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Ronald E. Wheeler

Boston University School of Law

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Is This the Law Library or an Episode of the Jetsons?

Ronald Wheeler

**Director of the Law Library & Information Resources & Associate
Professor of Legal Research, Suffolk University Law School**

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120 Tremont Street
Boston, MA 02108

www.law.suffolk.edu

IS THIS THE LAW LIBRARY OR AN EPISODE OF THE *JETSONS*?

Ronald Wheeler*

If I were to sum up the future of law libraries in a word, that word would be technology. Our future will be defined by technology and all of its implications including the fun and the intriguing but also the scary and the intimidating. It will include technologies that we know about and technologies that are beyond our imaginations.¹ Things like retinal and holographic displays are predicted to be in use in the next 5 to 10 years.² Lawyers, law professors, and other law library patrons will be browsing touchable, holographic shelves to select volumes instead of walking through the stacks of physical libraries. Intelligent, robotic, personal assistants will be providing clerical and other kinds of support to library researchers.³ Law library patrons won't carry around smartphones or tablets. Instead they will work on skin-embedded screens with fingernail displays, brain mapping, brain uploading, and DNA storage.⁴ Computers will use intelligent speech recognition and instantaneous intelligent language translation to answer a researcher's natural language question.⁵ All of these technological developments will hasten a radical transformation of how we educate lawyers, how law is practiced, and how legal research is conducted.

The real challenge for law libraries and for law librarians will not be acquiring and learning new technologies. Our challenge will be to completely change our mindsets. We will need to radically change how we think about legal research. We will need

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1. See, e.g., Int'l Legal Tech. Ass'n, *Legal Technology Future Horizons: Strategic Imperatives for the Law Firm of the Future* (2014), available at <http://www.iltanet.org/Downloads/LTFH-Report.pdf> (giving examples of technologies predicted to be in use in the next 12 months and those being developed for use in 10 to 20 years).

2. *Id.* at 68.

3. *Id.* at 66.

4. *Id.* at 66–68.

5. *Id.* at 79.

to put away old notions that there is one legal research process, based on print indexes and tables of contents, that is somehow more correct than any other. We will need to discard notions that electronic legal research must proceed a certain way based on how legal research platforms were organized and constructed in the 1990s.⁶ I use myself as an example because just four years ago even I was positing a process for legal research that contained certain “essential components,” and I now question whether “choosing a source” or “having knowledge of particular sources” are or will remain essential to electronic legal research. We will need to wrap our minds more completely around the reality of algorithm-driven searching on legal research platforms that may or may not strictly accede to our attempts to control our results through Boolean searching. We will need to learn and change and adapt and adopt and completely restructure how and what we do to find information, and we will need to do all of these things regularly and continuously.

In the future that I foresee for law libraries, we will need to change our mindsets about the nature of our collections. In many ways, we’ve seen this happening already with ever shrinking print collections and ever expanding electronic offerings. Yet, there still exists a sizable and vocal group of legal academics that disparage efforts to expand law library ebook offerings and etexts. Those critics remain convinced that law libraries that are heavily dependent on electronic collections are somehow less scholarly or less valid than those libraries with large print collections. Nevertheless, those of us working in academic law libraries know that our students and junior faculty are successfully using electronic information sources already. Law firm libraries have known this for over a decade. The future of law libraries is to catch up to and keep pace with successful students, junior faculty, and innovative law firm research practices.

The technologically advanced law libraries that I foresee will require us to rethink how we teach legal research and how students learn both legal research and the law. Even today, when many practicing attorneys know about or have downloaded at

6. See, e.g., Ronald Wheeler, *Does WestlawNext Really Change Everything: The Implications of WestlawNext on Legal Research*, 103 LAW LIBR. J. 359, 361–64 (2011) (discussing the process of legal research and its essential components).

least one legal research app on a mobile device,⁷ a sizable group of legal academics still disparage or completely ban the use of laptops and other devices in their classrooms.⁸ In spite of how students want to learn and how students are choosing to learn, these academics insist that they know best how students should access learning. We will be required in the future to teach with technology including mobile technologies, law practice technologies, and other technologies not yet imagined. Pervasive use of these technologies will be required for law libraries to stay relevant because cutting-edge technologies are what our students and other law library patrons will come to expect.

The bottom line is that the future of law libraries is limited only by the confines of our imaginations. I see a bright, techy and Jetsons-like⁹ future for law libraries. It is a future full of gadgets and robots and smart machines that will revolutionize how we think about the law, how we practice law, how we teach law, and how we conduct legal research.

7. A.B.A., 2014 LEGAL TECHNOLOGY SURVEY REPORT, question 44b (indicating that over 36% of the 312 attorneys surveyed had downloaded at least one legal specific app).

8. See, e.g., Steven M. Eisenstat, *A Game Changer: Assessing the Impact of the Princeton/UCLA Laptop Study on the Debate of Whether to Ban Law Student Use of Laptops During Class*, 92 UNIV. OF DETROIT MERCY L. REV. ____ (forthcoming 2015), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2554535> (asserting that students' use of laptops in classrooms should be restricted or banned).

9. *The Jetsons* (Hanna Barbera television broadcast 1962–1988).