Let's Call It the "Ubiquitous Library" Instead …

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Framing an argument with the right terminology is critical to making any case effectively. Sometimes such framing is to clarify understanding, while in others it is rhetorical and persuasive. Politics is a particular example of the latter. Since at least 1984 when Duane Webster first developed and wrote "Organizational Projections for Envisioning Research Library Futures," we have been struggling as much with the terminology as with the work of transforming libraries. "The intent of these organizational projections is to suggest alternative library futures in order to assess competing possibilities for research libraries in the next decade."[1]

The work has been updated several times and posits four basic futures—from a very traditional print-based model (not likely) to an IT-driven information agency model (which appears now to be closer to reality). The paper does not suggest terms or labels for the four futures that describe these library models. Since then the literature has grappled with the transformation we are experiencing, and terms like paradigm shift (to describe the phenomenon) or virtual library (to describe the outcome) have been much used. An exact phrase search for "virtual library" on Google yields 5,070,0000 matches while Yahoo results in a mere 2,800,000. These huge numbers alone suggest that "virtual library" is not a descriptive term of much use or precision for framing what is happening in libraries today although we throw it out rhetorically with great frequency. Digital library and electronic library are no better terms, I might add.

I want to suggest a term we have been using increasingly at the University of Maryland Libraries—the ubiquitous library.[2] An exact phrase search on Google yields a mere 114 instances of the term and in Yahoo a slightly larger 126 matches. This means we can add significant meaning and precision to the term that make it useful for framing. I think, too, that it is a better fit with what is happening and with what we mean than the term virtual library or commonly used alternatives. I claim neither "rights" nor originality in adopting the term. It was used in the pages of this journal an issue ago to describe chat reference.[3] In 1999, the term was used by Michael Keller to describe networked access to significant content, much previously in print.[4] Similarly the Monash

University Information Technology Web site describes an R&D project to develop a "ubiquitous library" client to locate and return items to users from anywhere in the Caulfield Library.[5]

Why is it a better term as opposed to virtual/digital/electronic library? One of the key challenges in describing what libraries are becoming has been the struggle to incorporate the real experience that library *as place* does not seem to be disappearing. There are many reasons. Perhaps the most important is that human beings tend to be "social" and need places to gather for intellectual work involving others on our campuses—hence coffee shops, group study spaces, Information Commons, and—yes—reference desks. Moreover, the staying power of books that seem to have an ergonomic advantage for linear reading and large, one-of-a-kind special collections of historic materials that are unlikely to be digitized in the foreseeable future both require physical space. Nonetheless, the rapid changes in scholarly information—the fuel for the engines of research and teaching in our colleges and universities—are the result of information technology and pervasively affect what we in libraries do.

I want to posit a premise—that the real challenge to the scholarly information exchange (using networked information technology) that underlies much of what academic librarians do is simply to lower costs and optimize access. That appears to me to best characterize how the ubiquitous library will emerge. How the staff and librarians of all libraries meet these basic challenges is critically important to the future. It is amply clear that the academic library as a place will be sustained. At the same time, it will become ubiquitous because of the use of advanced networking and computing to support innovation in how libraries work with and for the students and faculty.

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The use of the term ubiquitous is meant to convey that the resources of libraries will be available to the campus community in a pervasive fashion, basically at their fingertips. Of course, this does not mean that every print volume will be online—a dream of "Memex" that may never happen. The ubiquitous library will have a number of characteristics that relate to the way we will deliver information and the way library faculty and staff will be engaged in the teaching and research mission. Some of the characteristics are:

- An increasing preponderance of scholarly information will be accessible online in full text. Although the shift to networked electronic access is accelerating for journals, books will persist in print for a substantial time until peripherals can mimic their high usability.
- Library IT applications, particularly gateways enabled by URL resolving IT, will present diverse resources that we license and those available for free on the Internet so that the user will experience them as highly integrated, creating order out of the chaotic nature of the Internet. Users will be able to control the presentation of these resources through "my library" capabilities.

- Subject expert librarians will be reachable through networked reference service—and increasingly on a 24/7 basis.
- The role of librarians will continue to change dramatically as they become more directly engaged in classroom teaching and research in collaboration with faculty, particularly with respect to information literacy and building synchronous and asynchronous learning capabilities.
- The notion of libraries as place has demonstrated resilience characterized by continued high demand as reflected in foot traffic. Better access provided by the ubiquitous library creates a strong demand on facilities for use of libraries in person. This will mean, too, that remote access to print materials housed elsewhere must be expedited by speedy delivery and digital access through page turning technology and image transmission.
- Older facilities will need significant attention to keep them up to date with new demands. Some facilities may be replaced or repurposed to non-library uses.
- Large retrospective print collections will still be required by research universities, but libraries will enter into shared-use facilities and will create consortia that eliminate duplication of some low use materials while maintaining "last copy" access through regional and national print repository agreements.
- Equally important, cooperative agencies in which libraries have invested time and money—local and regional consortia, utilities, networks for sharing resources, among others—all will be more vital in this future.
- Digital library programs, currently in their infancy, will become a vital offering that make unique special collections available to a wide audience on campus and will have the added benefit of high impact on the broader K–12 educational community that will serve to strengthen the service role of libraries. Special collections will not be reformatted comprehensively but will become more accessible through effectively marked up online finding aids and significant digital library projects, which capture content. This will make off-site (though not comprehensive) research possible. Some efforts at digitization will be aimed at protecting content currently in the public domain from being exploited for commercial profit.

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- Libraries will take up institutional leadership in advancing access to the scholarly output of campus faculty through projects, digital repositories, and digital archiving. Such projects imply strongly that libraries will emerge as publishers of the new knowledge created on our campuses.

It seems to me that these characteristics are summed up nicely by the term ubiquitous library and that this frames our thinking about how to move into the future and make the argument against the notion that some totally different, as yet unimagined, model will be needed to advance the historic role of libraries as information agencies. It

is critically important for us to have such a common use phrase that has its own particular meaning, is capable of changing over time, and is closely if not exclusively used to describe what libraries may or may not be now but will become. Without such a term we cannot move forward in our conversation about the transformation of libraries within the profession or with those outside of it who have a vital stake in that change.

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Notes

1. Duane E. Webster, "Organizational Projections for Envisioning Research Library Futures" (unpublished paper, Association of Research Libraries, Washington, D.C., 1984).
2. See, for instance, Charles B. Lowry, "The Ubiquitous Library, University of Maryland Libraries in the Next Five Years, New Directions & Continuing Legacy," University of Maryland Libraries (November 7, 2003), http://www.lib.umd.edu/deans/ublibreport.html (accessed April 20, 2005).
3. Neal Kaske, "The Ubiquitous Library is Here," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 5, 2 (April 2005): 291–7.
4. Tia O'Brien, "You Thought Librarians were Dull," *Stanford Magazine*, (September/October, 1999), http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/ (accessed April 20, 2005).
5. "R&D Projects—CoolPlaces," Monash University Information Technology, http://www.infotech.monash.edu.au/coolcampus/rdprojects_coolplaces.html (accessed April 20, 2005).