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The Library as the Latest Web Venture

By LISA GUERNSEY

When Carrie Larkworthy, a student at Harvard University, is faced with a research project, getting a book out of the library is the last thing on her mind. Instead she sits in her dormitory room and logs onto the Web, starting with Harvard's online system for searching and retrieving journal articles. "I hate the library, so I try to avoid it," Ms. Larkworthy said. "It's such a big facility that you have to search through."

If Ms. Larkworthy's experience is anything like that of other students, and many librarians acknowledge that it is, the use of books for research is becoming an archaic concept. If scholarly books are not on the Web, they are invisible to anyone using the Internet as a substitute for in-depth investigation.

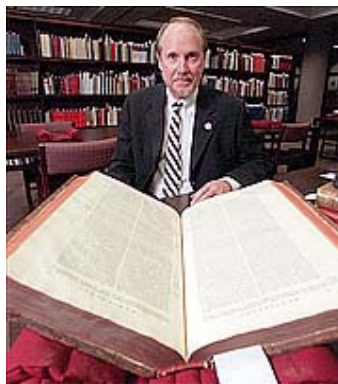
But new efforts are afoot to change that. Several companies are racing to put the full texts of hundreds of thousands of copyrighted books, old and new, on the Web.

NetLibrary started the contest, with technology that lets people view books online for short periods of time, the digital equivalent of borrowing them from the library.

Now two other companies, [Ebrary.com](#) and [Questia Media](#), are taking on the same challenge but using a new strategy. They want to give people the opportunity to search through reams of pages at no charge, then will charge people a few cents a page for using that information.

(Questia users will be asked to pay for viewing, copying and printing the online pages. Ebrary.com users will be able to view pages free but will pay for copying and printing.)

These electronic library projects are not attempts to compete with the budding electronic book industry, which offers books for downloading to handheld devices and is focused on popular fiction, like Stephen King's recent Web-only novella, "Riding the Bullet," and on other newly published trade books. The library projects have very little to do with the debate over the promise or pitfalls of



Jennifer Warburg for The New York Times, top; Andy Manis for The New York Times, bottom

FROM BOOKS TO BYTES - Kate Douglas Torrey, top, is director of the University of North Carolina Press, which is working with Questia Media to put many of its books online. Questia and another service, Ebrary.com, will charge their customers. Kenneth Frazier, bottom, of the University of Wisconsin at Madison wonders how digital libraries will affect actual libraries.

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gadgets that let people read novels electronically from the comfort of their beds.

In fact, the new effort to build an electronic library is not about reading at all. It is about the power of electronic searching. With digital scanning, texts of works that may be decades old can be mined for those few morsels of insight that may enhance a research paper or help prove an argument. It could be a way, some publishers say, to move books into the Web's fold and make them more visible to students like Ms. Larkworthy.

"In an ideal world, a person would find a book in the card catalog, pull it off the shelf and use it," said Kate Douglas Torrey, director of the University of North Carolina Press. "But that is just not the world we live in today." The University of North Carolina Press is among more than 80 publishers working with Questia to turn many of their titles into searchable documents available on the Web.

Laziness is not always the excuse for avoiding the traditional library. Even people who do go hunting in the stacks are sometimes thwarted. The books they want might be checked out or misplaced, lost forever among call numbers that have no relation to the sticker on their spines. Or the books might be at other libraries and available only to those researchers who are willing to wait weeks for interlibrary loans.

Such situations can be avoided on the Internet, proponents of digital libraries say. "This will take some of the tedium out of research," Ms. Torrey said, "and make it easy to use an extensive collection of scholarly work."

Of course, people have been hailing the promise of digitized libraries for years, and the reality has not yet measured up. When [netLibrary](#) opened in March 1999, for example, it was promoted in press releases as a company that would "revolutionize the library system" by enabling people to tap into a searchable and comprehensible database of reference and scholarly books.

Until this month, netLibrary offered two types of access: holders of library cards from participating libraries could use the service at no charge, and others could subscribe to the service for \$29.95 a year. The subscription option is no longer being offered to new users.

Now netLibrary is primarily a service for public, academic and corporate libraries that want to buy electronic titles and make them available to their patrons.

Rob Kaufman, netLibrary's president and chief executive, said the shift away from a consumer service was partly an attempt to appease librarians and publishers. Some librarians said the service was competing with them. Publishers did not like the subscription model for another reason: they said it gave people too much access to electronic texts at too low a price.

Even those who gain access to netLibrary may find the experience

less than satisfying. There are just not yet enough books in the site's collection to make serious searching worthwhile. The site now has about 18,000 copyrighted books and 4,000 public-domain works, numbers that are tiny compared with the hundreds of thousands of volumes in most research libraries and the millions of volumes in major ones.

Will companies like Questia Media and Ebrary.com do any better? Ebrary.com already has more than 130,000 volumes in its demonstration database and says that it may include as many as 600,000 by the time it opens in the fall.

Questia, backed by \$45 million in venture capital, plans to offer access to 50,000 volumes when it opens next spring and is working toward a goal of 250,000 books in three years.

These numbers are possible, the founders say, because they have appealed to publishers' pocketbooks. When a book is sold to an actual library, the publisher makes a one-time profit. That book might be retrieved and read by hundreds of people, but the publisher never sees another dime. In the models used by Questia and Ebrary.com, however, that book could continue to make the publisher money as more people see it.

Anyone going to Questia's site, for example, will be able to search the entire database of books at no cost, but only subscribers will be able to see the books' pages by clicking on the search results. (Questia has not yet set its subscription price, but Troy Williams, the company's chief executive, said that it would be "affordable for the average college student.")

Ebrary.com has adopted what Christopher Warnock, the chief executive, calls "the photocopier

SITE-SEEING

Although commercial companies are getting into the act, several education Web sites have been offering access to electronic texts for years. The sites are ideal for finding classic texts that are not restricted by copyright, like works of Shakespeare or Robert Frost. Most of them are plain text versions of books and are not integrated into Web-based databases, which means that they do not allow keyword searching across multiple volumes. Here are some of the sites that give people access to texts of literature and reference works:

ALEX CATALOG OF ELECTRONIC TEXTS: sunsite.berkeley.edu/alex

Includes about 700 books that are in the public domain, which typically means that they have been written by authors who died decades, if not hundreds of years, ago. Titles are drawn from American and British literature and Western philosophy.

BARTLEBY.COM:

<http://www.bartleby.com/>
Features a searchable database of about 100 books, most of which are multivolume reference books or classics of literature and poetry. Although the site is now commercial, it started as a university project and access remains free. The company is starting to include copyrighted books as well, like The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition.

ELECTRONIC TEXT CENTER: etext.lib.virginia.edu/uvaonline.html

Offers about 5,000 public-domain texts, including English literature, manuscripts and newspapers from 1500 to the present. Also includes texts in more than a dozen other

model." Searching will be free, he said, and so will the act of simply reading whatever pages are retrieved from a search. But when a person tries to copy the text of those pages by using copy and paste commands, a dialogue box will appear on the screen. In a recent demonstration, the box said: "This will cost you \$0.25. Would you like to continue?"

languages.

PROJECT GUTENBERG:

promo.net/pg

One of the first electronic text projects on the Internet, this has about 2,500 public-domain titles.

The same kind of message pops up when a user tries to print the page. If the user decides to pay for copying or printing, the software will automatically generate a citation for the work and place it below the copied or printed text.

Most people will have no problem paying a few cents for what they want, Mr. Warnock said, since they already scrounge up quarters to use photocopy machines. At the site, a user will be able to sign up for a debit account of, say, \$10 and will then need to type in a user name and password during each session in which the user prints or copies pages.

These payments, the founders say, can add up to big money when millions of people are spending a few cents at a time. And many publishers are willing to license their copyrighted material in exchange for some of that cash. "It holds the promise of being profitable," said Tim Cooper, vice president for strategic operations at Harcourt Trade Publishers, one of the companies that has signed a letter of intent with Questia.

It is not just those micropayments that interest publishers, said Larry Weissman, director of new business development for Random House, which, he added, has struck no deals with either Questia or Ebrary.com. But the ideas are appealing, Mr. Weissman said, partly because they may introduce readers to new works. "The hope is that they would want to continue that reading experience by buying a book," he said.

If the sites succeed, they will be mixing the qualities of libraries and bookstores. Most people think of the bookstore as a place to buy and the library as a place to borrow or browse at no charge. But on the Internet, where full texts can be searched in seconds and information can be retrieved with a few clicks, convenience is part of the package as well. These companies, including netLibrary, are betting that people will pay for it.

Librarians are intrigued by the concept, said Kenneth L. Frazier, the president of the Association of Research Libraries. And they are eager to see how quickly texts can be digitized when put into the hands of companies, which may find more efficient ways to scan books on a huge scale.

But Mr. Frazier, who is director of the general library system at the

University of Wisconsin at Madison, also wonders what that will mean to traditional research libraries, which have always been motivated by public interest, not private profits. Making sure that low-income people have access to expansive new online libraries is one area of concern. Another concerns the selections made by digital libraries. Will databases include only the most popular books, Mr. Frazier asked, "or the stuff that gets the highest return economically?"

At Ebrary.com, books are included for technical reasons. They must already exist on publishers' computers in a format called PDF (for portable document file), which was developed by Adobe Systems and is commonly read online using the Adobe Acrobat Reader. Many publishers, Mr. Warnock said, have been using this format since the early 1990's during the design of their hard-copy books.

Questia is taking a more academic approach. It has hired Dr. Carol Hughes, a research librarian who recently worked at the University of Iowa, to lead a team of librarians in selecting core titles that have been known to be useful to college students. A few of the books that will be included on Questia are "The Industrial Revolution," a 1956 book by Arnold Toynbee, and a 1982 edition of Dante's "Divine Comedy."

Dr. Hughes said she suspected that Questia might drive more students to the actual library instead of away from it. After using the Web to find books that meet their needs, she said, they may want to check them out to read them more closely. "I think it is going to greatly enhance libraries," she said.

Being able to search online books will help students see their value, Dr. Hughes said, particularly when they can easily get access to books that have become classics in particular subject areas.

A nonprofit project called JStor is often offered as proof that digitizing old texts can breathe life into them. For the past five years, JStor has been creating digital copies of scores of scholarly journals, some of which have issues more than 100 years old. University libraries around the world pay for access to JStor and provide it to their students free. A recent study by JStor showed that students used the online service almost 20 times as much as they dug into the stacks for the paper versions.

Just a few years ago, said Mr. Frazier, of the University of Wisconsin, librarians and publishers scoffed at the idea that a full-scale project like JStor could be adopted for books any time soon. Many people said it would take centuries before the equivalent of a library's bookshelves would ever make it onto the Web.

But now that Mr. Frazier has seen and heard about new efforts, he said, "I'm not so sure about that anymore." "I think this might happen much more quickly than we might have imagined a few years ago," he added. No longer, he said, will books suffer from

what he called that "fatal disadvantage": the fact that they are available only in print.

Related Sites

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