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Jon Jablonski is head of the UCSB Library’s Map & Imagery Laboratory (MIL). With graduate degrees in Geography and Library Science, Jablonski is responsible for collecting, organizing, and providing access to the Library’s geospatial content. MIL includes the largest collection of historic aerial photography in an academic institution, hundreds of thousands of topographic maps and thousands of basemap data layers from countries around the globe, and a huge selection of thematic layers collected since the early 1990s, when the original Alexandria Digital Library was conceived. Since coming to UCSB in 2010, Jablonski has fostered close working relationships with both computational scientists and digital humanists on campus while helping to increase the variety of data services available to Library users. His personal research focuses on how Internet and Communications Technologies (ICTs) affect culture, economy, libraries, and how individuals navigate the world around them.

Perspective Statement

Academic Libraries have struggled to build systems that offer effective access to spatial data. A very small number of very large institutions have managed to construct and maintain usable geoportals, despite rapid advances in server-side GIS technologies. For example, libraries devote significant financial and human resources to the library catalog—frequently paying tens-of-thousands of dollars per year on maintenance contracts for these commercial “integrated library systems.” There are typically entire departments whose employees spend their days populating the database with metadata. Digital repository systems to host digital content are typically viewed as projects that can be developed and then forgotten. Rarely are significant numbers of metadata creators, system administrators, and software engineers dedicated to the task full time.

No academic library has surplus personnel ready to be re-tasked. And no matter how widespread the use of GIS systems becomes, the number of people who have a conscious need and desire to find and use spatial data is considerably smaller than the population as a whole. However, in my work I encounter people daily who have information needs that would best be met by a mapped dataset. My task is to connect them not only with that data, but also with the skills and tools required to use that data.

Progress has been made in recent years as data services have become more widespread and more library personnel have become involved with the data enterprise, however, more work needs to be done. Remote, unmediated access to digital content has been the preference of our users for at least fifteen years. We have started down the path and made significant progress,
but only through significant re-tooling, re-training, collaboration, and investment will it be possible for libraries to transition to the place where our users already live.