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Indiana University

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"Information to Inspiration: Knowledge & Vision Shaping the Future"

Indiana University, where I am pursuing my Masters of Library Science degree, is fortunate enough to own a spectacular off-site compact storage facility. On a tour of the processing and storage spaces last semester I was impressed by the efficient processing methods and use of space. The facility also has an outstanding reputation for accurate delivery and reliable service. I believe that off-site compact storage facilities will become more common in the future, particularly among universities with large research collections. Materials stored in such carefully controlled facilities survive hundreds of years longer than those stored in normal library stacks. Academic libraries are searching for ways to free up more space for demanded technology commons. Libraries are facing increasing pressure, too, as university administrators are faced with building freezes and eye the relatively large spaces that libraries occupy.

Despite the many benefits of off-site compact storage facilities, there are some disadvantages. One of the strongest arguments I have heard against such restricted access spaces is that researchers can no longer browse for the materials they need. Many researchers, and librarians, as well, rely on browsing as one of their fundamental search methods. Even the most experienced and knowledgeable searcher cannot identify all the possible places where relevant resources may be located. Indeed, researchers often make innovative connections because of the serendipitous discovery of a text found while browsing through the stacks.

Current OPACs do not enable patrons to effectively "browse" a library's collection in the same way that they can by walking through the stacks. Many OPACs provide the capability to browse linearly through the holdings based on call number, subject headings, or title. These features, however, do not sufficiently replicate our experience of letting our gaze wander over thousands of titles grouped compactly on shelves, organized by subject. Of course, the shelf groupings by subject are not always ideal. Each book can be placed in only one spot in the stacks, even if it covers multiple subjects as many texts do.

I envision an OPAC of the future that not only approximates the traditional experience of browsing, but improves upon it. Digital environments expand the realm of what is possible. In the "digital stacks" there is no physical constraint limiting the placement of each resource to one single spot. First, of course, the interface and display technology must be improved. I am confident that over the next five to ten years we will see interfaces that allow more natural interactions with online environments. We must get beyond the current linear display of OPAC queries. In the future, improved online browse capabilities will enable researchers and librarians not only to continue to use this important search strategy, but also to enjoy its expanded powers in a digital environment. ❖