

WHAT IS A VIRTUAL LIBRARY?

Virtual library. Electronic library. Online library. Digital library. Library without walls. Networked library. E-library. All these phrases have been used to describe the library as it exists in the networked environment. Yet each may describe something distinct depending on the context and individual, whether an extension of the physical library, a stand-alone completely autonomous library, or a combination of both.

The library profession has defined characteristics that place libraries into categories: academic, public, special, and school. Although libraries may have particular nuances depending on location and clientele, they also have common characteristics that allow them to be grouped into one of these categories. Within the networked environment, digital libraries have evolved to fit a fairly standard definition: a collection of digitized resources occasionally accompanied by other electronically available sources or services. Virtual libraries, on the other hand, do not yet have this clarity of definition.

“When it was proclaimed that the Library comprised all books, the first impression was one of extravagant joy. All men felt themselves lords of a secret, intact treasure.” (Borges, “The Library of Babel”)

Kay Gapen’s definition of the virtual library is often quoted: “The virtual library has been defined as the concept of remote access to the contents and services of libraries and other information resources, combining an on-site collection of current and heavily used materials in both print and electronic form, with an electronic network that provides access to, and delivery from, external worldwide library and commercial information and knowledge of sources. In essence the user is provided the effect of a library that is a synergy created by bringing together technologically the resources of many, many libraries and information services” (Saunders, 1996).

A decade earlier, A. J. Harley defined the virtual library as “one where the user has the illusion of access to a much larger collection of information than is really present, immediately or simultaneously....[The user] has access to universal knowledge without delay, at his desk” (Kopp, 1999). Much has since been written and much discussion has taken place about the role of the virtual library. As technology has become more pervasive and the Web becomes the standard mechanism for delivering library content and services, libraries have developed Web sites they call virtual libraries as extensions of their services into the networked environment. These virtual libraries deliver similar content and services as their physical counterparts, albeit electronically.

The term hybrid library has been used to describe this combination of physical and electronic library and may be seen as a stepping-stone between the traditional physical library and the purely digital. The British eLib program exemplifies this hybrid model recognizing that paper and electronic access will continue for the foreseeable future. One of the outcomes of this program includes the Hybrid Library Toolkit (HyLiFe, 2000), an excellent guide for those considering implementing widescale virtual libraries. In 1993, a section of the United Kingdom Higher Education Librar-

ies Review discussed the implications of information technology in improving libraries (Rusbridge, 1998). eLib evolved from this Review and, through a series of projects, explores ways in which the hybrid library, a library in which electronic and paper-based sources are both in use, can be implemented (Pinfield, 1998). Other virtual libraries have been developed separately, having no physical counterpart and offering a unique set of content and services. Others are broader in scale, revolving around consortial arrangements among many libraries, usually on a state or regional basis.

Meanwhile, popular culture continues to view the library as a repository for books and other print materials within the imagery of library as place. Even the notion of digital library often appears fixed within the repository concept: digitized collections of knowledge with little attention paid to support services. As digital libraries have become more established, more attention has been focused on access, retrieval, and service issues.

The Internet and Web have had a profound impact on libraries and the publishing industry, as well as the choices people have in determining where to find information. Vendors and commercial information providers have begun offering databanks of information through alternative means in addition to services that have traditionally been available solely in libraries.

Data providers have begun marketing themselves either directly to the public or through other commercial services providing search capabilities and fee-based document delivery services that may allow subscribers to bypass the library completely. For example, Questia has made an agreement with America Online (AOL) to sponsor portions of AOL's Research and Learning Channel, providing access for students and others to Questia's database as well as a one-month free trial of the Questia service featuring scholarly books and articles for liberal arts undergraduates. Questia will also be the online library for Netscape's Research and Learn area (American Library Association, ALA TechSource, 2001).

Other commercial ventures are marketing themselves to universities, particularly those offering distance education courses, as an easier, faster, more efficient way to deliver library content and services. These information services could compete with libraries; they raise questions about the value of libraries and librarians and the development of virtual libraries as extensions of the brick-and-mortar library.

Definition

For the purpose of this issue of *Library Technology Reports*, the term *virtual library* is defined simply as a managed collection of information resources and services available electronically through the Internet. The focus is on consortial efforts that bring together resources and services through one common gateway. Several states have launched such efforts: VIVA in Virginia, TexShare in Texas, and Ohio's OhioLINK are just a few examples. The two virtual libraries profiled in this issue are statewide efforts; one focuses solely on providing library services to distance education students and the other aims more broadly to electronically provide library services to all citizens of its state. Both libraries exemplify similar yet distinct models for assembling virtual libraries that incorporate physical libraries and traditional services and extend and expand them into the virtual world. Perhaps in this sense they best exemplify the virtual library as hybrid—that which has surpassed the physical but has not yet become purely digital.

Chapter 2 examines the creation and management of virtual libraries, including planning, management and funding, technology, and content and service development. Although virtual libraries may exist on the basis of their technology, content, and services, the planning that must go into assembling and implementing them is crucial for their success. The planning process sets the stage and determines the outcomes and success factors for the library.

Chapter 3 profiles the Kentucky Virtual Library (KYVL). KYVL was planned and implemented through legislation and appropriation by the state legislature to serve the distance learning needs of the state as well as the lifelong learning needs of the general public. It is centrally funded and administered with the cooperation and collaboration of the state's academic, public, and special libraries.

The Florida Distance Learning Library Initiative (FDLLI), also state funded, is profiled in Chapter 4. It was founded to coordinate distance learning library services for the state. It has brought together existing disparate services of state public academic institutions and fosters collaboration between the community colleges and four-year institutions of higher learning. The Reference and Referral Center, although originally initiated to provide reference services as one of the components of FDLLI, has become the clearinghouse for the initiative and is a major focus of the FDLLI profile.

Unlike many other statewide virtual library efforts, KYVL and FDLLI have assembled virtual libraries that not only focus on collaborative resources, and information sharing through purchasing of shared databases, courier, and document delivery services but also offer mediated services associated with the more traditional physical library. Similar and yet distinct, both initiatives reflect planning and management practices that can be emulated and used as models for those planning similar efforts.

Coordination and collaboration is emphasized in the profiles of these two libraries. FDLLI has coordinated the existing efforts of many institutions within the state that provide services to distance learners. This coordination is a highly focused effort, devoting FDLLI'S resources to a single, albeit diverse, audience. KYVL was planned in conjunction with the Kentucky Virtual University with the expressed intent to serve the needs of distance learners in the state through a centralized coordinated gateway that allows access to courses and services. Unlike FDLLI, KYVL also serves as a virtual library for a much broader audience: the entire population of the state, bringing together academic, public, and special libraries.

During planning and development, both of these virtual library initiatives have tackled many issues arising from efforts of this magnitude. They have created effective management structures, coordinated and collaborated with existing institutions to establish technology infrastructures, and demonstrated new levels of innovation in developing and enhancing service models for their constituents. Most importantly, they have done so within the boundaries of their individual circumstances to provide the best possible service for their primary audience.