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# Random Ramblings: Bigger is Not Necessarily Better

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# Random Ramblings — Bigger Is Not Necessarily Better

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My favorite public library ever was the **Clifton Branch** in Cincinnati. It was the summer of 1967, and I had just graduated from college. After a difficult year with a full-time job and a full class load, working 40 hours per week on a summer job seemed liked vacation. With time to catch up on my reading, I made frequent visits to replenish my stock of books. The **Clifton Branch** had only one room with a very limited selection. But this selection was perfect since the branch served mostly the members of the nearby university community. Except in the children's area, I could have selected my books blindfolded and would have been happy to read around 80% of my random selection. I'll now fast forward to a few years later when I was a student in library school at **Columbia University**. The professor proposed to the class that having one unified list of all the serials in the world would eliminate the need for other lists with its universal coverage. I raised my hand to disagree and made the point that smaller libraries could easily make do with a specialized list more tailored to their interests. I argued that a small public or school library would have no interest in scholarly resources or foreign language materials. I also pointed out that the comprehensive list would be too expensive to purchase in print format and would require frequent revisions. (Such a list would make more sense today in a digital format.)

I believe that most users would like to have all needed items together in one physical or digital space with as few as possible extraneous materials to complicate finding what they want. This is why most of us have personal collections. This is also why most faculty like to have departmental libraries. I still remember the faculty member who couldn't understand why the book on ceramics in Vermont was in the art section (LC N) while the book on ceramics in Pennsylvania was in the science library (LC T). She had looked at both books and found them quite similar even if the catalogers had determined that one was over 50% art and the other over 50% technology. She would have much preferred an art departmental library where both books would have been within easy reach rather than in far distant locations from each other in two different libraries.

Many research universities have an undergraduate library for somewhat different reasons. The first is to save undergraduate students the time needed to navigate the complex research library since the simpler undergraduate library contains most materials that they need for their assignments and facilitates effective browsing. The library can also provide services including reference tailored for this student population. A second reason is that undergraduates may not yet have sufficient information seeking skills to understand that a research library includes source materials that represent all positions including those in scholarly dispute. Having the undergraduate

library helps protect the sophomore from citing Klu Klux Klan propaganda in a research paper on race relations in the United States.

The digital era makes vast quantities of materials theoretically available but practically inaccessible. Most information professionals understand this concept in regards to search engines. It is impossible to look at result number 5,023 even if the user were willing to scroll through all the screens to get there. (In one test, **Google** stopped providing results after around 300 entries.) The search algorithms that put popular materials at the top may push scholarly materials to the bottom of the result stack.

I am not sure that information professionals realize that the materials that libraries offer to their users can pose the same problem of too much rather than too little. To return to the pre-digital age, major microform sets often went unused because researchers didn't know what they contained without using print finding aids. Even worse, the researcher doing a general search might not even be aware that the library owned materials in this format. I know of one faculty member who was contemplating a trip to a distant university to consult a rare item before the reference librarian at the other institution told him that the item had been filmed and was available at his home institution in a major microform set. The pre-Internet solution to this problem was a major effort from around 1980-1993, supported in part by grant funding, to catalog major microform sets and to make the records available from **OCLC** for batch loading. The sheer volume of Internet resources and their mutability make this level of bibliographic control impossible.

Search rules for large library databases can complicate access and show that more is not always better. I once needed to find a known item in **OCLC WorldCat** with a one word title that was a common word. Since I didn't have any other bibliographic information, I typed the one word in the title search box. The search algorithm defaulted to a keyword search that retrieved thousands of items in no useful order. The reference librarians that I consulted didn't know how to solve this problem. A call to the **OCLC** help desk didn't provide an answer either. Only a year or so later when I spoke to an expert from **OCLC** did I learn the proper procedures. She emailed me the rather complicated steps, which I most likely have stored somewhere but am not certain that I could ever find again.

I've already written a short article in favor of the **Google Books Project** since having all the books in the world accessible is a laudable goal. I have not, however, in my reading seen any discussion of the potential problems that opening up the floodgates of availability might bring. "The Public Access Service license will allow free, full-text, online viewing of millions of out-of-print books at designated computers at U.S. public libraries." (<http://books.google.com/googlebooks/agreement/faq.html>)

From the **Google** terminal, the patrons of the smallest public library with a few thousand books will face some of the same access problems as those who use the world's largest research libraries.

What problems will these users face? First, patrons will need to learn more effective search strategies. Many will enter search terms that bring up thousands of records. The **Google** search algorithm may bring to the top of the list the books that would most interest them, but then again it may not. Some will be overwhelmed at the number of possibilities when they would have been less frustrated with a more limited number of options. Choosing breakfast cereal in a convenience store is much easier than in a mega supermarket.

Second, the rules for searching and displaying results are not clear. I pretended to be an untrained user and searched for "Mars" to see how **Google Books** would handle this ambiguous search. The **Google** results page told me that I had 173,478 hits but returned only around 190 books before **Google Books** stopped providing results. All the suggested refinements at the bottom of the first page of results referred to the planet. Searching "planet Mars," "God Mars," and "candy Mars" all had fewer hits; but **Google** showed more results before cutting off access. Finally, the French word for the month of March ("mars mois") returned the most available results of any search — around 400 books. If I'm confused as a trained librarian, think what will happen for the average user who wants books on Mars, the Roman God. I believe that readers can guess what happens when a teenager looks in **Google Books** for items on the singer "Sade."

The third issue is the question of reliable and useful information. Small to medium public and academic libraries choose the most useful items for their user community as the **Clinton Branch Library** did for me. These patrons are not interested in esoteric scholarly materials that will become an increasingly important part of **Google Books** as **Google** staff scan the collections of major research libraries. The problem may be even worse if the **Google Books Settlement Agreement** is not approved because full text availability will be more common for out-of-copyright materials that are older and less useful for most patrons of smaller libraries. The 1910 book on child rearing certainly won't help today's parent very much. As I said earlier about undergraduate research, the patron may also access primary sources that large libraries collect for research but that require sophisticated evaluation skills and background knowledge beyond the competencies of some small library users.

To conclude, I am convinced that one reason why libraries and librarians will survive is that they help people find the right needles

*continued on page 00*

## **Random Ramblings**

*from page 00*

in the massive information haystacks on the Internet. Before the arrival of the Internet, the problem was often too little information. Now the problem is too much information. I'm not sure that individual librarians and the profession have adjusted completely to this mind shift. Pathfinders, bibliographies, and reference sessions may retain their importance not to find needed materials but to screen out the garbage in an information universe where bigger is not necessarily better. 🍷