Nurturing curiosity: A librarian's view

by [David R. Stewart](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

The emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web as a source of information, a venue for publishing, and a forum for dialogue now defines libraries nearly as much as the more familiar milieu of printed texts. The technological dimensions of this shift are less intriguing than the cultural ones. And from where I sit, the developments are a decidedly mixed blessing.

It doesn't seem so long ago that the best a researcher in theology could hope for was to visit a theological library (if it was close enough) and search its card catalog, which did a brilliant job of opening the doors to the local collection. Now, ready access to all the catalogs we want is the norm, from wherever we are connected.

A surprising number of texts are out there on the Web. Good places to browse include the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (www.ccel.org), the Online Books Page (digital.library.upenn.edu/books) and the University of Virginia Electronic Text Center (etext.lib.virginia.edu). Such projects put good collections within the reach of people who otherwise would have no access to some of the great literature of Christendom. No need to wonder whether the book is signed out. And unlike the version-on-the-shelf, the digitial versions usually allow you to carry out word searches at lightning speed.

Meanwhile, online newsletters, listservs and e-journals have put much more scholarly discussion within the reach of The Connected than ever before. The potential for interchange of ideas and resources is almost unlimited.

Librarians have had a broad and decisive role in guiding such developments and typically are strong advocates of extending access. Still, there are some trade-offs involved.

Uneasy paradigms: The real forte of the Internet and Web is high-volume, high-speed information. But is this always what a researcher needs? A water fountain can't compete with a fire hose for speed and volume, yet when a refreshing mouthful is what's wanted, it serves best. What's more, the wired environment is

almost intrinsically impatient, and so doesn't always foster quiet, reflection and deliberation—the low-anxiety cast of mind which often produces the best thinking about God.

What "**virtual library**"?: Scholars are not in a hurry to give their work away gratis, in any format. Online theological texts at their best and worst have one thing in common: they are in the public domain, and so can be posted on the Web without payment of copyright fees. This tends to limit online research to "classic" texts, and often less-than-definitive translations at that.

Library or info-quagmire?: The fact that there is so much on the Web obscures how it got there. In the print environment, publishers evaluate manuscripts, then painstakingly edit and review them before sending them to press. Likewise, libraries scrutinize items carefully according to standards and policy before adding them to their collection. But only rarely does this vigilance carry over to the Web. The same egalitarian spirit that puts so much information within reach of so many offers an equal entrée for inclusion to anyone who has access to a Web-server. There is a treasures-to-trash disparity. "It's as if the Library of Congress had exploded in mid-air," says one librarian of the Web. No wonder one professor said that search engines are more analogous to slot machines than to library catalogs.

The McLibrary syndrome: For years research libraries have set up reserve collections, making high-demand items available on short-term loan. Some high-tech libraries have even extended this service by providing e-reserves, where such items are scanned and placed on secure Web-servers, eliminating the need to visit the library at all. But such well-intentioned plans may bring an unintended outcome: the "McLibrary" syndrome. If a list of the "best" (or at least faculty-approved) titles is already set out for the student, where is the incentive to look any further? Are we derailing students' initiative, depriving them of the impetus for making their own discoveries? It would be a shame if we were discouraging emerging scholars from reaching deeper into the bookstacks, from sending their buckets down deeper into the wells of knowledge.

The late Raymond Morris, for many years director of the Yale Divinity School library, said that when he walked up and down the stacks, he received "an almost mystical experience. Here are Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas . . . and there they stand, these books, with patience and modesty, waiting for the curious mind and the pilgrim soul, an unmeasured potential of human experience and wisdom, waiting to

be introduced to these, our times."

Libraries are, among other things, in the business of fostering and satisfying curiosity. If we have anything to be afraid of, surely it's not change, or technology, or budget-cuts, but the atrophy of the spirit of inquiry, a nasty side-effect of what theologians used to call "sloth." Almost 40 years ago, Robertson Davies warned of sloth in its scholarly form: "intellectual and spiritual torpor, indifference, and lethargy." Only the triumph of this sloth over the spirit of inquiry can ever completely marginalize libraries and the research they support.

The future of libraries will involve finding ways and means of getting more of "the best stuff" on the Web, re-engaging students' "foraging" skills in the bookstacks, rethinking reserve-lists and assignments, and who knows what else? Whatever we do, no effort should be spared to foster the curiosity and hunger that continues to attract people to the study of Christian theology.