Introduction

MARK STOVER

There is a movement today that has no official leaders or published agenda. It could be called an underground movement, except that no one denies its existence. This movement brings together participants from many professions—librarians, computer scientists, teachers, scholars, business professionals, and practitioners from every vocation. The movement is strong and unbending, but there are many who recoil from its grasp. It began with a dream, and it may end in a nightmare, but it will not stop until its goals are realized. The movement does not have a name, but here it will be referred to as "electronic information."

Electronic information refers to practically anything in machine-readable form. This includes online and optical text-based files like bibliographic databases and full-text reference works, as well as computer-simulated audio and images. Technically, it could also refer to many videotape products, but these are generally excluded from the category of electronic information. While machine-readable information exists on various media, such as floppy diskettes, optical disks, or large magnetic fixed disks, it is almost always accessible from a personal computer.

Humanists have regularly received "bad press" from the conventional wisdom of electronic information. Humanists, it is said, are resistant to the idea of using computers for research. Humanists are a traditional group, and they will never allow their disciplines to be taken over by technological freaks who could not distinguish Homer from Homer Simpson. Humanists, pure and simple, will not
allow the tangible texts that are the foundation of their research to be converted into ephemeral bits and bytes. It just will not happen.

But it has happened. While a few isolated and celebrated computer projects in the humanities developed during the 1960s and 1970s, it was not until the early 1980s (with the advent first of the personal computer and then CD-ROM) that many humanists began to see for the first time the incredible capabilities of electronic information. They too joined the movement, and some of them even became its most vocal proponents. Today, humanities computing is a growing and respected organism within the larger body of electronic information. The new Center for Electronic Texts in the Humanities, established by Rutgers and Princeton Universities and led by Susan Hockey, is symptomatic of the spread of enthusiasm among humanists concerning things electronic. It should prove to be a powerful force for electronic information in the broader humanities community.

This issue of Library Trends is devoted to a discussion of the ways in which humanities scholars and librarians are working together (or not working together) in the electronic information movement. The scope of the issue includes all of the traditional disciplines in the humanities. There is, of course, some disagreement among scholars about exactly which disciplines fall into this category. For example, one of the essays focuses on history, even though some historians consider themselves to be social scientists rather than humanists. The reader is asked to be tolerant of the editor's decisions regarding which disciplines were (or were not) included.

Electronic information, for the purposes of this issue, refers primarily to textual information but does not categorically exclude images or sound. Indeed, although most humanists look to "the text" as their chief source of research, many humanities databases (especially of the hypermedia variety) also include images and sound as both primary source materials and as secondary background information. Some might even ask questions like, Why are words considered more important than nonwords? Can the text of a historical document be placed into machine-readable form without image reproductions of pictures that orginally appeared alongside the text and still retain its validity for research? Are musical scores "text"? These questions will not be answered definitively in this issue of Library Trends, but the research and library communities must ultimately deal with them.

Almost all of the electronic tools discussed here are presently being used or could conceivably be used within a library environment. This excludes some kinds of "courseware," although, of course, many curriculum-based materials could potentially be used by or within libraries. And the nature of electronic publishing would anticipate remote or networked access to many electronic texts, thereby blurring
the distinctions that used to be so easy to make—i.e., whether or not a product is used within a library context. In any event, the focus of most of the articles is on both the electronic information itself and on the library’s role in providing access to the information.

Many observers (and participants as well) believe that the fundamental responsibility of librarians lies in the area of collection development. What librarians choose to purchase for their collections has long-lasting ramifications. It could even be argued that all other facets of librarianship revolve around collection building. The reference interview is conducted under the assumption that useful materials exist in the core collection. Cataloging and classification occur only after the materials are purchased and are generally restricted to local holdings. In the first article of this issue, Edward Shreeves discusses some of the challenges that face those who would include electronic information in the collection development equation. He offers valuable insights especially in regard to the librarian-scholar relationship.

Mara Saule draws on her background of bibliographic instruction to discuss various user education issues vis-à-vis electronic information. Her article sets forth problems (and solutions) which arise when librarians seek to educate humanists in the fine art of database searching.

The literature of the humanities seems to many to be a prime candidate for conversion to hypertext and hypermedia. Erwin Welsch, in his nearly exhaustive article on hypertext and the humanities, separates the promise from the reality in a critical look at what hypermedia may and may not bring to humanists and librarians.

One of the more interesting ways that electronic information is conveyed is through the electronic journal. Michael Stoller brings together a sampling of electronic serial publications in the humanities, provides descriptions and critiques of these “e-journals,” and shares with the reader his ideas for providing access and preservation for these materials.

The next six articles are based in the various disciplines of the humanities. Matthew Gilmore and Donald Case present a sobering, yet hopeful, analysis of the ways in which historians use information technology. Mark Stover writes about religious studies, concentrating on the subdiscipline of biblical studies. Anita Lowry discusses English and American literature with a focus on the most widely distributed electronic text in this field, Shakespeare. Beatrice Oshika and Sylvia Krausse survey the unique realm of linguistic and language research. On the “arts” side of the humanities, Marcia Reed writes about electronic resources in art history, and Mary Kay Duggan discusses
musicology. In the final article of this issue, James Sweetland makes predictions concerning the future of humanities computing.

It is not without anxiety that most humanists and librarians enter the brave new world of electronic information. The nightmare scenario mentioned earlier was not hyperbole; electronic texts have the potential to wreak havoc on the scholarly world if preservation and standardization (not to mention bibliographic control) issues are not forcefully confronted. Nightmares can be avoided, and dreams can come true but only if a diverse group of professionals with common goals are willing to work together in harmony.