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Languages

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is an active member of the Electronic Thesis and Dissertation / Institutional

Repository Task Force at West Virginia University. A long-time advocate for open digital communication, he was the first faculty member from the WVU Department of Foreign Languages to direct a thesis under the electronic submission mandate nearly a decade ago.

How has scholarly communication changed in your field of foreign language in recent years?

Direct access to bibliographical sources and data in the field of foreign languages has greatly improved over the last few years, as more and more

universities across the globe are joining the digital revolution. In my specialty, which encompasses French and Spanish literatures and cultures, a great wealth of material, including primary and secondary sources, has been made available electronically. Communication among universities and scholars has greatly improved due to the immediacy of digital exchange, which benefits scholarly research everywhere. However, there is still quite a way to go, and scholarly communication in foreign language studies presents a very particular set of challenges, both linguistically and culturally. Different cultural imperatives and political agendas have to be considered, for they can interfere with the very notion of open access communication. The success of such an endeavor depends largely upon external factors, such as cultural priorities and political climates. I don't think for instance that totalitarian countries such as North Korea or Burma are ready to even consider open access communication, be it scholarly or otherwise.

In what ways has digital scholarship helped advance research for you personally?

Digital scholarship allows for a much greater availability of both primary texts and bibliographical sources. Beyond mere convenience, it permits one to re-focus his or her research in a much broader and richer environment. Scholarly research is naturally time consuming; from this point of view, digital scholarship could be considered as a very serious victory over time itself.

I'd like to bring a personal anecdote to the case in point. After a lecture in Madrid, Spain, at the turn of the century, I gave a copy of my first book to a student who attended the conference. Six months later, I found large excerpts of my book – mainly those concerning the theory of the fantastic – on a Web site, without any type of direct bibliographical references. My name was indeed mentioned at the end of the link but the title of my book had been carefully omitted. My initial reaction was mixed: although I considered this use of my work unethical, I also sensed that this would allow for a much greater exposure of my theory of the fantastic genre than the original book format. As years went on, my theory and my name became associated with the definition of the fantastic genre in Spanish

and Catalan. In the end, Internet and open access promoted my work, and helped me contribute to the field in a more efficient way.

Why have you been an advocate of open access?

Information wants to be free. The more we share knowledge, the faster knowledge will advance. I am somewhat surprised by the reluctance of some faculty members to provide open access to their work. It seems natural that, as members of the academic community, we should share our findings with our peers and our students, and promote evaluation and discussion of our work. This can only be beneficial for the community as well as for our own advancement. We should not ignore the fact that a faculty member is responsible for research as well as for teaching and service, therefore our research activities are actually already funded by our salaries. To prevent access to our research appears then not only counterproductive but also in contradiction with the very definition of our activity.

You've been quoted as saying "students will show us the way" in these endeavors. Can you explain what you mean by that?

The youth are in touch with modernity at large. A child on the Internet will run circles around his father. Look at the speed at which students text each other and their intuitive knowledge of the latest cybernetic application for downloading music or a movie. They have embraced the electronic age of communication without doubt or fear. Scholars can learn from the students, as much as they learn from us.

Tell us about the Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Initiative at West Virginia University. How did it come about?

In 1996 WVU partnered with other institutions in a project sponsored by the [Southeastern Universities Research Association \(SURA\)](#) that would

allow us to share scholarly information. Within two years, as the benefits of digital access became clear, we moved to implement the Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETD) requirement. WVU and Virginia Tech were the first institutions in the world to implement such a policy.

Was there opposition?

Although there has been very little direct opposition, until recently, against allowing open access to scholarly materials, I did notice that some faculty members were suddenly somewhat reluctant about directing theses. This can be explained by the much greater access the digital format implies. The difference between associating your name with 90 pages or so which are destined to collect dust in a university library and signing off on a work which can potentially be read by thousands of students and scholars within a few days is enormous, and some faculty members are naturally still coming to terms with it. At the root of this unfortunate reaction lies the confusion between a thesis or a dissertation and an actual scholarly publication. A thesis or a dissertation is to be considered the last formality before becoming a scholar. To expect to live one's entire career off a thesis or a dissertation is not only academically unsound it is also simply unrealistic.

I understand some ETDs at WVU have been accessed thousands of times. What has the response been?

John H. Hagen, who spearheaded the ETD project at WVU and efforts with the [Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations](#), published the now famous [data \[PDF\]](#) of 145,000% increase in access from print to electronic distribution. The results of his findings on open access ETDs in the humanities have been commented on recently in the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#). Others have published similar [data on increased citation](#) impact factors for open access scholarly publications. The numbers are unquestionable: a digital thesis or dissertation is likely to be accessed by thousands of individuals, and therefore becomes a true act of communication and not a simple academic formality. This has undoubtedly influenced the over 80% of students who now file open

access for their ETDs at WVU, largely at the advice of their faculty advisors. Graduate faculty realize the benefits and are now much more favorable to the notion of open access.

How do you counter concerns that digital archiving takes time and money that libraries don't have?

Any financial examination points to the contrary: the economy of space, handling, and paper speaks for itself. Storage and circulation become cybernetic, therefore liberating us from material constraints. Further, WVU has always made digital library resources a high priority. The benefit of global exposure to the university's intellectual property far exceeds the costs of digital archiving. The question should be "How long can you afford not to do it?"

What do you think about the recent developments at Harvard, where the arts and sciences faculty has chosen to make their work open access? Do you think that might have an impact on other campuses, including yours?

Our university libraries have been at the forefront of scholarly communication at WVU; hence the [news of Harvard's policy move](#) was received by faculty as a natural progression. However, it is true that, if only because of the prestige its name suggests, Harvard's recent move might be both an inspiration and an example to the institutions that are still reluctant to embrace open access. West Virginia may be more known for being "wild and wonderful" rather than at the cutting edge of the scholarly communication revolution; however, WVU's efforts and commitment to the digital age of scholarship should as well be considered exemplary and inspiring.

What unique challenges do scholars in

foreign languages face in digital communication that might be different from other fields?

Beside the linguistic and cultural difficulties mentioned earlier, economic situations and technological conditions must also be factored in. As we progress toward open communication, we must not underestimate the implications of globalization: the erasure of individual national characteristics and the triumph of a profit-oriented consciousness represent a constant threat to the humanistic values scholars are promoting. The digital Tower of Babel is not necessarily an impossibility, but it will require time, effort, and a whole lot of good faith from everyone involved.

What do you think about the future of digital scholarship in your field?

In the humanities, digital scholarship will keep on growing and will become the standard for scholarly communication, just as email has replaced most of our daily written exchanges. It will enable anyone from anywhere to have access to primary and secondary sources, and therefore empower the individual to participate actively to his or her field of studies. But as we look at a bright, friction-free cybernetic horizon, we must not let our optimism clutter our judgment. As a foreign language teacher, I am concerned by the fact that most communication regarding the issue of the digital library takes place in the English language. Our position as leaders in this revolution should not indulge us to give in the temptation of ethnocentricity. However, digital scholarship for me is not an option: it is simply the future.