Managing Technology (Journal of Academic Librarianship, September 2011)

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How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Google

Google (www.google.com) and academic librarians have had an uneasy relationship since the company and Internet search engine were launched in 1998. One might even use the words “fraught” and “tense.” Perhaps tears have been shed and cross words spoken on both sides. Thirteen years ago, Google was just one of dozens of search engines on the cyberfrontier and it bears remembering that the landscape was once so crowded that *Online* started a regular column in 1998 by Greg R. Notess devoted to search engine news and updates.[[1]](#endnote-1) The situation now, as we all know, is dramatically different. Google is more than just one of a dozen search engines—it is ‘the’ Internet search engine and the transnational corporation has rolled out an astonishing series of products, tools, and web sites. Like Xerox and FedEx, “Google” is also now a noun and a verb and the company’s global reach is astonishing. An article posted on the *24/7 Wall Street* blog named Google as one of the next generation monopolies, noting that its search engine market share is an astonishing 90.1%.[[2]](#endnote-2) Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com) and Bing (www.bing.com), the company’s nearest competitors, have no more than 4.1% of the market, respectively, and some sites that many of us remember and remember using like Altavista (www.altavista.com), Teoma (www.teoma.com), Ask Jeeves (www.ask.com), Hotbot (www.hotbot.com), Lycos (www.lycos), and Dog Pile (www.dogpile.com), have either gone the way of the telegram, rotary phone, and Betamax, or they just hang out in cyberspace in case anyone cares to visit.

Academic librarians became increasingly nervous as we watched Google grow from pushy startup company to fun, edgy search engine to colossus. We began to see ourselves in competition with a single web site. Meanwhile, our students and faculty loved it—Google made Internet searching delightfully simple—but many of us countered that it made users lazy, teaching them to be satisfied with the first one or two search results or content to settle for information that was “good enough” instead of “best quality”. Here, “best quality” meant proprietary databases for which libraries were paying hundreds of thousands of dollars, even if those databases were difficult to search, had intimidating interfaces, or used a controlled vocabulary unfamiliar to anyone without an MLS. Google also enabled unmediated searching. Previously, researchers relied on librarians to help them negotiate databases like Dialog or the UN documentation system or tell them how to interpret the catalogue record for the library’s holdings of *Nature* magazine. Now users could find a great deal of this specialized information on their own and our reference statistics suffered, as did our pride and self esteem. No wonder so many librarian hearts were crushed when they heard or read variations on the statement “everything is available on Google.” In response, we got a little combative. In 2005 Stephen Bell (now vice president/president elect of ACRL) titled a *Library Journal* column: “Don’t Surrender Library Values.”[[3]](#endnote-3) In an article the year before he wrote that libraries faced a harrowing choice: “We find ourselves having to choose between succumbing to the lure of Google-ized database interfaces and vehemently resisting them.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

In just over a decade of existence, Google has swallowed and absorbed much of its competition, opened offices around the world, and customized international versions of Google Search for Canada, France, India, Japan, and New Zealand (among others) and Google is also available in an incredible number of languages, including Yiddish.[[5]](#endnote-5) Beyond Google Search, the company has rolled out an astonishing number of tools, sites, and applications, and almost all of us use one or more of them on a daily basis. Gmail (<https://mail.google.com/>) is a free web based e-mail and chat service, Google Maps (http://maps.google.com/) allows users to look up an address in almost any part of the world and often get a street view, as well as directions, distances, and public transport arrival and departure times. Google Earth (http://www.google.com/earth/) lets you look at satellite images of the planet and ocean floor and incorporate GIS mapping techniques, and Google Images (http://www.google.com/imghp) indexes a vast array of photographs, drawings, paintings, and other digital images, not to mention the exciting new Google Art project (http://www.googleartproject.com/) to display free high quality images from the Museum of Modern Art, the Frick Collection, Tate Britain, and the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Google Docs (https://docs.google.com/) is attempting to change the way that people think about software and applications through cloud computing, by which files are stored on an external server, means that users no longer have to worry about e-mailing files to themselves, carrying around a USB key, or a laptop.

Enter Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.com/). The company launched the site in beta form in 2004 and claims that it “provides a simple way to broadly search for scholarly literature. From one place, you can search across many disciplines and sources: articles, theses, books, abstracts and court opinions, from academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities and other web sites. Google Scholar helps you find relevant work across the world of scholarly research.”[[6]](#endnote-6) The site, which exhorts users to “stand on the shoulder of giants,” includes a dedicated section for librarians on which it advertises that, “Facilitating library access to scholarly texts brings us one step closer to this goal [universal access to information]. We're thankful to the libraries and librarians who make it possible.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Libraries can use their link resolver service to access full text licensed content, as well as access to web sites, blogs, and newspapers. Google Scholar presents a lot of information, often quite accurate information, but it can be overwhelming and unwieldy—a search on “Einstein” retrieves 1,050,000 results.

No matter how hard it tries, though, Google, like Rodney Dangerfield, can’t seem to get no respect. First Google Search made everyone lazy. A few years later, starting in 2004, Google Books (<http://scholar.google.com/>) was seen as a threat to our traditional print collections. The company’s plan to digitize the collections of major research libraries like Harvard, New York Public, and Michigan struck fear into authors, publishers, and many librarians. Google Books and the Google Settlement deserve much more consideration than I can give them here, but suffice to say that the recent ruling by Judge Denny Chin effectively blocking the company’s efforts to digitize materials both in and out of copyright has made things even more confusing.[[8]](#endnote-8) In response to this ruling, *Library Journal* editor-in-chief Francine Fialkoff declared that “We Don’t Need Google” to digitize our shared print heritage,[[9]](#endnote-9) and, as I have described before, Harvard’s Robert Darnton has been a long-time advocate for a non-profit digital library.[[10]](#endnote-10) I would, however, agree with my former colleague Ann Okerson, who titled a December 2006 editorial in *Serials Review* “Thank You, Google” noting that “We are being handed a huge gift by Google. We did not have to develop a massive RFP and solicit vendors, and most of all we do not have to pay for what Google is doing [large-scale book digitization]. This is the most colossal outsourcing deal in the history of libraries—and all of us are getting it for nothing.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Librarian and columnist Barbara Quint is also a fan of the company’s work: “Where would we be without the big G? Would the world be filled with online users? Would the web be a worldwide presence? Would mobile computing have taken off as it has without the foundation of faith in the data that Google built? Would a cloud be nothing but a weather report if Google hadn't made relying on outside computer services so familiar to so many?”[[12]](#endnote-12)

Where would we be? I side with Quint and Okerson. It does librarians no credit to disparage Google or to attempt to diminish the massive effect that is has had on our profession. Rick Anderson claims that anti-Googlers “ignore how much closer Google and the Internet get to a perfect information solution than libraries do.”[[13]](#endnote-13) In effect, we need to stop thinking about this as a competition or a race to the death. Google does some things very well and libraries do other things very well—better than Google, in fact. In an article in *Louisiana Libraries*, Van P. Viator proposes a simple, yet brilliant, idea: use Google as a way to introduce users to library research. Go from easy to hard or from “good enough” to “best quality.” He writes that “it is imperative that library educators make up for the shortcomings of Google...we can use students’ knowledge of Google as a gateway to greater possibilities—to learn to perform using library databases throughout their academic careers.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Librarians at Grand Valley State University also offered a faculty workshop on Google tools with the intriguing title “Using Google Like a Librarian” in which they stressed Google as a supplement to library resources.[[15]](#endnote-15) Google may also be able to provide some free IT and information management support. Tami Morse McGill wrote about how the University of Wyoming’s collection development office decided to use Gmail as its e-mail archive after Microsoft’s Outlook application was found wanting. Obviously, McGill and her colleagues had concerns about storing so much information, much of it confidential, on a third-party server. She noted that “an in-house management system may prove to be a better long-term solution to the problem of preserving our electronic records and institutional memory, if time and funding allow.”[[16]](#endnote-16) In library IT speak, “if time and funding allow” could be code for “never,” but you never know. More to the point, has anyone measured the value or use of services that libraries are getting from Google—and for free?

What’s next for Google and libraries? The answer is anyone’s guess, but it strikes me that there is now a sense of calm, a kind of peace in the information valley. We seem to have moved on from the comparisons and nay saying, and I have met only a handful of librarians who actually don’t use Google to find a web site or track down a phone number or address or movie time. Google Scholar is an accepted and valued resource (with flaws, of course) and Google Maps and Google Earth have been a boon for map and geography librarians and the faculty and students they support. Meanwhile, our users still assume that all interfaces should be as easy to search as Google’s and many have a hard time understanding why a controlled vocabulary can be helpful or why someone might wish to try to evaluate the information he or she is looking at. Do we need to start younger? Should we ask our public and school library colleagues to teach students to be aware of how and what they’re searching? And what about Google Books? And, as collection development librarians and administrators know, libraries are still paying millions of dollars a year for proprietary article databases and web tools. Google hasn’t replaced libraries or many of the resources that we provide, but it has changed the way that our users think about us and interact with us, and the ways in which we now respond to our environment and the work that we do on a daily basis. But we’re still here and the lights are still on. We just need to learn to stop worrying and let go, let Google.

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1. Notes and References

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