

# LIBRARIES AND SOCIAL SCIENTISTS IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE

PETER T. JOHNSON\*

## RESUMEN

Este ensayo trata sobre las varias disciplinas de las ciencias sociales en el contexto del impacto que los varios medios electrónicos de creación, organización, mantenimiento y difusión de información han tenido en cada una de ellas. Se argumenta que, en contrariedad a la tendencia corriente entre administraciones bibliotecarias, los expertos en colección de áreas extranjeras forman una parte clave de los programas de bibliotecas para adquirir, introducir e integrar recursos electrónicos a los métodos de investigación de estudiantes y letrados. Al paso que acceso y número de medios electrónicos crecen, el propio ser de la disciplina es desafiado por sus mismos practicantes al igual que por investigadores que emplean métodos interdisciplinarios. Aunque es de esperarse que cierta homogeneidad ocurra dada la uniformidad requerida por cuantiosas aplicaciones electrónicas, al igual por el incremento en investigaciones de tipo interdisciplinario, este ensayo propone que ciertas características tradicionales continúan y sirven para subrayar el contenido único de cada disciplina, incluyendo su organización y

método de pensamiento. Maestría no se hace necesariamente más fácil, sino es simplemente distinta a sus aplicación pre-electrónica.

## ABSTRACT

*This essay discusses the various disciplines of the social sciences in the context of the impact that electronic means of creating, organizing, maintaining and disseminating information have brought to the individual fields. As electronic access and means spread, the substance of a discipline is challenged, not only by its own practitioners, but also by those coming from an inter-disciplinary approach. While we can expect a certain homogenization occurring, given not only the standardizations required by many electronic applications, but also through increasing interdisciplinary research, this essay will argue that certain traditional characteristics remain that serve to signal a field's distinctive content and way of organization and thought. Mastery is not necessarily any easier, it is simply different from pre-electronic application.*

This essay explores the implications of post-industrial information technology on research collections of Latin Americana in the social sciences and endeavors to assess the range of issues influencing scholars' and students' use of these collections. That a crisis exists for libraries in fiscal terms cannot be understated, nor can the crisis of a similar magnitude be ignored in the area of user competence and ongoing programs to ensure sufficient expertise to utilize the benefits of electronic access to and presentation of bibliography and texts. How libraries reached this juncture is not nearly as important to understand as are the professed solutions and the responses of users to them. Definite patterns exist in the response strategies, and from these designs one can better understand what is transforming collections and research methods.

Until the advent of the electronic age within libraries, the guiding principle was ownership of materials. Few libraries could afford to maintain comprehensive coverage in more than a few areas, with most collecting being done at a research

\* Universidad de Princeton

level judged adequate to meet the needs of graduate study. Interlibrary loan served as an effective supplier whenever a collection lacked materials. But with the huge expansion of post-secondary education after World War II, and for Latin American collections, after the Cuban Revolution, libraries that had hitherto served undergraduate needs were suddenly placed in situations of supporting graduate programs and a greatly expanded faculty. With federal, state and private foundation funding, many libraries rapidly expanded their collections and services. At the same time more and more material was being published worldwide and the shifts in research interests created demands for subject areas and types of materials rarely collected by most libraries. The establishment of the cataloging utilities OCLC and RLIN linked libraries as never before, not only for technical services but also for collection development purposes. For interlibrary loan the broad acceptance of these electronic databases signaled the solution to what was becoming increasingly evident to collection development specialists: funds were inadequate to maintain even research-level collections serving the immediate needs of campus departments and programs. Through a combination of fiscal crises (e.g., the reduction in public funding and the drop in the value of the dollar) and the growth of new fields of inquiry (e.g., women, gender, environment, and ethnicity), libraries operating at what had been expected to be the accepted norm to meet research needs found themselves increasingly reliant on other libraries. The ownership vs. access question parallels the expansive growth of electronic databases and the conversion of some materials to electronic format. At the same time the costs of computers dropped while their power increased, and campuses turned to investing in network access from dorms, classrooms, offices and the library.

### BIBLIOGRAPHERS AND COLLECTIONS

A reconceptualized library as the gateway to information (i.e., electronic storage and document delivery systems) guides much planning and management thinking. Certainly the benefits are not to be denied, but the implications for research materials remaining in traditional formats and continuing to present acquisition difficulties, as is especially true for Latin Americana, merit thought. It is generally accepted throughout the field that the circumstances of the 1990s dictate quite different strategies for developing first-rate research holdings. The growth of regional library consortia with carefully defined collecting responsibilities underscores this point. Such groupings more often than not arise from the initiative of bibliographers, frequently in anticipation of administrative decisions to cut budgets<sup>1</sup>. Such consortia will increasingly shape the extent of collecting practices ranging from new periodicals subscriptions to holdings of ephemera issued by marginalized groups. Part of the success thus far of such institutional links derives from the immediacy of ready access to information via electronic systems.

Perhaps equally important though is the recognition that the comprehensive collections argued for and funded during earlier decades are neither as feasible to form nor as institutionally needed as was believed. Part of this realization stems from a clear sense of the economic shocks traveling through academia, along with the admission that often large portions of the student body and faculty really do not engage in the type of research and writing that require the superior collections bibliographers proudly formed and universities cite in recruitment propaganda. At many libraries the position of bibliographer has undergone a reconfiguration by broadening of responsibilities to include work unrelated to a specific area, often in public services. Ultimately only a few large and well-funded libraries will retain the services of an individual dedicated exclusively to the various dimensions of collection development.

The peculiar niche that area studies librarianship has held for nearly half a century in research universities is one that can, if reconfigured, provide leadership based upon scholarly knowledge and familiarity with the ever-changing electronic opportunities for organizing and storing information. For the largest of collections and budgets, this role has to be assumed along with the existing demands of careful selection of research materials and such other related work as preservation decisions, advising researchers on the collections, and maintaining current awareness of research trends nationally and abroad. Technological implications for collections introduce entirely new fields for understanding and mastery by the bibliographer. Particularly daunting is the speed marking innovation and obsolescence. Taken together with substantive subject knowledge, these factors place the bibliographer in a central position to advocate, interpret, and even design policies and programs involving electronic applications. To ignore this expertise is to risk failure in interpreting the ever-changing developments that characterize today's electronically driven library. In sum, administrators need to incorporate these experts earlier into the discussions of programs and policies that involve electronic applications; no longer may the traditional boundaries that set apart the subject specialist from many standard functions of a library be considered fixed. Yet, at the same time, that all-important area expertise, and the time to maintain and improve upon it, should not be eroded, for without it, the quality of the collections and broad knowledge of research trends and methods applicable to the various social science disciplines will decline precipitously.

#### SCHOLARS: ACTIVE, PASSIVE, AND JUST BREATHING

For the bibliographer as a mediator and interpreter of information technology for the area studies community, certain immediate advantages need emphasis in order to gain adherence; and on the part of the researcher, mastery of use must be a primary objective. The entire thought process of research is likely to change for most individuals; new questions and new answers are feasible, often in sharply reduced time frames. Hence, styles of research are likely to change, thereby altering the traditional relations between researcher, library subject specialist, and research materials. Accessing through sophisticated search techniques vast bibliographic databases or full texts of documents, while also knowing when it is necessary to explore print sources, make for a profound change in research strategies. It would seem self-evident that an active researcher's primary technical task is mastery of the search methods and knowledge of the principal electronic sources. Although all this requires work, the salient fact is that unlike only a few years ago when nearly all electronic access was through a librarian, today the user has direct access. Costs of connections are less, and through the Internet one may encounter much that is free. The outcome of this is a more democratic atmosphere, one that allows the user to grapple directly with concepts and searches (superficially not unlike using the card catalog and print bibliographies), as well as engage in missions of discovery through World Wide Web crawlers and other information sources on the Internet. The youngest generations of scholars commonly expect the facilities and unrestricted availability of whatever they utilized as university students. Much that libraries currently provide meets these expectations, thereby fostering a new generation of researchers with greater independence and capability to access far broader arrays of documentation than was feasible ever before. Nevertheless, one is continually confronted by scholars unwilling to learn about electronic connectivity let alone to dedicate the time required for mastery. How can this be?

### *Tenured Deadwood*

This attitude and behavior should not be thought of as the exclusive domain of a particular discipline or generation, although older scholars are more likely to be intimidated by or hostile to the electronically-driven research world. Quite possibly another element, independent of the merits of connectivity, prevails. That is the matter of tenure and what is required to secure this life-long contract for employment. As one of the very few fields to guarantee such an arrangement, academia has brought upon itself as never before the glaring discrepancies between those engaged in research published after critical review by editorial boards and their anonymous reviewers, and those holding tenured posts but no longer contributing to scholarship through independently reviewed and published original research. As the senior members of the faculty, such individuals control or influence many aspects of the educational process. They are as likely to allow passage of inadequately researched student papers as they are to remain blithely oblivious to new research trends and contributors to their own fields. Today rarely is field mastery possible to maintain without being linked to a variety of scholarly communication mediums (e.g., listservs, electronic journals, newsletters and bulletin boards) commonly available even to those on small campuses or in foreign countries. In an employment system often characterized as unwilling or unable to judge competence at the senior levels, and empowered with few measures other than salary adjustments (and in some systems even without that option), no reason exists to justify thinking that those unproductive in the pre-electronic age are eager to transform their record. Such circumstances dictate the need for library-led strategies to reach the students subjected to such individuals; to expend energies on updating unproductive and entrenched faculty members is largely to waste one's time.

### *Embellishers of an Age Past*

The nostalgia factor accounts for another body of resistant or reluctant users. These individuals are convinced that manual systems always are superior, that all research needs are met by a carefully-crafted card catalog and through various print bibliographies. Such idealization of the past more often than not is a transparent reluctance to let go of and go beyond the old or familiar. Often this group considers scholarship as it had been in the earlier part of the century: the purview of an elite working in a linear fashion, never straying from the bounds of a discipline. For this group any measures that suggest speed in compiling bibliographies or benefiting from full texts in machine-readable format are incompatible with the notion of scholarship. Unfortunately for them, the hypotheses and topics engaging leading scholars today in the social sciences are not static. Research trends emphasize the strong tendency to utilize documentation from a variety of areas and sources heretofore considered the realm of a single discipline. Largely because the «nostalgia schoolers» elect to remain aloof from the immersion necessary to utilize effectively electronic databases, they are overwhelmed by what they see as the lack of specificity when venturing into subject searches. The inability to distinguish between a fixed vocabulary and a keyword search leads to frustrations and further conviction that thumbing through card catalogs with the cross-reference cards and «see also» references can never be improved upon<sup>2</sup>.

### *The Arrogant Clique*

This self-declared group believes and states that anyone working on their topic is personally known to them. It is inconceivable that anyone unknown to them could be working on their topic. Sometimes this is true, but increasingly it is not, especially when one considers the extent of Latin American scholarship worldwide, research within different disciplines on the same topic, and even the presence of interdisciplinary research. This perception of topic "ownership" is indeed curious in

a sphere of inquiry dedicated to seeking truth. Certainly personal connections remain significant in the scholarly world, and have, through electronic mail, been expanded and strengthened. Going beyond one's immediate circle holds the potential of revealing, if not indeed potentially fostering, a new generation of scholars, or possibly older ones now crossing fields or time periods. Some of this will reveal itself at professional conferences and in association newsletters identifying on-going research projects, but equally significant are citations of published works appearing in databases. It seems logical that a scholar would want to discover such contributions on a continuing basis, but for the arrogant this logic does not hold. One wonders whether the arrogance is self-contentment or rather predicated upon fear of the unknown (i.e., electronic databases), but how better to hide that fear than through the self-assured posture of topic domination!

### *The Executive*

Another resistant character is the scholar who protests against the «proletarianization of the executive class.» In this group are members of the other groups discussed above along with individuals one would consider reasonable by any other standard: when it comes to the direct handling of research needs that involve keyboards and data entry, that rightfully is the domain of the clerk, secretary or research assistant. Traditionally staff handled various phases of research prior to computers, so why not continue? Of course, whether such individuals readily grasp the full extent of power and potential brought by electronic connectivity will be for the scholar to discover. Those individuals blessed with highly self-motivated staffs will do well, but others may find (belatedly and often in potentially embarrassing situations) that someone ideal with print sources did not master the electronic ones, thereby rendering the results questionable in comprehensiveness or accuracy. Such situations may be enough to jar the scholar into a changed attitude toward direct engagement with electronic bibliographic and data systems.

### *The Powerless or Impoverished:*

A fifth group consists of the junior rank and/or impoverished. These professors by virtue of the low status accorded their rank do not warrant expenditure by their department for hardware or software. When low status combines with the fiscal realities of a low-priority department in terms of budgetary allocations and university mission, the result is an assistant professor forced to provide his or her own connections to the networks or to compete with students for use of public terminals. Outcomes, often colored by resentment and frustration, may have a wide qualitative variation.

## NEW APPROACHES IF NOT SOLUTIONS

Clearer recognition by librarians of these pervasive realities within academia is needed, and librarians must take them into better account when designing programs and materials to convey the extraordinary range of research opportunities available via the application of electronic connectivity. Overall the advantages of end-user computing merit continual emphasis. Able to connect to resources ranging from bibliographic databases to electronic mail, the researcher becomes increasingly autonomous and communication that previously required extensive time or cost can occur with a speed and economy unimagined merely a decade ago. Being able to reconceptualize a project or add specific factual content as a result of being linked to the appropriate database cannot be understated in terms of overall importance and personal satisfaction gained. As computer usage becomes an integral part of the research thought process, an increase in truly interdisciplinary research should occur<sup>3</sup>.

How then may user connectivity become a reality regardless of a library's size and user requirements? On the first level, general descriptive materials will suffice either to meet the superficial familiarity requirements of those no longer doing research yet needing to maintain a minimal level of bibliographic competence, or for all others to introduce the vast array of what is available and to develop the capability to select germane items. Crafting the program and text to meet the needs here requires not only thorough familiarity with content but also the ability to select that which serves most appropriately given the user's level of knowledge. By emphasizing the principal databases known for clarity of instruction and successful usage, the user's self-confidence should develop through positive initial experiences. Self-confidence developed empirically is the best, and achieving this end comes with a combination of instructional sheets, augmented by personal instruction as necessary, and practice. Never should this last element be understated: frequent and far-ranging exploration of databases perfects search strategies, strengthens the familiarity with content and sharpens awareness when a researcher switches to other sources.

The second level of approach requires a more detailed elaboration of databases and the methods of extracting information as well as the backward and forward linkages of one source to others. As with print sources, the researcher needs to establish a hierarchy of electronic sources. But because for some fields the sources are new or combined with others, a direct, unaltered transfer of arrangement or sequencing of consultation is impossible. Rather, a new hierarchy needs to be compiled, particularly useful databases being mentally marked, and unusual characteristics (both advantages and disadvantages) being noted. This type of mental sorting, accompanied by a steadily increasing sophistication as a searcher, should occur at this level of expertise. It is here that one expects to find students engaging in independent work and scholars maintaining current awareness or exploring related fields for materials and contacts. When considered from an interdisciplinary perspective, this level's program and materials are the most difficult to design and convey. Area specialists though are accustomed to thinking in such a mode because the process of developing research collections requires evaluating materials from a range of perspectives. Rarely will the contents of any primary source be of interest to only one discipline. Secondary sources often enhance the understanding of a topic by social scientists from other disciplines. Unified by the foreign area comprehensiveness that marks a bibliographer's approach, taking the next step to explaining what worlds exist beyond the traditional print one is logical.

When the researcher becomes fully versed in the databases and the ways of computer-assisted research, a new level of need is evident. At this point the isolation that often characterizes disciplines diminishes because the researcher must query sources often somewhat distant from those traditionally consulted and relied upon either in print or machine-readable format. Whether the approach—or for that matter results—are truly interdisciplinary will depend in part upon how information is arranged, described and analyzed. Ideally for connectivity to succeed, both the database and the instructions for its use require an expansiveness of imagination at the time of creation. No longer can it be considered acceptable to couch descriptions and instructions in terms exclusively used by a single discipline. Such a parochial understanding of the full range of potential use justifiably exposes to criticism those responsible for creating databases and other machine-readable resources. Indeed, in today's age of information, technology costs are too high to create ill-conceived products. Rather, systematic consultation with librarians responsible for explaining databases to users, along with a range of potential users, would contribute to avoiding some of the serious mistakes (i.e., unsatisfactory products) available commercially today.

Lest researchers become completely infatuated with technology, it merits recalling that much of what enables speed and testing of hypotheses relies on old-fashioned techniques of research and knowledge of materials or ability to develop hunches with a high degree of accuracy. No substitute exists for mastery of content, but determining what constitutes that canon of knowledge may often be aided by continual brainstorming with colleagues via electronic mail rather than at infrequent conferences, or by mail or telephone<sup>4</sup>.

### COLLECTIONS AND TECHNOLOGY'S IMPACT

Libraries and their users can expect continuing changes not only in the methods and systems for accessing collections bibliographically, but also in the formats of information available. The magnitude of the internationally mounted systems is stunning, so great in fact that only the most sophisticated user navigates easily through the maze of protocols to tap remotely located collections. With the small but steady tendency for some materials to appear only in electronic format, along with services providing the full text of regularly printed publications, certain niches of demand are met effectively albeit at considerable cost to the user. Such materials in fields relying upon current information with minimal, if any, need for historical perspectives offer the best example of market forces in action: substantial demand and a willingness to pay allow these full-text services to exist. Electronic journals represent a somewhat different formula, with the sponsoring organization or membership absorbing costs. But what destiny awaits those fields without the same urgency or funding base?

For Latin Americana this becomes a salient question. In situations with well-known infrastructural and fiscal limitations, converting even the principal information sources to electronic format is rather unlikely. Overall demand for much that interests research libraries is never great either in the country of origin or abroad. While such works will increasingly be cited electronically, and in a more timely fashion than heretofore through print bibliographies, it will still be necessary physically to collect, process and store such items. Items outside of the normal lines of commercial or academic press publishing are even less likely to arrive in research collections. For those responsible for developing research collections, the challenges substantively do not change; rather, the range of format varies and access questions may figure more prominently prior to a selection decision. For scholars accustomed to other fields boasting far more in electronic format, researching Latin American topics requires a mix of skills, not the least of which must be recognition that the collections being formed of primary and secondary documentation, in print or microform, represent a continuity. Bibliographers and others responsible for assisting researchers need to emphasize that collections have constraints and strengths, that research today uses many of the same time-tested techniques of the past in terms of cultivating existing depth and going elsewhere for other materials.

Through a variety of consortia collections are being rationalized as never before. Certainly technology assists in the process, but of equal or greater weight are budgetary limitations for acquiring, processing and storing materials. In a field of many experiments and projects devoted to cooperation, the current phase of collaboration for microfilming<sup>5</sup>, regional collecting<sup>6</sup>, and purchasing<sup>7</sup> reflects stronger commitments and immediacy of knowledge of a kind that was absent from previous, pre-electronic projects. That these efforts exist and influence what direction research may take requires broader recognition of implications by librarians and researchers. For libraries significant changes in known collecting patterns are feasible. The depth and extent of collecting may vary, primary sources may become more or less prominent, and costly purchases may represent shared responsibilities

with housing in a non-campus library. The necessities mandating such measures must be conveyed in a timely fashion to researchers of all levels, and periodic summaries of existing agreements presented again for new students and faculty. Some of this may be feasible through electronic means, especially informational gophers mounted on many campuses. Whenever a shared resource situation exists, descriptive handouts and electronic instructions need to be available. Participating institutions should collaborate in the preparation of the basic document and adjust it for individual descriptive need.

From the perspective of researchers in Latin American countries these inter-institutional collection trends ensure both better coverage and often enhanced access at least to the bibliographic citations if not to the works themselves. As more and more research centers located in Latin America gain Internet connections, we can expect a greater equalizing in some areas of research. With adequate funding and improved as well as cheaper telephone service, a few centers will pay for access to full-text databases, thereby putting their researchers nearly on par with those in the U.S. who work on topics relying largely upon such services. Nevertheless, in the Latin American context as in the domestic one, users must not begin with the false premise that everything worthy of attention is going to appear in some electronic format. This warning, especially for younger scholars more accustomed to navigating the Internet, should be illustrated by frequent examples of important materials that will not be machine readable. Imaginatively and skillfully traversing an ever-changing bibliographic landscape to locate pertinent documentation will increasingly be the hallmark of the sophisticated scholar. Attaining such expertise comes through partnerships with various participants in the realm of information. The pace of expansion will certainly not cease and probably not appreciably diminish. We can reasonably expect more to be written, more published and more acquired for permanent storage. Organizing all of it in meaningful ways for diverse users is the ongoing challenge. Success in this task is more likely when one understands the nature of the user's acceptance of electronic resources, has a substantive knowledge of the social sciences, and can rely upon a working familiarity with collections, print resources and those in machine-readable format.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Examples include such groupings as Latin America North East (LANE) consisting of Northeastern RLG libraries with large collections (Cornell, Harvard, Brown, Yale, Columbia, NYPL, New York University, Rutgers, Princeton and Pennsylvania), the Intensive Cuban Collecting Group (ICCG) comprising approximately 15 libraries nationally recognized for significant 20th century Cuban collections, the University of California-Berkeley and Stanford University agreement on collecting, and the Latin American Microform Project (LAMP) operating at the Center for Research Libraries with more than 30 institutional members. See Carl W. Deal, "The Latin American Microform Project: The First Decade," *Microform Review* 15:1 (winter 1986): 22-27. Since 1987 the Intensive Cuban Collecting Group consisting of most major U.S. libraries with strong Cuban interests and collections has identified, pieced together and microfilmed dozens of serial titles.
- <sup>2</sup> Nicholson Baker, "Discards," *The New Yorker* (4 April 1994): 80-83.
- <sup>3</sup> Avra Michelson and Jeff Rothenberg, "Scholarly Communication and Information Technology: Exploring the Impact of Changes in the Research Process on Archives," *American Archivist* 55 (Spring 1992): 244-251.
- <sup>4</sup> Electronic mail message Rebecca J. Scott to Peter T. Johnson, 19 March 1994.
- <sup>5</sup> Among those engaged in preservation microfilming are LAMP, ICCG, and the recent NEH-funded project among SOLINET (Southeastern academic libraries).
- <sup>6</sup> LANE for current newspapers in paper and microfilm, news magazines, and business/finance magazines, as well as its video consortium based at NYU; the branches of the University of California system also have shared country responsibilities.
- <sup>7</sup> LANE for video; METRO (NYPL, Columbia, New York University, and Rutgers); ephemera consortium for Mexico (Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Princeton Theological Seminary).