Think Globally, Act Locally: Electronic Resources and Collection Development

Abstract

Despite numerous cooperative collection development endeavors, the building of library collections has remained a highly individual and local practice. The physicality of bound volumes has posed a distinct limitation on our ability to share collections, although libraries have made huge strides in recent years. Electronic resources and the ability to digitize our physical holdings offer the potential to redirect our investments in collection building to the creation of a global network that would serve an international community of scholars. By facilitating the creation of disciplinary-based portals to knowledge resources, librarians can channel their efforts to the benefit of many without sacrificing the quality of local relationships. To accomplish this, libraries need to develop collectively built and managed web sites that supplant the need for autonomous, selector-created “webbiographies” and that greatly expand the number of sources that can be identified and described. Selectors, freed of the individual responsibility to shoulder the increasingly heavy, and ultimately unsustainable load of tracking a proliferation of resources in a variety of formats and states of publication, can turn their attention to the capture of more elusive, but important, material; to more detailed evaluation of the use of information resources; toward improvements in the user interface of portals; or toward the transformation of scholarly communication, with the discipline-based portal serving as a magnet for attracting new forms of scholarly thought and research.

“My library is down,” taunted the computer scientist, speaking to the librarian of his main reference source, Google. This faculty member, an internationally known digital library specialist, claims that he and many of his colleagues meet 80% of their information needs through the open Internet. He spends perhaps 50% of the semester off campus consulting, attending meetings, and at his second home, so the ability to access material online is a critical requirement. Like many scientists and engineers, he foresees a declining role for the library over the coming years, as more and more materials is available online in an unmediated form. He eyes the space occupied by book stacks covetously, and not altogether teasingly suggests that his research group might move in to a floor that will become vacant as printed materials become obsolete.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a noted historian drafting a new book, a study of Sojourner Truth, enters the library when it opens at eight A.M. and departs late at night, moving between her fourth floor study and the Rare and Manuscript Collection, where she consults primary sources and a large collection of anti-slavery pamphlets from the early to mid-nineteenth century. She composes her manuscript on a laptop and makes extensive use of electronic full-text resources, but her bibliography will contain references predominantly to printed materials or handwritten archives. Like many of her humanist colleagues, she possesses considerably higher expectations for the continued value of the library over the coming years. Her fervent wish is for longer opening hours, as well as increased online access to scholarly resources.
Whether an information scientist or a humanist, academicians mirror our culture at large in relation to certain characteristics. They want the convenience of any time, any place service that is increasingly ubiquitous in banking, purchasing, and other customer-oriented operations. In their libraries, they want 24-hour virtual and physical access. They want one-stop shopping and convenience. Increasingly pressed for time, squeezed by mounting professional demands and the shared family responsibilities of dual career couples, they seek efficiencies that enable them to manage their own information needs and enhance their productivity. The LibQual survey conducted through the initiative of the Association of Research Libraries reveals a strong emphasis placed on self-reliance by library users. Libraries have developed an array of innovative services to enable readers to locate and manipulate information on their own. North Carolina State Libraries’ MyLibrary, for example, enables the user to create her own gateway to information resources. Other aids to user empowerment are self-help tutorials that explain how to access library resources, electronic reserves, or well-designed web pages that facilitate intuitive retrieval. Today’s scholar and student will often function in a multidisciplinary, multilingual, and cross-institutional environment. For example, Cornell University, Rockefeller University, and the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center have a tri-lateral agreement in which the three health sciences campuses (including the New York City-based Weill Cornell Medical College) share resources. Cornell’s Ithaca campus offers depth in computer science and chemistry that the more narrowly focused health science institutions cannot, and reciprocally, a Cornell graduate student in chemistry can move to one of the New York City partners for more specialized biochemistry training. In such a framework the definition of what is “local” shifts to a more expansive concept than had been possible in an earlier era, the pre-Internet age. The user frequently needs information beyond the boundaries of the host institution’s collection. Indeed, where once there were libraries which could supply almost all faculty requests on site, it is inconceivable today that any one organization could aspire to such an aim.

As a consequence of the changing information environment and changing patterns of scholarship and learning, academic users are developing new information behaviors that are important for libraries to monitor and analyze. JSTOR, an online resource providing access to retrospective periodical literature for readers and a collection management tool for libraries, conducted a survey of faculty views on electronic resources and libraries in 2000. Faculty as a whole considered the Internet or World Wide Web as slightly more important for their research than the library catalog, although this was not (yet) the case for humanists. They perceived a declining dependence on libraries as a resource, anticipating a 10% drop over the next five years in those who consider the library “very important.”

Another instrument providing insight into the attitudes and expectations of library users is LibQual. Organized by the Association of Research Libraries in conjunction with Texas A&M University Library, this survey of 43 college and research libraries conducted in 2001 examined the minimum, perceived and desired expectations for libraries by library

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1 Kevin M. Guthrie, “What Do Faculty Think of Electronic Resources,” ALA Annual Conference Participants’ Meeting, 17 June 2001. Available at http://www.jstor.org/about/faculty_survey.ppt
users. At Cornell University the areas with the greatest gaps between the desired and perceived service lay in categories such as “convenient business hours,” “enabling me to find information myself 24 hours a day,” “full-text delivered electronically to individual users,” “Complete runs of journals,” “a haven for quiet and solitude,” and “a library website enabling me to locate information on my own.” Although the Cornell University Library consistently ranks highly in evaluations of services for users, it, and other academic libraries, can still improve to live up to community ideals.

Other study results indicate that users find libraries confusing to use, and that they sometimes prefer the currency and quantity of web resources on the open Internet to the carefully selected library resources. Analysis of student papers in one class revealed that student use of scholarly materials declined as their use of web resources increased.\(^2\)

As the information, educational, and cultural landscape has changed, so have libraries. In the past two decades the information revolution has swept the world, resulting in a vast increase in publications in all formats. Printed works are estimated at almost one million titles annually, and Internet websites have proliferated to a staggering 9 million in 2001.\(^3\) Libraries have promoted access to materials over ownership as acquisition of items became economically and physically unsustainable. More and more collection development has become “just in time” rather than ‘just in case.” As libraries lacked sufficient financial means to purchase materials, they turned to consortia to negotiate economical licensing of electronic resources and to facilitate and promote resource sharing. Aware that users had difficulty navigating the Internet and identifying relevant and high quality material, bibliographers and reference librarians began to create web pages of recommended sites and gateways to both free and proprietary resources. Often these web sites and online subject guides have been the product of a single, highly motivated individual. Although there are many examples of collaborative initiatives, there are many more examples of locally produced sites tailored to campus needs. This approach demonstrates the fertility and originality of their progenitors, but it can produce a fragmented and redundant collection of resources. Pitschmann, in his 2001 work entitled Building Sustainable Collections of Free Third-Party Web Resources, estimates that subject pages and guides on library sites exhibit overlap of 75% or higher from library to library.\(^4\) For the scholar for whom local boundaries diminish in importance as she undertakes multidisciplinary, multi-institutional research, these shortcut sites are a welcome, but inadequate tool. From the library administrator’s perspective, these web pages are an expensive investment of time to produce and costly to maintain. There is often little tracking or assessment of their use or value, and they may lack sophisticated design or usability planning. Depending on the technical proficiency of the subject specialist and the priority he gives to facilitated access to electronic materials, some domains may not even have the support of a local web page of resources. The result is


\(^3\) http://www.oclc.org/oclc/press/20011004a.shtml

often a spotty, uncoordinated montage of resources that lack the traditional organizational rigor of the library catalog or the exuberant diversity returned through a search engine such as Google.

Libraries today are undergoing significant transformation in their organization and in their host culture, but there are strong forces preserving a propensity to think locally. The majority of practitioners entered the workforce when the model of ownership was dominant. As they have an important constituency in faculty who share many of the same predispositions, it is difficult to change past practices. Attitudes and expectations shaped in one environment affect willingness to adopt new models. Cooperative collection development, for example, is an idea which has endured much testing over the past fifty years. Many bibliographers, responding to the long-standing preference of library users to have material available for onsite browsing, have a somewhat jaundiced view of cooperative collection building, especially when conducted at the national or international level.

An early and much cited example of cooperative collection development is the Farmington Plan, initiated in 1948 in the post World War II period of international engagement. American research libraries volunteered to collect publications from designated countries or regions, with the objective of building comprehensive, nationally distributed collections that would be expeditiously cataloged and available to scholars through interlibrary loan. The Farmington Plan never achieved its full promise, as the voluntary arrangement and the acquisition of materials that were not always a local priority undercut its effectiveness. With the added burden of manual, original cataloging and the barrier of physical distribution through interlibrary loan, the Farmington Plan was abandoned in the 1960’s.⁵

In the mid-1970’s, the Research Libraries Group (RLG) came into existence with the goals of shared cataloging, shared collection development, shared resources, and shared preservation. A major tool for collection analysis was the conspectus, which was designed to assist libraries in balancing their collecting responsibilities on a national scale. Despite the value of the conspectus in assessing collection strengths and in creating a framework for cooperative collection development, true distribution of collecting among RLG libraries did not occur at the ideal level envisioned by its members. Again, libraries were loath to forego purchasing titles for local use in order to collect more deeply in a subject or area for the national good. By the 1990’s RLG had shifted its emphasis to collection access, rather than coordinated collection development, and no longer maintained the conspectus. The overhead of coordination along with the precedence of local interests over the common good overwhelmed the original intentions.⁶ More recently the Association of Research Libraries, with the encouragement of the Association of American Universities and support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, has developed the Global Resources Program. This

A voluntary initiative has embraced a variety of different approaches aimed at expanding access to foreign publications. It includes a cooperatively developed table of contents database, coordinate collection development with commitments to collect publications from specific countries at a national level, and creative resource sharing agreements. The Global Resources Program has continued to expand and to increase its utility for participants, but it has not yet had a sweeping transformation of research libraries’ collecting behavior. Bibliographers still struggle to acquire as much material as possible for local ownership. The policies and practices for physical acquisition often carry over into the thinking about access to digital materials. Local considerations hold the greatest weight, and cooperation occurs on the margins of behavior.

Branin, Groen, and Thorin, writing on the changing nature of collection management in research libraries, posit that information technology will create a new model of scholarly communication, and that the effect of the digital revolution will be to foster a “shift from a decentralized system of duplicate print collections to one of fewer central repositories.” They describe the contribution of economic constraints and digital information systems to the reshaping of collection management, as publication inflation (in number and in cost) and competing endeavors such as the rise of big science created enormous challenges for traditional operations. They characterize the emergence of Web resources as an untamed phenomenon. Significant new categories of material, perhaps a manifestation of gray literature, but with far more impact than their print cousins because of the ease with which any researcher connected to the Internet can find them, present a wide-open field for collection management. The authors observe that over 20 years ago Charles Osburn envisioned collection development as having two fundamental stages, the first, in which the local constituency would be served, and the second, which would integrate local efforts into a cohesive national resource sharing system. In the print world, librarians achieved only an imperfect movement toward the second stage, hindered by physical barriers where geography played a significant part in defining focus. Osburn in turn cites the visions of library leaders William Warner Bishop and Verner Clapp, who both predicted a new mode for libraries that would transcend local, physical limitations. Bishop, in 1940, anticipated that in 30 years, all material in the U.S. would be within reach in a reasonable amount of time, and Clapp in 1964 foresaw the need for radical restructuring of library operations to cope with the rising growth in publication. Electronic resources and the ready ability to transform analog materials into digital documents create powerful opportunities for librarians to achieve “the ultimate goal: a freely accessible, integrated, and comprehensive record of serious scholarship and knowledge.”

The primary organizing elements for access to resources of interest to academicians have, until the last decade, been the library catalog and subject indexes. With the growth of the

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7 http://www.arl.org/newsletter/206/grp.html
10 Ibid, p.92-93.
web and the popularity of search engines many students and scholars have rejected the standard tools in favor of Google, Yahoo, and other Internet services. The New York Times reported on this behavioral shift in August 2000, noting that: “Even though libraries are organized and easily navigated, students prefer diving into the chaotic whirl of the Web to find information.’” Although librarians continue to invest heavily in the maintenance of their catalogs, they have recognized that they need to find new methods of providing access to a range of materials that may never reside within their walls. Pitschman addressed the issue of non-traditional content in his monograph Building Sustainable Collections of Free Third-Party Web Resources, in which he outlines criteria for "selection" of materials falling into this category and describes the vulnerabilities of both the digital documents themselves and the systems for making them available.

Applying the fundamental responsibilities of the librarian to acquire, organize, provide access to and preserve literature of scholarly value to digital resources, Pitschmann proceeds from the premise that libraries need to include free third-party sites in their discovery tools such as library catalogs or authorized web sites in order to assist scholars in locating quality materials amidst the chaff of the Internet. By employing standard terminology or description to this information, librarians further facilitate retrieval. Specific selection criteria and a collection scope note should govern the choice of materials. Among the criteria for selection are validity, accuracy, authority, uniqueness, completeness, coverage, currency, and audience. Other factors may include the design of the site, language, and site and system integrity. Pitschmann also explores the organizational and financial aspects of building and maintaining sites. When creating large, comprehensive web sites with many resources, librarians often establish advisory boards to assist them in identifying and vetting materials. Links require consistent monitoring. There is often a need for close collaboration among subject specialists, catalogers, technical staff, and reference librarians in order to produce a reliable resource of substance and utility. Although an individual can build a subject gateway along, it is increasingly a demanding task, as the volume of resources increases at a rate that exceeds the capability of most people. Most libraries now have pages featuring collections of electronic resources—guides, pathfinders, portals, and gateways—generated with significant investment on the part of many staff. Pitschmann observes the duplication of effort, with perhaps 75% of the resources being redundant from site to site.13

A review of a selection of subject gateways reveals some of the challenges facing librarians and scholars. In the area of German Studies, for example, there is a voluntary collaborative effort on the part of members of the Association of College and Research Libraries Western European Studies Section to identify digital resources of value. A bibliographer at Dartmouth College coordinates a web site with the assistance of five other experts who monitor resources in particular sub domains and contribute the URL’s of resources on a regular basis. This is a rich site with many links and good organization, although it does not post its selection criteria or have a scope note. There is no historical information about the existence of the resource, which currently receives

13 Pitschmann, Building Sustainable Collections, 35.
computer support from Dartmouth. Sampling the web sites of the home institutions of the contributing members, the searcher learns that the WESS German Studies web site is incorporated in local pages, although one may need to scroll through dozens of items to locate it. At one institution with an outstanding German program, WESS site appears on a second page under the heading Social Sciences & Electronic Texts. The alphabetical listing that begins Avalon Project, Bobst Library at NYU, Bundesesinstitut… etc. makes it relatively easy to find the resource. At another prominent university, there is a German Literature Research Guide which provides access to a variety of print and non-print materials. The first item under the heading “Selected Internet Sources in General German Studies” is the German Studies Web.

At yet another premier institution with an active German bibliographer, there is no online guide to German Studies materials maintained by the library. Rather, it is the German Department itself which has a web site with hundreds of resources. A quick sampling of this colorful site reveals no discernable organization except for rudimentary categories and several broken links. Clicking on the heading “Electronic Resources,” one finds “Our German and Cultural resources are also worth your time.” The first link on the resulting page is for the Uni Karlsruhe Virtual Library, which has a list, again in no apparent order, of resources. The second one listed, German Studies at the University of Arizona, seems like a potential route to the WESS German Studies home page, but following this link does not reveal it among the sources listed on this departmental web site. Meanwhile, returning to Google, the “library” of our computer scientist, and searching German Studies, the result is that the WESS site appears as the second listing. (The first is a site maintained by a faculty member at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. It indicates it was last updated in May 2001, or seven months before the time of this search.) One concludes, from this brief excursion into the world of German Studies resources, that the environment is somewhat chaotic. Although there is effort to coordinate the identification of resources and to facilitate access for scholars, the results are mixed. Awareness of the German Studies Web appears limited in many other sites which purport to provide access to German studies. There is considerable overlap, but also surprising disparity in these sites. In many sites, the organization seems haphazard or opportunistic. Maintenance of the site is not always current. Libraries and academic departments are both engaging in duplicate effort, with no clear division of roles or evident collaboration.

In an attempt to impose greater order on the vast resources of the Web and to provide the professional organizational expertise of librarians, the United Kingdom’s Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) has created a service RDN (Resource Discovery Network) which aims to bring “the best of the Web” to scholars and students. According to its promotional literature, “The big difference between the RDN and search engines like Google and Altavista is that the web sites are selected for you by one of our network of subject specialists. You can be certain that the sites you find will be useful, relevant to UK education, up-to-date and reliable.”  


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(German politics and government appears in the Social Science Information Gateway). It is possible to cross search the hubs to locate information for interdisciplinary work. Selected contributors to the catalog of Internet resources include the University of York’s Archaeology Data Service, the University of London’s Institute of Historical Research, the University of London Library, the Oxford Text Archive, and the University of Oxford. The web site exposes its collection development policy, defines its audience, and indicates its willingness to collaborate with other existing web sites. It aims to achieve “critical mass” through accepting contributions from organizations and individuals and from metadata harvesting. Contributions are governed by selection guidelines that include relevance for the audience, the authority of the site, the originality of the content, and the currency and expected persistence of the site. Metadata is both descriptive and evaluative. The managers of the site operate a link-checking program semiannually and declare the right to remove contributions that no longer meet selection criteria.

A quick check of the site demonstrates that the WESS German Studies Web is not among the resources cited. Using the online submission form, the author proposes the URL, adds a brief description copied from the German Studies Web, and adds the resource for consideration by an evaluation committee and, if accepted, cataloging. If accepted, it will appear within two weeks and the submission will be credited to the author. Approximately thirty records are added per week to Humbul. The site offers several exemplary features, including a well-defined selection policy, standard description, and ease of submission and use. It is sensitive to people with disabilities in its design and to the limitations of technical platforms. However, at this point it has not yet implemented its metadata harvesting capability, and its growth is slow. Humbul has fewer than 2500 “live” records as of February 2002, and the RDN advertises 30,000. The ability to scale to the expectations of its user community has not yet been proven.

A very different subject-based resource, one aimed at surmounting the obstacle of scale, is currently under development under the auspices of the National Science Foundation. The National Science Digital Library is a prototypical national library for science, mathematics, and engineering education. It envisions providing access to information through a combination of selection by subject experts, public submissions, metadata harvesting, and the use of web crawlers. One of its basic goals is to solve the scalability problem through the use of automated tools. It supports the Open Archives Initiative and Dublin Core Metadata. The NSDL developers believe it is essential to move away from the labor-intensive model of providing access inherent in today’s library operations and to use metadata harvesting and customized interfaces in order to provide information consumers with sufficient high quality Internet resources.

Taking a different path, but also striving to deliver quantity with quality results are the advocates of the Scholars Portal. Although this initiative aims broadly at resources of value to higher education, it is of interest because of its proposal to apply the capability of the search engine to mine Internet resources and because it couples this automated retrieval feature with other traditional library services, such as document delivery. Several members of the Association of Research Libraries have invested in the search for
a system that can be adapted to specified requirements, with the goal of piloting the Scholars Portal over the next two years. Its goal is to deliver high quality content, including a mixture of proprietary and free resources, access to library digital projects, plus bibliographic information already abundant in libraries such as catalogs and finding aids. Using cross-domain searching, aided by the deployment of common standards that foster interoperability.  

The ARL Scholars Portal initiative goes far beyond the creation of collaborative, subject-based web sites, but its success will give a boost to the development of such sites, since it will expose the redundancy from library to library and provide a framework for scholars to regard all connected resources as an integrated library.

This small sample of library-driven activities to link students and researchers with resources cannot reflect the diversity of options available, but it does illustrate some common objectives and some hurdles which must be surmounted to create a tool for improved information service. In the information environment of twenty-first century, academics require fast, flexible access to global resources. They are increasingly likely to seek and expect information from a variety of sources, and they may launch their initial source on the Internet, rather than beginning with the local catalog, as was historically their starting point. They are more likely to identify with their discipline than with their department or their university. Although they have delighted in the abundance of the Web, the serendipitous discovery of unique items, the granularity of full text, the plasticity of multimedia, their empowerment to search millions of pages in seconds, and the democratic aspect of the Internet, they are beginning to understand its deficiencies and their vulnerabilities as well. As they encounter retrieval sets of hundreds of thousands of items, sift through those of dubious authenticity, and sometimes fail to pull up the one resource they know does exist, they may be more open to a tool which enhances their productivity.

At the same time, librarians are painfully aware that search engines and catalogs bring different results. The need to evaluate millions of sources has caused librarians to realize the futility of attempting to chase down resources individually, or even at the institutional level. In the 1970's the formation of the Ohio College Library Center, later OCLC, enabled universities and colleges to transform their cataloging operations through the use of copy and shared cataloging. The emergence of electronic resources, both proprietary and non-proprietary, has led to the adoption of a number of make-shift techniques that attempt to provide access to these items. Some of the problems encountered have been the ephemeral nature of web resources, the reluctance, because of the cost of cataloging and because of the sense that items entered into the catalog should describe permanent acquisitions, to add electronic resources to the traditional catalog, and

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the inability of bibliographers to scan the glut of literature of the Internet, particularly as they continued to cope with a rising number of titles appearing in print and other formats. Still primarily rooted in the model of local collections, selected for a local clientele, they hesitated to import wholesale resources identified by others. Cooperation and true collaboration, as the Farmington Plan or the RLG Conspectus and its coordinated plan for collection development have shown, can take fearsome investment and can still fail.

Nonetheless, the dominant trend today is one of merger and unification on an international scale. Increasingly, developments and advances are achieved through teamwork, rather than by a solitary genius. Effective and economical solutions call for shared intellectual capital and a common system. In order to meet the needs of scholars and researchers, librarians must work together to produce an integrated suite of services for information discovery. Among the services they must develop are regional depositories of physical items, shared collection building expertise, collaboratively created web-based tools for locating information of value to academics, subject-based digital repositories, cooperative reference based on centers of disciplinary excellence, and flexible delivery options. Naturally, preservation responsibilities align with disciplinary agreements.

Focusing on the subject gateway or portal, we can highlight some of the elements that would be required for a successful implementation. There should be an organizational cohesiveness to the effort, with participants recognizing a common bond. They might belong to a particular association, such as WESS, be part of a consortium, such as Committee on Institutional Cooperation, be members of the Center for Research Libraries, the Association of Research Libraries, or the Digital Library Federation. The presence of a coordinating center would increase communication and compliance, which ought to be structured and not based on volunteer labor. There should be a knowledge management policy, with a scope statement and criteria for inclusion. An editorial board, drawn from participants and scholarly societies should establish the policy and review general terms of inclusion. Standards for description should be set at a low enough threshold to permit submission from multiple levels of contributors. Metadata harvesting will be an essential component, because even a coordinated network of selectors and indexers will be insufficient to provide timely access to the growing body of world literature. Human intelligence will review and evaluate the gathered content, adding that critical dimension to increase the tightness of organization and relevance. In the democratic spirit of the web, there will be an opportunity for user feedback on the resources, such as the Internet Scout Portal Toolkit proposes, a concept popularized on Amazon.com and eBay. This feedback, coupled with other evaluation tools, could be used to float superior resources to the top. Multilingual interfaces would be developed and expanded as the project grows legs. Another feature would be the ability for someone to subscribe to receive updates of additions to the portal or to customize it to suit their individual requirements. An intermediate level between the general portal and the personalized portal would be the local library version, which might overlay particular local information such as the names of subject experts or onsite events. Branding the resource will be important, since that will convey authority and credibility, which will in turn increase its use. To ensure the broadest possible acceptance, those responsible for
the subject-based portal would publicize it broadly. This would also reduce the redundant
efforts currently rife in academic departments that have undertaken to describe web
resources without having this as their core mission. The site would incorporate traffic
monitors and assessment tools to determine the extent and value of its use and impact and
to refine its structure for increased worth.

A Utopian vision? Perhaps. The economic model for such a collaborative effort must be
clarified. Does the subject-based portal operate through the circle of gifts, in which
different institutions take the lead in certain disciplines, achieving an unforced load-
leveling? Do we follow the net lender, net borrower model and establish compensation
for net contributors and charges for users, perhaps for users outside a certain community?
Is the resource collaboratively funded for the public good, either on a single or tiered
dues level? Will governments subsidize it? Will the PayPal mode work, or the Public
Broadcasting Pledge approach? Most collaborative efforts begin with seed money from
external sources and a set of committed believers who contribute to establish the proof of
concept. Around the world, there are a variety of initiatives developing that will explore
different models. At present, the Internet is still in its infancy, and we cannot predict
what a mature enterprise will look like.

Currently a group of libraries belonging to an informal group know as Ivies+ (The Ivy
League institutions plus Stanford, Chicago, and MIT) are entertaining a proposal put
forth by Michael Keller, University Librarian at Stanford, to produce collaboratively
“web-based synthetic guides to disciplinary literature.” The goal would be to create
online tools in the social sciences and humanities to reduce duplication of effort, produce
improved pathfinders that would be more comprehensive, current, and detailed, and to
inject a degree of standardization across domains that would facilitate interdisciplinary
scholarship. Keller envisions locally mounted pages that would plug into the local
environment and be constantly and cooperatively updated.

It is only a matter of time before such ideas precipitate and produce aggregated resources
from distributed contributors. Initially, the creation of common discipline-based
resources will require yielding of some individuality and local flavor. For those who
believe they alone can be the arbiter of quality, they will believe that excellence will
suffer. But, electronic resources are ubiquitous, and our scholars show an ecumenical
taste for them. A powerful driver of change is economic necessity. Individuals and
single institutions cannot adequately cover the universe of knowledge with existing
resources. They must band together with others of shared purpose to divide up the
workload, reduce costs, and create more useful services for their ever-expanding and
overlapping constituencies. The technology which fosters the generation of electronic
resources and the infrastructure which enables their dissemination is another critical
factor in changing the culture of libraries and the pattern of access and use of information
resources. Although we cannot underestimate the complexity of achieving collaboration,
the limitations of precursor initiatives can be overcome the new reality of global
connection through the web. Librarians must exercise leadership in expanding
consistent, high quality information service through the development of collaboratively
designed and built disciplinary based portals.