

## *Don't write the library's obit yet<sup>@</sup>*

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**Abstract:** The article is an extension of “the task of digital information management”( *DH Education*, July 19, 2007) and discusses the issues of e-journals, consortia approach to resource sharing, problem of access to excess, the loss of value addition of libraries, content dilution, disinter-mediation and identity crisis of librarianship in the new digital environment.

**Keywords:** E-journals, consortia approach, resource sharing, gray content, disinter-mediation, information overload

As part of ‘*the task of digital information management*’ ( *DH Education*, July 19, 2007) digital decay is contrasted with paper decay, proliferation of gray content on the Web and how the trio factors (accessibility, ease of use and perceived utility) accelerate use of digital information are discussed. While the unpublished and the semi-published (gray) are receiving high attention in the digital world, the real e-publishing is happening at a lower pace than expected. E-publishing models look like extension of traditional book publishing models as only price models of print replacements are talked about.

### **E-journals and p-journals**

Growth of e-journals is neither rapid nor significant as was initially expected. Today’s e-journals are not real e-journals. Only paper replacements of some journals of Societies and hybrid e-journals of commercial publishers (both require least social and cultural changes) are flourishing without full ‘electronicity’ journals ( see Hovov and Gray for an excellent review article on the topic in the latest ‘*Advances in Computers*’, volume 67, 2006). In case of e-journals, without backward compatibility, institutions and libraries are at the mercy of continually changing digital world. It has been well established that a typical researcher (scientist) uses 5 to 15 journals. But the consortia deals of commercial publishers and their greedy agents are boasting that they provide access to thousands of journals, usually 10 to 20 times more than the number of journals subscribed by an institution or a library. Like information on the Internet, this makes useful to access ratio of journals (and information) drastically low. Hence the purpose of optimising the use of resources faces a set back. As far as institutions and libraries are concerned, digital access management consisting of handling license agreement, price negotiation, offer evaluation, usage assessment, etc. became new exercises wherein publishers and their agents decide and dictate terms. Alongside risk tolerance for litigation is also necessary. Incidentally, e-books are yet to

take off. Digital Rights Management (DRM) is the main issue. Having not been able to resolve the copyright issue, more and more gray literature like theses and dissertations and copyright-free old books are getting digitized. Yet we do not have confidence to discard old dilapidated printed material after digitizing, but try to make a copies to continue preserve and / or use.

### **Access to excess has serious implications/ problems**

Yes, the technology (ICT) has enabled instant access to enormous information anywhere anytime. One serious consequence of this “access to excess” problem is the reversal of the traditional sequence of selection and then accessing information in the new digital world. That is traditionally libraries were first selecting the material and then allowing their users to access them. Now the users have to access and retrieve a large chunk of material and then start sifting the mass for selecting the required information from thousands and at times, millions of hits. In other words, the filtering responsibility got shifted to users and the value addition of libraries is lost. Take the latest example of video sharing on the Internet. It has been reported that 90% of clips viewed on YouTube remain obscure and are shared among a few friends. In addition, top search engines have been challenged in courts for altering the rankings of hits. Unfortunately, common users are not aware of and / or bothered about the ranking procedures followed by the search engines and also the inbuilt biases of the search engines.

### **Content dilution with increase in speed of communication**

Information is activated by effective and efficient communication. That is information and knowledge become meaningful with their communication and use. We have witnessed a communication revolution in the recent past with tremendous increase in speed as well as frequency of use. But we have forgotten that the density (or value) of information communicated is inversely proportional to the speed of communication. Our recent modes of communication like mobile phones and e-mails are too fast, but the contents passing through them are proportionately diluted.

### **Sharing and collaboration are more dependent on people than technology**

ICT has also greatly facilitated information sharing and collaborative working. Cost of sharing and distribution of information is low and negligible in digital world. But sharing is a complex human process subjected to psychology of individual and his professional and cultural predisposition. Despite certain drawbacks, problems and adverse predictions, a close runner-up position accorded to Wikipedia by ‘*Nature*’ in a comparative study with traditionally strong Encyclopedia Britannica is a triumph for collaboration and open access movement. The team

behind it deserves more appreciation than Wiki software. According to a recent survey, one important barrier in sharing corporate information is lack of common Information Retrieval (IR) tool (73%). Extensive sharing of information and collaboration are welcome. Are hither to popular 'technological gatekeepers', 'communication stars' and 'invisible colleges' losing ground or is it yet another kind of disintermediation? Of course, beyond ICT and libraries social sharing is negligible except car pooling. It is well known that the forces and objectives behind resource sharing among libraries and forming consortia include: 1. Existence of unutilised spare capacity of resource, 2. Optimum utilisation of resource, 3. Budgetary crunch, and 4. Avoiding duplication. It is difficult to say that these objective are much better achieved in the new digital environment, particularly in view of content boom, enormous duplication and unutilized resources as well as huge expenditure indirectly incurred by centralized agencies towards consortia subscriptions.

As said earlier, ICT has enabled information sharing and collaborative working. But the collaborative evaluation of content in the Internet has become a marketing tool. Amazon uses evaluation and views of customers to rate books and present to others to further its commercial interest. Imitating collaborative evaluation on Web, personalising contents and product customisation based on usage and observed user behaviour are being attempted. What information management community requires is that technology learn users' likes and dislikes over time in order to dynamically and consistently deliver the right content to users.

### **Dubious disintermediation and identity crises**

Are much talked disintermediation of librarianship and the resultant identity crises real? To be frank, libraries are inherently not mission-critical and do not deal with esoteric or essential aspects of life. Hence disintermediation and identity crises, at the outset, are spurious, not real and should not be taken seriously. With technology-driven changed scenario of causing a power shift and computers becoming household appliances, all kinds of information is in the reach of common man. Then, are we heading towards end of libraries is the question often raised. Information is everywhere and everybody needs information. But as usual, libraries are continued to be used by a small subset of the population. Hence it is meaningless to compare libraries with Google. With the invasion of the Internet, no doubt the number of reference queries to libraries have declined and the innovative personalised service like 'Ask a librarian' on the Web has also been made redundant by auto answering services of the popular search engines.

One prediction, world over, is that libraries, particularly public libraries, may stay and become “intellectual commons” or community centers in future. Another survey (of course, in the West) revealed that libraries continue to be graded as top among community services. Yet another study showed that there is no change in the number of construction projects of library buildings over the years. Obsession with new tools and ‘kick’ given by the technology occasionally overpowers experience and maturity to pronounce extreme predictions as mentioned in an editorial of *The Economist* (18-24 Nov 2006), “...displays of excessive enthusiasm for particular new technology often end in tears”. As early as 1970s, experts predicted paperless society by 1990s. Now, there are a few wishfully predicting that libraries will die soon. Neither paperless society arrived nor libraries are going to extinct. Every technology has to become old and has to be modified or occasionally replaced by some better newer technology. But basic issues remain same with need for some refinement.

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<http://www.deccanherald.com/Content/Aug92007/dheducation2007080817892.asp>

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