

# “I Can’t Find You Anywhere but Gone,” Revisited

John Lubans Jr.

Several years ago, I did a series of Internet use studies among library users.<sup>1</sup> Why did I do that? Plummeting reference statistics. As a library administrator, I was tracking the precipitous drop off in reference questions. The decline, starting in 1992, was akin to an S-shaped curve on which we had passed the happy upward years of long lines and never-ending demand. Now, we were slipping downward into a quaint inutility unless we reversed the trend with another, upward curve.

At the same time, I observed large numbers of library users migrating to the CD-ROM reference tools and the OPAC, avoiding ye olde card catalog at all costs. Also, the unstaffed “computer lab,” with its thirty or more word-processing computers, was crowded day and night. Then, first with Gopher, Mosaic, and Netscape, and the World Wide Web concept, users moved to Yahoo! and Google. Instead of lining up at the reference desk, our users were lining up to use library computers. These computers had high-speed connections to the Internet, including e-mail, and free printing. And more users became *nonusers* of the library. “[The Internet’s] moved library resources to my desktop,” a student observed.

My research hypothesis, in mid-1997, was that the Internet was causing different use patterns and that the library would be marginalized if we ignored what was happening.

This column has two parts:

First, I want to review why users love the Internet and how that affinity is relevant to today’s library. Student users, from middle schoolers to graduate students, were my focus; but what they had to say applies in many ways to public libraries. Also, because these studies were highly predictive of information-seeking behavior, the findings are still relevant, especially when augmented with post-study observations and experiences.



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Second, I want to explore library leadership’s response. How effective have we been? What are some of the program initiatives that leaders can claim as new upward curves?

## Users Love the Internet

Why? Some reasons are obvious; a few are more subtle.

- *Ubiquitous*: First, it’s *everywhere*. We can access digital information from any location as long as we have the equipment and the connection.
- *Anytime*: Users are drawn to the Internet because we can use electronic information 24/7. Connectivity has reached such a point that we need to ask ourselves “how much do we want?”
- *Timesaving*: Using e-resources can mean less time in finding what we are looking for, and can give us more time using what we find. Of course, not all Internet use is time-efficient or economical. Nor are all searches successful in finding the desired information.
- *Learning*: For students there is something about the Internet that helps them learn and that satisfies their need to know. Learning does not happen every time we use the Internet, but often enough to make us want to come back. At the same time, many users state that the Internet can be distracting and that it is easy to lose your way and become frustrated.
- *Recycling information*: Because electronic information can be manipulated easily, we can copy someone’s work and paste it into our own. While we can more easily attribute others’ ideas in our papers, this process can also make plagiarism as easy as click and drag. We can move e-info everywhere, from e-notepad to cell phone to Blackberry to MySpace to anywhere that a digital connection exists and accepts the data stream.
- I’ve saved the most important reason for last—*Disintermediation*: The Internet’s self-service feeds the users desire to be independent. As it turns out, it’s not information that “wants to be free,” as we used

to enthuse in the pre-dot-com Web era; it's the user who wants to be free! User-driven blogs and Web 2.0 initiatives suggest just how strongly many users seek independence.

Many students told me that the Internet allows *less* dependence on libraries. According to them, that was a plus. Students, like the rest of us, value anything that saves steps on the way to finding information. It is why when we can access journals online and print out articles, we stop going to the stacks or microfilm machines. Economists probably would call this the law of least effort.

## What Library Users Want

They want *high-speed connectivity*, and the user does not want to lug around a laptop; they want computer hardware available for their use.

*Digital resources:* If it is in print, users want it digital. Google, Yahoo!, Microsoft, and the Open Content Alliance's efforts to convert print to digital resonate with users. Even if publishers and librarians are unhappy about that, the users still want it. A student: "[The library] should try to have more books available online so that students can access it *without need[ing] to actually go to the library.*"

And, users expect libraries to provide them with access to the *best* e-resources. They trust and rely on our selection and organization role. "If it is in the library, it is OK."

*Print resources:* Perhaps surprisingly, many users know that print resources are essential to a complete understanding of a topic. They know that "Internet only" or "print only" is no longer sufficient. Students know that if they are to understand a subject really well, both electronic and print have to be used.

*Navigation help:* "Internet use can be problematic" was one student's understatement.

Users want a simplified way to get to the best sources. They believe the library should streamline access without referring students to a help desk or to have to scroll down multiple pages on the library's site. While Google aspires to be the World's Answer Desk—the WAD—many students know that googling is not enough. Currently, a thorough search on a topic results in a patchwork mix of sources from Google or Yahoo!, local databases, including OPACs and consortial access portals, subscription databases, and Web 2.0 databases, including blogs and wikis.

*Our help* is needed in weaving these resources into a useable quilt. This may be difficult for librarians to accept and it may be even more difficult to implement, but users do not want tutorials on information literacy any more than they wanted instruction in pre-Internet library use. Many endure(d) our well-intentioned efforts at user education, but given this powerful new tool—the Internet—users believe we can help them get to resources they need without our intervention, unless *they* ask for our assistance.

*A single search box:* Users want a transparent, easy-to-use, and organized approach to information. Organizing information is what we do best. It is what we have done better than anyone else for the print collections and users would like this service in the electronic format—they want to find what they need and to find it with minimal effort.

"Impossible! Utopian!" we may exclaim, but it is still what the users want. That is the direction our planning and design should be taking.

*Trustworthy Internet resources:* Users would like libraries to rate the accuracy and authoritativeness of information sites. They want a "seal of approval"—an implicit one will do—on links provided by the library. To make this happen, we need to collaborate with others who are exploring ways to help users discover the best and most reputable information.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike some critics, I look forward to Google's applying their search algorithms to the use of their digitized books. One aspect of quality is how many people are using a particular item. This is the principle behind the *New York Times* bestseller lists and on many disintermediated reputation sites, like Trip Advisor. If I am looking for a good translation of *Don Quixote*, I will be very happy to see which translation is linked most often. Unless I am looking for a particular translation for some erudite purpose, the first few that come up on the Google page will likely include one I want to read. And, no, I do not need the AACR2 cataloging entry.

## Creating a New Curve or "Jumping the Shark?"

This unprecedented shift in how people find and use information—and how they use libraries—cannot be addressed by doing business as usual. As dropping reference statistics demonstrate, our traditional services may not be as effective as they once were. Our users—our customers—have changed their behavior. Have we kept up with them? Have we anticipated what they want and need? Are we behind or out in front of our users?

It is precisely in ambiguous times like these, in the midst of transformational change, that leaders get to lead the development of new services, to implement new upward curves. If we want to *re-intermediate* ourselves, to integrate the library's many good services, and to facilitate the "virtual" user's finding and using information while *outside* the building, what can we do?

Remember, users prefer independence. They flock to sites that permit disintermediation: the elimination of the middleman. The user is in charge and decides when and what he or she wants. If we are to have a presence, then the more seamless it is, the better.

Take a moment and consider where your library is on the S-shaped curve? What actions have leaders taken? What new upward curves are in place?

Do some library shape-shifting initiatives suggest we are “jumping the shark?” This term comes from the entertainment realm for the desperate measures some take to revive a failing television series. Instead of exiting gracefully, producers flog writers to come up with new episodes even if the muse is unwilling and unable. The shark phrase comes from a *Happy Days* segment in which the Fonzie character literally jumps, on water skis, over a shark in San Francisco Bay! This outlandish measure failed to revive viewer interest. If anything, jumping the shark confirmed it was time for the curtain to come down.

## Leadership Responses

Libraries have added impressive and beautiful spaces. These renovations and additions have repopulated some parts of library buildings. One architect enthused about an increase of 700 percent in the door count! Another academic observer drolly noted that new library furnishings were so comfortable that there were more students sleeping in the library than in the dormitories.

Users are drawn in part to these new spaces because they are a merged design of an upscale retail bookstore and a sports bar. In colleges, they feature group study rooms, flatscreen TVs, and coffee bars, and, less obviously, they may appeal to more than a few users seeking a quiet “sanctuary.” Another change: no ban on food and drink. One library, desperate to increase its door count, permits pizza and chicken wing deliveries to anywhere in its twenty-story building!

But, all of that aside, the real magnet is dozens, in some cases hundreds, of computer workstations, often located in an “information commons” (IC). While we do not have a firm grasp of what is happening in the IC, we still point with proprietary pride to the hordes of users, day and night. Absent computers, it is unlikely that the new coffee shop, the “eat and drink anywhere” policy, the plush furnishings, or the calming color schemes would alone account for the numbers.

Users are the first to admit that there are times when they are stumped and need our help. They want us to mediate. How can we “be there” when they need us without our nagging the user or staffing little-used service desks? How can we help connect users to information *when* they need our help, inside or outside the library building?

If you go to many academic library websites and click on “reference,” virtual reference services pop up: chat, instant messaging (IM), phone, and e-mail. In-person reference service is still available, supplemented by these other formats. All are *mediated* services.

Are these reference services being used? One study’s statistics are unimpressive. There are steady annual increases, but in 2006 less than two thousand total questions were asked, half by way of chat and half by e-mail.<sup>3</sup>

On a three-hundred-day schedule, that is 6.6 queries per day. Am I alone in finding Second Life’s virtual reference desks, staffed by buff and buxom information attendants in a Walter-Mitty-on-LSD landscape, as forlorn as some real reference desks?

The library can be seen as an Internet portal. Where do library webpages fit into what people do on the Internet? If library leaders claim there is increased library use through the information commons, do these leaders also have a strategy for drawing more people to the library webpage and to the OPAC? An OCLC study found that 89 percent of college student information searches start with search engines. How often did they start with the library webpage? Two percent of the time.<sup>4</sup>

How can library webpages gain market share? We know users would do better if they consulted us, but if we do not save their time, if we do not add enough value, if we make e-resources and printed material difficult to locate and difficult to use, then users will not return to our websites.

Let me illustrate: I’d forgotten the title of an article I needed to cite so I put NCLive (the North Carolina state library network) to the test versus Google. It took me twenty minutes to drill down to the actual article in EBSCO Host. I got what I wanted from Google in twenty seconds. Which source would I return to? Which source would a user give up on?

Our most obvious success is the IC, arguably a new upward curve. While architects may claim the IC as their innovation, it represents an upgraded service that was already evident in the standing-room-only popularity of drably functional computer labs, some of which were located in libraries. A question that needs an answer is whether ICs result in increased use of library materials, both print and electronic.

Could we do better in developing new upward curves? No question. Consider the two examples I’ve discussed in this essay: seamless navigation assistance and increasing library webpage use.

Unlike the compromises often seen in library strategic plans, sometimes a new curve means literally abandoning the old ways. This is high risk and probably accounts for why many new curves are flat, imitative, and overly cautious.

One student’s sweeping statement—unhindered by pragmatism—should embolden us to look beyond our present practices: “The library could really be an electronic window into the wider world. In some respects it already is, but it could expand its opening onto the world much more. . . . The library shouldn’t just concentrate on putting its own resources online—it should bring more information in from the outside. Bring the world in, make it accessible to students, and fun to study.”

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ing a unique campaign that promoted the library to school-age children from kindergarten to grade seven. The highlight of the promotion was the Ralph card for kids, possibly the world's first round library card.

- University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB) for "UCSB Reads for Earth Day 2007." Reflecting the values of the Santa Barbara community, home of the original Earth Day, the UCSB library led a campus-wide

initiative to read, discuss, and even recycle (for other readers) the book *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*.

Applications for the 2009 JCD awards are due December 4, 2008. The application is available on the web at [www.hwwilson.com/jcdawards/nw\\_jcd.htm](http://www.hwwilson.com/jcdawards/nw_jcd.htm).—*Sherrill Smith*

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Leading from the Middle *continued from page 207*

### References and Notes

1. John Lubans Jr., "I Can't Find You Anywhere but Gone: Avoiding Marginalization," *Library Administration & Management* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 67-69. Also, this column incorporates many of the ideas presented in a talk I gave to the National Library of Latvia's International "Digital Libraries for Learning" Conference, Nov. 19, 2007, in Riga, Latvia. My Internet Use studies are available at [www.lubans.org](http://www.lubans.org). The student quotations in this article come from these studies.
2. Michael Jensen, "The New Metrics of Scholarly Authority," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 53, no. 41 (June 15, 2007), B6, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i41/41b00601.htm> (accessed Aug. 13, 2008).
3. John Hubbard, "Going Virtual: Technology & the Future of Academic Libraries," Library Council of Southeastern Wisconsin Annual Conference, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, May 16, 2007, [www.mcfls.org/librarycouncil/lcademic.pdf](http://www.mcfls.org/librarycouncil/lcademic.pdf) (accessed Aug. 13, 2008).
4. OCLC, *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC, 2006).

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