if you can't find it."

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Revisiting Books of Youth

By Diether Haenicke, President Emeritus

[In 1998, Diether Haenicke retired as President of Western Michigan University, and returned to the faculty as a Distinguished University Professor. In addition, he prepares a weekly column for the News Plus section of the Kalamazoo Gazette. Dr. Haenicke and the Gazette have given their permission to reprint the following January 10, 2001 column.]

One of the great luxuries that I currently enjoy is having time to read for pleasure. For over 25 years, I held academic positions that forced me, day in and day out, with too little time for other reading, to peruse financial statements, office memos, funding requests, general office correspondence, or accreditation reports. Although their respective authors undoubtedly put great effort into these communications to me, none remains memorable or triggers the wish to re-read it. These days I can read exclusively what I want to read, not what I must read, and the treasure trove of history, biography, poetry and novels again lies open before me.

All my life, I have been an avid reader. I was very fortunate to have friends in my teens who also loved to read, and with whom I could exchange and discuss books that fascinated and enthused us. Most of the books that I read when I was 15 or 16, I remember vividly to this day, and also some of the long debates I had about them with my friends at the time.

Occasionally, now, I take some of those books off the shelf and read them again, 50 years later. It is a wonderful experience that I highly recommend. Of course, there are a few books we read many times during our lives, and they become steady and trusted companions. But it is a powerful experience going back to books that defined our youth, and that we have not read in between.

I always found it intriguing that books, which I loved, could make a vastly different, and lesser, impression on other readers. We can fail a book, or a book can fail us-depending on the care with which the reading is done, the mood in which the readers find themselves while reading, or the emotional or intellectual experiences the reader brings to the book. The dissimilar impact on different readers is relatively easy to explain.

It is similarly easy to explain the changed impact of a book on the same reader at a later time in his life. After all, it should not come as a surprise that a lifetime of experience mightily changes a book’s impact. But the great pleasure of reacquainting myself with a book of my youth lies not only in noting its changed impact; it also has other benefits. The greatest is the miracle of encountering oneself again, the youthful reader of half a century ago, and the rediscovery of the fanciful dreams and uncertain emotions of one’s earlier self. With fondness and nostalgia I remember the particular features of the books that occupied and overwhelmed me then. When I was 12, for instance, I fantasized about slipping into the heroic role of Edmond Dantes, the Count of Monte Christo. A few years later, I sensed, while reading Charles Dickens for the first time, deep anger and indignation about the harsh social conditions, and I was incensed at the religious persecution depicted in Werfel’s The Forty Days of Musa Dagh. At 15, with great curiosity and still well-remembered ambiguous and tentative feelings, I read countless times the love scenes between the courageous Robert Jordan and the beautiful Maria in Hemingway’s For Whom the Bell Tolls.

Most of us read for content in our youth, not for style, composition, or other artistic elements. The story mattered most. What happened and how it ended drove our interest. But along with the love of reading, an appreciation grew for how a story was presented, in what way it was told, and in what language. Thus the reading for content, powerful in itself, developed into a much deeper involvement and enjoyment that characterizes the adult reader.

Revisiting the favorite books of my youth, I also gratefully remember all the people who read to me as a child, who taught and encouraged me to read, who gave me my first books and thus opened wide the doors to the limitless world of knowledge and enjoyment. A belated blessing on each and every one of them! Would that every child could enter the world of reading as happily as I did.

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The patron is again left to wander amidst the four floors of general stacks, the towering shelves, and the rows upon rows upon floors of gray shelves that hold a dull rainbow of books. Their spines are worn; threads stick out like gray hairs. Their gold and silver lettering has been rubbed away long ago by a thousand sweaty hands, leaving only a shadow of their former elegance. Smaller ones hide behind larger ones, some even slip behind the front runners. Each lurking, hidden amidst hundreds; each identified by 10 to 15 letters of the ubiquitous call number that is sometimes further hidden on the cover that is not visible. Each sits in mean silence while the patron searches for his needle in the haystack. Only after he has trekked a mile over the hard, gray carpet, stared blankly at the dozens of signs that all seem alike—PR3671.T85 to PR 6842. S9—does he sigh, “I hate this library.” Slowly, without enthusiasm, he returns to his original nemesis, the librarian, and asks for help.

The librarian is calm, cool, and ever smiling in spite of his impatient and frustrated tone when he asks where his book is. She marches to and up a flight of stairs, oblivious that her heels send thunder rolling through the stairwell, and then goes down an aisle, up a row, around a corner and stops. Voila...she pulls a book from the shelf disturbing a cloud of dust. The cloud hangs between the two. The patron’s bewildered gaze turns to elation for a moment, but in the next minute has darkened with self-reproach: “Why didn’t I find it if it was that easy?” His limp and humble posture betrays his frustration, and he wonders if he will be successful next time. And, the librarian’s smile has softened to sympathy because she understands that the library is an intimidating maze to the unpracticed.

“...A book ought to be like a man or a woman, with some individual character in it, though eccentric, yet its own; with some blood in its veins and speculation in its eyes and a way and will of its own.”

—John Mitchell
DEAN SEARCH REOPENED

Provost Fred Dobney announced on May 1, 2001, that the Search for a new Dean of the University Libraries would be reopened. Although four candidates had been brought to the campus for consideration, none seemed to meet the expectations of all the key constituencies. In an e-mail memorandum to WMU administrators, faculty and staff, he stated:

“I am asking that the current search committee persevere in their duties until the search is successfully completed. Dean Elise Jorgens has graciously volunteered to continue to chair the committee. I appreciate her commitment to the successful outcome of this process. We are considering hiring an executive search firm to aid us in the search.

In the meantime, I have prevailed on Dean Joe Reish to continue in his current capacity [as Interim Dean of Libraries] for another year. I am very grateful for his willingness to do so.

Once again, I seek your help in identifying strong candidates for this important position. Thanks to all of you who have shared your views with me.”

PROVIDE THE TEXT OF THE FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARIES SECTION HERE.