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Whither the Law Librarian?

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We're Information Experts. **Really.**
They just call us librarians.



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Information Experts. **Really.**
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By Fritz Swanson

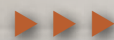
Whither the Law Librarian?

In Fact, the Digital Age Makes Law Librarians More Necessary than Ever

A 2008 story in *Forbes* magazine estimated that Google handled 235 million searches a day. If we suppose that the number has risen a bit to a quarter of a billion of searches every day, that breaks down to more than 35 searches a day for every man, woman, and child on the face of the Earth.

If a machine can do that, where does that leave the librarian?

I spoke to four of the 12 librarians at the University of Michigan Law Library to get an answer. **In addition to being credentialed librarians, all four are also lawyers.** They want people to know that many stereotypes about librarians are outdated, and that they in fact are helping to advance digital research rather than hinder it.



The Image of the Librarian

One popular image of the librarian, a quiet but strict book-shelver who occasionally glares sternly, seems a poor match against this digital behemoth. How does the law librarian fit into the digital age?

Quite well, thank you, according to Michigan Law's librarians.

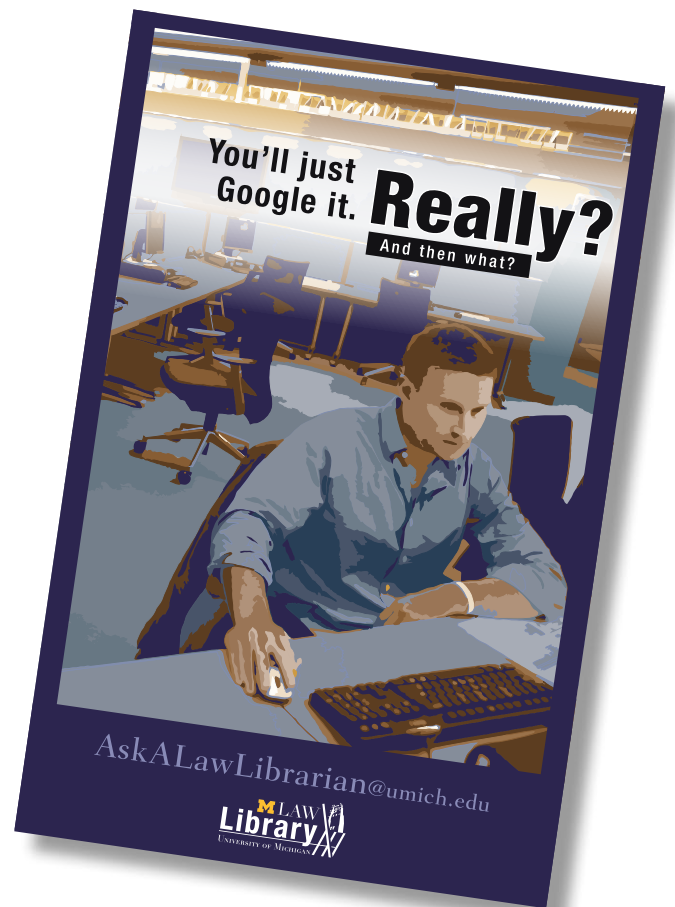
Barbara Garavaglia, '80, notes: "I've never experienced in my entire career any problem whatsoever in embracing technology. ... For me it has always been: What is the most efficient and effective way to get this work done?"

The Law School launched an educational campaign last year to illustrate the many ways librarians can assist students, and to remind people that technology hasn't supplanted the need for librarians. "We're information experts. Really. They just call us librarians," states one of the posters from the campaign.

Shaking up that old image is a welcome change, notes Jocelyn Kennedy, until recently the head of the circulation services unit and a reference librarian at Michigan Law. She believes many people hold a misperception that stems from their childhood interactions with librarians. "Their memory of a librarian, right, is their elementary school librarian, who helped them choose *Curious George*."

Kennedy, who now is associate director at the library at the University of Connecticut School of Law, has never once helped a student find a copy of *Curious George*. Rather, she spends a lot of her time assisting students with finding information through digital resources.

Which makes it all the more maddening when people say to her, "Do they even need librarians anymore? Isn't everything on the Internet?"



This educational campaign about the value of library staff won the Best PR Tool Kit category in this year's AALL (American Association of Law Libraries) Excellence in Marketing Award. It was created by the Law School's communications department.

Driving Innovation

Garavaglia points out that, throughout time, librarians have managed information in many formats, including "oral history, stone tablets, papyrus, acidic paper that deteriorates," and now digital information. In response to these changes, librarians changed how they did the work, but the "nature of the work" didn't change. When you are a librarian, "you are a specialist in how to find and use information."

She offers as an example the digital database Westlaw, with which she has been working for the last 30 years. The online legal research service collects primary legal materials, court opinions, laws, regulations, books about the law, journals, and secondary materials.

"When I first started using Westlaw, it was very unsophisticated. I was on the phone with them every day saying, 'This is really annoying.' And [Westlaw's] development took place over many years, and those developers responded to the needs of the librarians.

"Programmers were putting this software out for people to use, but they didn't know about the underlying resources they were making searchable. The knowledge of the materials and the research strategies, which came from librarian users, was critical to making those products what they are today. And that continues to this day. Now they hire librarians to help develop those products."



The Value of Law Librarians at Law Firms

Law librarians are “information and research professionals in an era when finding essential information is more important than ever,” according to a recent ABA Journal.com article written by Patrick Lamb, ’82, founder of the Valorem Law Group in Chicago. “Associates, who do most of the research in law firms, are not research or information professionals. . . . When you live in a value-fee world, someone who finds the right information efficiently is really valuable.”

The article prompted a spirited debate about the value of law-firm librarians in an age when much information is available online. “I’d hire a law librarian . . . if I could afford one,” said one commenter. “My sixteen-year-old daughter maintains my library,” wrote another.

Joyce Manna Janto, president of the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) and deputy director of the University of Richmond School of Law Library, points out that the value of law-firm librarians shouldn’t be in doubt.

“I think in firms especially, the lawyers forget that the librarians are just as well educated as they are,” Janto notes. “They have no idea that we are able to go beyond the stereotypical ‘reference question’ and that the librarians are a good source for client development and client retention.

“It may have to do with the fact that our user base is so well educated. They seem to assume that if they can’t find it, it can’t be found,” she contends. “Then they’re amazed that we find that piece of information for them. They sometimes become embarrassed, ‘Oh I should have found that for myself.’

“Librarians are, or should be viewed as, the information professionals in any organization. It is our job, our responsibility, to find, analyze, and categorize, teach others how information they need to do their jobs. find the

As a young associate at Harness, Dickey & Pierce, Jennifer Selby leveraged her understanding of the value of the firm’s librarian to get ahead in her job.

“At HDP, which was a medium-sized patent firm then, there was one librarian and no support staff,” recalls Selby, now a senior associate librarian at Michigan Law. “What some of the summer associates quickly learned (and I also took advantage of as a young associate) was that the librarian was a treasure trove of helpful information. Many times, she helped me craft effective searches for expensive online databases—like Lexis or Westlaw—saving me from looking bad by racking up too much in online searching costs.”

The firm’s librarian also helped Selby navigate the paper collection and “pointed me in the direction of a more obscure treatise, journal series, or looseleaf service that helped me find the answer to an obscure legal question.”

Selby knows, though, that not all associates, or even partners, at firms are willing to go to the firm librarian for assistance. “I knew that others in my same position were not availing themselves of her expertise either out of ignorance or really arrogance.”

The cost of such arrogance, Janto argues, is a loss of valuable time and money. At worst, it can lead to an attorney using incomplete or inaccurate information.

“There is so much information available, and it takes a trained researcher to sift through the dross to find the gold,” notes Janto. “As I tell my students, it only takes a few bucks and a little determination to become a content provider on the Internet. Many users, even well-educated lawyers, don’t always think to check the information they find on the Internet for currency, accuracy, and authenticity.”—FS

The Limits of Technology

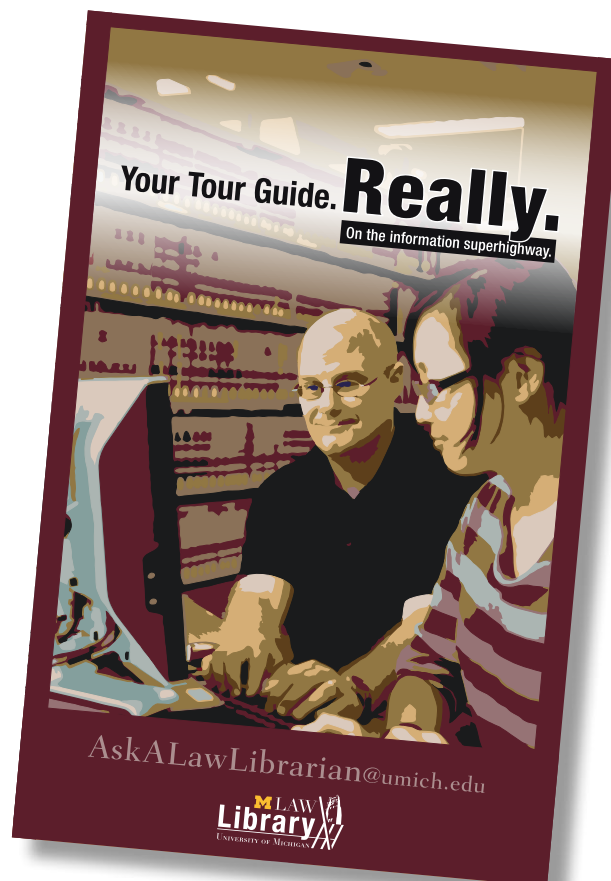
For students of today, who all but came out of the womb doing Google searches, it may seem unlikely that much of the information they need isn't retrievable using a Google search, even if the material is available free on the web. A variety of factors prevent a Google search from retrieving everything, including the structure of a website or its search interface, the need for a password, a resource's use of a controlled vocabulary, the absence of the material from the Internet, or a bad search. Because of that, researchers who rely solely on Google run the risk of missing critical information.

"But even for what is on the Internet," notes Kennedy, "when you do a Google search and you get 10 million hits ... you would never be able to view more than 10,000 things. That's just their limit. And you're only going to look at the first 10 or 20 hits and think that you have found the information you need."

Librarian Kincaid Brown, '96, notes that people want information in the fastest way possible. "Back when books were what was available, that was the fastest way to do it, but now, sometimes Google may be the fastest way to get to something. Where we librarians come in is, sometimes the book is faster. And we often know ahead of time which way will be faster. The book is right there on the shelf; you can get it right there instead of trying to figure out how to sort your 10,000 Google hits."

It's no accident that the reference librarians at the Michigan Law Library are all required to both have a master's degree in library science and a J.D., and to have passed the bar exam.

"To move through this collection," notes librarian Jennifer Selby, "you need to think like a librarian, and you need to think like a lawyer. When I was at a law firm, the people who remained at the law firm were the people who could get the information the fastest. I saw people waste thousands of dollars sitting on Westlaw trying to find their information and not knowing what they were doing. So, there is a real liability issue here when people don't understand how this information is structured, and how best to get at it."




The Mind of a Librarian

Changes in technology have given many people the impression that the "problem" of research has been solved. In some ways, though, technology has flooded researchers with so much information that, now more than ever, they need a guide to help them navigate the chaos.

Returning to the question at the beginning of this article, where does the digital age leave the librarian?

The answer: Even when a tool has been built to search this data, whether the tool was a card catalogue, the Dewey Decimal system, or a search tool like Google or Westlaw, you have always needed the expertise of a librarian to teach you and help you to use that tool effectively.

These search skills can't be encoded fully into a tool. These skills, instead, are programmed into the librarians who oversee a collection. They come from the years of training and experience a librarian has moving through the very specialized knowledge of a law library. They come from the mind of a librarian. 

Editor's Note: After 38 years at the Law School, Law Library Director Margaret Leary will retire in July. Her book, Giving It All Away: The Story of William W. Cook & His Michigan Law Quadrangle, is scheduled to be published later this year. Leary will remain in an academic environment after her retirement; she has been accepted to the M.A. program in creative writing at Eastern Michigan University. Look for more about Leary in the fall issue of the Law Quadrangle.

Michigan Law Library Lends Documents to Haiti Project

Earthquakes, hurricanes, and cholera have conspired to devastate Haiti in recent years. While residents, governments, and aid workers have joined forces to improve the basic necessities of Haitians—health, housing, food—Jerry Dupont, '67, realized his expertise could help the island nation as well.

"I was talking to Kent McKeever, the director of the law library at Columbia. We were chatting about the earthquake in Haiti, and we said we ought to be able to do something," Dupont recalls. "I said, well, we can build a library."

Dupont, the founder and longtime executive director of the Law Library Microform Consortium (LLMC), didn't waste any time. He worked with Columbia Law and the Library of Congress to begin collecting titles, such as Haitian constitutional documents, judicial publications, and treatises. Then he asked a few other law schools to assist, including his alma mater. Dupont served as assistant director of the University of Michigan Law Library until 1973, when he left to establish the University of Hawaii Law School Library.

In all, the LLMC's Haiti Legal Patrimony Project has collected more than 700 books and other documents, with 75 coming from Michigan Law. The only libraries that contributed more were the two core donors to the project: Columbia Law and the Library of Congress. Resources have been donated by dozens of libraries around the world.

"It shows how libraries collectively think. You can never say Harvard has everything, Michigan has everything," notes Dupont. "There's a lot of stuff scattered around. Two unique titles were even found in Germany."

Several people at the Michigan Law Library helped to locate the titles regarding Haiti, including some that the project had requested and some that Dupont hadn't identified until learning that U-M had them. "Jerry had to track these libraries down, going to smaller and smaller libraries until he found everything he was looking for. It was a treasure hunt," says Bobbie Snow, an assistant director of the Law Library and the U-M leader of the effort. "It's a huge bibliographic project."

Now, the LLMC is in the process of scanning the books and other materials, most of which are on loan and will be returned to the library of origin. From there, a massive digital record will be created that combines the strengths of the various collections.

How the images will be delivered for use by the people of Haiti is still under negotiation, Dupont notes. An outside agency, possibly the Digital Library of the Caribbean at the University of Florida, may host the free service until the Haitian government can take over.

While the primary beneficiaries of the project are the people of Haiti, Dupont points out that the resources also will help researchers around the world. "Libraries now will have access to a much richer collection than they otherwise would have," he says.

Notes Margaret Leary, director of the Michigan Law Library: "This project is an excellent example of the way collection development policies result in the whole being much greater than any one library."—KV



COURTESY OF JERRY DUPONT, '67

