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Away From the Library

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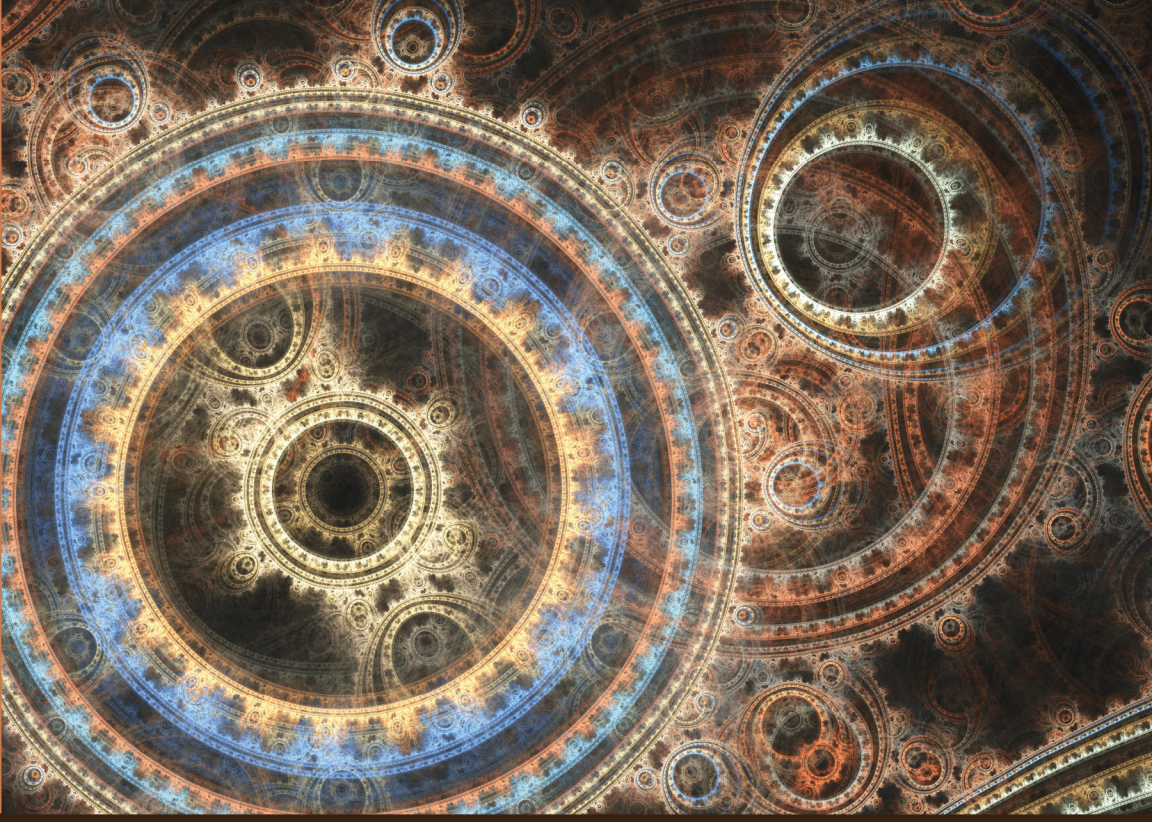

THE SELF AS SUBJECT

Autoethnographic Research into Identity, Culture, and Academic Librarianship

edited by
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Chapter 9*

Away from the Library

David H. Michels

Introduction

The professor's admission was a surprise: "I use Google for my research; I don't use the library." It is an assertion I usually hear from students. I was annoyed. Had the professor stopped going to the library in favour of its electronic sources? Had the professor abandoned the OPAC for the more user-friendly Google search? Or had the professor had abandoned the library's resources altogether? The comment was not directed to me specifically, and the discussion continued along. But it stuck with me; I was taking it personally.

Doing legal research traditionally has meant mastering not only a very structured process but also many specialized tools. Law libraries provided access to legal information, and librarians vetted authoritative sources. The digital age has eroded the guardian role, as much (though not all) of legal information can be accessed online. Too much of that digital information, however, is proprietary and expensive. It is a barrier to access to justice, a long-time concern of mine.[1] So why am I so irritated when someone says, "I use the Internet." I use the Internet all day long; I teach Google power searching. Is it just that I am feeling superseded?

As I reflected, it occurred to me that it touched on my role as a teacher. When I hear that assertion, I am feeling, "That is not how you do legal research." I have a conception of how legal research ought to be done, the process perfected by my profession and tested by eighteen years of experience. Adapted for new tools and, of course, digital information, it was unassailed. Shortcutting that process, for a

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novice researcher, might be considered "legal research malpractice."[2] The professor, however, is a careful and accomplished researcher, and I am conflicted.

My usual reactions to assertions like the professor's would be: "It was just hyperbole," "The professor was accessing library databases through Google unknowingly," or "The professor was missing out on a wealth of research." This time I thought: "Maybe the professor is doing just fine without the library." That thought was unsettling. I honestly did not know how easy or difficult it might be to NOT use the library. I decided then to put one interpretation of professor's assertion to the test: "Can I locate and access appropriate scholarly materials to answer a research problem without using academic and public library collections, tools, and resources?" It was to be a carefully crafted research study.

I was in the midst of planning my study when another professor e-mailed me: "Can you teach my students to do legal research with only free online tools they can access after they leave the University?" I was being asked to train students to NOT use the library. It seemed at the same time a reasonable and an impossible request. I am an experienced law librarian and instructor, but this perplexed me; was it even possible or ethical? I think I said exactly that to him, but he would not be dissuaded: his students needed this training. I thought back over the many lay people who arrived at my reference desk with a sheaf of Internet legal research documents in hand: statutes from foreign jurisdictions, cases that had been overturned, and legal principles misapplied. There is a reason why there are law libraries and law librarians: The Internet does not come with warning labels. Somehow I needed to teach these students to do better on their own and without the library.

This paper is about me, the librarian, irritated by the assertion and puzzled by the request. It captures just two of many events on a long and incomplete journey of reimagining librarianship and my changing role as librarian. I would test the assertion, plan the classes, and share those experiences. However, I would be dishonest if I did not also share that I am apprehensive about the results of my tests. *What might it mean for me if my clients could be just fine without the library?*

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Research Problem

What does my experience researching beyond the library, and teaching others to do the same, mean for my own sense of identity as an academic librarian? *How do I feel about the librarian stepping out of his library?*

Literature Review

How do I conduct research without the academic library? Ironically, I first turned to the Library and Information Science databases to explore the problem, because… well, it was what I was trained to do, and it was safe! I found a number of studies of the utility of the free online tools I planned to use. Stirbu and colleagues, for example, found Google Scholar a strong alternative to commercial databases for geographic literature.[3] Gehanno, Rollin, and Darmoni found that Google Scholar could be used as a stand-alone database for systematic reviews in medicine.[4] Pedersen and Arendt found 52 percent of computer science conference papers and 55 percent of periodical papers were freely available through Google Scholar.[5] The literature I reviewed suggested that the non-library literature searching is easier for some disciplines and harder for others. I recognized this as an important variable in my own non-library searching.

I also read Archie Zariski's *Legal Literacy*, an introduction to law and legal systems. He sees the Canadian legal system in crisis and makes a case for the importance of legal literacy. Legal literacy, he argues, provides tools to allow someone to engage the adversarial system without a lawyer, "Becoming legally literate is gaining full membership in a community that shares a legal system. Such membership comes not only with many constraints but also many opportunities for action and change."[6] *How will I help these students become legally literate?*

Beyond this study, I had another question: what does the future hold for the librarian if his clients are doing just fine without the library? The changes affecting libraries are frequently discussed in the academic literature, as well as the resulting impact on librarians' professional identity.[7] Professional identity is defined "as a description, or

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representation, of the self within certain professional practices."[8] Our profession has always been prone to"self-consciousness"[9] and recently has been described as in a state of crisis: "Desperate to slough off the old limiting stereotypes of the stern bespectacled cardigan-clad shushing controller of books, librarians are clamouring to convince themselves, each other and the wider community that there is far more to the humble librarian than meets the casual eye."[10] This "sense of crisis," often driven by technology, is reflected in how mid-career librarians perceived their roles: continually reinventing and realigning themselves and then positioning themselves as proactive drivers of positive change in libraries and the profession. Their drive to stay abreast and drive innovation, however, could create anxiety and feelings of being overextended and "like a dilettante."[11] I found studies exploring many aspects of identity perception, formation, and change.[12] *I am familiar with this literature, but reading through it again reassured me that I am not the only person wrestling with their professional identity in changing times.*

An article by Hicks spoke directly to me. She explored the interpretive repertoires that librarians use when articulating their professional identities and their social function. Using discourse analysis, she identified five repertoires: service, change, professionalism, library-as-place, and insider/outsider, each repertoire serving a particular function. *Service* was central to identity, and a core value, though occasionally challenged: "A service orientation isn't what makes librarians special. What makes the library profession unique is our set of skills and knowledge." Hicks pointed out the interrelationship between these ideas: expertise was valued because it led to high-quality service. *Service* was also linked to *Change*. The *Change* repertoire "was used to highlight how flexible librarians were when managing change of behalf of their users." *Technological change* was identified as having the largest effect of librarianship. It was seen as both a threat to the profession and an opportunity to reframe the librarian role as educators, facilitators, teachers, guides, and often technology experts. In opposition to high-tech competitors, librarians could help clients find not only high-quality information but also "honest and unbiased information." One respondent shared, "Technology can help free up librarians so they have more time to help people.… But the LIBRARIAN will always be the

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most important resource in the library" (emphasis in original). Service was also reflected in the relationships with users, in this context students and faculty. Librarians were positioned as underutilized and even misunderstood, and consequently, users were losing out on the services they needed. The *Service* repertoire was tied to the librarians' sense of professionalism, highlighting that librarianship was more than technical skills. Another important repertoire was *Library-as-place.* Libraries as a community space and service have positive associations for most library users. Librarians frequently grounded their identities in physical library and even in the digital space the libraries were becoming.[13]

"Librarians wanted their profession to be understood by others as valuable" and needed their users to validate their service and ensure their continued existence.[14] As I read Hicks' conclusions, I wondered about the reciprocal relationships that these librarians seemed to expect. They were committed to serve their clients but were frustrated when that commitment was not returned or even recognized. These ideas of service appear to be at the heart of our professional self-identity. It is significant that, although a few LIS studies have considered the affective dimensions of library work, I found that little attention has been given to emotion and the transformation of our profession.[15] *Are the repertoires Hicks identified reflected in my self-talk about my work and my roles?*

Methods and Data Collection

The methods I used to test the non-library research assertion were straightforward. I formulated search queries from three different academic research areas: Canadian Law and Religion, Library and Information Ethics, and Sociology of Religion. I am familiar with these fields. I choose four online search tools: Google Scholar, Google Books, Google Play, and Microsoft Academic Search. I conducted the searches off campus while not logged in to any proxy services so I would not inadvertently access library subscriptions. Each literature search took approximately sixty minutes. Document records I found during the literature search were recorded in a Word document with notes on access options and any costs. I also took notes on challenges and barriers to my searching.

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To teach the non-library class, I created an online research guide to non-library legal research using a LibGuide application. The link to the guide was embedded in the course page in the class management software. I demonstrated the guide in research instruction sessions for non-law undergraduate students over two semesters, and it was accessed 338 times over four months. I received positive feedback from the course instructor. Below I describe the guide development, and I reflect on my thoughts and feelings about the creation and use of this tool.

In order to reflect on my experience searching beyond the library, I used an autoethnographic method to observe and reflect on my activities. The definition and characteristics of this research method are explored elsewhere in this volume. In this study I am following Carolyn Ellis' understanding of autoethnography as "writing about the personal and its relationship to culture," in this case, my place in academic librarianship.[16] It is autobiographical and written in the first person. I gathered data for my reflections by recording all my searching using a web usability software that captured video of the full transactions, including the search screen, cursor movements, facial expression, and audio. Using a talk-aloud method, I recorded my observations and reflections throughout each search. Charters' survey of the think-aloud literature found that it can be an effective method for gathering data that can be interpreted qualitatively.[17] Charters recommended that the think-aloud method required some form of triangulation.[18] To achieve this, I recorded brief written notes on my experiences after the recorded search sessions. I transcribed the audio recordings and coded key themes that emerged from the narratives. I would like to believe I was open coding, allowing the codes to arise naturally from the text. However, in an autoethnography, can I ever really stand apart to be an objective cataloguer of my own words and thoughts?

The nature of autoethnographic research raises questions about the applicability of traditional ethics review for research involving humans. I am the only research subject visible in this study; however, I must also consider the implications or harms that I might self-inflict and inflict on those with whom I interact. Participation in ethics

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review helped me to think through potential issues. The research proposal for this study was submitted to the Dalhousie University Social Science and Humanities Research Ethics Board and received approval on December 10, 2015. *Research plan and ethics approval in hand, I began my study; I was still paddling in familiar waters.*

Findings and Reflections

Part One: Moving Away

I use Google for my research. I don't use the library.

I was excited to start these literature searches, and I could see that enthusiasm in the video recordings. *I enjoy the thrill of the hunt; it is part of the reason I became a reference librarian!* My written reflections after my search sessions revealed other emotions: "It almost feels like I'm being sneaky by not using the library tools.… It does take conscious effort to avoid these tools, as that is my first instinct." I described feeling handcuffed or tied up. I had not realized how difficult it would be to break the library habit, and I wondered repeatedly aloud what it must be like for our newly unplugged graduates. I wanted to go back to the OPAC and check my results, as that was my usual benchmark. Microsoft Academic Search was not the most effective tool, but its features were closest to a traditional OPAC. I found myself liking it because of that. *How would I be able to train students not to use the library?*

As I listened to my narrative, themes emerged: barriers and successes in non-library online research, old familiar habits of library research, reflections on librarianship, emotions, and unanswered or rhetorical questions. I talked a lot about barriers during all the searches. Of course there were challenges locating appropriate materials, and then the barriers of currency of the materials, the cost, or limited access. I also encountered structural issues such as poor formatting or broken links. Tellingly, my greatest annoyances related to librarian concerns like the quality of records: "It wasn't obvious from the record that it was a book review," or "See, you have got to let me know what it is." I know what I think a good record should

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look like, and I was clearly irritated when what I found failed that standard. At one point I encountered a file in a university repository. The record was full of metadata, and I had to scroll down to find the download link. It bothered me that a searcher has to navigate all this, and I asked, "Who cares about metadata except librarians?" I was familiar with many of the key authors in these fields, but at one point I exclaimed, "I don't know who these people are." If I do not know them, how would a novice searcher know if these are authoritative? Selecting and vetting good materials has always been an important task for libraries, but I asked, "Does the library still vet material for you, and how much do they vet?" *Has this task been mostly delegated to publishers?*

There were no great "eureka" moments, but I was often pleasantly surprised and pleased with what I could find. Even among preview versions of books I found adequate material to answer my research problems at an undergraduate level. Tools like Google Books and Google Play offered good alternatives to searching our library OPAC largely because they led to multiple means of accessing materials. I found greater success when the search tools led me to documents in subject repositories like ResearchGate and Academia than institutional repositories that were frequently less advanced. I was surprised by both the uneven quality of library repositories and, in the case of library and information science, how little of the research was open access. *Were we not supposed to be the leaders in open access?* I often reflected on librarianship in the narratives. Some expressions were positive: "in good librarian fashion," while others, like the above example, were critical. I frequently noted that I did not need the library to access these materials, but the alternatives could be costly. We librarians often argue that library materials are free to the students and faculty, but I reflected that students do pay for a rapidly rising cost for access through their tuition, fees, and the university bookstore. *Is it really free?*

The questions I asked myself during my searches were often quite telling. Some were questions I wanted to follow up, and others were rhetorical. I began with the personal challenge: "How much could you do?" I discovered I could do quite a bit. I was repeatedly impressed by the quality and the look of some online subject and

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vendor repositories. I thought in contrast about some of the university repositories I visited, and asked, "Why can't we [be more like the others]?" I asked: "Is this article worth $25?" "I wonder how much it costs [to research my whole paper]?" "How would the pay-per-use model compare with the high cost of academic libraries?" "Who is their market?" and "How do services like Google Play gather their content?" It struck me that I know very little about our competition.

I was successful in my non-library searching. I identified adequate material to answer my various research questions to an undergraduate level, though more advanced research was often beyond the scope of free or inexpensive resources. I often identified key texts and authors that I knew were leaders in their fields. Without an expert-level knowledge, I would not know which works are more authoritative and which were not but… they were there and I found them. I was pleased with myself; I hate getting stumped, and I pride myself on my search skills. I was also dismayed with the implications; I had demonstrated some people might do just fine without the library's collections. Surely they would need me to train them in search skills like Sare and Bales and Hicks suggested. *Would they think to ask me*?

Part 2: Moving On

Teach my students online tools they can access after they leave the University.

My initial reaction to the request to teach student legal research using free online tools was that it was not possible. The law (statutes and cases) is publically accessible, but most of the tools for legal research are designed for academics and legal professionals. They are proprietary and expensive. The few free tools seem inadequate to the task. Yet everyday self-represented litigants, entrepreneurs, and small business owners encounter challenges that require legal knowledge. They cannot afford the subscriptions available to law firms or universities. I was reminded of Zariski's argument that legal literacy was essential for full participation in society.[19]

I spent considerable time thinking through this problem and sought out colleagues' advice. I pulled off the shelf some of my favou-

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rite legal research handbooks. I assured myself that the legal research process remained the same, and this became the structure for my guide and lesson plan. There was a section on legal analysis: Facts, Issues, Law, Analysis, and Communication.[20] It was tool-unspecific, but my mind went immediately to the kinds of library-based tools I use to demonstrate each of these steps to my law students. I created a section on essential legal research concepts: jurisdiction, currency, and authority. These concepts were fundamental to information literacy, and I could demonstrate each using free online sources.

Then came the hard part. "Good legal research," in the paradigm in which I was trained, begins with authoritative secondary literature to orient the searcher to topic, identify key concepts and terms, and references to the law. Typically, I would send students to a legal encyclopaedia and then textbooks, but now I did not have a library. I reluctantly began with *Wikipedia*. I have told students that *Wikipedia* was a useful tool to get oriented to a topic and find citations to better sources. The problem was that I wasn't entirely convinced; I praise the utopian ideals of crowd-sourced knowledge, but I do not quite trust the crowd. I was relieved to find the articles on Canadian legal topics well organized and written. They provided basic explanations of the law and links to online law sources (thus fitting into my legal research paradigm). Another valuable source was the local legal information society. It has created online resources for self-represented litigants, and I have previously assisted it in creating online materials. I have referred lay people to these sources, but using them for academic purposes seemed inadequate. I began to see these tools in a new light, and I felt a little embarrassed by the quality of the guides I previously created for it. They did not seem good enough now.

There are several online legal dictionaries, including a Canadian dictionary that is part of a publisher's website. Defined terms were followed by links to the online store, where seekers could purchase print or digital copies of introductory textbooks on the appropriate topic. I disliked directing students to an online store and reflected on my reluctance. The publisher was reputable, and the textbooks it advertised were ones I would recommend in the library. The library was the middleman, and I resisted cutting it out. I had to come to terms with the reality that, without ready access to a law library, purchasing

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several key texts would provide students with the necessary foundation. I included the publishers. I also included tools like a guide to legal abbreviations and even other online guides to research.

The next steps would involve locating appropriate statutes and case judgments that constitute the law on the issue the students are exploring. In Canada, current legislation and a substantial collection of case judgments are accessible online. These tools, however, were created not for laypeople but for the legal community and assumed the user understood the law and legal terminology. This is why beginning with secondary sources is so essential. Even as I explained this to the students, I had to catch myself in my own use of jargon. I created a number of video walk-throughs for point-of-need guidance in using these tools and embedded them into the guide.

I was pleased with the guide I created, in spite of the resource limitations. It raised afresh many access to justice issues. If I accepted Zariski's premise, that legal literacy was essential for full citizenship in society, then this would take my challenge to a new level of moral obligation. The initial class was successful, and I received positive feedback. I have now used this tool for other classes. *Have I really converted?*

Discussion

I asked the research question "What does my experience researching beyond the library and teaching others to do the same mean for my own sense of identity as an academic librarian?" Though bespectacled, I like to think I am NOT Davis's shushing librarian clamouring for recognition.[21] As I reflected on the library literature, I recognized that I was framing myself as Sare and Bales's mid-career librarian "orienting myself" (Part 1) "and others" (Part 2) "to a shifting profession," though the adjective *shifting* seems inadequate.[22] I feel the sense of crisis they spoke of pervading the librarianship discourse. I am a tech geek and position myself that way; that technological change could be perceived as a threat seems a grand unresolved contradiction. Hicks's observation was, "Librarians wanted their profession to be understood by others as valuable" and that, I believe,

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is at least part of my unease.[23] I believed that I, and my library, had something valuable to offer that was being missed. I identified in my talk-aloud transcripts several of Hicks's repertoires, most frequently: Service, Professionalism, and Change.

In Part 1, *Change* was the dominant theme in my narratives. Certainly *technological change* as threat was evident, as well as opportunity to offer more for our clients than the library could. Hicks believed the *Change* repertoire was often used to communicate "how flexible librarians were when managing change on behalf of their users."[24] I wrestle with whether this was what I was expressing. There were times in my narrative when I sounded very inflexible, and I struggled with old habits. I clearly heard my belief in a "right way" and "wrong way" to do effective research, and even "good" and "bad" information sources, similar to the librarians Hicks observed. This came out in how I measured each tool and result against my internalized standard. My standard is an amalgam of the standards of the disciplinary community of law and, of course, librarianship. I imagine myself as the protector of the standards, a role tied up in my sense of professionalism and service to the legal profession. What if the negotiated standards for legal research were shifting? The professor's assertion suggested that it might be for some. How would I recognize and adjust to those changes?

I would not have thought the *library-as-place* repertoire would be significant, but earlier I restated my question "*How do I feel about the librarian stepping out of his library*?" In this context it was the digital library more so than the brick one which represented the *library-as-place*. I, like the librarians in Hicks's study, had a role in building its virtual portal, developing the OPAC, and selecting the databases. My identity was tied up in the virtual place. Despite the apparent success of non-library searching, I was not prepared to surrender the library position of privilege but instead questioned how it might do better.

In Part 2, the *Change* repertoire was still dominant, particularly in respect to my teaching task. I did not seem to question whether it was a librarian's task to teach these students, again echoing Hicks's enthusiastic librarian, "the LIBRARIAN will always be the most important resource." Teaching research skills is our domain. However,

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I did question my skills to do so effectively. That desire to stay abreast and drive innovation described by Sare and Bales did create stress and anxiety. I was continually being pushed to leave my comfort zone of the familiar tools and processes. I was presented to the class as the expert, but I did not feel that way. I was learning along with my students. *This is not abstract; it is my life, and it is both intriguing and unsettling*. As I reflected on my narratives above, it was the *Service* repertoire that I believe drove my story. I wanted to provide the best resources for my clients, to be responsive to our faculty's needs, and to fulfill my professional obligation to their students. Somehow in the midst of this, I connected these experiences with the wider social question of access to justice.

Conclusion

How have these experiences impact my identity as a librarian? Moving away and moving on from the library challenged me to examine not only the sources of legal information, but what is and how we do "good" legal research. Perhaps intertwined with technological changes is a legal information paradigm shift. Previously, my perception of the information problem was simply one of access: proprietary tools limit access to legal information, and complex systems restrict laypeople's ability to understand and use that information. Perhaps these barriers I saw are instead contributing to a new ecosystem of accessible legal sources and tools. I will need to understand what shape this shift is taking if I am to respond. Despite the digital and funding disruptions, the library, its tools, and its collections are not going away anytime soon, and I will still collect, use, recommend, and teach these resources. In the short term, that part of who I am as a librarian will not change. I currently teach library research and legal research. These tasks overlap by are not synonymous. To equip my students, I had to engage with a wider information ecosystem than I was unaccustomed to and challenge some of my biases about "good information." I, for example, will be rethinking many of the research guides I have created and shared. There are too few opportunities to be reflective in librarianship. Taking those opportunities is both disconcerting and reassuring.

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