Interview with Oliver Obst of the Medical Library at the University of Muenster

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This interview with Oliver Obst of the Medical Library of the University of Muenster in Muenster, Germany, describes what has influenced and shaped his career as a health sciences librarian and blogger.

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Question: Please describe your current role and responsibilities at the University of Muenster, a typical day at work, and where your office is located.

Obst: Currently, I’m head of the medical library of the University of Muenster, Germany. As this is my very favorite job, I will probably stay here
a few more years until reassignment in 2024. With 11 staff members, we serve 3,000 students and 1,200 physicians and scientists. The library is located just across the university clinic, and we are visited by 200,000 people annually, mostly students, as we put each and every journal online. If there is no deadline for budget proposals, conference papers, or the library magazine, I check Twitter and retweet where appropriate to my personal account or our library’s account. After the all-morning staff round, I check my e-mails to see if there are requests for literature searches for theses or if anyone is asking for iPads.

Once a week I ride by bike to the university library downtown to counsel with my subject librarian colleagues. In the afternoon I go on a “house call” to the clinic for pediatric oncology. The clinic had requested a short alert on new library collections and services. On the way back I met the head of marketing, who is interested in our new information display, a large LCD panel that is fed with all news channels of the faculty and is situated in the library lobby. We conclude for a business meeting next day. Connecting with the iTunes store, I find a cute new app which would be of much use to our first grader. I buy and install it on our four library iPads and alert potential users by posting an update on our library blog Aktuelles (see Figures 1 and 2).

**Question:** For the benefit of readers who may not be familiar with your university career, please describe how you first started working there. What are some of the most significant changes you have experienced during your time at the University of Muenster?

**Obst:** I studied biology and received a diploma in 1984 in the field of plant pathology. After serving as a civil servant, I wrote my thesis in the field of cardiovascular physiology at the University of Aachen. Only then did I recognize that I derived from a long line of librarians and booksellers, so I took a two-year postgraduate training program to become a subject librarian. Unfortunately, this did not at all prepare me for the many tasks and demands of being head of the medical library of the University of Muenster. My first duty was learning to write HTML for building a library presence on the web. As the university library had only DOS computers at that time (1994), I had to bike ten minutes to a more advanced computer lab which had Unix desktops with Netscape to actually see the results of my writing!

The second challenge was budget. Becoming head of the medical library of the University in 1996 meant becoming responsible for cutting journal subscriptions worth US$200,000, with a deadline of one month. I learned the hard way of how to cancel journals without been crucified by the faculty, but it was also a lot of fun, because I love being challenged in that way. Subsequently I wrote a series of six well-received papers on my experiences with that cancellation process and how to make it a benefit for faculty and library.
Nobody at library school told me about that, let alone HTML. The next big thing was a weekly newsletter for our customers, which we started in 1995 (620 issues have been published so far) and of course the daily library news on the home page, which comes with a blog. In 2003 we lent out personal digital assistants (PDAs) equipped with drug information, textbooks, and a bunch of medical tools. Last year we switched to lending iPads (see Figure 3), which made much more sense in the library. Students just love to use our textbooks on them—annotating was never so easy and permitted—and train for exams with multiple choice questions.

**Question:** How do you keep up with the professional literature?

**Obst:** Reading library journals cover to cover is often boring; I fell in love with the shortness of Twitter and the cuteness of blogs. I subscribe to some 60 RSS feeds with Google Reader, but mostly I rely on Twitter. Following some neat guys such as Guus vd Brekel, Eric Rumsey, or Frank
Norman always gives me the feeling of not missing something valuable in my field, let alone being informed on the fly, as soon as something happens.

**Question:** Who or what influenced you the most in your career?

**Obst:** My staff. Makes you humble. My customers. Makes you proud of what you are achieving. Their real needs and existential demands make you accept only the sky as the limit of your services. Several colleagues from all around the world, mostly EAHIL members, with their great passion, dedication, and wonderful ideas. Nancy Start, who started MEDLIB-L, and several other medical librarians from Buffalo and Hopkins. Visiting them at the beginning of my career was like lighting the flame of passion for this job.

**Question:** If you were not a librarian, what other professions would you be suited for temperamentally? Intellectually?

**Obst:** I always loved doing research, mixing things up at the lab bench. I love teaching passionate people and pass along my knowledge in a light minded,
almost funny way. I admire clinic clowns. And I love to write and express myself literally.

**Question:** How do you think that handheld devices will assume a larger role in accessing the latest scientific research?

**Obst:** As I said, we have quite an experience with mobile devices. In the field of medicine they can be very beneficial because of their ubiquitousness. They simply connect you to what's going around; nobody would like to be cut off from that universe of information which enriches the physical world and is available at hand. It's not only about access but also input. Being an active participant and being able to change the (virtual) landscape is a great force for driving humans. There is no one way in communication, and especially in medicine there are great advantages in terms of patient information, patient consent, getting information at the bedside, at the point of care, and so forth.

**Question:** Do you think the phenomena known as Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 are significant trends or mere hyperbole? How do you view peer production,
tagging, annotations, and syndication, for example, as potentiators of scientific research?

**Obst:** As I said, with Twitter, looking at your peers can really be a shortcut for finding information, for becoming involved in just the kind of (scientific) discussion to make significant progress in the short time you have.

**Question:** This generation of science undergraduates fails to recognize a journal issue as a discernible unit. The monitor screen has blurred the distinctions between different kinds of content. Is this a problem or an opportunity?

**Obst:** Neither and both. It’s the reality. When it comes to information searching, nobody needs to know about issues anymore (except librarians for looking up specific articles). When it comes to keeping up with the literature, issues may help, but Twitter is better.

**Question:** Do you have any predictions for the future of electronic publishing in the next three to five years? Ten years?

**Obst:** You can already see what will happen in the next few years. That is not of interest for me. There will be new kinds of interactive, multimedia textbook apps, which may boost learning and remembering stuff by heart. There will be devices which not only combine the benefits of smartphones and tablets but also will make information exchange so easy and natural that you will forget that there is a “device”; for example, speech recognition will enable Morgan’s famous Mister D. (a thinking robot).

I’m more curious about the years after 2020. Then libraries and librarians could be remarkably different from now. In one place libraries may even get extinguished; in others, they may take over other universities. In one environment they will find a well-balanced niche between publishers and customers, in others they may be chafed—who knows? My assumption is that money will decide this in the end, at least in Germany.

**Question:** Are there any predictions that you have made in the past that have not come true yet? What are they?

**Obst:** I thought librarians would act as information brokers for molecular biology information, such as sequences for genes or proteins. Clinical librarians would help busy doctors get information at the ward or bedside. Both are far from happening in Germany. Budget cuts were always feared but nothing happened until now. Keep your fingers crossed!
**Question:** Is there a question that was not asked that you would like to answer?

**Obst:** More of a comment than a question. The digital natives rely less on the library. They learn not to be dependent on gatekeepers (let it be TV stations or libraries) but to put their media together by themselves. If this extends to textbooks as well, libraries will lose their main business model and perhaps become simple study halls drained of printed books.

**FURTHER READING**