Thinking Out Loud: Google - Not

By William R. Brody, President, The Johns Hopkins University

[In December, 2004, President Brody wrote that the “highly successful multi-billion-dollar initial public offering for Google, a company created by a couple of Stanford graduate students” suggested that Johns Hopkins might well emulate their efforts, and, in so doing, assist “users to find and validate information in mammoth files.” Read on and discover that this university president has a special solution to managing information that might well be “faster and more robust” than the latest technology.]

Surely among all our talented students and faculty there must be the seed of an idea that could command an equally high premium [cf. Google] in the commercial world. Rather than wait for something like this to happen spontaneously, I could charge our Office of Technology Licensing to be proactive and see if it could create a company that Hopkins could take public — and increase our endowment by more than a billion dollars. Think of all the wonderful programs and scholarships we could create with such a success.

Then the light went on! Full of Google-envy, I suddenly realized that we already have the ultimate information search engine right here at Johns Hopkins. It’s one that is readily accessible and highly trusted. And it can be used to locate important references from credible sources, without getting a lot of extraneous garbage. Just think of what this Hopkins search engine would command on the NASDAQ market.

Therefore, any day now, two prominent New York investment banks will announce the initial public offering for JHUSL.com, the newest and most powerful search engine yet — better than Google, Yahoo, MSN and AskJeeves by a long shot. Already traders have lined up across the world to purchase shares. Why this excitement? It’s all in the discernment. What is so great about JHUSL.com is that when you perform a search, say on “16th-century weapons of mass destruction,” you will get only one or two dozen references — the ones that are really meaningful and helpful — rather than the 50,700 that came up in the Google search I tried.

What is this great technology, you ask? Well, JHUSL stands for the Johns Hopkins University Sheridan Libraries. You see, our library has the most effective search engines yet invented — librarians who are highly skilled at ferreting out the uniquely useful references that you need. Rather than commercializing the library collections, why not export to the public market the most meaningful core of Hopkins’ intellectual property — the ability to turn raw information into useful knowledge.

I hope by now you realize that any talk of taking our library public is simply to emphasize the point missing in all this Google mania: Massive information overload is placing librarians in an ever more important role as human search engines. They are trained and gifted at ferreting out and vetting the key resource material when you need it. Today’s technology is spectacular — but it can’t always trump a skilled human.

Have you hugged your librarian today?

Johns Hopkins University President William R. Brody writes “Thinking Out Loud” for The Gazette, the University’s weekly newspaper for faculty, staff, and students. His columns appear regularly in the first issue of the month and can be found at www.jhu.edu/~gazette/president. The above reprint is reproduced, with permission, from the December 6, 2004 issue, Vol. 34, No. 14.