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Sent: Thursday, 24 April 2008 12:27 PM
To: Information Futures Commission
Subject: Feedback via InfoFutures web site

From the Information Futures feedback form:

----- Comments -----

Hello,

As a postgrad student at Melbourne Uni I was recently invited by my Department (Psychology, School of Behavioural Science) to comment on the proposed plans to replace our physical libraries with electronic repositories. As the School has decided not to make a coordinated response I have been encourage to send my contributions on directly to you. I include them below.

I understand you are accepting and collating comments from students and staff regarding the University's deliberations over the future of our libraries. I have included some thoughts below which I hope may be of some help.

While it is undeniably true that we are immersed in a digital age, and that knowledge is being increasingly disseminated electronically, it seems to me that the rationale for closing our libraries is a little flimsy. There is far more to learning than can be represented in (electronic) words. An electronic book is not equivalent to a hard copy book. There is no smell, colour, texture, weight, or physical presence to electronic media. All these things communicate something about the content of a book, placing it in a cultural, social and historical context.

While this in itself would be insufficient reason to retain our libraries, it does serve to highlight the somewhat impoverished and sterile nature of electronic literature. Electronic storage and delivery of information is very efficient and cost effective, however it misses the point that we are not computers, we are humans! We thrive on multi-sensory stimulation. We are more than just a set of eyes stuck on a walking brain.

Possibly of greater learning value than the physical and contextual aspects of printed material though, is the intrinsic invitation to browse. The intellectual meandering that is typical of users of bricks and mortar libraries is, I would argue, an incredibly fruitful activity. It encourages lateral thinking, creativity, awareness of cross-disciplinary connections, broad reading, reflection, and imagination. In contrast, sourcing electronic media is usually a very structured and targeted process (which, indeed, is one of its strengths).

From a purely practical perspective, it remains the case that the vast majority of printed material (especially pre mid 1980's) is only available in hard-copy form. Does the University propose scanning all this information? If not, how would students access it? What effect would it have on learning and research activities if students had ready access only to information from a particular point in time onwards? Surely one would expect biases to appear.

I suspect there would likely be substantial environmental implications of moving toward an entirely electronic library system. From my own experience in coordinating electronic libraries, it is the norm rather than the exception that students choose to print to hard copy any electronic media they are interested in. People tend not to read articles and books on screen - they prefer hard copy. One might expect therefore that in the absence of physical libraries, printing and paper consumption would increase exponentially.

Most of the thoughts I've noted here just reflect my opinions. But they are all testable. If the University is serious about this, could it not undertake some independent research to find answers to these and other issues?

For a university that prides itself on excellence, its suggestion of closing physical libraries seems to me to be a backwards step that puts business ahead of learning.

While I am a strong proponent of electronic media, I do not believe that this should come at the exclusion of traditional print media.

In short, I believe strongly in the value of continuing with our bricks and mortar libraries.

Regards,

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