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# Letter from America

## A Millennial Report from WESS Germanists to Our Colleagues in the UK

By Jeffrey Garrett, Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois)

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As I compose a few lines for you on this Sunday afternoon, the year, the decade, the century, and the millennium are all coming to a simultaneous end, and we Germanist librarians in the United States hope fervently, no less than our counterparts in the UK, that history will be forgiving and grant us a clean slate in each of these categories on the appointed day. While looking ahead may be uncertain, looking back can also be difficult, especially on our side of the Atlantic. For one, as we don't need to hear from our European colleagues, we here in the US are millennially handicapped. In the year 1000 Leif Eriksson was just exploring our eastern coast, surely with other things on his mind than founding libraries. Looking back a century is perhaps more realistic (after all, our *Ahnherr* Melvil Dewey was 49 years of age in 1900), but such a long retrospective could be very taxing on this writer as well as tedious for his British readers. So perhaps it is wisest to restrict myself to a look back upon the now concluded decade of the '90s and-most modestly but most manageable of all-the now ending year of 1999.

Certainly, there have been developments enough over the last ten years that have affected and in fact deeply transformed our professional lives. The revolution in computing and communications has not only had a huge impact on the nature and dispatch of our day-to-day duties, redefining what constitutes expertise and "job performance," but also on our lives as a nationwide community of Germanist librarians working at the colleges and universities of the land. This community, as many of you will know already, usually regards its home to be "WESS," the [Western European Specialists Section](#) of the Association of College and Research Libraries, founded in 1979.

WESS currently has about 750 members, of whom 150-250 would possibly describe themselves as a whole or in part as "Germanists," or at the very least as germanistically interested. Of these, only 50-75 take an active role in the discussions and other activities of the organization, virtual and real. Defining is most commonly the participation in WESS's [Germanist Discussion Group](#), or GDG. Beginning with the general adoption of electronic mail in the late '80s and early '90s, and especially with the creation of our online discussion group German-E, founded and ably managed to this day by James Campbell of the University of Virginia, our ability to interact with one another has made the national exchange of news, ideas, and opinions a natural part of our working day. Those who choose not to be engaged actively often "lurk," as we say, auditing quietly the exchanges on German-E or reading the useful and often engaging columns of the twice-yearly [WESS Newsletter](#), published and distributed both in paper and online via WESS's extensive website, WESSWeb. A number of Germanist librarians in the US also choose to disregard their professional *Geschwister* altogether and work in splendid-or, as the case may be, dismal-isolation. It should also be pointed out that a number of Germanist librarians are not members of WESS, and yet participate actively in German-E. And nobody has a problem with that.

One positive side-effect of our access to German-E as a permanent forum is that when our group physically meets-which we continue to do twice yearly at the meetings of the American Library Association, usually in January and June-there is no longer so great a need to catch up on institutional news, debate the issues, etc. Instead, meetings of the German Discussion Group increasingly feature guest speakers or demonstrations of new electronic media. For example, at our New Orleans meeting in June 1999, there were presentations by Steve Hall of Chadwyck-Healey of their latest German database products (Luther, Schiller, Deutsche Lyrik) and also by Roger Brisson and myself of the competing CD-ROM-based full-text literature databases from Directmedia in Berlin. The preceding January, in

Philadelphia, we were treated to an evaluation by Axel Schmetzke of Altavista and other well-known search engines, as well as lesser-known ones, such as the specifically German utilities Fireball and Paperball, in light of their adequacy and comprehensive for discovering information on German websites.

Let me just mention parenthetically that WESS also celebrated its 20th anniversary this past summer in New Orleans with a leisurely lo-tech cruise up the Mississippi and a program "[Looking Forward After 20 Years](#)," the latter featuring WESS historian [Barbara Walden](#), who mainly looked back, and University of Pennsylvania classicist [James J. O'Donnell](#), who mainly looked forward. Guests on board the river steamer included many of the booksellers we do business with, as well as several librarians from Die Deutsche Bibliothek, taking a break from their duties at the first-ever DDB booth at the annual ALA conference.

Since around 1995, the Web has revolutionized our work as German specialists to an extent even greater than e-mail did in the five years preceding. As Internet connections have become more reliable and faster, processor speeds have increased, and websites have become more flexible and interactive, the WWW has brought us comprehensive and convenient access to the catalogs of German research collections, full-text databases, publisher sites, as well as to the inventories of our booksellers. A number of US institutions, Stanford and the University of Chicago among them, have recently been pioneering online ordering of German materials from our principal German supplier, Otto Harrassowitz in Wiesbaden.

The new ease of information access and exchange has not only increased our bibliographic penetration of German, Austrian, and Swiss resources, but has also greatly facilitated collaboration between academic librarians in the US and Germany. In October 1998, for example, a group of fifteen WESS librarians-mostly Germanists-traveled to the [Frankfurt Book Fair](#), meeting with the Fair's then director, [Peter Weidhaas](#), additionally with Klaus-Dieter Lehmann and other prominent representatives of the German library and publishing establishment. Virtually all of the planning and arrangements for this journey were made via the Internet, and a report on this journey was posted on the World Wide Web (accessible through WESSWeb. Before the Fair, four members of the Frankfurt expedition presented a [full-day seminar at the Universitätsbibliothek Stuttgart](#)-this event would probably also have never taken place without the planning ease made possible by the Internet. (Note: The proceedings of this seminar have since been published as *Informationsvermittlung und Dienstleistungsorientierung wissenschaftlicher Bibliotheken in den USA*, ed. Uwe Laich and Werner Stephan, Stuttgart: Universitätsbibliothek, 1999.) In October 1999, WESS returned to Frankfurt with its own booth, made possible not only by a generous invitation from the organizers of the Fair's International Booksellers' and Librarians' Center, but also by a travel subsidy from the Association of College and Research Libraries. A [photo album](#) is accessible from our WESSWEB site. It was, we all hope, the first of many happy returns to Frankfurt.

Another transatlantic product of the Internet age is [Reference Reviews Europe](#), a collaboration between Germanist librarians primarily in the US (with the participation of several Canadian and UK colleagues) with Dr. Klaus Schreiber, editor of *Informationsmittel für Bibliotheken*, the respected review journal of the Deutsches Bibliotheksinstitut in Berlin. RRE abstractors take the German-language reviews published in IFB and abstract them in English, thereby compensating for the fact that there is no regular review source in the United States of European and mainly foreign-language reference works. In the meantime, RRE is entering its seventh year on the Web and fifth as an annual print publication. The editors of RRE are scattered over four states, the 25 abstractors over two continents, and the publisher of both the print version (RREA) and the more frequently updated online version (RREO) is Casalini libri of Florence, Italy-not at all surprising anymore in this new age.

A final development worthy of description that is transpiring on the western shores of the Atlantic (and the eastern shores of the Pacific and at many points in between) has been the resuscitation of the German Demonstration Project, an initiative dating back to the early 1990s, and its re-establishment in 1998 under the new name [German Resources Project](#). The focus of the GRP and its 48 members is "improving the effective acquisition, sharing, and use of German-language materials among North American libraries, in addition to fostering closer collaboration with German research libraries." Perhaps its most exciting aspect has been the involvement of German partner libraries, especially the Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek in Göttingen, and its director, Dr. Elmar Mittler. As talks progress, reciprocal document delivery and even interlibrary loan has been initiated between US and German research libraries. Further types of cooperation are under discussion. Collaboration in the area of digitization projects and cataloging is also being contemplated. In fact, AACR2 is being translated into German as a joint German-US project under the aegis

of the German Resources Project.

I conclude this review of recent developments affecting German librarianship in the US with a few final thoughts. As Americans tend to do, we look optimistically into the future, even at a time when German studies in the United States are not flourishing. We do this because even as interest in German language and culture declines at American colleges and universities, accessibility to the vast resources in German libraries is steadily improving, making them ever more relevant to scholars and students in all areas-and not only for the study of German *Dichter und Denker*. The internationalization of research has become a reality through recent technological advances, giving German librarians in the US-and presumably in Great Britain as well-a new role as intermediaries that transcends and may yet surpass the old one.

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