

## Advisor Op-Ed

### **SNARB - Coming Soon to a Library Near You**

Margaret Landesman (Marriott Library, University of Utah) [mlandesm@library.utah.edu](mailto:mlandesm@library.utah.edu)

Published in [Volume 7, Number 4](#), April 2006

---

*Author's note: I wanted to write something provocative and a bit funny, thinking about the shrinking differences between libraries and bookstores; and about what happens for good and ill as we are able to search across greater and greater aggregations from disparate parts of our lives. This is how it came out.*

---

To: Students

From: University administration

Date: Unclear

Subject: SNARB

### **Sign up for your classes!**

#### **We'll take it from here\***

\* and if you'd like suggestions as to classes that best match your interests, SNARB can help

---

Many students and faculty, while impressed by the convenience, timeliness, and increased range of choices offered by our new library/bookstore/publishing system (SNARB), are unclear about how exactly the new system works.

#### **What does SNARB do?**

SNARB provides textbooks, curricular materials (course packs, lab notebooks), and assigned readings in the format(s) of your choice. SNARB also provides added choices for the identification and delivery of research materials--whether it is three peer-reviewed articles, suggested articles for a term paper bibliography, or a literature search as you begin work on an advanced degree.

SNARB offers the maximum number of format choices: e-book, audio, files for your PDA or cell phone, print--by the page or chapter, paperback or hard cover. Books may be provided through the POD (our Print on Demand station), or in the original printed

edition (where one existed). When the text provided is from the library collection, you may, depending on factors outlined later, need to return the text after use (sort of a cross between library "circulation" and "buy back" at the bookstore.)

Students with certified disabilities may obtain audio, Large Print, or Braille copies at no additional cost. Others must pay the multiformat supplement

### **How much do I pay?**

Each student receives a Text Allowance, worked out with the faculty member and based on the level of the course and the number of credit hours.<sup>1</sup> It should be possible to meet your text and research needs without exceeding your allowance. However, the Text Allowance is not generous enough to cover every book in every format. If, for instance, you want a hardback text for home use and to keep in your personal collection, print-outs of critical chapters to carry to study sessions; and online versions for your PDA and your PC (multiformat supplements charged separately), you may well need to supplement the Text Allowance.

The most common problem encountered by students is that, when a paper is assigned later in the term, the portion of the allowance intended to cover desired materials has been used up for less essential purchases. We strongly advise that you pay careful attention. A short or inadequate bibliography can seriously affect your grade.

### **Where do I find SNARB?**

Through the campus gateway, . SNARB is integrated with Web CT, our Course Management system. On the course page, you will find a materials list, together with options as to format, cost, and delivery.

Online formats are delivered via your campus e-mail account. If you choose materials in a printed, cd-rom, or other traditional format, they can be mailed to your home or picked up at the library in the Knowledge Commons. If you are a Distance Ed or online-only student, or, for whatever reason, find it difficult to come to campus, please allow enough time for delivery.<sup>2</sup>

### **Can SNARB help when I need to write a paper?**

SNARB shows to its finest advantage here. SNARB searches the full text of textbooks and required readings, monitors appropriate academic journals, preprints, discussion lists, and blogs, and searches any lecture notes or other materials posted by the professor. SNARB can utilize keywords garnered from anywhere in your click stream to list topics of possible interest to you. Simply remember as you go through the semester to type any stray keyword rich thoughts into your notes.

When you are ready to work on your paper, go to the Bib command and type in your topic (or choose a SNARB suggestion). SNARB will produce a bibliography, giving you

plenty of references to choose among and suggesting related topics for further exploration.

Each course also has an assigned librarian consultant. You can schedule a consultation (in person or online) for yourself or your group to go over research strategies and learn how to make best use of the many resources available to you. In some courses, especially those designed for newly declared majors and incoming graduate students, faculty may require a library consultation session.

### **How does SNARB know what I need?**

SNARB knows what you have told it--which is usually plenty. For example, SNARB can infer from the fact that you looked at five articles and post daily to a discussion list on illuminated manuscripts that your interest in that topic is stronger than the interest you have occasionally shown in Coptic portraits.

If, in fact, you are not very interested at all in illuminated manuscripts, it is best to keep this in mind while surfing.

### **Isn't this an invasion of my privacy?**

It is. Many students are uncomfortable with SNARB knowing quite so much about the details of their lives and there is no reason you need to use this feature of SNARB. However, a regret factor seems to kick in shortly before papers are due. Many students change their minds about then.

### **Is SNARB really any different from the commercially available services that sound pretty much the same?**

No. We do like to think that we are more forthcoming about the downsides.

### **Isn't this a new concept in searching?**

Not really. It takes existing information from lots of different places and provides a mechanism so you can search them all at once--think of it as a giant federated search engine that searches your life.

Your "click stream" creates what John Battelle calls, in Search,<sup>3</sup> a "database of intentions." Your intentions (impulses, preoccupations, interests, and class assignments) are pretty clearly embedded in these electronic traces of your life. You have not previously been able to see them joined together in a meaningful way (nor, of course, could third parties.)

### **What if we are doing a group paper or presentation?**

Create a "group" on the Web CT page. SNARB can search the combined click streams of the group members--or just the materials on the class WebCT page. You can brainstorm a list of possible topics and ask SNARB to produce added possible topics and bibliographies for several ideas so that your group can choose among a several possibilities.

**What if I should accidentally enter information about private interests--like my cats, my peony growing; won't SNARB get confused?**

SNARB finds it relatively easy to pick out undergraduate queries that are recreational in nature and can be safely disregarded. For graduate students, this is more of a problem. SNARB could be fooled into thinking you really do want to research peony growing habitats.

Do not discount the possibility that SNARB can connect recreational and academic pursuits in a truly dynamite suggestion to write about, for example, cats eating peonies in the paintings of the seventeenth century Dutch painter, Franz van Mieris. Students, we find, often do their best work having found a topic that is of interest both academically and personally.

**I have my bibliography--how do I get the books and articles?**

The traditional method, coming to the library, browsing materials on site, and conferring with a subject specialist, still works extremely well. However, many students prefer to have selected items from SNARB's suggested bibliography sent to them.

Delivery depends on format. Journal articles (or book chapters) are almost always delivered as e-mail attachments. You can print them, though increasingly students choose to read them on their PC or other device so they can highlight, add notes, and enlarge the type font and illustrations as needed.

Mixed format materials--and an increasing percentage of requests are for this type of resource--are delivered as a URL to your e-mail. For example, an oral history with accompanying manuscripts, photographic, and map materials, can really only be delivered online.

You need to be aware that not everything has been digitized. Unique materials cannot leave their home libraries, and it requires time to request permission and obtain a digital copy (not always forthcoming). Many such requests exceed the Text Allowance for undergraduates. Text Allowances for graduate students take into account their research-intensive needs. On occasion, the university may find it cost effective to send the student to use other libraries rather than to have materials sent here. In such cases, the Text Allowance can be used for travel expenses.

Our library collections, together with the growing amount of high quality Open Access material (including that found in Institutional Repositories on our own and other

campuses) can provide almost all undergraduate needs at no charge to your Text Allowance. When materials have to be obtained through Document Delivery or ILL, the library makes every effort to provide them free; but just as you now pay for photocopies and for printing, some choices do have associated costs.

### **What do publishers think of SNARB?**

Like librarians, publishers are unsure about SNARB's effects on their future. Unlike librarians, if they guess wrong, we often hear they have left "to pursue other interests." This is why publishers are more nervous than librarians. You would be, too.

Nothing about SNARB changes the nature of primary publishing. The value a publisher provides is in the accessioning, working with the author, editing, and quality-assurance given the work. All these functions must continue. Most publishers, for their improved online products, do increase prices; this seems likely to continue. It is only the production and distribution that change.

### **What if, while studying, I am distracted and enter frivolous searches into my click stream, some of which might lead SNARB to make erroneous assumptions about me?**

SNARB has no interest in your leisure reading or entertainment habits. Given the age old antipathy of librarians, booksellers, and publishers to government snooping, SNARB is designed to retain as little information as possible about individuals and their reading habits (or, of course, any sort of habit really.). However, there are trade offs in this, as in other areas of life. (Note the recurrent theme of Unintended Consequences.) Deprived of the rich context of your full clickstream, SNARB cannot as accurately predict what you will be most happy with.

SNARB cannot, of course, ensure that commercial and government entities are not interested in your click stream. You can tell SNARB not to share your data with commercial entities, though you may miss appealing purchase opportunities (and it does deprive the University of a source of painless revenue.) If the government requests information, however, we must comply and are forbidden by law from disclosing to anyone that queries have been made, under the terms of the Patriot Act. We would say more about this, but it doesn't seem safe.

### **Do I have to return books and other library materials after I am through with them?**

The library's mission (quite similar to Google's) is to have all the books (and other good stuff) anybody wants, whenever he wants them--regardless of format--both now and in the future.

If the item you are using contributes to our ability to fulfill the mission, it needs to be returned. If it doesn't, you may keep it. The library first must ascertain whether the book

is "SAFE" (short for "digitally archived both locally and by trusted third parties; and at least 30 copies of printed book held in noncirculating library storage facilities"). Once a book has been declared SAFE, the library may decide to treat some or all of its copies as "redundant."<sup>4</sup>

When a book in the collection interests you, you can ask for a determination of whether it might be a "redundant copy." If it is, other issues come into play. The owning library will consider whether this title contributes to a good browsing experience or is likely to be wanted by other users. Then the library decides whether to give you the book outright or to request its return. As you can understand, there are many books whose status is unknown, and we must retain them at least for the present.

We have limited space to store "redundant" copies &.

### **Why are the commercial entities so fast and so good at building search engines and digitizing books?**

We don't know. Because they have managed to circumvent peer-review, they don't have to tell anybody how they do it.

### **What does SNARB stand for?**

We have no clue. You ought to be able to think of something.

### **Final Thoughts**

Libraries, I think, have a choice. We can refuse to have anything to do with this sort of privacy-invading technology--on the grounds that it is so very dangerous to our civil liberties and against all the tenets of librarianship. Which it is. Then our students will use similar systems provided by others, who have less interest in educating them as to civil liberties. So perhaps we shouldn't do that.

The author is indebted to Chuck Hamaker, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, for being, as always, such a knowledgeable and loyal friend in helping me with this piece.

### **Notes**

1. Faculty members work with SNARB to determine the size of the Text Allowance. Faculty have expressed concern about textbook royalties. Royalties will work as they do now. It is possible, in select cases, to negotiate a reduced teaching load in exchange for providing texts to the Open Access Text Pool (a joint project of many scholarly societies, publishers, and libraries). See the accompanying memo on SNARB addressed to the faculty.

2. A "Knowledge Commons" is the next generation of an "Information Commons," now an outdated concept. And note that Express or 24-Hour Delivery is available for course materials mailed but does cost quite a bit extra.

3. Read John Battelle's *The Search: How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed Our Culture*. Portfolio (a division of Penguin Books, a division of Pearson); many cities listed, 2006.

SNARB, in addition to searching, can tailor suggestions to the length of time between now and the paper's due date--and to the number of words per article. Think of it like this. Take all the places in which you have done searches, set up alerts, posted to blogs and discussion groups, ordered things, paid bills, and told booksellers, travel agents, and others about the types of new services, products, announcements that you'd like to hear about, the photographs you've stored online, and the music for your I-Pod. Add to this, in the future, the records of the places where you've paid for a latte with a card, used a Customer Loyalty card at a grocery store, and so forth. And of course surveillance cameras everywhere have gathered a lot of information about you. Did you think about adding graffiti to a London bus? Run a red light? Go out the library entrance even after the dinger dinged? Talked online or by phone to someone who did those things? Who knows? You may be able to search this all in one glorious search. (See, among others, Patrick Radden Keefe, "Can Network Theory Thwart Terrorists?" *New York Times*, March 12, 2006 and Spencer S. Hsu, "D.C. Forms Network of Surveillance," *Washington Post*, February 17, 2002).

4. Please note that there is no such thing as a "redundant book." There are, however, "redundant copies," although unfortunately, they are most frequently titles like *Books in Print*, 1983 or *Dissertation Abstracts*, March-July, 1992. However, librarians are quite sensitive about this distinction.