



Editorial — Ejournals Today: Forerunners of the Unrealized Potential of the Digital Medium

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Current Issues in Education strives to be at the forefront of the electronic journal movement. In its second year of publication, the journal is inviting scholars to take advantage of the opportunities of this new medium. While seemingly simple, the idea of preserving this exchange of research is complex when considered from the notion of time. In a hundred years from now, will this communication be of any value? Will it be necessary to preserve it for future generations? E-journals have made it possible to create a virtual space where scholars of diverse backgrounds can engage in a dialogue that transcends the limits of physical space. Nevertheless, the preservation of scholarly works over time is a timeless challenge faced from the creation of early libraries to the digital libraries of today.

The preservation of human communication beyond the evanescent sound of human voice and memory very likely encouraged the development of writing. Writing in turn produced early "books" consisting of stone, clay tablets, papyrus or parchment. Careful preservation of these early writings was the genesis of the library. The famous library of classical antiquity—the library at Alexandria, founded in the early third century B.C.—was part of the Mouseion, the greatest research center of its day. Around the museum a great university grew, attracting renowned scholars including Euclid, the mathematician; Aristarchus of Samothrace, the collator of Homer's epic poems; and Herophilus, the anatomist who performed scientific dissection of human bodies. The library, however, was gradually destroyed beginning with Julius Caesar's invasion of Alexandria (Edwards, 1969; Johnson, 1976). Today, with support from the United Nations and other international agencies, the Egyptian government plans to build a new library on or near the site of the original (Swerdlow, 1999).

The creation and destruction of libraries were not limited to Egypt. In Florence, the famous 15th century Medici collection of art, manuscripts, and books was

destroyed at the time of the conquest of the city by the French King Charles VIII. Savonarola, a friar of the Dominican order, helped overthrow the Medicis and a mob sacked their palace (Hibbert, 1975).

In their heyday, the libraries of Alexandria, the Medici palace, and other venues provided a place for scholars of diverse backgrounds to meet and exchange ideas (Brinton, 1925; Canfora, 1989). Since then, the function of public and private libraries evolved into their primary modern use of housing collections. Today the sense of permanence traditionally associated with libraries has never seemed more threatened: the degeneration of paper over time and the destruction of libraries and museums through natural calamities or opposing political and religious forces attest to this. While the destruction of individual libraries is possible, the idea of a library once established has served an important communicative role throughout space and time.

The advent of the Internet and electronic media has begun to exert a drastic change in the role of libraries as archives of print-on-paper. Now, at the seam of the millennia, we are envisioning the use of the Internet via electronic journals and digital libraries as respectable, reliable places for scholarly exchange and archives. Yet, the ease with which an e-journal can be destroyed—a few keystrokes—makes the medium tenuous. The longevity of magnetic or digital media is approximately fifteen years at best; it can be argued that digital archives are perhaps more ephemeral than print-on-paper. However, supported by a global network of librarians, multiple digital archives of e-journals can be created worldwide providing better and more equitable access to the collected wisdom of scholars. The construction of such a network of digital archives, now in its pre-infancy, is quite probable in the years to come.

The Internet makes e-journals an opportune global mode of communication for scholarly exchange in which national and international borders are erased. The appeal of e-journals is enhanced by the power of the electronic

medium to open up possibilities hitherto impossible. The complex, dynamic, multidimensional world can be represented in rich visual experiences using this medium. Moreover, a digital library does not have to exist in a particular point in space, such as Alexandria. Through digital archives, the libraries of classical antiquity and the great modern libraries of today can exist on one's desktop.

The interactivity afforded by electronic media will help change the nature of scholarly communication. For instance, effective use of video and audio clips with text will alter the nature of the scholarly reports. The ability to make large data sets available at relatively low cost allows other scholars to conduct further analyses on the data. Opportunities like these challenge scholars to prepare research reports that are not mere imitations of print-on-paper reports in electronic format.

One important challenge of editing an on-line scholarly journal is facilitating this appropriate use of technology. What innovative things can be done with new technology? Are we, in fact, making effective use of the medium? The unique capabilities of electronic reporting—such as providing hyperlinks, presenting a forum for discussion, increased interactivity, use of video, audio, and data sets—need to be considered. Yet the challenge of preserving

electronic scholarly communication for future generations exists. Will the future present a network of digital archives of e-communication? There is hope that new applications will arise as the world of technology advances rapidly. We invite you to continue the dialogue by responding with your ideas and by submitting to *Current Issues in Education*.

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