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Judaica Librarianship in the Age of the Internet

Bella Hass Weinberg

St. John's University, New York, NY, prof_wberg@yahoo.com

IN THE BEGINNING

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Bella Hass Weinberg, Editor

A Yiddish proverb states, *"Vi es Kristlt zikh, azoy Yidlt zikh"* (roughly translated, "Whatever happens in the Christian world, an analogous phenomenon develops in the Jewish world"). There is now a substantial number of Judaica CD-ROMs and electronic newsletters in Jewish studies, including several of interest to librarians. An article in the ALEF BIT section of this issue describes the numerous Judaica resources on the Internet, paralleling the trend in secular disciplines. Like many other organizations, the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) has established a "home page" on the World Wide Web; the table of contents of this journal is accessible through the home page, which provides information on AJL services.

What is the function of *Judaica Librarianship,* a printed journal, in the age of the Internet? This question has an underlying assumption: that paper journals will continue to exist in the electronic era. The question as well as the assumption are explored in this editorial.

Proposed Alternatives to the Traditional Journal

As a professor of information science, I am familiar with the history of scholarly journals and with proposed alternatives to them. The journal was invented more than three hundred years ago, and proposed alternatives to this medium of communication—such as distribution of individual articles on particular subjects to interested scholars—antedate the computer (Subramanyam, 1981, Chapter 3).

The Internet is a term that entered our vocabulary in the '90s, but proposals for electronic journals were published in the preceding decade (Turoff, 1982). Considerable thought was given then, as it is now, to replicating the quality-control features of paper journals in the electronic medium.

One of the most publicized pioneer electronic serials is the *Online Journal of Current Clinical Trials.* At its inception, the editors announced that manuscripts would be refereed and then published quickly after acceptance. Rapid publication is important in the field of medicine, but in a presentation about the fledgling electronic journal at the 1992 Annual Meeting of the American Society for Information Science, it was reported that the editors were not inundated with "manuscripts" (meeting summary by Weinberg, 1992, p. 9). A more recent conference summary noted that the future of the electronic journal was uncertain (Benjamin, 1994, p. 247).

The most distinguished paper journal in the same discipline is *The New England Journal of Medicine* (*NEJM*). Decades ago it preserved its influence through the Ingelfinger rule, which states that if a medical discovery is released first to the broadcast media, *NEJM* will not publish the paper. (That is why we hear radio reports of medical studies in that journal.) Recently, *NEJM* addressed the threat of another fast communications medium—the Internet. Again the editors announced that a discovery reported first in an electronic newsletter would not be publishable in *NEJM* (Kassirer & Angell, 1995). No comparable restrictions on prior publication exist for this journal!

Having an article in a refereed paper journal is prestigious and counts for a lot in the academic promotion-and-tenure system. When a librarian is being considered for promotion or tenure, having been published in a refereed journal in his/her specialty, including *Judaica Librarianship,* contributes materially to the decision. (I have recently responded to several surveys that are designed to determine which journals in library-information science are refereed.) No one has as yet worked out a brownie-point system for electronic publication, although some institutions claim that the same criteria as those of paper journals apply (Cronin, 1995).

The number of refereed electronic journals is small, while the number of unrefereed electronic newsletters is very large. Many people spend a high percentage of their time on electronic discussion groups or listservs, posing or answering questions, and expressing their opinions on various professional matters. A question posed in cyberspace may reveal the inquirer's ignorance (my favorite example is the query posed on an indexer's listserv regarding the handling of pseudonyms—as if this issue had never been addressed in the literature); the answers are not guaranteed to be authoritative (I've seen several of these in the area of Hebraica cataloging and Romanization); and the opinions may not be worth reading. Clifford Stoll (1995) has expressed this eloquently in *Silicon Snake Oil* (Chapter 12). In a recent discussion of the Internet with my faculty colleagues, I cited several published opinions that there is no information of value in cyberspace. Dr. James Benson countered, "Most print is garbage, too!" I agree that much of what is published is not worth reading, but at least in carefully edited and refereed journals, misinformation is rare.

Some employers are concerned about the amount of time that their staff members spend surfing the Internet, gathering information or transmitting messages that may not be directly relevant to their work. Expressing an idea on the Net, without peer review, counts for nothing in the academic brownie-point system, but the idea may be original and important, and if so, there is concern that it may be stolen. One of the primary purposes of the scholarly journal is to protect claims of priority. Copyright issues on the Internet have not been worked out yet.

A thoughtful piece in the *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* (Bloomquist, 1994) explored many facets of electronic journals, noting that Americans are product- rather than process-oriented. A published paper by an individual counts more than contributing collaboratively to an electronic document.

Libraries are product- and service-oriented, and librarians are evaluated in terms of countable items, such as the number of books cataloged, or the number of online searches executed. Despite all the talk of teamwork, librarians are evaluated as individuals when they are up for promotion, and their original writings generally count more than committee work.

We are used to paying for tangible products, and everyone understands that a professional association incurs printing and binding expenses in publishing paper journals. Many individuals subscribe to association journals in their specialty, but few are expected to pay for access to electronic journals; they will demand such access through libraries—for free. It has been observed that the revenue of professional associations may disappear if they move from paper to electronic serials (Benjamin, 1994, p. 247). The economics of the Internet, and the role of libraries in that environment, have not been worked out.

Paper vs. Electronic Media

Nearly two decades ago, with the rapid proliferation of computers, it was predicted that we would soon live in a paperless society (Lancaster, 1978), but that did not happen. The fascinating article on "The Paradoxical Proliferation of Paper" (Tenner, 1988) predated the Internet, but its primary observation still applies: The more computers we have, the more paper we use. Individuals print out email messages; libraries print out electronic newsletters in order to preserve their contents. For example, YIVO archives the printouts of *Mendele*, a newsletter in Yiddish Studies (sponsored by Trinity College and the Classics Department of Yale University).

As my university office is located near a special library of information science, I see the constantly changing displays of new books, and have noted that new printed guides to the Internet appear practically daily. There are several paper journals devoted entirely to the Internet, and almost every periodical in library / information / computer science has an Internet column.

Why is this? People need paper guides to advise them on how to access and search electronic resources. This explains the numerous printed publications about the Internet, but why do so many other books and journals continue to be published in the paper medium rather than electronically? In my opinion, the primary reason is *visibility*. When you subscribe to a journal and an issue arrives in your mailbox, minimally you look at the table of contents. Electronic journals, in contrast, have to wait for a subscriber to access them. With all the demands on our time, it is easy to ignore the information that is only available electronically, even if it has undergone quality control and is more up-to-date than printed sources. Many individuals have disconnected from listservs because they do not have time to read all the messages; people often process their "snail" mail before checking their email. Similarly, I expect that subscribers will scan their paper journals before turning on their computers to look at e-journals.

I have observed that most predictions of a paperless society have been made in printed publications, not in an electronic medium. Why? Because in the latter form, no one might notice, and authors want to be read. Recently, I read an article by two information scientists who argue that it is advantageous to scholars to publish in electronic journals because they will get faster feedback. And yet, the authors of the paper (Koenig & Harrell, 1995) chose to publish their idea in a paper journal that has a long delay between manuscript submission and publication—nine months, in the case of this brief communication, and more for full-length articles. A recent column in *American Libraries* (Whiteley, 1995, p. 926) announced a publication on the subject of this editorial, *Scholarly Journals at the Crossroads*, which is "the print version of a lively Internet discussion." This suggests that important ideas expressed in the electronic medium may be republished in a paper medium.

For Jews who observe the Sabbath, printed publications will be the only kind that they can read on the seventh day of the week. (There is probably not an editor alive today who has not considered the pros and cons of electronic and paper journals, but only those in the field of Jewish studies can use this argument!) Ultra-Orthodox Jews consider reading professional publications *'uvda de-ḥol* (weekday activity) and therefore inappropriate for the Sabbath. While such Jews may search a topic in Rabbinic literature on a CD-ROM during the week, on the seventh day they study from traditional printed *sefarim* (religious books).

I believe that a major advantage of paper journals—both on the Sabbath and on weekdays—is their browsability. For example, Hebraica catalogers probably read not only the technical articles relating directly to their work in *JL* volume 8, but also the papers on the Judaica rare book market.

Scholars wrote to comment that they enjoyed *JL* volume 7 because they had formerly known little about Jewish children's literature. A printed journal with a broad scope encourages reading and learning about cognate fields, while the vastness of the Internet and its poor indexing make such browsing prohibitive, except to people who have vast quantities of leisure time.

Differentiation of Functions

The study of the use of various media throughout the centuries has shown that despite predictions that a new medium will replace its predecessor, this generally does not happen. The old medium continues to exist, with specialized functions (McLuhan, 1964). Thus television did not eliminate radio, and microfilm has not been replaced by optical disks.

What do I see as the function of *Judaica Librarianship* in this electronic era? Clearly, it is not provision of up-to-the-minute news. The journal from the outset did not accept press releases or job announcements. Its differentiation from the quarterly *AJL Newsletter* has always been clear. For the past few years AJL has had an electronic newsletter, called *HaSafran*, but only about 25% of AJL members are connected [it is difficult to get a precise statistic because many people who subscribe to *HaSafran* are, regrettably, not AJL members]; thus there is still justification for the printed newsletter.

An important component of *Judaica Librarianship* is illustrative matter: photographs, tables, printouts of bibliographic records, etc. The illustrations in the journal are not just decorative; they are essential for comprehension of the text. Computers that can handle such graphics—and process them quickly—are expensive, and few people own them. Articles in *Judaica Librarianship* often feature Hebrew bibliographic data; many individuals do not have computers that can display non-Roman scripts. The technological capability is here, but we must consider the "installed base" [a term I acquired from my colleague Dr. Gary Marchionini]: people do not replace their computers every time a new feature becomes available.

The limited number of lines that can be displayed on a computer screen is another reason given often for the superiority of the paper medium. Edward Tufte, an expert on the visual display of information, has predicted that improvements in screen resolution are not imminent. But even were all these technological limitations to disappear, I believe that paper journals will continue to

exist. This conclusion was reached by an expert in scholarly publishing employed by Elsevier (Zijlstra, 1995). I have even read a prediction that the number of printed publications will *increase* as a result of the Internet (Ariail, 1995, p. 20).

When all the technological components are working right, electronic communication is faster than print. *HaSafran* is the appropriate place to announce a new reference book, or the addition or change of a number for a Judaic topic in the Library of Congress Classification. *Judaica Librarianship*, in contrast, is the appropriate medium for a lengthy review of the reference work, which places it in the context of related works (see the APPROBATIONS section of this issue for several such reviews), or for an analysis of the implications of restructuring the Judaic component of the Library of Congress Classification.

Like other disciplines and professions, Judaica librarianship is changing continuously. Some consider an advantage of electronic journals to be that one can alter and update the articles; others consider this a serious disadvantage. John Ziman, a noted expert on scientific communication, has observed that a paper must be "frozen in time" before it can be evaluated. Referees for *JL* evaluate the "frozen" version of a manuscript; in some cases a paper is updated before the journal goes to press, but then there is the inevitable production lag. The carefully refereed and edited papers provide accurate snapshots of our profession at a given point in time and allow us to write its history. Continuously updated papers would not.

I believe that the evaluation function extends to our readers. When you read a paper journal, the clock on an online service is not ticking; you can take as long as you like or need to digest the information and think about it. This contrasts with the rapidly scrolling messages of a listserv, which are designed for a reader who is quick on the delete button. (One can, of course, download electronic articles, print them, and read them slowly, but then the cost of producing a paper journal is merely transferred to the individual.)

I hope that your evaluation of the content of the journal is positive, but more importantly, I hope that the articles stimulate evaluation of the state of the field of Judaica librarianship and lead to original ideas for its enhancement. I encourage readers to submit those ideas for publication in this paper journal, which I am confident will continue to have an impact in the age of the Internet.

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