
Twenty-first Century Academic Media Center: Killer App or Chindogu?

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ABSTRACT

What is the role of the academic media center in the twenty-first-century research library? Will it be relevant or irrelevant? In this article the author attempts to answer these questions by first abstracting and summarizing recent reports from the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). Both reports offer guidance on how tomorrow's research library can be best prepared to meet future challenges and opportunities. The author then uses themes generated from this review, along with his own experiences as a media librarian and archivist, to frame a discussion of how academic media centers around the nation are already actively engaged in imagining and transforming their institutions into the research library's twenty-first century killer app. He ends by suggesting that research libraries look to media centers as models of how to be adaptive and innovative for twenty-first century academic environment.

What is the role of the academic media center in the twenty-first century research library? Will the traditional media center, many of which were established in undergraduate libraries in the 1970s, play an essential role in tomorrow's research library? Perhaps media centers are so crucial to the future success of these libraries that they will emerge as its *killer app*. Or is the academic media center already an obsolete relic of twentieth century design? Rather than a *killer app*, is the media center an emerging example of library *chindogu*: a useless invention that seems to be useful but in reality is not. Will these centers, along with the librarians and staff that support them, fall into oblivion, their collections absorbed into library stacks or replaced by batteries of subscriptions?

In what follows, I begin from a working definition of *media center* and then move to culling information from two recent documents—Council on Library and Information Resources’ *No Brief Candle* (CLIR, 2008) and the Association of Research Libraries’ *Transformational Times* (ARL, 2009)—that offer guidance on how tomorrow’s research library can be best prepared to meet future challenges and opportunities. Using themes generated from those documents, along with my own experiences as a media librarian and archivist, I frame a discussion of how academic media centers around the nation are already actively engaged in imagining and transforming their institutions to meet future challenges. I argue that, ultimately, media centers are the twenty-first century research library’s *killer app*.

WHAT IS AN ACADEMIC MEDIA CENTER?

I wish to ground this discussion with a definition of the topic at hand. What is a *media center*, in a traditional academic sense?

The Oxford English Dictionary (2009) offers the following definition for *media center*: “n. U.S. a library, freq. in a school, college, etc., offering audio-visual facilities” (<http://dictionary.oed.com>) While this definition is true—academic media centers do provide playback facilities for audio and video materials—I offer this as a more complete, definition: Traditionally speaking, academic media centers build and house audio and video collections, provide playback facilities for patrons to access these collections, offer course services for faculty and their students, and are organizationally a part of a college or university-based research library.

Though the above is my working definition, it is important to note that because a particular unit or department fits the above definition, it may not necessarily be named or called a media center. While it is also true that numerous academically based media centers are or have been associated with an information technology or classroom support department and not with a library, my discussion focuses specifically on those media centers that fit within the organizational framework of a research library.

Lori Widzinski does an excellent job of describing the development of media librarianship and the confusing issue of naming where media librarians and other media professionals work:

The basic question of naming library media departments and positions has resulted in long discussions that generally add to existing confusion about services and resources. Is the proper term “audio-visual” or AV? Is it “media,” “multimedia,” or “instructional resources?” Not only are these terms vague, but they also have had various meanings over the years. (Widzinski, 2001, p. 3)

Some examples of the variety of names under which media centers, according to my definition, operate include the University of California Berkeley’s Media Resources Center, University of North Texas’s Media Library, and the University of Maryland—College Park’s Nonprint Media

Services Library. The unit I head at the University of Washington Libraries actually is called the Media Center. For the sake of brevity, I will represent this constellation of media/multimedia/nonprint departments and units with the shorthand “media center,” and as instances of my definition above.

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY RESEARCH LIBRARIES

As I write this, our nation is undergoing profound economic change. At the University of Washington Libraries the reality of these economic troubles has taken hold in the form of layoffs, collection funding cuts, and the consolidation of branch libraries. Nevertheless, such economic change can be considered, at least in part, an opportunity. How can we cut our staff budget without canceling essential services or shelving the development of emerging services? How can we cut our collections budget while increasing access to information resources? The opportunities arise in positive answers to this question: how can research libraries do more with less?

Both the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) have committed significant efforts to answering these and other questions related to the future of the research library. In August 2008, CLIR published *No Brief Candle: Re-conceiving Research Libraries for the 21st Century*. This document is the work of a group of professionals from across disciplines who considered the question “how should we be rethinking the research library in a dynamic, swiftly changing landscape dominated by digital technology” (p. 1)?

In February 2009, ARL published *Transformational Times: An Environmental Scan Prepared for the ARL Strategic Plan Review Task Force*. This report attempts to “identify trends that are likely to affect research libraries and the work of the Association” (p. 5) and will serve as a base for ARL’s renewed strategic plan. Many of the trends and recommendations discussed in these publications tend to either overlap or complement one another. In what follows I attempt to boil down these common and interrelated topics into a set of themes that, in turn, will be revisited within the context of an emerging media center model.

Experimentation and Reconfiguration

Experimentation and reconfiguration are perhaps the most often mentioned and overarching set of recommendations found in these reports. Many of the authors sound a clarion call for libraries to avoid complacency and embrace change, imploring libraries to realign risk-averse attitudes into an organizational mindset that is both proactive and innovative. As noted in the CLIR report, “Institutions need to support environments, within and external to libraries, that not only promote but demand change. More funds should be allocated for experimental projects and new approaches; staff with nontraditional or new areas of expertise

must be hired” (2008, p. 65). If libraries do not experiment and embrace substantive and meaningful change, the authors warn that “libraries will become stuck in a niche that becomes smaller and smaller. As one participant observed, ‘We could be eradicated in the early stages if we are not a player’” (p. 65). And as CLIR President Charles Henry notes in his foreword, “this report demands change” (p. 65).

Research libraries must take note of productive experimentation that directly supports, encourages, and fosters the growth of academe’s essential research and teaching activities. At its most proactive, the report calls for libraries to realign their services, functions, and resources to further these goals. As noted in the CLIR report, “The functions of libraries must be aligned with the core mission of research and education at the institutional level. We need to create professional and practice layers that enhance research and teaching across disciplines” (2008, p. 11).

In the ARL report the authors write, “radical reconfiguration of research library organizations and services is needed coupled with an increasingly diverse and talented staff to provide needed leadership and technical skills to respond to the rapidly changing environment” (2009, p. 6). Entrenched hiring practices that myopically seek out individuals with MLS or MLIS degrees can make “it difficult for libraries to attract or retain staff with special expertise” (CLIR, 2008, p. 9).

Within the context of experimentation and reconfiguration, numerous participants in the CLIR study also underscored the need for the library to actively advocate for itself and its values. Passivity was not an option. For example, some of the authors stated that the library needs to identify and assert its unique competitive advantage in terms of setting digitization standards and promoting best practices. Others implore research libraries to be advocates for their mission and the public good: “Libraries must position themselves to retain their intellectual advantage. As one participant noted, ‘Any functions that don’t require human intellect will default to commercial interests’” (2008, p. 5). Libraries are urged to advocate both for their own interests but also to pursue forms of partnerships (e.g., with other libraries or nonprofits), while simultaneously resisting excessive outsourcing and the often costly licensing terms dictated by commercial vendors whose “services could further erode research institutions’ control of the intellectual assets produced by research and teaching” (ARL, 2009, p. 6).

Outreach and Collaboration

Authors in both reports also call on libraries to increase outreach and collaboration both inside and outside of a campus community. Research libraries are encouraged not to go it alone. The ARL report suggests that libraries are in peril of isolating themselves, such that if they remain focused “on protecting local resources, they could pull back from essential cooperative work” (2009, p. 6).

Within the campus setting, new forms of alliances with students and fresh modes of engaging with faculty are called for so as to “support rapid shifts in research and teaching practices” (ARL, 2009, p. 6.). In fact, outreach and collaboration are so strongly recommended that the authors of both reports essentially state that any project that is not grounded in such contexts should not be pursued:

Collaboration should undergird all strategic developments of the university, especially at the service function level. . . . Greater collaboration among librarians, information technology specialists, and faculty on research project design and execution should be strongly supported. Any research project, digital resource, or tool that cannot be shared, is not interoperable, or otherwise cannot contribute to the wider academic and public good should not be funded (CLIR, 2008, p. 11).

Closely related to the overarching call for collaboration is the recommendation for libraries to communicate and perform outreach to surrounding community members:

Higher education needs to articulate not only the benefits it conveys to university and college students but also the value it provides to the public. The popular conception of higher education has been influenced by critics who dismiss its perceived high costs and the impracticality of its curriculum, by those who are intent on taxing the larger endowments, and by those who want federal intervention to lower tuition costs. The cultural, social, and technological advancements that higher education can foster are lost in this impassioned rhetoric. (CLIR, 2008, p. 11–12)

Along with greater outreach, research libraries are called upon to develop effective modes of evaluating the impact of their resources and services: “Accountability and assessment are essential for data-driven decision making within libraries, on campus, and with funders and policy makers” (ARL, 2009, p. 5). Research libraries need to frame discussions of accountability within contexts that are relevant to the greater public, too. Effective communication of such information should foster a better understanding within the community of exactly what it is that research libraries do. This, in turn, may also result in greater legislative success—be it in terms of greater funding or advantageous policies—for the library and university.

Creation and Distribution

New forms of experimentation, reconfiguration, outreach, and collaboration will play a leading and influential role in the development of the final set of core themes for the research library: the creation and distribution of fresh resources and services. Though certainly nothing new for research libraries (the creation and distribution of resources and services is at their core), creation and distribution in the twenty-first-century setting ought not to follow tried and true methods.

Libraries need to change their practices for managing traditional content and develop new capabilities for dealing with digital materials of all types, but especially new forms of scholarship, teaching and learning resources, special collections (particularly hidden collections), and research data. (ARL, 2009, p. 5)

Be it archiving and curating online content, developing new modes of scholarly communication in collaboration with students and faculty, or creating engaging online learning resources, the research library needs to be nimble enough to experiment, reconfigure, reach out, and collaborate with new partners. As the ARL authors write, “Libraries will be developing new partnerships and strategies for cooperatively collecting new materials and managing existing collections” (2009, p. 9).

New modes of creation and distribution are not limited to online or digital-born resources and services. Reinvigorated means of creation and distribution must also be applied to the research library’s tangible and unique collections. This focus will be especially important for undergraduates:

As undergraduate instruction shifts to active and experiential learning and research, libraries will draw more heavily on primary materials in special collections, digital image repositories, and data stores to support the new pedagogy. To achieve this, special collections and library instruction staff may intensify their marketing to academic courses, as well as facilitate digital access to these resources. (ARL, 2009, p. 17)

Closely related to the creation and distribution is the topic of copyright. In *Transformational Times*, the authors warn readers that, “There will be continued focus and tension on copyright and intellectual property issues” (ARL, 2009, p. 12). They also frame the discussion by noting that “content industries inevitably seek to extend control over the copyright regime and over content, in general, while libraries, authors, and research institutions endeavor to provide more access to and active management of the intellectual assets produced by the academy” (p. 5). I understand “active management” in the preceding quote to include librarians taking an activist role by being willing to assert and utilize the limitations on exclusive rights as spelled out in sections 107 and 108 of U.S. Copyright Law.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MEDIA CENTER TODAY

If we take the themes presented—reconfiguration and experimentation, outreach and collaboration, creation and distribution—and use them as lenses through which to look at today’s academic media centers, what will we see? In other words, are academic media centers already embodying and realizing these themes, and if so, how?¹

Experimentation and Reconfiguration

Examples of experimentation and reconfiguration can be found in numerous media centers around the country. At the University of Minnesota Libraries, Media Outreach and Learning Spaces Librarian Scott Spicer and his colleagues have reconfigured the traditional media center into a Learning Commons (<http://www.learningcommons.umn.edu/>), where audio and video materials can be cut, edited, and remixed, into new works.

As he notes,

I have . . . seen some really beautiful teaching and learning through media clips integrated with interviews of subject experts and research to create digital storytelling presentations on water sustainability. There was a final event that we sponsored in my Learning Commons, where the students presented their videos and had the interviewed expert subjects, along with scholars from all over campus participate in dialog over the issue. So the possibilities are tremendous. (S. Spicer, personal communication, August 28, 2009)

At Florida State University Libraries, Media Librarian Chuck McCann has been instrumental in molding their Digital Media Center, a space where students and faculty and students can receive “assistance with digital media projects—images, sound, video. . . preparing images for publication, assistance with converting analog media to digital formats . . . help editing and producing short videos,” as well as access a 5,000+ item video collection. In addition to a physical presence, Chuck McCann has also carved out a substantial online presence for the Digital Media Center that gathers together and presents informational across a vast multimedia horizon: “media and copyright, technology, open source solutions, media and ETD tutorials, where to find videos, audio, images, equipment, reviews and more” (Florida State University Subject Guides [FSU])!

At the University of Washington Libraries we, too, have been attempting to experiment and reconfigure our Media Center into a space and set of functions that directly supports both teaching and research needs of faculty and students. Located in Odegaard Undergraduate Library, the Media Center utilizes the following: audio and video digitization and editing facilities, videoconferencing suites, and a video presentation studio that allows students to record and distribute presentations with ease (University of Washington [UW], Technology Spaces, n.d.). Beyond introducing people to these spaces and the workshops associated with them, we have also been working directly with staff, students, and faculty to record, edit, simulcast, and distribute events, recitals, and oral histories. The Media Center is reconfiguring itself as a space where audio and video isn’t only accessed, it’s also being created.

Outreach and Collaboration

Media centers have also been active in the arena of outreach and collaboration. At the UCLA Film and Television Archive, Archive Research & Study Center Manager Mark Quigley has been reaching out and working with faculty to codevelop undergraduate classes that are built upon specific media collections:

One of the main objectives for this activity is outreach—to encourage and facilitate significant, meaningful curricular use of our materials by students (and faculty). In Spring 2008, I collaborated . . . to develop a for-credit undergraduate course . . . around the Archive’s Outfest LGBT collection. Foregrounding the Outfest collection, research methodology, and the Archive Research & Study Center (ARSC) as a resource for the course, we were able to deeply engage the students in an otherwise “hidden collection.” Assignments included individual research viewing projects in our media lab. (M. Quigley, personal communication, August 4, 2009)

Quigley and his colleagues conducted a postcourse survey that indicated 94 percent of student respondents intended to further utilize the Outfest collection in future coursework. Additionally, 88 percent of respondents indicated that they had “greatly increased awareness” of the UCLA Film & Television Archive as a “research resource for students.” Quigley also notes that the “course allowed ARSC the opportunity to observe both faculty and student interaction with existing collection resources, which yielded important information on how to adapt and update such tools for future curricular use” (personal communication, August 4, 2009).

At the University of Washington I am endeavoring to reach out and collaborate with diverse user groups. In January 2008 I offered a seminar called “Puget Sounds: Documenting Music Cultures Close to Home”² This course coincided with a grant of the same name that enabled us to build a regional music collection. Each week the seminar’s students would research music in a particular predetermined part of the Puget Sound region, post their findings to our class blog (along with links to listening examples, if possible), and then come to class prepared to debate the merits of including their selection in the collection. In this way the students were directly involved with the development of the collection.

Many media centers are also stretching and collaborating via screenings of media titles in their collections. At the University of North Texas Libraries Media Library, Media Library Head Sue Parks has been actively producing a host of film festivals that reach out across disciplines.

In the 2008–9 academic year, the media library hosted seventy-one screenings and had nearly eight hundred attendees. These included the

DocSpot Film Series: Weekly documentary film screenings; Fem Flicks Film Series; Monthly documentary film screenings in collaboration with our Women's Studies Program; One Book, One Community Film Series. . . . We're collaborating with several departments on campus to do film screenings and panel presentations. (S. Parks, personal communication, August 4, 2009)

Outreach in the form of promoting media center resources and services are also taking hold. From Facebook to Twitter to MySpace to blogs of all of kinds, online media center promotion is active across numerous institutions. UC Berkeley's Media Resources Center blog (University of Berkeley Library, 2009), which extends back to 2006, highlights numerous collection treasures. At the time of this writing, recent posts included information about new acquisitions, short films, literary and dramatic adaptations, cult films, exploitation films, and sundry midnight movies available in the collection. Similarly, with the UW Libraries Media Center (n.d.) YouTube Channel we are attempting to push out information about our collections beyond the library catalog and into the online environments that our users navigate. With over 1,200 hits on just one of our promotional slide-shows, it appears that these outreach efforts are connecting with our users.

Creation and Distribution

How are today's media centers approaching the creation and distribution of new resources and timely services? With vigor and vision. For example, at the University of North Texas, the Media Library is developing a Gaming Collection. As Sue Parks notes, "We've started purchasing consoles and games to support courses taught in our College of Visual Arts and Design, College of Computer Science, and Radio, Television, and Film Department" (S. Parks, personal communication, August 3, 2009). Though it is not typically the role of the media center to collect games, the burgeoning teaching and research needs of the University of North Texas community is supplanting tradition.

In a similar vein, media centers are not often thought of as a locus for access to unique, unpublished material. Nonetheless, media centers *are* collecting, archiving, curating and providing access to unique visual materials. At the University of Washington, for instance, our Chamber Dance Collection is a unique collection of dance footage that is the product of the UW Chamber Dance Company's eighteen years of presenting selected modern dance (n.d.). More recently we worked with the UW Ethnomusicology Archives in acquiring, preserving, and providing access to the Crocodile Café Collection, a unique collection of live popular music recordings. Due to rights issues, the collection is distributed through two media center listening stations. By limiting access in this way, we are able to balance the artists' rights with public's desire to access the material, though this effort may not always be appreciated, especially by those who have not actually visited the collection:

Searching through the near-encyclopedic list of the thousands of hours of footage induces feelings of joy and dread at the prospect of being able to re-listen to some of my favorite shows I saw at the Crocodile at the expense of listening while being strapped to a pair of headphones under fluorescent lights. (Seattle Metblogs, August 7, 2009)

Comparable to the creation and distribution of unique and unpublished material, media centers are also beginning to realize that they are already home to rare published material. New York University Professor Howard Besser has demonstrated that the collections of NYU's Avery Fischer Center contain numerous rare VHS titles. An abstract for his poster presented at the 2009 National Meeting of the Association College and Research Libraries sums up his argument:

This session describes recent and upcoming research that identifies large numbers of rare videos in circulating academic library collections. After tracing the methodology of the studies, it offers up suggestions that libraries might take including: identifying materials that are likely to go out of print, developing preservation specialist skills in handling video, techniques for minimizing collection deterioration, working cooperatively on preservation with other libraries, pushing the limits of copyright law, etc. (Besser, 2009)

At the UW, we too have identified many published VHS titles that are neither held by other WorldCat libraries nor available for purchase on any format. To meet this growing preservation issue, we have begun to digitize these titles while simultaneously screening them in a series of day-long events that we call VHS BBQs: "How do you like your VHS? At the Media Center we like them rare." This effort is an attempt to combine outreach (in the form of a film festival) with the preservation of analog material into more resilient and accessible formats.

Numerous institutions are supplementing their physical collections by subscribing to, creating, and curating material. The University of North Texas Media Library has assembled an Online Video on Demand Collection that contains almost 300 titles. Sue Parks notes that in the 2007–8 academic year there were 12,600 sessions for these titles, and in the 2008–9 academic year there were 15,000 sessions.

At the University of Washington we have been floating a pilot project to stream video course reserve material. This pilot saw over 40,000 sessions during the 2008–9 academic. This was a fourfold increase over our traditional, in-house reserve service where students check out the VHS or DVD for two hours at a time. We have also been broadcasting audio content via a weekly radio show (*Libraries + radio = LibRadio*, n.d.), augmenting our collections by offering a free Netflix for Teaching service (*Netflix for instructors*, n.d.), participating in regional library lending consortium (<http://www.orbiscascade.org/>), and curating online audio and video content through an online portal that highlights both free and university paid-for content (*Online media*, n.d.).

Media centers are also putting considerable effort into distributing information about their resources and services in ways that promote discovery. At the University of Maryland's Nonprint Media Services Library, Librarian & Film and Television Studies Subject Specialist Carleton Jackson is producing a series of online tutorials that show users how to perform both basic and advanced media searches within their catalog (n.d.). At UC Berkeley, Head of the Media Resources Center Gay Handman produces extensive lists of titles organized by topics and supplemented by narrative descriptions that facilitate discovery in a browsable and subject-oriented manner. At the University of Washington we are encouraging discovery by way of providing lists of genres, adopting the use of WorldCat Local, and moving a portion of our most popular DVD titles out from behind the service desk and into open stacks.

CONCLUSION: KILLER APP OR CHINDONGU?

The educational use of video on campus is accelerating rapidly in departments across all disciplines—from arts, humanities, and sciences to professional and vocational curricula. Faculty, librarians, and administrators expect their use of video in education to grow significantly over the next five years (Kaufman & Mohan, 2009, p. 2).

Though increased use of video is common knowledge among media librarians, it does not guarantee the future success of the academic media center. Like the research libraries of which they are a part, today's academic media centers face the challenge of having to prove their worth.

Specific challenges are noted by Kaufman and Mohan, who write,

technology, legal, and other barriers continue to thwart faculty finding and accessing the segments of video they want for teaching and lectures. University libraries contain significant video repositories but the majority of the content is in analog (VHS) format and/or is not networkable. The majority of video usage today is still confined to audiovisual viewing equipment in classrooms or at the library. (2009, p. 2)

Many users, students, and faculty alike, have expectations concerning the state of digitization and online distribution of all video and audio resources that are born in the home-use (e.g., Netflix streaming) and Internet (e.g., YouTube) sectors and don't translate to the educational market. And even if there were enough resources to digitize all analog titles in a media center's collection, a bulwark of excessively complicated and restrictive copyright legislation make the digital distribution of such content (even for purely academic purposes) daunting, at best.

Copyright and budget concerns have long haunted media centers (as seen in the introduction to this issue) and it may seem that it is a given the academic media center is being edged out of the academic library. However, as I have attempted to demonstrate, many of today's academic media centers are already actively meeting these challenges head on. The me-

dia centers mentioned here, along with the librarians and archivists who head them, embody many of the visionary themes articulated in the ARL and CLIR reports, hence, are prepared for the future as envisioned by those groups. Media centers have not become chindogu. I hope I hence demonstrated that they are in fact the research library's killer app, and a role model for the other departments of the twenty-first century research library to emulate. As research libraries attempt to remodel themselves into collaborative, experimental, outward looking institutions, they would be well advised to look inward to the academic media centers they house. Many will discover that, like rare audiovisuals and other primary sources, media centers are in fact rich, homegrown examples of how the transformations articulated by CLIR and ARL are already being pioneered and successfully realized.

NOTES

1. The various institutions that I highlight are not meant to represent an exhaustive or exclusive list of institutions that are paving the way for the twenty-first century media center. Rather, the examples I share here (including those from UW) are but snapshots of the ones that I am aware of.
2. The syllabus can be located at Vallier, 2008.

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