# A few possibilities for librarianship by 2015

The library profession is at a cross roads. Computer technology coupled with the Internet have changed the way content is created, maintained, evaluated, and distributed. While the core principles of librarianship (collection, organization, preservation, and dissemination) are still very much apropos to the current milieu, the exact tasks of the profession are not as necessary as they once were. What is a librarian to do? In my opinion, there are three choices: 1) creating services against content as opposed to simply providing access to it, 2) curating collections that are unique to our local institutions, or 3) providing sets of services that are a combination of #1 and #2.

## History

Librarians love to create lists. Lists of Internet resources. Lists of names, addresses, and contact information for directories. Lists of manuscripts and various special collections. Above all, we love to create lists of books and journals – our venerable library catalogs. Life in Library Land was good.

Trouble in paradise began to rear its head in 1965 with the advent of MARC – Machine Readable Cataloging. The United States Library of Congress, which had been printing and distributing catalog cards since the early 20th century, started distributing cataloging information in electronic form. A few years later the ERIC and MEDLARS bibliographic database systems became available reducing the need for printed bibliographic indexes. By the early 80s there were a proliferation of such tools and libraries began whole-heartedly creating "online catalogs" from MARC data. The lists we loved to create and maintain had become electronic.

Around the same time, the information retrieval community was investigating various automated indexing techniques. The approach of the information retrieval scientists was fundamentally different from us librarians. Their primary tool was mathematics. They used numbers to weigh and measure content. Most importantly, we were (and still are) mostly interested in creating order – a cohesive whole, an organization – out of the apparent chaos of our local collections. On the other hand, the information retrieval community was most interested in finding information. We were building a system of knowledge. They were making it searchable.

Fast forward to the present day. Computers have become ubiquitous. We carry them around in our pockets. Moreover, they are connected to a global network we call the Internet. The computers create information that is "born digital". This information is put on the Web and becomes accessible without the need of cataloging. Indexing technology has matured and "relevancy ranked" output has become the norm. For better or for worse, people's expectations have changed, and Google has become the gold standard.

## Whats and hows

At its center, the library profession provides four services against data and information for its clientele: 1) collection, 2) organization, 3) preservation, and 4) dissemination. We bring together content we believe is necessary for our students, instructors, and researchers to do their learning, teaching, and scholarship. Instead of simply placing this content en masse on our shelves we organize it into smaller, more manageable sub-collections, and we create linkages between similar times through name authority lists and controlled vocabulary terms. We believe it is important to maintain a historical record – preservation – so future generations can repeat and reexamine the discoveries and interpretations of today. Finally, all of this work comes to fruition when the content is shared and interpreted with our constituents through reference interviews, the borrowing of materials, information literacy sessions, exhibits, and other public service activities.

The things outlined above represent the "whats" of librarianship. They are processes valued by the wider community. On the other hand, given an environment where globally networked computers share digital information with a lot less effort, we need to be thinking about the "hows" of our profession to a greater degree. When it comes to collection, how much effort is being spent bringing together content in digital form compared to analog form? With the advent of full text content as well as "smart" and automatic indexing techniques, is the application of name authority lists and controlled subject headings as necessary as they once were? Our archivists have the most challenging job. With all of the digital media how can we ensure it will be readable in the near future, let alone decades or centuries from now? Finally, if we have to teach people how to use our information systems, then are the systems really useful? More than the "whats" of the profession, the "hows" of the profession need to change in order for us to remain relevant.

## Services against collections

Instead of simply providing access to information, why don't we provide our users with tools enabling them to use information, to put it into context, to evaluate in

any number of ways. They operative word here is use. Ask yourself, "What do people do with the books, journal articles, data sets, images, etc. that they find, identify and download?" Once we answer this question, the next step is to figure out ways to enable the patron to do these things in a networked environment. What do people do with content from our libraries? Here are some answers, exemplified by action verbs: add to my collection, annotate, cite, compare & contrast, create different version of, create flip book, create tag cloud from, delete from my collection, do concordance against, do rudimentary morphology, find opposite, find similar, highlight, incorporate into syllabus, map to controlled vocabulary term, plot on a map, print, purchase, rate, review, save, search, search my collection, share, summarize, tag, trace author, trace citation, translate, etc.

Libraries and librarians are expected to know the information needs of their clientele. Based on this information we ought to be able to not only make our search interfaces smarter, but we should be able to create simple, introductory tools to be used against our content enabling the user to put the content to greater user.

Building collections and providing access to them represents a crowded market. There are many competitors, and libraries do not posses the technology to do it faster nor cheaper. On the other hand, we are expected to know our users more intimately than our competitors. This is our unique advantage, our niche. Coupling this information with our knowledge of how information is used, the library profession can create tools to make information more meaningful, more useful, and more within the context of our users. Collections without services are useless; services without collections are empty.

## Special collections and archives

The students, instructors, and researchers of our institutions are generating data and creating information. This content is almost universally digital in nature. As alluded to above, preserving content is one of the functions of librarianship, but who is going to preserve the content of your institution? Why not actively collect this material, preserve it, organize it, and re-disseminate it? If every library were support this process, then the world's academic output might be more freely available and some of the goals of academia more easily achieved.

Similarly, libraries and archives often house sets of rare, unique, and infrequently held materials. These things might be medieval manuscripts, the unpublished papers of a scholar, or even sports memorabilia. Because these things, by their very nature, are not widely available the future of libraries may include the digitization and dissemination of our "special collections".

Both of these things – the collection of content created by universities and the digitization of content in our special collections – are things unique to each of our libraries. They represent niches we can fill and where competition is small. When libraries apply the tasks outlined in the previous section to their institutional repository or digitized special collections content, then libraries will be significantly and measurably contributing to the activities of higher education.

## More realistic

More realistically, the future of libraries in 2015 is less like the things outlined above and more like a continuation of things we are doing presently.

Libraries represent an increasingly smaller player in the information universe. With the invention of globally networked computers, information services are much less centralized as they once were. Information creators, distributors, and aggregators abound. While open access publishing models seem to be on the rise, it is doubtful they will totally replace the more traditional scholarly publishing models, let alone the traditional scholarly communications process. Books – the technology of the codex – will continue to be created into the foreseeable future. They have special qualities that make them very appealing. Portability. Durability. Technologically independent. Immutability. Unencumbered by licensing. For these reasons there will be still be needs for libraries to systematically collect, organize, preserve, and disseminate books and journals.

Think evolution, not revolution. The activities outlined in this presentation represent some possibilities for the future of libraries. I embrace the second option, the option of change. Time and energy need to be spent now in order for the change to become reality, to discover new, additional, and supplemental roles for ourselves. The opportunities are only limited by our imagination and willingness to transform them into reality.

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November 18, 2009