

Daisy Dominguez, LACUNY Dialogues, January 19, 2007

I once heard Stephen King say about his horror writing, “I want to take people around the corner and scare the hell out of them”. I didn’t want to follow Stephen King anywhere after that because what he said unnerved me. In a less visceral way, so do some of the things I’m going to mention here today. In keeping with Beth’s nice visual, I’d be the ghost of “librarianship yet to come” and my tour will include some corners.

I think that our profession’s most fundamental value is our belief in the power of knowledge and our desire to ensure that it survives into posterity. Everything we do as a profession can be marked on a continuum of that one idea. As librarians, we help guide people to knowledge, teach them how to find it for themselves, organize it, and/or preserve it. But that simple line has gotten a lot busier as technology has incorporated itself into our workplace (and world). We now have a more complex relationship with our students, with our faculty and with our vendors. We now license products that, if not for perpetual access clauses (and I sometimes worry if in spite of them), we may not be able to access later on. Librarians are asked to be part of focus groups on how to improve products and we are somewhat uneasy if, say, our students are recruited as employees to promote these same products.

So, in these heady times, how do we ensure that knowledge survives? Technology inspires me with its great potential to expand and democratize our access to knowledge and, oddly, the simultaneous fear that, without some vigilance, we are quickly losing our grasp of it. While creative technologies allow us to access far more information far more quickly than we ever dreamed of in the library of yesterday, I sometimes worry that similar technologies and their models of access and delivery are leading us to create a homogenous library good only for the moment.

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Let's take a look at one example of how technology has the potential to create a more plural atmosphere. After reading an earlier draft of my paper, Steve suggested I look into the "Long Tail", a theory set forth by *Wired* editor-in-chief, Chris Anderson. Anderson explains how online retailers, such as Amazon or Rhapsody, offer little known books, movies and songs – products that their physical counterparts would not make available because they would not sell as well as the sure-fire "hits" and "bestsellers" – and make just as much or more revenue than the mainstream hits. This phenomenon deals with retail but Anderson mentions its application closer to home. His article proposes a series of promising conclusions about how information does and will flow in the future; he writes:

Already, we're seeing a blurring of the line between in and out of print. Amazon and other networks of used booksellers have made it almost as easy to find and buy a second-hand book as it is a new one...Combine that with the rapidly dropping costs of print-on-demand technologies and it's clear why any book should always be available. **Indeed, it is a fair bet that children today will grow up never knowing the meaning of out of print.**

He goes on to say:

**...the cultural benefit of all of this is much more diversity, reversing the blanding effects of a century of distribution scarcity and ending the tyranny of the hit.**

This paints a very bright picture for the availability of alternative viewpoints. If this is the wave of the future, we may assume that libraries, too, will be able to diversify their collections. But I am not sure I see this happening.

#### DIVERSITY IN COLLECTIONS

Let's take a look at a technological version of a very traditional library function in the modern library: monograph collection development via electronic book collections. While I admit that I prefer reading print books, I am not against e-books per se. I can appreciate the convenience of

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finding all mention of a word in mere seconds on an online reference book, for example. I can also appreciate having multiple users access a single e-book from home, office or elsewhere. What I find troubling is giving up our roles as selectors by buying into pre-packaged e-book collections that do not necessarily reflect the interests or strengths of our local academic departments and patrons. The idea that many libraries are buying into these collections and thereby creating cloned libraries throughout academia bothers me. How does this model enable us to create collections of complementary resources? If we are adamant about pursuing e-books, let's push for individual collections that take into account not only our local needs and interests but make the most of our role as part of a consortium of libraries.

These e-book collections are not only very expensive but present a recurring cost for access, not ownership. Given that we are all under monetary restraints – some such that libraries may have gone several years without being able to purchase *any* monographs – I can imagine the great joy one must feel to allocate a certain amount of money to create an instant collection of thousands of titles. It may be reasoned as a good economic decision but I wonder what the non-monetary cost is. Since we seem to be at the mercy of publishers and vendors who have the ability to withdraw certain journals from online databases, I am concerned this may transfer over to e-book collections as well. Do we know how many titles are monthly deleted from these collections? What do the agreements say? I am sorry to say I do not know the answers to these questions and I am intrigued why I don't hear more people ask them.

Until vendors are willing and able to make more of a commitment to accommodate our needs, maybe libraries, as institutions with a responsibility to preserve the world's cultural and intellectual heritage, should stick to collections that we can mold and own. Print books, retro as

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they may be, still seem to be the best long-term investment. At least we'll own them (cover to cover) generations from now.

The specter of an increasingly depleted library does not stop there. We know that not everything is available online. Patrons ask for book reviews or small articles that are not included in our sometimes euphemistically labeled "full-text" subscriptions. Since publishers and vendors have complicated relationships of their own, we may have access to some journals one day and conceivably lose them the next as they see fit. If patrons are lucky, we have the paper copy. If they are willing to wait, they can request an ILL. But what happens many years from now, when even more indexes and databases go online? Perhaps most material will be born digital and we may not have cause to worry. But if we are looking for older material or we are still dealing with print and selective electronic indexing or full-text, we may face a growing chasm of material that is ever more difficult to find.

At last year's Town Hall, Steve noted that we pay a lot of money for databases and we should ask that they work in a way that best meets our needs. There are a great many questions we can ask and results we can expect. We have a crucial role to play in deciding how knowledge is made available and accessible to our patrons and posterity. And since a lot of the technical aspects of this may feel out of our hands, I also think that all library school programs should strive to have more practical and technical components so that more graduates leave with a better understanding of licensing agreements, database creation and other technologies. We librarians should not be so divorced from the technology that feeds us.

#### DIVERSITY OF IDEAS

I think that a fundamental part of the research process is to seek both or more sides of an issue or topic. We often hear faculty complain about students only using Google or Wikipedia in their

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works cited list. While these have become staples and do have their usefulness, they have not supplanted library databases for finding scholarly material. Even if you use Google Scholar, you will not pick up all the material out there. And even if we get over these two usual suspects, I do not believe one single library database has been able to find all the best scholarly resources that one needs for a particular area of study, either. And I'm glad. What would it be like if we all used just one database, one website, one anything, contentedly believing that it could possibly encompass all viewpoints? Would people become complacent and not question information when it is from the one source they come to know and trust?

This brings me to a related technological advancement that gives some of us pause; it's called federated searching. Step right up and search all related databases in half the time of going in to each separately. Skip the part where you figure out the best database-specific subject terms to use. Well, some of us worry that, for all its speed, federated searching may not always pick up the nuances that a particular subject area requires. In the rush to make things simpler, some wonder, are we making it too easy?

Steve's discussion about how the collaborative and transparent nature of the Internet is allowing people to evaluate things on their own and question authority is very inspiring. And I see it. But I also see patrons who do not always *care* to evaluate. Students who need to create an annotated bibliography for class come to the reference desk and do not necessarily care to read the abstracts to see if the articles fit in with their paper. They just want a list of 10 sources. Are they doing any "critical thinking" or are they just completing what in their minds may be random and unrelated tasks? This may well be a very un-technological phenomenon. Some students want to learn to expand their horizons and others just want to pass the class and get on with it. I'm just concerned

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that the latter attitude combined with the tendency to oversimplify resources doesn't necessarily advance the scholarly cause.

And I wonder if sometimes we are not guilty of it in our own different way.

A seasoned librarian once told me that he felt he was a much better librarian before the Internet and that comment left an impression on me. Are we, like some patrons, not engaging enough with our resources?

I once mentioned to a librarian that a certain index did not pick up material in other languages and that it was a shame because we were probably missing out on some good research. Nevertheless, the librarian insisted that this particular index picked up the *best* scholarship. As generalists we categorize certain publishers, indexes and databases as picking up the best material in a particular subject area. And that may be. But I wonder. Is this kind of thinking just practical or does this mind-set sometimes lend itself to the creation of generic collections? Do we sometimes display cultural hubris and forget to adhere to our core value of preserving the scholarly record?

I hark back to what Steve said about questioning our own schemas of authority – rethinking what is reliable and what, in this new day, we can incorporate into our palette. In this long-tailed and transparent new world, what will terms like “core” and “mainstream”, “alternative” and “marginalized” mean as more individuals and groups gain the ability to make their opinions known to the world? The person or group that was once seen as marginal may soon become very influential. And what will we decide to preserve in that virtual environment? Steve wrote a fun and interesting article on the need to preserve certain blogs, for example.

Okay, I'm going to stop trying to scare you and bring things together. I call this part:

OUR ROLE WITH RESPECT TO “OTHERS”: ADVOCACY AND ADAPTATION

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I think the biggest change in our profession may be that we will increasingly become advocates for libraries. As Beth discusses, when there was not much technology to learn and understand, we knew our place and understood our surroundings. With the impact of rapidly evolving technology, we find ourselves writing about the need to archive blogs and the need to question the closing of EPA libraries, to name a few examples. There are big initiatives out there that affect libraries, even though they may not be initiated or run solely by librarians. Some examples that come to mind are CLOCKSS, or Controlled Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe, a joint publisher and library initiative whose mission is to make digital content available in the event of a “trigger event” where a publisher would not be able to provide access and SPARC, the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, a collaboration between universities, libraries and organizations who work towards finding alternatives to high cost journals that impede the scholarly process.

On a local level, I know a librarian who has reached out to various sectors – library administration, faculty, filmmakers, film festival coordinators and other librarians – in order to begin discussions about the distribution of Native American video and film from Latin America. This may sound simple, but it has been difficult for libraries to purchase these materials because of the collective way in which they are filmed and the historical mistrust of indigenous communities towards outsiders. A few years from now, we may be able to become a member of this initiative and acquire films from a wide range of Native filmmakers that we might never have otherwise come across. And it started when a librarian reached out to new players in order to advance one of our core values.

Closer to home, I think of CLICS. It presents us with a good opportunity to experiment with cooperative collection development CUNY-wide. There may be uneasiness that in collaborating

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with other colleges, we may lose our local flavor. We would have to ensure that our college's departments and programs were provided for, but let's envision a future with more complementary and diverse collections. Let's reach out to colleagues at other CUNY libraries and figure out ways to approach collection development for different subject areas more effectively. In finding ways to create better collections, I imagine we would also learn some good tricks of the trade from one another. When I do not find reviews for my collection development areas, I use Google Books to preview monographs. What about starting a list of librarians collecting in certain subject areas? We could notify each other of recommended titles and cutting edge material that we would want at least one of our libraries to have. It may get a little heated when it's time to decide which library. But just "Remember the Town Hall" and its mantra: plays well with others.

In closing, if I were pressed to point out the one thing that I thought librarians working in the current and future library will be a lot more comfortable with, it's adaptability. As Steve said, "the information landscape has become way too complex"; we have to adapt to that reality. It doesn't look or feel the same format-wise and its creators are so varied that it's hard to pin down people's roles. I think those of us in the library of tomorrow will be more comfortable with the fluidity of these relationships. Beth noted the importance and value of playing well with others and that for librarians in the traditional library, "others" were known entities. Now, "others" are any players who can creatively bring our mission as a profession to life in more interesting ways. Beth probably could not have envisioned herself being a maverick librarian in MySpace years ago but she found a way to parlay an unorthodox partner into something that builds her library's community and is in keeping with our core values. So besides any funky tattoos that may differentiate today's and tomorrow's librarian from the librarian of the so-called past, I think that

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in future, we won't be so concerned with fitting in to a role but rather always carving out a new one that is still in tune with our professional principles. Collaborative relationships may include book dealers, film distributors, faculty, students, support staff, vendors. One thing is certain: the players will continue to expand but at our core, we are still interested in that same spectrum of issues that I set out in the beginning. Just as custodians, we're entrusted with watching over knowledge and ensuring that it will be accessible in many ways and for many generations to come. And it is our commitment to getting that done, in as many fun and interesting and colorful ways as we can, that will make us thrive in the future, whoever we decide play with.