

## **Same as It Ever Was: Interlibrary Loan and Collection Development**

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**Abstract:** Pervasive in the literature of librarianship is a portrayal of technology-driven change as conversion, and specifically a conversion that renders institutional values analogous to the utility promised by networked information technology. This essay will argue that change is better articulated and best achieved when librarians work forward from their recognized legacies. The argument will investigate how locale is integral to change, how locale manages and defines the interconnectedness of real change, and the role of interlibrary loan as a catalyst of change will be explored by way of example.

In his song “Once in a Lifetime” David Byrne creates a narrator who surveys his life and comes to two conclusions:

And you may ask yourself, how do I work this?

And you may ask yourself, where is that large automobile?

And you may tell yourself, this is not my beautiful house!

And you may tell yourself, this is not my beautiful wife! <sup>1</sup>

Our relationship with technology is sometimes realizing that this is not my beautiful spouse, especially when anticipated results are designed to undercut their rationales. For librarians with an ear for the *Talking Heads*, the unrecognized spouse and house is the print and blogged literature of librarianship which calls for a reinvention of libraries and librarianship to trump the utility of networked information technology. It is a reinvention by absorption, accept the underlying arguments of the utility’s design, and the result is a new librarianship, or, more within keeping with the rhetoric, *new service paradigm*. With the emergence and cultural ascendancy of Google this absorption argument reached a crescendo best encapsulated by the late Peter Lyman when he commented, “There’s been a culture war between librarians and computer scientists, and that war is over, and Google won.”<sup>2</sup> Being sufficiently motivated to try to avoid obsolescence is a good thing, but this motivation needs to speak change as a part of human experience. Like the weather, change from experience is specifically cyclic, it occurs within a purposeful and decipherable pattern. Google is a game changer, but the changes Google articulates do not inherently consumer institutions into its vowels, and, in fact, Google is malleable. If calculated to advocate what an institution is and does Google and related technologies can demonstrate an institution’s adaptability as a social function, and can, as a game changer, mitigate what technologies inadvertently do. As Daniel Boorstin noted, switching from the seasonal hour to the “equal hour” of mechanical time accomplished much but put humanity “under the dominion of a machine.”<sup>3</sup> An emerging literature about reading online through dominions such as Google have characterized the

unintended consequences, very recently articulated by David Corn, “The toughest challenge, I find, is wading out of the cresting information river to experience media for frivolity’s sake or simply escaping the churning waters altogether for a few moments...I do miss reading. Nowadays, we absorb.”<sup>4</sup> To illustrate the kind of change which manages change, this essay will argue that interlibrary loan can and should now work to underscore the concept of a library collection, and that the flexibility interlibrary loan services can bring to a library make it an ideal venue to advocate what a library collection is and does. Further, like Byrne's incredulity at those moments when one spontaneously self-reflects, it is exactly right for the advocacy librarians must currently undertake.

### **Inevitable or Irreversible?**

The history of commerce and industry is littered with enterprises that failed to anticipate a technological transition gone cultural—Arrow Collar, the Rock Island Line, Studebaker (Chrysler?)—yet while fear motivates, fear often plays out in this-or-that narratives where change is a dubious either-or equation. Speaking in 1995 when character-based Gophers would have ruled the Internet, editor/writer Kevin Kelly said “It’s inevitable that the net will continue to grow, to get bigger, to become the dominant force in culture. *That is inevitable.*”<sup>5</sup> *Prima Facia* Kelly was prophetic, the Internet (in the broadest sense of the word) grew, and as a telecommunications infrastructure is a “dominant force.” What Mr. Kelly got wrong, and got wrong in the same way as Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, former Vice President Albert Gore got it wrong, is that technological impacts on culture aren't inevitable. A character based Internet could have flourished in a society that was book oriented. So could an Internet that was a collectively constructed city of Information, as Geoffrey Nunberg suggested when thinking about metaphors for the Internet in 1995:

If you are looking for a good metaphor for the Internet, in fact, go to Venice in February.

You thread your way down foggy streets and over bridges until you lose all sense of compass direction, and then all of a sudden you break into some glorious piazza...It’s a place you get to

know as an accumulation of paths and hidden passages, the way a woodsman knows a forest.<sup>6</sup> Nunberg's sense of Internet as Virtual Rialto could have continued on (it almost did) rather than be supplanted by all propriety technologies like the Blackberry (and the revolutions Blackberry's and their ilk promise to portend). Internet made of green cheese might have come about—the scenarios are less important than the trajectory of a technology that should have everything to do with cultural leadership and cultural will. The expectation that the Internet would integrate into rather than dominate culture is curiously enough, central to those prophetic documents that truly motivated the Internet's inception. As *We May Think* by Vannevar Bush is a vision of associative indexing and the version of hypertext that foretold of human beings interacting with graphical user formats, but it also foretells of a technology that intuitively arrays technologies, not blends them. In the formative essay for the Internet, *Man-Computer Symbiosis*, J.C.R. Licklider makes a forceful case for a symbiotic relationship not only between human thought and computers, and also specifically makes the case for the symbiotic relationship between books and computers. Both are versions of game-changing technology, but versions that reflect a cultural orientation wherein the technology works in a partnership with human endeavor that is evocative of a beautiful spouse.

Part of any partnership is the work—simply put change is work, and work that reinvents work is reflection itself: it has to be planned to move the institutional sinews central and periphery. In their book *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart* Bonnie Nardi and Vicki O'Day use the metaphor of ecology to explicate how change works within a library:

An information ecology is a complex system of parts and relationships. It exhibits diversity and experiences continual evolution. Different parts of an ecology coevolve, changing together according to the relationships in the system. Several keystone species necessary to the survival of the ecology are present. Information ecologies have a sense of locality.<sup>7</sup>

The metaphor accounts for the coevolving systems similar to those described by Bush and Licklider, the metaphor also speaks to the idea that parts rearrange the whole, and speaks through the rearrangement to a locale. Further, like the nature metaphor, it all takes doing. In contrasting *Web 2.0* with information ecologies John Blyberg makes this point:

Libraries, on the other hand, are significantly more delicate ecosystems that require more care and discretion.<sup>8</sup>

He goes onto make the point that librarians must “understand” and “tend” information ecologies, rather than invest energy pell-mell in social networking software.<sup>9</sup> Blyberg’s point is that Web 2.0 is at best a garnish, and as a garnish can’t ultimately effect meaningful change on the work that makes a system. Blyberg’s assessment is open to debate, but what he at least illuminates is that reinvention by technology can be a form of outsourcing, an outreach that moves the library off its core message, and onto a software platform that renders a muddied virtual version of library service. Reinvention to coevolve, reinvention to recalculate technology to the life force of the locale is real change—real change that sustains the institution by adapting most visibly what has made an institution permanent, what the institution is understood to be, and what is common to the institution: branches, leaves, photosynthesis.

### **A Library on the Maine Coast**

A student in a course I taught not long ago wrote of a small library in a seaside Maine vacation community whose collection was, in a significant part, made up of books given away by summer people. The memorable point she made was that this summer place had a collection of summer reading, and while this is not a collection development model, it registered with this student as a serendipitous way to understand a library. Therein is the key to effective overlapping change, a tangible identity and service that become the locale. What this student was connecting was place to library as a collection, a collection that was the readers she had known. In a piece on anticipating tectonic-scale change for the

libraries of the near future, James Billing concluded, “It will be as *familiar* and just as *surprising* to us as today's library would have been to users a decade ago.”<sup>10</sup> The interesting interplay here is between the words *familiar* and *surprising*. Collections, reading, quiet, all that is familiar about libraries is what gives change, and even unexpected change, a meaning which can then be a way to gauge the evolution. It can be a way to the institution transitioned in things—in a librarians look at Google, James Caufield argues the case that Google's success through its interface and through PageRank have everything to do with libraries:

Thus, Google brought to the Web a functional (if abbreviated) analog of the process of judging, filtering, and recommending materials that has traditionally been carried out by libraries...Pagerank represents a remarkable step forward in bringing the library values of access (in this case intellectual access) and uncorrupted indexing to the web environment.<sup>11</sup>

That is, Google translated an algorithmic reference and collection development approach to a search typed toward the World Wide Web. So, if one accepts Caufield's take, Google's transition to everyday verb had everything to do with Google recognizing a need for recommendations independent of commercial interest and developed a process to systematize human interaction with information. The Internet of the late nineties was hugger-mugger itself, by providing a word and phrase driven version of a librarianship, Google created the identity it has. Identity is how users characterize an institution or service, it's how they define what's valuable. All that networked information technology can do it should do in the name of facilitating identity.

How? Interlibrary loan services have become (or at least should be) supercharged by networked information technology, but the very nimbleness of said can work to articulate the relevance of a library's collection both in practice and in theory. Looking to the future (and thinking about obsolescence) Thomas Teper warned, “Without providing long-term, reliable access to information in

all its forms, research libraries differ little from the local chain bookstores.”<sup>12</sup> Interlibrary loan is an infrastructure with an established history of finding and delivering formats palatable and otherwise, working forth from a collection. Acquiring a collection is an activity that a library does which users understand, and a collection is also a filter—long before digital technologies libraries bought *this-book-not-that* as a way of serving their community. Interlibrary loan can build off the first to fully articulate the second by: building the collection in increments, by providing a context for reading one thing after another, and by championing reading through format. To crack that sentence thrice, interlibrary loan can now deliver materials in ways timely enough to be added to the collection relative to changing community need. Short of even acquisitions-interlibrary loan integration, real time decisions about buying materials can be made and demonstrated. Secondly, this demonstration can be the way to frame public service: what you want relative to what is in the building. If what is in the building has been assembled with work and care, the jumping off point is that *library-as-read-manifestation-of-the-community*, works. Finally, interlibrary loan can work to provide the format that a library user, a reader wants. The key here is that along with electronic text, the willingness to borrow books for readers who want books is a key service that interlibrary loan can provide. Interlibrary loan has been from its start the kaleidoscope of library collections, and in thinking on Teper’s comments, interlibrary loan can bring the *moving parts* advantage of a Barnes and Noble to the community building of a collection. Like Google, interlibrary loan renders what libraries do digital, but, because interlibrary loan is a transformative infrastructure within libraries, it can present choices Google isn’t interested in, namely, enabling a social institution to provide the kind of opportunities that constitute real choice. Delivering books to readers who want books in a nearly instantaneous time frame is a simplicity that makes a library collection a working infrastructure, but preserves that notion of a library’s permanence. It makes the kaleidoscope play again, and makes the case that interlibrary loan as system is neither burdensome nor obsolete. Therein is a jumping off point for library advocacy, changes wrought by all

things digital work best transplanted into the system, and once part of the ecosystem, work for the locale.

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## Notes

1. David Byrne, and Brian Eno. "Once in a Lifetime," *Remain in Light*, With Talking Heads. 1980 by Sire Records M5S 6095 (compact disc).
2. Peter Lyman, "Search for Tomorrow." By Joel Achenbach, *Washington Post*, (February 15, 2004): D1.
3. Boorstin, Daniel. *The Discoverers* (New York: Random House, 1983), 39.
4. David Corn, "What I Read," *Atlanticwire* (April 19, 2010), <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/features/view/feature/David-Corn-What-I-Read-1037> (accessed April 20, 2010).
5. Kevin Kelly, John Perry Barlow, Sven Birkerts, and Mark Slouka, "What Are We Doing Online," *Harpers Magazine* 291, 1743 (August 1995): 35-49.
6. Geoffrey Nunberg, "Virtual Rialto," *The Way We Talk Now: Commentaries on Language and Culture*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 176-177.
7. Bonnie Nardi, and Vicki O'Day. *Information Ecologies: Using Technology With Heart* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 50-51.
8. John Blyberg, "Library 2.0 Debased," *Blyberg.net* (January 17, 2008), <http://www.blyberg.net/2008/01/17/library-20-debased/> (accessed May 12, 2009).
9. Blyberg.
10. James Billings, "The Wild-Card Academic Library in 2013," *College and Research Libraries* 64, 2 (March 2003): 105-109.
11. James Caufield,. "Where Did Google Get Its Value," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 5, 4 (2005): 555-572.
12. Thomas Teper, "Current and Emerging Challenges for the Future of Library and Archival Preservation," *Library Resources and Technical Services* 49,1 (2005): 32-39.