Among Harvard's Libraries: End of the war between print and electronics

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more than 250 issues, the latest ones hard-bound and limited in number, produced at his expense by the Crimson Printing Company. In 1944 he began another hard-bound series, The Bulletin of the Canadian Collection at Harvard University, which ran to six volumes by 1949 and was printed (also at his expense) by the Harvard University Printing Office.

The latter issues of the Chronicle frequently contained inventories of Canadiana given to Harvard and sometimes texts as well; the Bulletin was wholly made up of such things. This is where I became further involved with Dr. Morse, for he was anxious to find someone to provide material for his publications. For his sake (and Bill Jackson’s) I struggled with French notarial handwriting of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and translated the documents involved, and I transcribed and edited correspondence of Thomas Chandler Haliburton, Bliss Carman, and other Canadian worthies. Dr. Morse also drew on the labors of Arthur Rau in London and Dr. Gustave Lanctot in Canada, both of whom were sources of some of the books and papers he collected, but they were far away and I was on tap right in Cambridge.

So I came to know Dr. Morse, and later Mrs. Morse, quite well. My wife and I were living with our two small daughters in a flat in East Arlington, and the Morses invited us all to Sunday dinner—a gala event for us. After dinner Mrs. Morse charmed the little girls by giving them rides on the Inclinator in the staircase, while Dr. Morse and I retired to his library. Would I do him a great favor? He needed a new ribbon in his mammoth L. C. Smith typewriter, and found that his arthritic fingers refused to thread it through its complicated track. I did the job; but no one could install a ribbon in those machines unscathed. When he saw my inky fingers, Dr. Morse opened a door to reveal a small washstand. “Hold out your hands,” he said, and poured most of a large bottle of eau de cologne over them, removing the ink but leaving powerful odors behind. When it was time to leave, amid profuse thanks on both sides, Mrs. Morse led my wife to a large table covered with new books and insisted that she should take home a selection of them. She was a confirmed patron of the Personal Book Shop, the literary depot for many Cambridge ladies, and all the latest titles were arrayed.

Meanwhile Dr. Morse pulled open a drawer to reveal that it was full of new briar pipes and was equally insistent that I pick a few out. Giving pleasure—and presents—to others was deeply ingrained in their character.

Once when I had produced a fairly lengthy contribution for the Bulletin of the Canadian Collection I was escorting Dr. Morse out the back door of the library, and as he left he turned to shake me by the hand. He was twinkling as usual and I sensed that it was not an ordinary handshake; indeed, I could feel that a tiny square object was involved. “Tell It not in Gath!” he said as he climbed into his limousine. After I locked the door, I looked at what had passed from hand to hand. It was a brand new one hundred dollar bill, folded as small as possible. That amounted to at least a week’s salary before taxes, and it bought the coal for the hand-fired furnace of our Arlington flat that winter. I was, and remain, profoundly grateful. And I think that it is high time to tell it in Gath.

END OF THE WAR BETWEEN PRINT AND ELECTRONICS

Kenneth E. Carpenter

A few Fridays ago, on January 31, 1997, a reception was held in the Faculty Club for Karen Carlson Young and Maria Quintana, two people who were moving on to other work after having seen to completion the Harvard Library’s massive project of converting its card catalogs into electronic form. The ramifications of this project will ripple down through the years and create a Harvard Library that will be different than it would have been without retrospective conversion, but everyone can now see the benefits of this use of electronic technology.

When Harvard’s books were recorded on cards, you had to go into a particular building in order to consult the catalog. An obvious connection existed among the card, the book, and the individual library. That tie has been severed, but it has been replaced with a much larger connectedness. No longer are the resources of the Harvard libraries divided into distinct collections. They now form a whole, with only one catalog to search for all of the libraries.

The change from the particular to the whole alters the work of all—librarians as
well as users; and the consequences of this becoming a unified library system will surely have consequences in the future, since the future’s crucial decision-makers will have a different perception of the library from the decision-makers of the past. For now librarians are taking advantage of the retrospective conversion and of electronic communication to provide better service. Now a user in one library can have a book charged out and delivered to another library. This includes books stored at the Harvard Depository. One used to have to travel to the library that owned a book in order to pick it up; now that book can be delivered to the user’s library of choice.

Electronic technology carries with it the necessity of ongoing change as databases grow and technology progresses. Conversion of the card catalogs has expanded the number of records in HOLLIS by several million; but despite this, HOLLIS has continued to function remarkably well. In fact, its speed, in comparison with many other online catalogs, is a notable characteristic. At some point, though, functionality will decrease, as sheer volume overtakes the technology underlying HOLLIS. That is one reason why work is proceeding on developing the criteria for the next generation of HOLLIS, known as HOLLIS II. Another is that it is necessary to change the underlying technology so that HOLLIS II can serve as an entering point to other sources. To develop specifications, four task groups of librarians were set up; these, in addition to covering many technical issues of the new system, are developing specifications for HOLLIS II with respect to the internal processing functions of the library as well as its role as a public catalog. To attend a meeting of one of these task groups is to be impressed with the expertise of Harvard librarians. At the same time one realizes that the expertise is of many different kinds. As one colleague put it, it’s like seeing the pyramids being built, except that in this case the workers are all differentiated.

That so many librarians are cooperatively involved in planning for HOLLIS II is a sign that within the library the war between print and electronics has ended. Another example that there has been a peace treaty is a major cooperative project among Harvard’s curators of manuscripts and archives to make holdings more readily accessible to users. Within the last decade what we librarians call “collection-level records” have been created for archival and manuscript collections. In other words, each record describes a collection and notes the major subjects with which it deals; each record also records those represented in the collection by substantial correspondence—or even by a little, if the person is famous. But behind most collection-level records are more detailed inventories. The task the curators set themselves is to determine the best format for digitizing those inventories; a few are now searchable (see http://hul.harvard.edu_dlfp/). Scholars will obviously be able to be more thorough in their search for the sources and with less time spent. That will free up time for reading and thinking rather than hunting.

The hunt can be fun and productive—up to a point—but the goal of a great library is to minimize the wasted time that the hunt entails. John Thornton Kirkland, president of Harvard from 1810 to 1828, recognized this in 1818. His article of that year on libraries, in the North American Review, perhaps the first American writing advocating research libraries, argued that large libraries were needed to save the scholar’s time:

The time necessary for reading or examining a particular book is often consumed in attempts to discover or obtain it; and frequently, after every effort it cannot be procured. We are obliged to give over our inquiries on subjects, where we would arrive at fulness and exactness in our knowledge, because destitute of the assistance, which the learned, in the same track of study, have furnished,—or to continue them under the disadvantage of ignorance respecting what has been done by others.

So an old dream moves to fulfillment every time libraries become stronger in collections, and electronic technology is bringing that about all the time. An accumulating amount of material is now available through HOLLIS Plus, and the digital texts become ever more a reality, but as an enhancement, not as a replacement for print. As it is put by Dale Flecker, Associate Director for Planning and Systems in the University Library, the task is not to build a digital library; it is to add digital content to the library.
Along with access through the library to a growing number of electronic files—and an increasing number that are not just electronic versions of print—the library is introducing many other innovations aimed at saving time. The project of the manuscript curators is only one example. What is known as the Comment Facility in HOLLIS does provide an opportunity for comment, but, also, one may point out an error in HOLLIS, ask a question of a reference librarian, or request that a book be ordered. There cannot be too much expertise employed in making sure that Harvard gets the right books.

Similar to the work on manuscripts are the tremendous strides being made to make visual materials available electronically. No one ordered that a Photo Curator’s Group be established, just as no one directed the manuscript curators to work on ways of making inventories available. Librarians simply began somewhat more than a decade ago to work together in order to share expertise and to consider ways of providing better access.

Some of the other innovative uses of technology are:

- David Cobb in the Map Collection, through cooperation with libraries outside Harvard, has taken the lead in creating an electronic atlas of the state of Massachusetts, the first state to have such an atlas.

- Thomas Parris, the Environmental Resources Librarian, has developed an environmental Web page that affords coherent access to a wide variety of resources related to the environment.

- John Howard and the Music Library have developed an electronic journal that permits the reader/listener to play music that is discussed in an article.

- The Cataloging Services Department in Widener has developed innovative software that greatly heightens productivity. With the use of this software one operation that used to require a fulltime cataloger a week to handle 3,000 records can now be carried out by a student, who in three hours can handle 10,000 records. This is the second instance in recent years in which the Cataloging Services Department has developed software that eventually became a standard product used throughout libraries nationwide.

Readers might respond to the assertion that there’s no longer a war between print and electronics because the war has been won—by the technologists. That’s not so! The Harvard libraries continue to buy books in large numbers—and to preserve them. In 1997 Nicholson Baker could visit Harvard and not be able to produce a scandalous New Yorker article. The technological changes that are now taking place are not being brought about either by zealots or by short-sighted individuals who feel it is necessary to destroy the old to create the new. Thus, it’s not the technologists who have won but rather people who consciously see themselves in the tradition of American librarians providing the best possible service by whatever means exist at the time.

Harvard’s libraries are being administered by people who value the collections as well as electronic technology—and two new appointments demonstrate this clearly. No part of Harvard has made greater strides in using technology than has the Business School—and Baker Library and its new librarian, Tom Michalak, are developing innovative services based on creative uses of technology. Mr. Michalak, who is a book collector, is, however, eagerly looking for ways to make the historical resources of Baker, including its Kress Library, more widely available.

In the Harvard College Library, similarly, a new librarian has been appointed who clearly values the book collection at the same time that she brings impressive credentials in facilitating the use of technology to obtain access to electronic sources. Nancy Cline is the first Roy E. Larsen Librarian of Harvard College in a long time to be previously unacquainted with Harvard and its libraries, having come to us from the Penn State Libraries. She has had a lot to learn about this complex institution.

One of the things she has learned is that many, many people, of all sorts, have great affection and admiration for this library, and
that it is crucial to their work. Nancy Cline also strongly asserts that what sets Harvard apart—and always will—is the quality of the collections.

Ms. Cline is beginning to act on this belief. She has announced her decision to fill one of the associate librarian positions left vacant by her predecessor. She is going to hire someone capable of handling what is now, for want of a better term, being called “collection programs.” That decision is, of course, more than an action; it is also a symbol that a great library requires many different emphases and interests as well as a variety of skills—and that she, the Librarian, values those other skills.

What we are increasingly witnessing in the library system is respect for the many aspects of the library, and for the library’s users and its staff. One might even say there is a sense of stewardship. This is further evidence that the war between print and electronics, in so far as there was one, is over.

To be sure, there will always be battles to be fought over resources, both financial and human, though librarians have through their devotion been making the issue of human resources seem less pressing than it should perhaps be. Libraries, including the Harvard Library, were once places in which librarians came in at a certain hour in the morning, worked on a specific task all day, and then went home at a fixed time. Increasingly, librarians set goals themselves and invest their own time in meeting them. Never have so many colleagues worked such long hours under intense pressure. So much more has become collaborative, requiring meeting after meeting. And, it’s not really possible to back off and do nothing, at least not when you are a librarian who is keenly conscious of the possibilities that exist.

Librarianship is hard work these days, but it’s productive—and it’s more interesting than ever before. No longer is electronic technology the threat. As one colleague put it, “If the computer hadn’t come along, I would probably have left library work; but I can now say that I love my job.”