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THE QUINTESSENTIAL LAW LIBRARY AND LIBRARIAN IN A DIGITAL ERA

Femi Cadmus[†]

LIBRARIES, LIKE MOST INSTITUTIONS and industries today, are faced with disruptive technologies that challenge their relevancy in a digital era. As a result, erstwhile notions and nostalgia associated with the quintessential library and librarian are changing rapidly. Certain images are evoked when one thinks of the archetypal law library, the elegant reading room with soaring ceilings, sturdy oak tables, burished brass desk lamps, and a comprehensive collection of primary sources and treatises, housed in handsome oak bookshelves.¹ The academic law library where I work, built in the early twentieth century, typifies this image of the classic library and still looks very much the same today. Walking through the reading room, time stands still and one is immediately swept back to another era.² The quintessential law library is not just aesthetically exquisite, but also renders top-notch services provided by well-trained librarians who today are often required to have degrees both

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¹ Many of the earliest academic law libraries evolved from private collections serving the purposes of lawyers, to expanded collections in academic and private law libraries.

² The Cornell Law Library (Gould Reading Room) has been recognized as one of the most beautiful college libraries in the world. See flavorwire.com/240819/the-25-most-beautiful-college-libraries-in-the-world and www.deseretnews.com/top/3163/8/7-Cornell-Law-School-Library-The-27-most-beautiful-college-libraries-in-America.html.

in law and in library and information science. However, this was not always the case. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was not uncommon to have faculty, law students, and even janitors overseeing academic law libraries.

By the turn of the twentieth century, there was a more concerted push for professionalism in academic law libraries and trained librarians started to take the helm.³ Even back then there was a lingering frustration with the seeming inability of some library users to understand the work of the law librarian. In a 1929 article in the *ABA Journal*, Frederick Charles Hicks, Law Librarian at Yale Law School, reported that,

Not long ago, an eminent professor who has been using libraries all his life said to me, “What do librarians do, anyway? When they have the library started and stocked with books, I don’t see how they continue to keep busy?”

Hicks then sought to answer the question in painstaking detail, sketching out the qualifications and work of what he called the “ideal or composite librarian.”⁴

Almost a century later with technological advances and the exponential growth and availability of digital information, librarians are more apt to field comments like, “What do librarians do? Everything is online.”⁵ The prickly problem of conveying the expertise of librarians and the value of the library as a place persists and is even more complicated in the digital era as collections are shifting from print to electronic.

The American Association of Law Libraries (AALL), viewed as the symbolic birthplace of the profession of Law Librarianship,⁶ is a membership organization for different law library types, including academic, law firm, corporate, and government libraries. For purposes of this discussion,

³ See Harry Bitner, Educational Background of the University’s Law Librarian, 40 *Law Library Journal* 49 (1947), for an early overview of the skills and background required for professional law librarians in academic law libraries.

⁴ Frederick C. Hicks, The Educational Requirements of Law Librarians, 15 *ABA Journal* 699 (1929).

⁵ And the answer to this question is that not everything is online. The expertise of librarians is all the more important to organize, retrieve, disseminate, and preserve digital content.

⁶ Morris L. Cohen, Tradition and Change in Law Library Goals, 75 *Law Library Journal* 193 (1982).

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I will focus on the challenges faced by two major segments, academic and law firm libraries.

Technological advances and a slow recovery from the 2008 economic downturn have translated into severely reduced budgets, which has meant decreased spending on print collections and on library services.⁷ The footprint of the classic law library is changing, more so in law firm libraries, with a trend towards either significantly downsizing print collections or moving to bookless virtual spaces.⁸ The traditional concept of the library serving exclusively as a physical space for study and the storage of books is changing. Librarians or informational professionals are moving out of traditional walls of the library in these new settings, furthering the concepts of embedment and the library as a service. These changes are not always universally applauded in both the law school and law firm settings and there are sometimes tensions resulting from the increasing shift to digital collections.⁹

In law firm libraries,

as books and printed publications vanish and are replaced by online resources, more librarians are taking on new responsibilities and even renaming their operations “knowledge services departments” to reflect their broader scope, which increasingly includes more business development and competitive intelligence research using analytical tools.¹⁰

⁷ The conundrum of translating the core mission from an analog era to a digital era is certainly not unique to librarianship. In the fields of mail delivery and communications, iconic mailboxes and telephone booths are disappearing, giving way to electronic mail and mobile devices which users have deemed more efficient substitutes.

⁸ Citing disuse of traditional library space and print resources, the Morrison and Foerster law firm designed a “loungebrary” in its downtown Los Angeles office, a combination library and café. Other law firm libraries such as Kay Scholer have downsized their space and print collections significantly and moved them to single off-site locations. *A New Look for Law Libraries: Fewer Books, More Tech*, *The American Lawyer*, June 29, 2015 (online).

⁹ In law schools, many are still users of print and the shift to electronic can be difficult for some faculty. In law firms,

Experienced attorneys are sometimes more comfortable using printed materials and can be sentimental about books: One librarian, who asked not to be identified, said some lawyers at her firm “broke down and cried” as law volumes were being discarded, and others “boxed up and took home entire sets of the Supreme Court Reporter.”

Id.

¹⁰ Id.

Contrast this with many academic libraries where the library is still very much a physical destination, a place, a hub for study and research, where print collections are still being acquired and retained (albeit less than before). Some law school libraries house new types of collaborative spaces, technology hubs, genius bars, and cafes, which tend to be incorporated into or operate alongside traditional spaces.¹¹ Similar to librarians in law firms, librarians in law schools are also providing highly sophisticated and embedded services requiring increased technological skills, but they are more likely to retain the title “librarian.”

With the challenges faced by the different law library types and the emergence of new roles for librarians, the AALL launched a rebranding exercise in fall 2015 and included a name change in its first phase. In today’s technology infused world, more than half of the membership of AALL do not use the “librarian” title and the “library” name for their institutions.¹² Rebranding was primarily an effort to highlight both the traditional and evolving roles of librarians and information professionals, while focusing on the essential resource, which remains the common denominator in the profession – to convey more clearly and powerfully how they remain relevant in a digital era. Take, for example, the Newspaper Association of America, which was recently renamed the News Media Alliance – with the declining circulation of print newspapers and increasing viewership of online content, this was deemed as necessary change. In 2014, the Government Printing Office underwent a name change to the Government Publishing Office. The reasoning behind this shift was articulated then by the Government Printer: “with so much of the government’s information being published digitally, and with GPO’s products, services, processes, and employees now so heavily invested in digital technology, the time has come for our name to change.”¹³

¹¹ In the fall of 2014, the University of Oklahoma launched a digital initiative with a first of its kind technology hub, housed in the law library, to prepare students to be competent and proficient in the use of technology. The space includes virtual reality stations, multimedia study rooms, a flipped seminar classroom, a “genius station” for research support, and a café.

¹² AALL Rebrand FAQ at www.aallnet.org/rebrand/faq (member access only).

¹³ Davita Vance Cooks, Public Printer (the Public Printer title was also changed to Director as part of the GPO rebranding), www.gpo.gov/pdfs/about/GPO_NewName.pdf.

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So how did the AALL name change effort fare? The name change was overwhelmingly rejected. Member participation in the discussions and vote was unprecedentedly high, with robust discussions centering on the perceived imperfections of the process and issues with the name selected by the Executive Board.¹⁴ Many also felt quite strongly that it would be a mistake to abandon the library/librarian brand with the proposed new name: “Association for Legal Information.” An enduring, powerful, and emotional connection to librarians and libraries emerged in discussions. The classic law library might be changing but the library name was still perceived by a significant number of the members as vital, strong and important. What are the next steps? A shift from nomenclature to the overarching and continuing focus of rebranding which is demonstrating value (the Association has always acknowledged that branding is more than a name and logo). In addition to a name change, the brand proposition consisted of building strong networks and collaborations in the legal industry and developing strategies that would highlight the traditional and transformative roles of law libraries and librarians in the digital era. These efforts would serve to promote the “new law librarian.”¹⁵

This is a compelling era to reimagine the library, retaining essential traditions alongside the new technologies, which facilitate the preservation, discoverability, accessibility, and delivery of information. It is also an opportunity for libraries to respond creatively and innovatively to change. The quintessential law library and librarian cannot only survive but can also thrive in the digital era by continuing to demonstrate value through the development of new services that satisfy user needs in a digital era. This will hopefully engender a new law librarian and new quintessence in the law library.



¹⁴ I was a member of the AALL executive board during the launch of the rebranding project, however observations in this article are written exclusively in my capacity as a member of the association and not member of the executive board.

¹⁵ From the 2015 AALL Comprehensive Rebranding Initiative (members only access).