

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Managers of virtual libraries must heed developments in the publishing industry and commercial e-library sector. New ventures such as Ebrary and its agreement with university and other publishers to make books available electronically based on a virtual copy machine model (Carlson, 2001) have the potential to add both to the array of resources that virtual libraries may make available to their users and to the confusion of the already overwhelming glut of resource choices patrons face. Other commercial electronic library ventures, called e-libraries, are lining up publishers to distribute academic content and are poised to insert themselves into the distance e-learning industry, potentially bypassing the traditional library altogether. Current market for these ventures totals \$250 million annually with projected growth to \$850 million by 2004 (Eduventures, 2001). As more and more students in both traditional and distance learning environments as well as the general public expect resources and services to be available online at the time of need, virtual libraries will need to decide how to work with these new ventures to provide the best resources for their target population.

The idea of the scholar's workstation has been adopted by some traditional libraries for several years. These one-stop stations allow users to access most if not all the programs they need to complete their work in addition to traditional library resources. Virtual libraries, given their foundation in remote accessibility, can take advantage of this concept by enhancing their services and their technological foundations to make it as simple as possible not only for the end user to access and use library resources but to allow seamless interaction with other applications on the user's desktop or other computing device.

Chris Rusbridge (1998) describes this workstation model as the "integration of information and work spaces. There are two ways of looking at how we use resources (data) in the electronic environment. First, what do we do with or to it; that is, what is it for? Second, how do we manipulate it?" By facilitating easy manipulation of the data found in the virtual library, the scholar's workstation can be wherever the user is and the data can be used in whatever way the user needs at the moment, whether it be downloaded into a citation manager, word processor, spreadsheet, database, or e-mail program.

As a platform for the delivery of library information and service, the Web is still evolving. Virtual libraries, whether extensions of traditional brick-and-mortar libraries or independent stand-alone institutions, have the potential to take the library into a new realm, to expand it, and to make it more meaningful. New and developing technologies, from customization and personalization to 3-D simulation, may allow libraries to recreate the sense of place associated with the traditional library in the electronic environment. Or perhaps that sense of place will no longer be an apt metaphor in the electronic environment and newer metaphors will emerge. In either case, the virtual library will continue to embody the traditional values and mission of libraries, albeit in a networked environment—providers of information and service, mediators between information and knowledge, archives of human knowledge and experience.

www.ebrary.com

“Perhaps I am deceived by old age and fear, but I suspect that the human species—the unique human species—is on the road to extinction, while the Library will last on forever: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly immovable, filled with precious volumes, useless, incorruptible, secret.” (Borges)

The concept of virtual library as examined in this issue of *Library Technology Reports* is one of a hybrid: a library that takes advantage of telecommunications protocols to enhance and expand on services. In a sense this hybrid library serves as a bridge between two worlds, allowing libraries to maintain an existence in the physical world as a place but at the same time move into new territory and experiment on new ground. It also allows libraries to leverage and scale themselves on the traditions and values that have made them fixtures in the public and academic lives of various institutions.