

Cites & Insights

Crawford at Large

Libraries • Policy • Technology • Media

Sponsored by YBP Library Services

Volume 5, Number 13: Mid-Fall 2005

ISSN 1534-0937

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Perspective

Life Trumps Blogging

In no particular order, a sampling of many similar comments, all within the last few months, noting that I applaud all these statements, at least partly:

- Cindi at *Chronicles of Bean*: “I haven’t been posting much, and honestly, I probably will continue that trend, as posting photos to flickr requires much less brain power. I don’t have that much brain power to spare word-smithing at this point!” Cindi’s primary reason: She gave birth in late September.
- Lois at *Professional-lurker*: “I wanted to warn you that I will be posting less frequently for the next several weeks... This is all part of my master plan to focus on a finite set of things that must be accomplished by the middle of November.” That set is impressive—and leads Lois to conclude: “To accomplish all of these things without killing myself in the process, I am paring away anything that seems to be excess at the moment...sadly that means I need to minimize the time I spend on the blog.”
- At *::schwagbag::*: “And speaking of blogging, *::schwagbag::* postings have been pretty sparse of late because there’s just so much going on at the moment.” Including moving, starting a new job, redesigning a website, moving again, weddings, a conference...
- Anna at *eclectic librarian*: “It’s been a quiet month here at eclectic librarian dot net... Actually, my non-digital life has been eventful and not at all quiet or boring. However, very little of it has been relevant to the focus of this blog, so I haven’t written much about it. Also, I’ve been saving my creative literary juices for

an essay I am contributing to a book about electronic resource librarians.”

- Christine at *Nexgen Librarian*: “It’s time to revive this blog from the dead...” Followed by an excellent commentary on real life, including “Don’t try and do more than you can do” and “F@#! living at the speed of today’s technology.” Quoting from that discussion (you might want to read the whole essay—August 13 in the archives at www.nexgenlibrarian.net): “I’ve discovered that acting as if technology has sped up the pace of life is ridiculous. It isn’t my world, I don’t choose to participate in that world, and in fact, I reject that world. Thus, I’ve found that I can’t blog every day (or, it seems, even every month!), I can’t return email in a lightning flash...”

Inside This Issue

Perspective: Library Futures, Media Futures 4

- Adri at *Library stories*: “Posts may be a little sparse the next few weeks. As some of you know the stork visited my house on 10/19 and left a avid reader at our door!”
- Meredith at *Information wants to be free*, in a post that inspired the second part of this essay: “I used to blog a lot more than I do. I was unemployed and had a lot of free time. Now that I have a job and a house and other commitments, I had to ask myself why should I continue blogging? Is it worth the time it takes?” Her answer is, emphatically, *yes*, for reasons offered in an interesting commentary (October 2, 2005 at meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/) but the relevant sentence for this discussion is the first one: “I used to blog a lot more than I do.”

- Jenny at *The shifted librarian*: “So things will be even quieter than normal here for the next month or so. Between traveling, vacation, and life, there will be few to no posts for a while.” And, later, noting medical reasons to focus on offline life: “Right now, life is easily beating out blogging, so I’ll see you back here when things even out a little more.”
- Steven at *Library stuff*: “Blogging may be light for the next 4 or 5 days or so as I deal with a family issue. Nothing huge. I just don’t know how much time I’ll have in front of a computer and family comes first. Way first.”

I could quote quite a few more—in addition to a mini-wave of blog shutdowns, library bloggers who’d been doing it for a few months or a few years and formally gave up the ghost. Others just disappear, temporarily or permanently.

Rory Litwin shut down *Library juice* after eight years. It wasn’t a blog but it was an interesting example of net media. Among the comments on Steven Cohen’s blog post about the shut down, I noted that I’d seen a wave of blog shutdowns and partial shutdowns—and that was a while back.

I’m not the only one who’s noticed this. Horst at *The aardvark speaks* offers this comment in October 28, 2005 post (homepage.univie.ac.ac/horst.prillinger/blog/):

I noticed one interesting phenomenon with most of the bloggers that I read more or less regularly...and that seem to be more like human beings writing about their lives...: most of them are currently going through a period of not posting anything.

Horst was largely absent during October, which he notes “seems to be a bad month for most bloggers”—and his reasons are similar to others noted here.

No need to apologize

Some bloggers are apologetic about cutting back or temporarily shutting down. Others, as with those quoted above, know better than to apologize; they note the situation and may choose to explain it. Still others just slow down or stop with no notice.

These aren’t one-day wonders who got signed up for a blog as part of a course or just tried out Blogger for fun, then disappeared after one post or a few weeks of posting. Look at some of the names I quoted: They include two of the three or four most widely read library bloggers, and one of them runs a sponsored blog.

What we have here, and what I expect to see continue, is something else. Something much healthier for those involved and, I believe, for the medium itself. You already know what I believe this boils down to: It’s the title of this perspective.

Life trumps blogging

At least it does for most sane, balanced people.

Family trumps blogging. Health trumps blogging. Work trumps blogging (unless blogging is your life or work, and I don’t think that’s true for anyone in the biblioblogosphere). I’m delighted to see that more and more people recognize that vacations trump blogging—that a vacation works better if the notebook stays at home (or at least stays off the internet as much as possible).

Good for you, all of you.

I’m not putting down blogging. I have a blog, after all, and I seem to be beating my informal target of two posts per week as a long-term average. I think scores of library-related blogs are worth reading; otherwise, I wouldn’t have more than 200 in Bloglines. I love the conversations that take place at *Walt at random*. I participate in conversations at other blogs. I rely on blogs (including those that don’t support conversation, and I’m sympathetic with their reasoning) for quite a few of the ideas and pointers that result in *Cites & Insights* pieces.

It’s a tool—and RSS favors quality over quantity

I believe blogging is making the transition from shiny new toy to useful tool. As a tool, blogging isn’t something “everyone” needs to do, and it isn’t something that you need to keep doing even when it no longer meets your needs. It’s a net medium—it’s a tool. What you can do with tools can be pretty exciting, but the tools themselves aren’t usually hot stuff. Very few people feel the need to use a power saw every single day, even when there’s nothing that needs cutting. You use tools when you have a use for them; you don’t go around looking for something to do with them, at least not once they’ve proven their usefulness.

For almost everyone in the biblioblogosphere, blogging is at most a secondary and usually a tertiary interest, or even lower. Increasingly, I believe most of you see it as something you do because you have something to say, not something you feel compelled to do every day, come rain or come shine, in sickness and in health.

Early on, during the shiny new toy phase of blogging, there was a reason to make that effort, to

find something to blog about every day: People had to explicitly visit your site to see whether you had something new to say. Fail to update it frequently, and people stop visiting.

Thanks to RSS and aggregators, that's no longer the case. I have 216 pieces of the biblioblogosphere in my Bloglines list. There's no way on earth I would visit 216 sites every day or even every week; who has time for that?

I'll probably trim that list slightly (sometimes life trumps blog-reading as well). When I do, the first ones to go will be high-frequency linkblogs. I'm finding that anything I *need* will probably be discussed by someone. The bare links that make up some high-frequency logs rarely serve my needs any more.

I'm far less likely to deep-six bloggers who write once or twice a week (or once or twice a month), but who have something interesting, special, provocative to say when they *do* blog.

I believe aggregation favors quality over quantity. I'm using "quality" in a broad sense—not just polished gems of mini-essays (or not-so-mini essays), but rough-hewn chunks of consciousness that reveal something worth thinking about.

Michael McGrorty of *Library dust* wrote a typically long and thoughtfully written essay on blogging and writing, "This pleasant slavery" (posted on October 8, 2005 at librarydust.typepad.com/library_dust/). Long for a blog post, that is, at just over 1,600 words (this essay is around 2,800 words). He talks about future net media replacing blogs but also the "Exercise Machine syndrome"—that most blogs wind up being used about as much as most exercise machines. He also, unfortunately, characterizes "the weblog" as "essentially a diary"—which can be true, but frequently isn't. If you accept his characterization, then his conclusion follows: "The fate of most diaries is to record a few impressions of life and to cease when the writer has passed beyond the phase of doing such things." It's true that most blogs die, whether because they're conceived as diaries (and most people stop writing in diaries) or for other reasons. He continues:

Weblogs that last, (whether their content has significance or no) will doubtless be those whose authors are possessed by that need which makes otherwise normal people sit down and write with the regularity that other folks eat dinner. In other words, writers will continue to be writers, out of a need which we need not consider altogether laudable; those who never create blogs, or who make them up only to abandon them will only be expressing the tendency for normal people to pursue

amusing new outlets until the toy becomes boring or something else comes along.

The title of McGrorty's post refers to writing itself, and those who *need* to write. McGrorty counts himself among that number. It's hard for me to discount a quarter million words a year, so I guess I'll have to fess up as being another, as do some of those discussed below ("Why Blog?").

But many worthwhile single-writer blogs aren't diaries and aren't written by people who *need* to write. Many, including a growing number of those with rare but worthwhile posts, are written by people who *don't* need to write, who would never enforce "an hour a day" or any other writing rule—but who sometimes have something they want to say. When you can update blogs once in a while, when you *have* something to say, they fall into a different realm. I find that realm the most interesting part of blogging.

You knew bullets were coming again

A few suggestions from my own perspective

- Don't apologize for cutting back on blogging. There's no need.
- You might let us know if you're formally terminating a blog, but there's no need to point out you're disappearing for a week or a month—unless you'd like to mention why. (Congratulations to Cindi and Adri!)
- Maybe it's time for some of us to abandon target frequencies for blog posting. Maybe the target should be to say something worthwhile or amusing in each post.
- *You* define what's worthwhile. People will pick you up if your definition has some overlap with theirs. (I'm not sure I care much about anime, but I read bloggers who write about that as well as topics that I *do* care about.)
- There's nothing wrong with metablogging (writing about blogging). There's nothing wrong with posts that don't do much more than link. There's nothing wrong with posts that don't have links at all. There's nothing wrong with maintaining big blogrolls—and there's nothing wrong with omitting blogrolls entirely. There's nothing wrong with going two days, a week, a month between posts—and then writing six posts totaling 5,000 words in one day, if that's what you need to do. There's nothing wrong with essay posts.
- If anyone tells you that you're not really blogging if you do any of the things in the previ-

ous bullet, *ignore them*. Blogging is a tool. It's not a narrowly-defined medium.

Why Blog?

The seventh bullet at the start of this PERSPECTIVE quotes Meredith Farkas, who used to blog a lot more than she does now. That's just the start of a fascinating set of reasons that she blogs; I suggest you read the post, "Why blog?" For Farkas, blogging is "the real thing"—a key part of her writing. She's gotten a lot out of blogging: Making friends "who have encouraged me to do things I wouldn't have the confidence to try before," making connections with "giants in the field" (at least in her opinion), finding that her insights are helpful to others, gotten on "publishing companies' radar." There's more.

For Rochelle at *Tinfoil + raccoon*, it's straightforward enough: "I've identified myself as a writer since I was in grade school..." (More at "Why I blog," October 10 at rochellejustrochelle.typepad.com/copilot/).

That's *one* reason Laura Crossett offers in an interesting essay ("metablogging 2: the why I blog post") posted September 30, 2005 at [lis.dom](http://lis.dom.blogspot.com) (lis.dom.blogspot.com): "I have always known that I am pretty good at writing—it's one of those things that makes up for other things, like being unable to run or throw or catch, being unpopular, being awkward and unsure of your place in the world." Here's another: "At the moment, though, the real reason that I blog is that I want to be part of a community..."

Travis Ennis asked why library school students blog; some answers appear at libfoo.blogspot.com/2005/10/carnival-why-do-we-blog-mlsmis.html. Ennis' own comment: "Part of the reason I blog is for this exact kind of collaboration. Blogging gives me an opportunity to meet really great people who are intelligent, thoughtful and expressive."

In my own case, it's fair to say that one or two folks (particularly Steven Cohen) were asking me "Why *don't* you blog?" for some time before I finally started *Walt at random* (walt.lishost.org). I must like to write, since I do so much of it. I started the blog because there were things I wanted to write about that didn't fit elsewhere—and, thanks to RSS, I believed I could make the blog work without posting frequently.

Until I read Laura Crossett's comment, I hadn't I hadn't thought of it this way, but what she says applies pretty well to me. I was never part of the In Crowd in high school (or college, or...): I was terrible at athletics, not particularly social, living on the

wrong side of town, and "awkward and unsure of [my] place in the world"—but I could write reasonably well. I don't know that it's ever resulted in a job; I *do* know it's resulted in speaking invitations. I can't imagine *not* writing for an extended period, although I do love the occasional break.

Why do you blog? Farkas' survey of the biblioblogosphere revealed a number of interesting reasons. I'll argue that fame and fortune should never be motivations for library blogging. Otherwise, almost any reason will do—except, I believe, "because everybody should have a blog."

Life trumps blogging. For that matter, life usually trumps writing. But for most of us, most of the time, life has room for secondary pursuits. All the writers noted have continued to blog or have come back to blogging, because they still have something to say.

Perspective

Library Futures, Media Futures

Where will we be in 2010, in 2015? Substitute "libraries" or "librarians" or "books" or "print" or "physical media" for "we" in that two-part question. Those are questions I've discussed at length in the past, sometimes with different time frames—in dozens of speeches, a number of articles, and two books.

I haven't spent much time on those questions recently in *Cites & Insights*. I don't claim to be a futurist, prophet, or guru. Turns out most of what we said in *Future libraries: Dreams, madness & reality*, a full decade ago, was reasonably on the money (see *C&I* 5:11 for a longer version of that statement). I believe *Being analog: Creating tomorrow's libraries* (1999) also holds up six years later (I suspect better than *Being digital*)—but I haven't done a careful rereading and don't plan to until 2009.

I made an exception in a July/August 2005 *C&I* PERSPECTIVE: PREDICTING THE FUTURE OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES—but that was in the context of turning down an invitation to engage in futurism. Think of this PERSPECTIVE as, in part, a followup to that essay.

The latest *C&I* index entry for "death of print" or "death of books" dates to July 2004. As a meme, it seemed to have faded away along with the "all-digital future." That was fine with me. I'd rather point out and comment on interesting new possibilities and

analyze problems that face new and old services alike. I'm an optimist by nature, a technologist by profession, a writer by avocation—and yes, Cory D., I do indeed read more from the screen every year. That does *not* mean I read less from the printed page: It means I read more overall.

So why this essay? Readers of *Walt at random* already know part of it: An essay by Blake Carver, some posts by Jeremy Frumkin and Dan Chudnov and Luke Rosenberger, a hasty offhand “response” by yours truly, and the conversations that ensued. Throw into the mix an odd UK report and two longer reports—one from the Kaiser Family Foundation, one from IBM Business Consulting Services—that have been sitting in my “Possible Essay” folder for months. Put them all together with some miscellaneous pieces and they form the basis for this PERSPECTIVE. I have a few modest predictions to match those in the July/August issue; some of these may be falsifiable in a few years. You may also find this essay as revealing about digital “conversations” as it is about projections.

Incidentally (or not), you will *not* find discussion of futurist stuff at Internet Librarian 2005. I wasn't there. I've gotten in enough trouble here for responding to second-party comments; responding to blogs of conference presentations would be even worse. That's probably just as well. If it means this whole essay is worthless to you—well, a more typical December issue will be out later in November.

Up front, I'll note an issue I've seen around the edges: The “brand” of libraries and the extent to which libraries are thought of as places where books reside. I have to wonder why this is regarded as something to be overcome rather than as a great basis to build on. Ask most public library users what they want most from libraries and the answer is usually “books.” What's wrong with starting from a basis of “the place where you can borrow books for free”?

[Formatting note: to fit 17,300 words in a 20 page issue, quoted material in this issue appears at 9.5-on-11.5 points instead of 10-on-12. Is this too small for comfortable reading, or should I leave it this way? Feedback invited.]

Blake Carver Kicks it Off

1,559-word essays are unusual in *LISNews*. Essays of that length from the proprietor, Blake Carver, are even more unusual. If you haven't read “Libraries and librarians in a digital future: Where do we fit?” you should, in full, before reading my comments (which

accompany fair-use excerpts from Blake's essay). It was posted October 7, 2005 and you should find it in the “most popular stories” list or the “technology” section. You may feel I'm excerpting selectively to prove my own points. I hope I'm not. I like and respect Blake Carver. I also believe he's mostly wrong in this case—and that he chose to be wrong in a way that makes it hard to discuss.

Excerpts from his essay appear in indented smaller-type form, with my comments following.

I have recently become convinced our future is digital... I believe I can see a small bit of the future, and it's not paper based. I'm not even sure I can see a place for libraries...

I've always bought into the assumption that books are here to stay. That libraries will always have a place... I think I've...landed on the side with the digitalists... I don't know what this means for the millions of books we hold currently. I don't know what this means for the future of libraries & librarians, nor do I know what, if anything, we can do to ensure we're still around in 20 years, but below I'll share with you why I've moved from fence sitter, to digitalist.

“Always” is a very long time. I don't believe *our* future (the future of anyone reading this essay in 2005) is solely digital and I don't see any evidence to support such a massive change.

100 years from now? Who knows? I don't see the future of libraries and librarians as solely tied to the future of print media, but that's another question. Twenty years down the line? I'm certain that libraries, librarians, and print books will still be vital, if only because I can safely project an audience of more than 200 million Americans who grew up with books, continue to read them, and will be around in 20 years.

New tools are replacing the library for people's daily information needs. Society in general, and younger people in particular, are moving away from the printed word, our bread and butter for a century or two now, and away from libraries, for a number of reasons. Why should they care about or use print? They can't put it on their iPod. They can't put it on their laptop. And they can't view it on a screen. They get most of the answers they need from Google. This is the essence of my argument. If most people are able to “get served” elsewhere, why do they need a book, a library, or a librarian? It doesn't matter if you think digital isn't as stable as print. It doesn't matter if you think it's impossible to read for extended periods of time on electronic media. It doesn't matter if you think Google isn't meeting their needs. And it certainly doesn't matter if you think books are more convenient. Some of those things may be true today, but none of them will be true in 10 years.

As I've said repeatedly in the past, libraries never *have* been "The Information Place"—and they've never been the place most people fill their "daily information needs," at least outside of academe (and I doubt that role even within academe). Quoting from *Being Analog* (not, for this paragraph, from Blake Carver):

How many patrons call their public libraries to check on current traffic conditions? What percentage of daily newspaper readership takes place at the public library? Have businesspeople trying to keep up with an industry ever relied on the library for the latest information—or have they subscribed to the industry weeklies, specialized newsletters, and, lately, online services?... Most people don't rely on the public library for the most current facts: that's what newspapers, television, and radio are for. Most middle- and upper-class people don't get their primary information in their key areas of interest from the public libraries: That's what personal magazine subscriptions, bookstores, and online services are for...

Libraries can't lose a role that they've never had, that of the primary place most people fill their "daily information needs."

"Society in general" is "moving away from the printed word"? Here I'd like evidence—not that people *aren't* using nonprint more (that's a given) but that they're abandoning print. I don't see such evidence in book sales, library circulation, or magazine and newspaper sales (down slightly, but certainly not abandoned en masse).

The next set of "can't"s is impossible to argue with, except to say that most people—young people included—don't view life or technology in terms of One Device to Hold It All. There's little evidence that even today's supposedly mutant kids *prefer* to read long narrative text from the screen.

Most people have *always* been able to "get served" elsewhere, depending on what "served" means. If libraries need to be the *primary* place where *everyone* gets daily information, the game's been over for a very long time.

The "It doesn't matter" litany is one reason I *didn't* respond earlier, and it comes as a surprise: Blake Carver is essentially saying *I don't care about facts*. It's a grand hand-wave: none of what we say in response will be true in 10 years.

In 1992 we were told repeatedly that by the turn of the century print books would be passé, with most people reading from ebook readers. The century mark came and went. Ebook sales failed to reach 0.1% of the book market. A decade came and went. Ebook sales still haven't approached 0.5% of the book mar-

ket and dedicated ebook readers continue to be essentially dead. So pardon me for not accepting the final sentence of the paragraph as anything more than another in a long series of handwaves that have no value as evidence or argument.

You can't search [a] printed book. If the index missed what you're looking for, you'll need to do some digging. You can't hyperlink from a printed page. And you'll never fit more than one printed book into, well, a printed book. All those things you think are so great about print are the same things millions of kids think [are] completely wrong. The technology exists now to realistically begin moving away from print, not because it's just the latest gizmo fad, but because it's going to be cheaper, faster, easier, **and** just as stable as, and just as good, if not better than, print. We'll have the ability to make connections between writings that have never been seen before. We'll be able to search and research across millions of "books" to find information in ways that will change how we learn. We'll be able to carry around more than one book in a single reader.

Indexes and free-text searching do *different* and complementary things. Who are these "millions of kids" abandoning books? Was the latest *Harry Potter* pulped for lack of sales? I don't disagree with some of what Blake is saying here—only with the idea that they mean moving drastically away from print.

And what of the fragile nature of digital media? LOCKSS! Lots Of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe. Digital archives are now measured in **petabytes**. We reached the point of no return years ago. With backups on tapes, optical media, flash media, and hard drives, our bytes are as safe as or more safe than paper ever was. Digital records are now as permanent as paper.

Blake backed down on this, at least partially, after a few experts pointed out that it just isn't so. LOCKSS has nothing to do with general digital preservation issues and there are very few people in the digital library community who will claim that any digital medium is "more safe than paper ever was."

So will we really need to have buildings filled with paper copies of knowledge? If everything produced in the future is available electronically, will we print and store copies? In 10 years will libraries stop adding new print items and become archives of printed works from "the good old days?"

That's a big "if." For a 10-year timeframe I'm willing to bet it's wrong. Very few libraries consist entirely of physical books, but never mind...

There's a couple of paragraphs about Google and its many genius employees as the solution to all library problems. Since I don't see Google as a library or print replacement any more than Google does, I

won't address those paragraphs. I agree that librarians shouldn't *denigrate* Google—but that doesn't mean librarians shouldn't point out problems with Google. Librarians can't just say, "Google's great and will solve all our problems" and let it go at that. To do so would be professionally irresponsible.

All these technologies are here to stay, and if we want the same to be said for libraries, we need to work harder to move our selves up, without putting others down.

Agreed (although it's true that 80% to 96% of new technologies fail), but pointing out advantages of fielded retrieval and professional indexing for research use is *not* "putting [Google] down."

The common perception that newer/faster/cheaper is always better is what will drive the move to a digital world. Storing knowledge in traditional printed books will probably still have a place, but I am convinced within a decade we will have the tools that will allow the majority of people that can afford it, and the desire, the ability to buy, read, and store all the books they want, without paper. Librarians are terrible marketers, and we've failed miserably trying to maintain an image of relevance. It may be print really is a superior format for many things, but we'll never be able to convince enough people to make a lasting impression. How can we if the new devices out perform print for most peoples needs?

At this point, I start to argue with the conflation of "libraries" and "print." Librarians don't *need* to "convince enough people" that print is superior for many things. People make that decision every time they buy a print book, read a magazine, read a newspaper, or print out a long article they've downloaded.

That second sentence undermines the rest of the argument. We have those tools *now*—notebook computers—although most publishers don't yet make most books available as digital downloads. I'll guarantee that, if publishers believed they would be able to make 10% additional revenue by doing so, they *would* make all their primarily-text books available as DRM-heavy full-price ebook downloads. But saying "the majority that can afford it...and [have] the desire" will have "all the books they want, without paper" doesn't diminish the role of the library that much. For one thing, that's all the books they want *to buy*. For another, good public libraries have always supported minority needs while also serving the majority (for all those items they *don't* want to buy).

Tell me people will always prefer print. Tell me it's more stable, easier to store, lasts for centuries and is easier to handle. Tell me DRM and copyright issues will kill many new devices usefulness. Tell me people don't learn as well from electronics as they do from print. On second

thought, don't tell me all that, I've been hearing it for years.

You've been hearing it for years because it's true—or at least partly true. DRM isn't going away. Many people will prefer print for many purposes for many years: I don't think that's really open to question.

Tell me how you'll convince the people that we'll need to support libraries in 10 years that we're worth it. Tell me how I can convince my 13 year old nieces that when they're in college they'll need librarians to help them learn. Convince me all these new tools are not replacing the library for many people's daily information needs.

Most of the people we'll need to support libraries in 2015 are already adults (you do know retired folks vote more heavily than young adults, don't you, Blake?), and are already library users. In most communities, they don't need convincing. Maybe 13-year-olds really are mutants (you're saying your nieces don't use libraries and don't read print books?), but even if true (which I doubt), that's a problem for 30-40 years down the road. One way public libraries *could* doom themselves is to ignore their millions of 40- to 90-year-old supporters in haring after teenagers. Librarians are smarter than that, just as most of them are too smart to ignore the teens and the need for services that go beyond the library.

As for librarians and how kids learn in college...Well, since I *worked* in a library through all but the first year of college, but avoided *using* the library except in dire circumstances, I'm not the best authority on that issue. I probably would have learned more if I'd paid attention to librarians, but I was a teenager at the time. Teenagers change as they become adults and grow into middle age; I see no reason to believe the next generation will be all that different.

As for the final sentence: Once again, the library *never had that role* for most people. It can't lose a role it never had.

That's Blake's essay—or portions of it. There were a lot of comments. Mark Lindner responded eloquently to Blake's claims about digital stability, with Blake finally relying on the argument that "people will find ways to preserve it" because there's so much of it. Others raised the issue of library as place, which Blake admitted he hadn't thought about; still others raised "class" issues related to "that can afford it."

In his response, Blake repeated a modified form of one comment: "Convince me that all these new tools are not replacing the library for **many** people's

daily information needs.” I can’t do that, again, because the library never had that role.

One commenter claimed “librarians are in a panic” and denigrated “library as place” as a new invention; that’s nonsense. This commenter, “pam-plemousse,” ended a lengthy comment with another “no point in arguing” statement: “Love it or loathe it, the digital era is here. Embrace it or wither.” I guess I’ll wither unless you allow for the notion of the *partly*-digital era and consider “embrace it” to include finding the best ways to use and develop digital services as part of a mix of library media and services. That’s a future I can believe in; I know it’s one many librarians are working toward.

Jeremy, Dan, Luke, and Walt

I’d been thinking about Blake’s essay ever since it appeared. I hadn’t done anything about it. Then I saw “5 years?” at *The digital librarian* (digitallibrarian.org) and a couple of comments elsewhere and I reacted—maybe “overreacted” is the right term. Luke Rosenberger at *lbr.library-blogs.net* got into the act and an odd (but good) multiway conversation ensued.

Herewith, some annotated snippets from that conversation and some additional thoughts. “Jeremy” is Jeremy Frumkin at *The digital librarian*; “Dan” is Daniel Chudnov at *dchud’s work log* (curtis.med.yale.edu/dchud/log/idea/); I just identified “Luke”; and “Walt” is Walt Crawford.

5 years?

Most of Jeremy’s first post, *without* comments because my own post follows:

Dan Chudnov and I were talking on the phone the other day...when Dan made what I believe to be a very astute and impactful prognostication: Basically, libraries have about 5 years to get their acts straight, or libraries will not be a player in the digital information arena. Why 5 years, or more pointedly, why the immediacy and urgency? Well, a number of things, but most immediately in my mind:

E-Paper: A couple of days ago, slashdot posted a story which described a development kit that is now available for purchase—at \$3000. That’s right—a full development kit for a display based on electronic paper technology that only costs \$3000. This means that electronic paper displays are quickly going to be available at reasonable cost....one [application] that sticks out like a sore thumb is that the ability to produce true electronic books will be available. No more bulky, clutzy ebook readers/appliances.

The \$100 laptop: Also announced recently, MIT has produced a prototype for a \$100 laptop. \$100. That’s it.

The price of two textbooks. And this is not a piece-of-crap laptop—it includes wi-fi, color display, etc. The \$100 laptop is just another example where portable information tools will become ubiquitous sooner than later.

The Google Print, Million Book, and the Yahoo Digitization Efforts: One of the strengths of the web is that just about everything is full-text by default. One of the great weaknesses libraries have is providing full-text via the web, especially in the area of monographs (but not limited to that area)...[These] are all efforts in the area to dispatch the hard line between digital full text and offline resources.

Online Office Applications...

The pattern that shows up is end-to-end, all digital information workflow.... Once these tools start to appear, the library world will either be part of the process, or will be increasingly irrelevant to the information needs of society. I think we will actually fall somewhere in-between—most likely libraries will work within the technical structure set upon us by the commercial sector. The problem is, if we let the commercial sector dictate the technical structure of our information net, then we will have little if any say on what services we provide and how we can provide them. Our ability to meet our users’ needs will be compartmentalized by the technical limitations placed on us by our systems, web services, and by the offerings of the commercial sector.

Quite apart from “This time for sure?” (see below), I do have a couple of reactions here. I regard the \$100 laptop as a typical Negroponte announcement: Could happen but don’t count on it—certainly don’t count on it as being available in developed nations. As for digitization efforts, I believe most of them will drive *more* traffic to libraries to use physical books, partly because it’s still easier to read long text in paper form, more because the vast majority of digitized works (63% to 80% at one estimate) will be covered by copyright and *not* available as online full text.

This time for sure?

That evening I spouted off at *Walt at random*—and on reflection “spouted off” may be the best description. It’s rare for me to update a blog entry *twice* (I explicitly mark each update as such). Here’s the post in full (with two bonehead errors corrected in square brackets) along with excerpts from comments on the post:

Maybe it’s time for another round, and another round is what we seem to be getting.

Blake Carver writes a long, heartfelt essay at *LISNews* coming down on the “digital side”—with a series of “ten years will fix all that” responses to the questions he’s inclined to raise, an assertion that the young’uns are all deserting print, and the sense that the library’s place will

be lost. (That's a really bad summary of a long piece, which has already had 27 comments. I've printed it out—too long to read and think about otherwise—and will probably prepare some sort of commentary later, either here or in *C&I*. This isn't it: This is just a preliminary musing. That's why there's no link.)

Daniel Chudnov is quoted with a five-year “be there or be square” clarion call, based on everything being all-digital all the time.

Update on the paragraph above: Dan takes exception to being misquoted—although, if you read the paragraph above, I don't actually quote Dan. I picked it up from a third party. But now that Dan's done an extended post, well, go read his post. Maybe he doesn't think it's a “this time for sure” post, but I certainly do. As to my abilities as a futurist—I've always said that I don't pretend to be a prophet. I don't remember a conversation about Amazon (I remember Dan pushing me very hard to try to convince RLG to make some money-making software open [source]). If I was dead wrong about Amazon—well, fine. I'm wrong about lots of things. Possibly including this one...but I don't think so. Now, back to the post...

I think I've seen one or two others, and of course there are those who keep predicting “ten years from now” in the hope that they'll eventually be right. Somehow, sales of Harry Potter do nothing to discourage the “young'uns don't read print” meme; somehow, growing use of American public libraries by all ages and classes doesn't matter (or isn't real, or they're all just checking computers, or something); somehow...well, this time, for sure.

I can't prove otherwise. Nobody can. It has the same feeling as the prevailing wisdom of 1992.

I do know that I got back to my own public library a week ago (Sunday afternoon). It was busy. I've never seen it any other way. Sure, three or four people were browsing the surprisingly large DVD collection. Sure, a dozen (maybe 20) people were working on computers. But there were also at least 50 or 60 people in the adult stacks, a fair number over in the children's areas, solid traffic at the two selfcheck machines, a short but steady line for the human checkout...

And it was all pretty typical. Loads of people taking out books and bringing them back, lots of others taking advantage of other resources, digital and otherwise. I saw kids, teenagers, young adults, and every age from there through retirement.

Maybe it's time to forget about print, celebrate the all-digital near future, and give up on the services and spaces libraries provide so they can be hip to the future. But maybe, just maybe, things will continue to move along in complex and unpredictable ways—and those 300 million Harry Potter books (along with all the others that make young adult and children's publishing healthy) aren't imaginary.

As I say, this is just a preliminary musing. More later, I think.

Second update, Wednesday, 10/12: No question: Blog “conversations” are a little peculiar in that the blogger gets to nominate the topics—and can warp the conversation by deleting comments, failing to approve them, or, ahem, modifying the original post to make comments look stupid.

I try not to do that last—but do choose in this case to use the blogger's prerogative of adding to the post itself, not just commenting-on-comments.

My possibly-hasty reading of “the other posts” (setting aside Blake's extended commentary for the moment) suggested to me that the writers were doing two things that caused a Reaganesque “there they go again” sense:

* Assuming that e-paper/e-ink as a plausible replacement for print was finally Just Around the Corner. Which might be true—heck, I hope it is true—but I've been hearing the same thing for considerably more than a decade, and the existence of development kits doesn't make me a true believer.

* Discussing “digital ubiquity” in a way that seemed to suggest that everything else would be marginalized in a few years—that print collections would be essentially irrelevant, even if still there.

It's quite possible that I was reading things into the messages. That happens with reading from the screen and posting offhand responses. Although, with at least one or two of the postings, I still get [that] sense fairly strongly.

If anyone believes I'm arguing that librarians should ignore digital possibilities, they've gone way beyond reading into my postings: That's just wrong, flagrantly so. (If anyone believes that I'm arguing that many—most—innovations don't work out in the marketplace, that's absolutely true.) (And if anyone believes that I argue that, for most public librarians, treating print books as secondary is a good way to alienate your users...well, you're right there as well.)

Want to set me up as an “only books matter” straw-man? OK. I don't know who that Walt Crawford actually is, but straw men are awfully convenient.

I used “and not or” as a summary of my credo for a long time. It still applies.

Sigh. I really do need to work on that fuller response. Maybe later in the blog. Maybe in the December *C&I* (not the November issue; that's already starting the editing/paring stages.)

[Excerpts from comments:]

Fiona: At a conference I attended recently, the results of a preliminary study into the impact of baby boomers' retirement on the public library was discussed. Contrary to predictions of everyone being digital all the time, they

predicted that library usage will increase significantly. Why?

Retirees in service/information professions are used to having email, research tools, and information all the time—when they retire they are immediately cut off. The library is a logical source for information.

They won't have as much money as they did before, causing discretionary spending on books, magazines, media etc to decline so they will borrow instead.

They will seek out places where they can communicate with each other—the library is a good source for that.

They will want travel information...

The presentation was “When I'm 64: The Public Library after the Retirement of the Baby Boomers” at RAILS2: www.nla.gov.au/initiatives/meetings/railsabs.html

Dorothea Salo: What chaps my hide is that avowed technophiles like me get blamed for this kind of cloud-ten thinking. Those geeks. They can't be trusted. They said ebooks were 'way better than print and were going to take over the world, back in '99.

Well, you know what? I wasn't saying that. The other ebook geeks I worked with weren't saying that. We bloody well knew better, since we lived on the ragged edge of “but the tech won't *do* that.” Frankly, nobody asked us. Too busy listening with bated breath to hype-hype-hype marketing droids and obstinately clueless journo....

You want to talk about why digital text is cool? I'm your gal. You want to talk about why digital text has a long way to go? Ditto. You want to talk about differences between print and digital text, or readers' experience of same? Sure thing. You want to talk about how libraries are participating in (not just reacting to) the creation and dissemination of digital text? Honey, I'm living it.

You want me to issue proclamations despising print and welcoming its supposed death? Go *away*.

I noted that “back in '99” was “back in '92” for me...

dchud Says: It will be very interesting to see where things stand in 2010. Seriously, I'll buy. :)

If nothing else, you have to admit that the sheer velocity at which we've had this little conversation is disturbing.

That comment makes no sense out of context; the context follows (“Five years to e-ink...”). I apologized for the delay in moderation and responded:

As for the potential velocity of net-based “conversations,” that is indeed an interesting and sometimes disturbing concept (which I've written about and will probably write more about). In this case, you've also seen the party-line effect: I “misquoted” you by probably overinterpreting a third party who had quoted you, and you interpreted the second comment (it wasn't the first, from Fiona) as an attack on you—which I wouldn't necessarily conclude.

I know better than to interpret third-party statements. One problem with a blog is that it's too easy to do something even though you know better...

OK, here's my mini-off-hand-prediction for 2010:

Public libraries will be healthy in the U.S. (with exceptions, as always) and will be massively used as sets of services (many of them remotely available), as collections of print books and other media, and as places. Given what's happened with Kepler's here (where a long-standing independent bookstore closed, at least in part because the landlord raised the rents too high—and the bookstore has now reopened thanks to massive customer response), I believe print books themselves will be doing just fine as well. And I believe etext of various sorts will be used significantly more heavily than it is now, just as it's used a lot more heavily now than it was five years ago—but I don't believe the increase in that use will be geometric over that ten-year slice.

And this is way too much to put in a comment-on-a-comment. If we're at the same conference in 2010, I'll buy the second round.

Dorothea Salo plans to join us in 2010, and notes that her comments weren't aimed at Dan. She believes in the potential of etext, “but we've got to be a lot more patient about working out the design and production problems than we've heretofore been.”

The remaining comments related directly to Luke Rosenberger's “Straw men made of paper” essay (which he attempted to link back to this post), so I'm moving them to that discussion.

This gets a little helter-skelter, given the reactions above to posts below, but it would be even worse if I parceled the comments on *Walt at random* out among other posts. Let's move on to Dan, Jeremy's follow-up, and the conversation with Luke...

Five years to e-ink, or, you know my name, look up the number

Dan Chudnov posted this on October 11 on *dchud's work log*. Excerpts and comments:

While it's good fun being wildly misquoted, and then being excoriated for it (see the first comment), by people you've met in person or at least exchanged a few cordial blog comments with in the past, and none of whom check with the source, there's only so much Blog People behavior I can take, so, here's what I have to say about E-ink.

See the first “update” in my post..and Dorothea Salo (the first comment) clarified that her comment wasn't aimed at Dan.

I don't make a lot of wild technology predictions....[Dan notes that he talks about what might be important or not important, not how everything's going to change. He goes on to note two “threshold” changes at his own li-

brary between 2000 and today: Incoming students who have much higher expectations for library use of technology, and the availability of full text for at least 80% of the journal articles medical students use most.]

These might not sound earth-shattering, or even that difficult to see in retrospect. They're not. They just require paying attention to trends and having a sense of when certain important thresholds will be crossed.

If Dan was able to predict both of those five years ago, I'm impressed—and both are quite possible (that he could predict that and that I'd be impressed).

Cheap low-power E-Ink devices are another important threshold.

Why? Because they'll be cheap, they'll be light, they'll be easy and fun to read (all those old e-book arguments about screen luminosity on crappy 1st and 2nd generation readers will be out the window), and they'll be super flexible in terms of what they can do because the vendors now know what *not* to do.

I reacted strongly because projections of e-ink/e-paper “just around the corner and dirt cheap” have been a recurring theme for more than a decade now.

So here's my prediction: these things will be in our libraries in mass quantities in about five years (fall 2010). I dunno whether that means on standalone next-generation “ebook readers” or iPod-like things or as laptop screens or some newfangled PDA, but somehow, they'll be here, and you won't be able to avoid them... I'll bet the actual cost of the parts themselves is less than 1/10 of [\$3,000]. Give two years to the product development people, and then two years for crappy products to start showing up on the market, and then one more year for Steve Jobs and Jonathon Ive or someone like them to make a good product, and then it's all over. People who own them will be so enamored that they'll want to read everything on them. And they'll want to read all the online stuff in our libraries with them.

I believe that time line is way too optimistic, even if this generation of e-ink/e-paper actually solves some of the problems (which, so far, I have yet to see indications of). “Everybody” certainly doesn't listen to all their music on iPods in 2005 (download sales revenue was less than 2% of CD sales revenue for 2004, according to RIAA figures: roughly \$185 million as compared to \$11.42 billion). iPods have been on the market for just over four years—and brand-name portable MP3 players (the Rio) have been around for *seven* years. Of course, it partly depends on your definition of “mass quantities.”

As to the last two sentences, I doubt the first (for most people) but, if the devices are as good as everyone hopes, I partially agree with the second. That is to say: I believe most people—including most young

people—will still read lots of stuff in paper form and prefer it that way, but if an e-ink/e-paper-based device is good enough, some of those who own them *may* want to use them to read everything they read in digital form. Why not? (So far, it strikes me that the next generations of e-ink/e-paper are being targeted at advertising applications, but hope springs eternal.)

Dan then explains why pointing students at a web browser isn't sufficient: If all goes well, the hypothetical e-ink devices will have lots of capacity (he suggests 6 to 12Gb flash cards for less than \$100 in 2010 and says “that's way conservative”; I agree).

People who use these devices (and I think that means lots of people) won't just want to read on them...they'll be more like books. Or, book collections, rather. Little libraries, if you will. They'll want to put stuff on there and take it with them and read it whenever, wherever, and they'll be able to, and they'll love it.

I don't know about “lots of people,” at least in 2010—it depends what you mean by “lots.” I think DRM's likely to continue to be a barrier to building your own collections except at very high cost. I don't believe *most* people will want to replace paper books (for those areas where paper books work well) with digital personal libraries, but it's possible that millions (conceivably tens of millions) will. It's *likely* that “personal libraries” (of journal articles, textbooks, reference material, etc.) would be useful and popular among students and faculty.

Now before you get excited or angry about that, or even stop to consider the corollary service implications, stop to ask yourself this: what if dehud's right? What if this is what everybody will want?... The question immediately becomes: is your library ready to serve these people, and these devices? I don't think mine is.

“Everybody”? In terms of the general public (not users of Yale Medical Library)? I doubt it. If the “great reader” does indeed arrive at a fair price by 2008 (which, given the iPod and DVD histories, is what it would take for it to be in fairly widespread use in 2010), the last question is relevant, even if “everybody” is just a few million early adopters.

Dan spends more time on personal collections, then adds:

One thing I'm *not* about this stuff is a pessimist. I love e-ink. I hate reading sitting in a cube staring at an LCD just as much as everybody else. I'm certain libraries can adjust to the new formats without massive closure...we have a decent track record of doing just that which extends over centuries, after all. And I'm also certain paper will remain a great and important technology...if you don't believe that I believe that, come to our house and

see the personal collection of paper-based materials we have assembled. :) Basically, if I didn't believe we could handle the change, I wouldn't be working for a library.

But, this stuff is coming. We'd better get it together within the next five years, is all. Look me up in fall 2010 and we'll have a laugh about how wrong I was back in 2005. I'll buy.

I love the *idea* of e-ink because really good ebook devices (or, more likely, nearly-booklike reading capabilities in multipurpose portable devices) would serve so many purposes, even if they don't replace print on paper for other purposes. I agree that librarians should be paying attention to ways to serve these possibilities. I also think the field is doing so.

Dan ends with a note about meeting me at an Access conference a few years ago and a point he says I made during my talk: "Amazon.com is losing money so quickly, there's no way they'll succeed." I don't remember saying that, but it's quite possible. I don't claim I'm a great prognosticator.

You may notice a difference between the tone of Dan's own message and Jeremy's version. Dan says it's important for libraries to be able to serve the early adopters in 2010; Jeremy talks about libraries being "increasingly irrelevant to the information needs of society" (the basis for my "be there or be square" comment). I reacted to Jeremy's message (in the context of having not yet reacted to Blake's essay).

I *believe* I would have reacted to Dan's message much as I have here: Skeptical of the belief that this generation of e-ink/e-paper will finally do what we'd like it to do in a couple of years (which is what I meant by "this time for sure"); noting that even phenomena like the iPod and DVD don't achieve mass popularity overnight and that downloaded music hasn't eclipsed CD purchases. I would also have agreed that librarians should be looking for ways to serve these users, which may mean trying to legitimize downloading of full-text articles to these "personal libraries" as part of contracts and looking for new opportunities.

Follow-up on 5 years

Jeremy posted an update October 11, saying in part:

I was not intending to present a pessimistic view of the world, though I see in retrospect that the post comes across this way. What I am trying to make clear is that a shift is coming, and it will effect how libraries provide service to their users, and not in a minor way. We can either wait and be reactive, or we can proactively embrace our future.

Additionally, the fact that I and others are talking about the future digital library does not at all mean we don't see the value and importance of the physical library, or do not appreciate a real book. I believe that the library as a physical place will continue to be important, but in addition, when people go to the physical library, they will be expecting not only books on the shelves, but services on the 'net.

We may disagree on the speed and extent of that "shift" (and whether it's so much a shift as a growth in complexity). Otherwise, I'd agree—except to note that many people *already* take advantage of library services on the net from thousands of libraries. The range of such services will certainly grow.

Straw men made of paper

This essay appeared October 12 at lbr.library-blogs.net. Excerpts (with a few interjections), followed by my comment (at *Walt at random*, since Luke had done a pseudo-linkback):

[W]e spend a lot of our time and electrons talking about new modes of reference activity that occur online, and how important it is that libraries and librarians understand the options and include them in their planning. Does this make us somehow **anti-face-to-face-reference or anti-telephone reference? Of course not, that's just nuts.**

So somebody explain to me how is it that Walt Crawford and so many other people read ideas like the ones put forward this week by Blake Carver, Jeremy Frumkin, Peter Brantley, and Daniel Chudnov, and dismiss them with a wave of the hand, a roll of the eyes, and a **"here we go again, predicting the death of print resources."**

[2005-10-12 Ex post facto clarification: "so many other people" refers to a commenter at *Walt at Random*, Dorothea Salo, as well as some of the anonymous commenters at LISNews, and (to be fair) some ghostly projections of too many other people I have talked to in my career whose immediate response to these discussions is the foregoing. Sorry for bringing along those ghosts. This post is hereby directed and dedicated to all of you out there who think that any of the first four blog posts cited above have anything to do with the continued vitality of print resources in librarianship.]

I *still* can't read Blake's essay as not having "anything to do with the continued vitality of print resources in librarianship"—and even Dan's "want to read *everything* on [epaper devices]" seems meaningful to me in this regard.

Nonsense. The only one of the bunch who's talking about print at all is Blake, and he does that only in passing. What they are all saying is that we as librarians, right now, have a very short window of opportunity to invent and develop digital information services, before we start facing a preponderance of our patron popula-

tion **whose expectations and life experiences will be largely driven by a totally different paradigm** of what can be done with information.

I don't care that you personally can't get past the same old "can't curl up in bed with it or read it in the bathtub" arguments. I personally love reading from my Dell Axim, in bed and everywhere else...you'll get even less comprehension from a patron a few years hence who can take [a] text file, and either read it page by page on a screen, or mark it up with marginal discussion shared by dozens of others reading the book at the same time, or have it scroll by hands free while they exercise, or have it projected in front of them while they relax in the bath, or read to them aloud to them while they drive or drift off to sleep, or...

No, we don't know for sure what interfaces will be available for people to consume digital information, but what do we know? Someone will adapt those interfaces to serve their every need, interest and desire.... Storage technologies will allow people to carry around staggering amounts of material...

[Discusses MP3 and its "ubiquity"]

Digital text will be **at least that ubiquitous—even as print continues to thrive**. The issue these guys are raising has Next To Nothing to do with print. They are saying, we have a limited window of opportunity to decide and establish what services libraries and librarians can and will offer to a world where digital information—text and other media—is ubiquitous. We can either make people's experience with that information more powerful, more efficient, and more effective, or we can remain, to a greater or lesser degree, irrelevant to that interaction. If you're happy sitting back and keeping the dead trees company, that's your decision. But my patrons—the ones I have now as well as the ones I haven't met yet—call me to do more than that.

I don't believe librarians *can* "establish" the range of digital services. Libraries have some of them now; others must grow as capabilities grow. That's not reactive; that's realistic. There's an enormous danger in committing too heavily to one set of forecasts (the all-microfiche library? serving the massive population of NeXT users, since Steve Jobs is never wrong?); there's relatively little danger and considerable promise in pursuing a range of present and near-future initiatives.

...The fact of the matter is, if we open our eyes, we will find that this is not a conversation about our future, but about our present—our patrons' expectations are already changing, and that change is accelerating, and that as new technologies appear (regardless of what form they take) they will increase that acceleration... There's more than enough work for us to be doing right now. Like for example...

* really taking a hard look at our libraries' online presence from the perspective that the web is another

branch—it's a service point where we interact with patrons who may never visit a physical library.

* planning so that in the midst of ubiquitous digital information, we can not only enhance access for those who can afford their own, but provide access to those who don't...

* addressing the problems we already know exist...[i.e. interface confusion]

* building interconnections between the library world (print and digital) and the larger world of digital information..

There's plenty more that needs to be done. The important part is not to waste time waiting around to see if this prediction or that prediction comes true. There's far too much work to be done building a positive future based upon what we already know.

My response, as a comment to Luke's pseudo-backlink at *Walt at random*:

OK, I've read lbr's essay.

I would apologize for saying "can't curl up in bed with it or read it in the bathtub" — except, of course, that I've never said that. Ever.

And, you know what? I've never said that libraries and librarians should be "sitting back and keeping the dead trees company" (amusing that lbr says "print will thrive," but then proceeds to assume "dead trees" will and should be marginalized—but maybe I'm reading into the comment). Ever.

I have said, and will continue to say, that print resources are and will continue to be vital for public and (the social sciences and humanities portions of) academic libraries, and that while building new services and understanding new media are also vital—and I've done a lot of writing to try to introduce and explain new media over the years—there's a considerable danger in treating both the current bookstock and the continuing building of the "long collection" as peripheral activities.

To lesser or greater extents, the posts I indirectly referenced struck me as arguing that digital information will soon be the only really important aspect of libraries, including public libraries—that that's all librarians should be paying attention to. Maybe I overinterpreted. As noted twice so far, it was an offhand, preliminary comment—and, after all, if blogs aren't noted for hasty over-interpretation, no medium is.

So, lbr, you've turned me into a straw man, arguing that we should just treasure those books and ignore everything else. Which I don't believe (and never have).

I still have trouble reading "digital ubiquity" as not marginalizing everything else, at least by implication. I also have trouble believing that such "ubiquity" is either right around the corner or likely to happen in a way that libraries can deal with effectively, since those who control the copyrights are pretty intent on seeing that fair

use plays no part in digital usage and that as much as possible is pay-per-use or ongoing rental. Now there's a set of issues librarians need to address...

Luke responded, in part:

Your response drove me to some more self-examination, and as I have now noted in the blog, I realize some of those "other people" are voices from whom I've heard echoes of these arguments in the past.

What I'm perceiving from your post and responses is a sense that this is somehow a zero-sum game:

- inferring that "while building new services... the current bookstock and continuing building of the 'long collection'" would be viewed as "peripheral"

- understanding "ubiquitous digital information" as "marginalizing everything else"

Do you view this as a zero-sum game, where efforts placed toward building and enhancing digital services will inevitably subtract from the ongoing enhancement of print collections and offline service?

Personally, I'm with you if we're talking about "and not or". Is that really what we're talking about?

Finally, w.r.t. "I also have trouble believing that such 'ubiquity' is... likely to happen in a way that libraries can deal with effectively, since those who control the copyrights are pretty intent on seeing that fair use plays no part in digital usage and that as much as possible is pay-per-use or ongoing rental..." That's absolutely an issue we need to address, I agree. Certainly we need to address it from within the system, making consumers aware of their fair-use and first-sale rights and actively opposing rollbacks in those protections—but of course, that's an uphill battle. I guess part of the reason I'm more optimistic about the future is that I'm inclined to cast my lot with the folks on the outside of that cabal—the consumers and the creators who are using and working on other models that make those rights harder to rescind, such as Open Access and the Creative Commons. "Ubiquitous digital information" is in part a result of a read-write environment, where direct connections between information producers and consumers will gradually erode the power of "those who control the copyrights"—at least, the ones who try to use them against us.

To which I responded (in part) with the final comment on the *Walt at random* post—but certainly not the last word in the discussion!

No, I don't see it as a zero-sum game; I hate zero-sum games.

I do see it as a tension, particularly when some people arguing for more attention to digital futures (not necessarily the ones cited here) argue, implicitly or explicitly, that little or no attention need be paid to existing services. That's when I get cranky, and maybe I'm tending to pick up that sense where it's not intended.

When you say a library's web presence should be viewed as another branch, I'm with you all the way. When I hear implications that, for most people who count, in just a few years, the web presence will be the only aspect of the public library that's of any real interest, I'm no longer on board.

As you may (or may not?) know, I've spent a fair amount of words on the Creative Commons and the various pieces of open access... I'm an optimist by nature—drives my wife crazy—and I'm hopeful, but it is indeed an uphill battle...

Maybe I'm temporarily tone-deaf on what was implied by a couple of posts. Maybe Blake's screed, which I still haven't had time or patience to process properly, set me off on somewhat unrelated posts that didn't deserve to be lumped in with it.

[OK, there's also my inclination to believe that 2010 is a pretty optimistic projection for truly ubiquitous use of high-quality e-paper and for anything like a "ubiquitous digital information" environment in any but a few highly-privileged enclaves of certain first-world nations—but that's a separate set of issues. I think.]

I think the penultimate paragraph here is true: "Blake's screed" did set me off on somewhat unrelated posts. This interminable recounting may make the relationships clearer.

Straw men made of vapor

Luke followed up with this (excerpted) post on October 13:

So I had a great blogosphere-style conversation with Walt today, and what a pleasure. I freely admit that I committed a real communication blunder—instead of paying close attention to what Walt was saying and speaking to his points, I addressed what I thought (feared?) he was saying based upon my own previous conversations with others, and talked right past him for the benefit of anyone within earshot (perhaps including those "others"). It's something that has a way of happening when we get a little too comfortable atop the soapbox. Perhaps a similar thing happened to Walt with regard to Blake's post or some of the others; perhaps not. If there's one thing I can be sure of, it is that I will never again presume to speak the mind of Walt Crawford ;-)

As I noted in a response, that last sentence is silly—but there is an emoticon. I'm perfectly capable of responding if I think someone's misinterpreting me (and I care what they say, as I do in these cases).

Walt's absolutely right—I ended up setting him up as the straw man by accusing him of setting up straw-man arguments about "the death of print" when the real conversation was about developing and enhancing digital services. There are plenty of other people in our profession who have erected that "future-of-print" straw man to derail conversations about digital services—in fact,

some keep him around as a permanent fixture. Walt is clearly not one of those people.

But as I read his responses, some of the words he chose concerned me, which is why I raised the “zero-sum” question that appears in the comments: “Do you view this as a zero-sum game, where efforts placed toward building and enhancing digital services will inevitably subtract from the ongoing enhancement of print collections and offline service?” I think it’s a very important question... [which he’s asked of others as well, in various comments]

What I’ve heard from all of you this week are very clear calls to the library community warning us that we have precious little time to ramp up our digital services before we find ourselves facing a critical mass of potential patrons who will find us to be irrelevant to, or incapable of meeting, their needs, demands, and experience. Do you feel that need to be so pressing and immediate that we must start making choices between developing our digital/online programs and developing our print/analog/brick-and-mortar programs? Or are there strategies that we could be using to actually make the kind of progress we need to make on both fronts?

Clearly, I see less of a reason for panic than Luke does—but it’s a matter of degree.

I’m with Walt on this one—I don’t think it is a zero-sum game, I think the answer needs to be about *and* not *or*... [Goes on to mention some current projects, specifically OpenURL CoinS, which I need to learn more about.]

...In the big picture, does keeping up with the pace of change in our patrons’ experiences and expectations and providing new kinds of digital materials and services mean making sacrifices in our other, “offline” services and collections? Or can the kind of symbiosis we see in the OCOinS project become a model for how we can raise the bar for all our services?

Here are portions of Dan’s response (to Luke’s zero-sum question):

I do think our profession is so far behind the curve on simply understanding and reorganizing around these kinds of threshold shifts (or even to realize when exactly they are happening) that I feel there’s already a certain amount of writing on the wall. And, obviously, in this case, imho, that writing is in e-ink.... [recounts a particular current development that he doesn’t think is getting the attention it deserves, and goes on to say that “everything [libraries] do is under threat in one way or another.”]

I honestly believe libraries have long-term staying power. That’s why I’m a librarian. But, if, as a librarian, you don’t start, in 2005, with the premise that everything we do is under competitive threat, with the obvious potential worst-case result being complete shutdown of libraries on a massive scale, then you are starting so far behind the eight ball that our competition will be stunned at how easy it is to take over the mar-

kets for the services we provide. Or, scratch “will be”... I should say “will continue to be.”

Note to feed reader readers: I did not just say that “libraries will be shut down on a massive scale”. What I said was, “if you don’t believe it’s possible, you won’t know what hit you if it does happen, and our competitors won’t care.”

I wonder just who the “competitors” to public libraries are; for that matter, I wonder the same about academic libraries. But I may be missing something. Blake also responded (excerpted here), in one of the last comments on his essay:

“Do you view this as a zero-sum game, where efforts placed toward building and enhancing digital services will inevitably subtract from the ongoing enhancement of print collections and offline service?”

I don’t know that I think it’s a zero sum game in that I think the two can co-exist. I guess I’m thinking in terms of majority, the majority of people who can will. I also think that digital will subtract from print for money and other reasons.

“Do you feel that the need for libraries to develop and improve digital services to be so pressing and immediate that we must start making choices between developing our digital/online programs and developing our print/analog/brick-and-mortar programs?”

Well... No. *But*. “start making choices” is a key phrase. We should start thinking about how we should be making choices now, based on how we think people will be using our services in 1, 5 or 10 years... Of course I’m assuming I’m right about the future.

Is there a way to sum all this up? I’m not sure. Maybe it makes most sense to look at some other voices and views about libraries, media and the future.

A data point in passing

One little data point about two traditional media. You probably know that print book sales continue to rise (in revenue if not always in volume), with bookstore sales growing faster than inflation again in 2004.

You may assume magazines are failing (and some of them are, just as some do every year). But ad page counts for the first nine months of 2005 are up (slightly) from the first nine months of 2004, and ad revenues for U.S. consumer magazines (as tracked by the Publishers Information Bureau and reported in *Media Life*) were up 8.4% for the comparable nine-month periods, to \$17.4 billion for the first nine months of 2005. Advertisers don’t buy ads if people don’t read magazines, and ads account for most magazine revenue.

Some of the writers above talk about the robust future for print; others imply some degree of margin-

alization. It's possible for both views to be correct: Print sales could continue to rise *and* their importance relative to digital media could decline.

Other Voices on Media and Library Futures

My job in 10 years—Collections pt. 2

I discussed John Dupuis' earlier posts in this series in PREDICTING THE FUTURE OF ACADEMIC LIBRARIES (*C&I* 5:9, July/August). This post, October 18, 2005 at *Confessions of a science librarian*, considers databases and other "non-book/non-journal" collections.

Dupuis doesn't believe abstracting and indexing databases have much of a future:

In 10 years, will Google and its successors be virtually good enough for everything, leaving no room for the traditional abstracting and indexing vendors we have today? On this I'm fairly certain the answer is going to be "yes"... When Google Scholar is out of beta, presumably having taken advantage of all the free R&D feedback we librarians have given them, I predict it won't be too long before it will be good enough for virtually all needs...

He says traditional a&i databases will be "in big trouble when Google Scholar starts being barely good enough, not when Google is a perfect replacement for their services"—and goes on to suggest Google might *purchase* A&I services to get their metadata. I think it's a sad comment on the future of academic libraries if a "good enough" Google Scholar convinces them to scrap a&i databases, but I can't be sure Dupuis is wrong. (**Self-interest declaration:** A substantial chunk of RLG's revenue comes from the a&i databases we provide. But then, I'll be retired in 10 years.) He does note one possibility "once Google Scholar has conquered them all" (Dupuis doesn't say "if")—namely, that Google "becomes a for-fee product too." Once in a while it is worth noting that Google is a private company owned by stockholders: There *has* to be a connection between its services and its revenues.

On the other hand, Dupuis sees full-text databases as a "huge growth area, one that will definitely survive and thrive." He wants to see *everything* digitized—and asks, "Who doesn't want to license the full text version of Google Print when it's finished—and it should have made some pretty good progress in 10 years." I guess you'd need to define "finished" and what, exactly, Google *could* legally license. I question whether Google can license full-text access to in-copyright books (assuming the current legal questions are settled), and I wonder why any library would *pay*

to license a searchable database their users can already use for free.

Dupuis' real hope here is that "the money freed up from A&I databases" will fund "massive digitization projects"—and sees those projects as including much more than text, such as "image and digital video collections, old movies, tv series, documentaries... audio files from old radio broadcasts."

Finally, he anticipates that "lots of stuff that's a bit on the fringe for your average library today will become mainstream"—specifically raw data. For scitech libraries, that might be true; I wonder whether most libraries would really become *primarily* repositories of raw data. And whether, if that happens, it makes sense to keep calling them libraries as opposed to, well, data repositories.

I hope (but don't necessarily assert) that Dupuis is wrong about academic libraries junking professionally-indexed A&I databases when Google Scholar becomes "good enough." I believe OpenURL makes non-full-text A&I databases *more* valuable, as it enables libraries to reduce the number of times they re-pay for the same full text. I agree that a variety of digitization projects going beyond text are likely. If I didn't despise the word "inevitable," I'd use it.

Man's best friend (outside of a dog)

This piece by Joshua Fruhlinger appeared on September 13, 2005 at IBM's developerWorks Power Architecture site: "Power architecture challenge: man's should locate it. It's one of a series of challenges to potential developers, with some of the responses. I found it noteworthy that an IBM official site aimed at developers takes such a conservative view of ebooks and their near-term future...and, for that matter, that respondents were more conservative than libraries.

Excerpts and one or two comments:

When is the electronic book going to be as useable as the old-fashioned kind? How do technologies need to change to bring e-books out of the geeky, early adopter ghetto and into digital bookstalls everywhere? Power Architecture™ readers provide the answers in this month's Power Architecture challenge.

"Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read." — Groucho Marx

Don't let anyone tell you different: the future is not here.

Our cars? Not flying. Our food? Not in pill form. Our books? Not electronic.

"Now hold on a minute, buster," I'm sure you're saying. "Why, I read sci-fi e-books from the Baen Free Library all the time! Every time I have a few spare moments, I

just pop out my PDA and advance through a few dozen screens of tasty e-book action! The future is here—for me!”

I hate to break it to you, though, but it looks like e-books in their current form aren't going to break out of their early adopter ghetto any time soon. Certainly books stored in electronic form have flourished in a number of niche markets—reference books, in particular, are becoming more and more prevalent as electronic form rather than paper... But when it comes to the books that make up the bulk of our reading lives, the vast majority of us are still reading words printed with ink on paper bound with glue and string.

The reasons for this are numerous and pretty easy to rattle off: [in brief: Ebooks *can* be uncomfortable to read; battery power is an issue; incompatible file formats; DRM hassles]. As for the Baen Free Library's success, Fruhlinger notes: (It's notable that the Baen Free Library, one of the more successful e-book outfits, gives away books that are DRM-free—and, for that matter, free as in beer. I guess it's easy to be successful when you don't expect anyone to pay you!)

On the other hand, old-school paper books are generally easily portable, use reflected light and are thus easy on the eyes, don't need batteries, and can be read as often as the reader wants and even lent to others. And they're still readable after the sort of abuse that would send any piece of electronics to the scrap heap.

...So where does that leave us, we who yearn for the better-than-today's, brave new future of embedded microprocessors? We're still reaching for the stars (if by the "stars" we mean a "commercially viable book with some electronic components"). And you all came up with a plethora of potential books of the future that will bring the sci-fi age closer without making anyone go blind.

...There is one bright spot on the immediate horizon for e-bookery—electronic paper. This is a catch-all phrase for thin, plastic, embedded with tiny colored balls or black-and-white disks that respond to electric charge, creating text and graphics like pixels on a screen.... [Notes that e-paper's been around for three decades, but now "some commercially viable implementations have shown up—where else?—in gadget-mad Japan." Notes better readability, decent portability. Two suggestions for using e-paper:]

I think Marylou Vigue speaks for a lot of us Muggles when she says she wants our lives to be a bit more like the world of the Harry Potter books...."books with moving images. With electronic paper, the 'pixels' would just have to change quickly enough to produce an animation effect. It could really add to children's books with pictures, or technical diagrams that work better with motion."

You know, I've always loved the idea of these moving pictures in the Potter universe, but this suggestion actually made me contemplate the practical realities of it.

This contemplation leads me to two words for you: "animated" and "GIFs." These two words should rightfully be preceded by two more words: "Everybody" and "hates." There's nothing that's more distracting on a Web site than a little animation looping endlessly in the middle.... I honestly can't imagine the effect will be much better on paper (or "paper").

Although I've never been enamored of the idea that all books should be moving and singing, I wouldn't dismiss the idea of *selectable* animations. Selectable is, to be sure, crucial; otherwise, the e-document would be incredibly annoying.

Marketing tie-ins: [Nelson Summey's idea:] "Why not use the electronic paper of an e-book as a display for a simple video game? The best thing to do would be to tie it in to the book's content. It could serve as a reward for completing a chapter." [Fruhlinger suggests a few possibilities—e.g., for *A Tale of Two Cities*: "Will Sydney Carton end up on the guillotine? Not if you can help it."]

There's one big problem with both of these electronic paper ideas, though, and that's electricity. Specifically, changing the electronic paper pixels fast enough to do real animation is going to drain the batteries in any PDA-sized device very quickly. And if you've got to plug your e-book into the wall, well, we're right back where we started.

Electronic paper isn't a panacea for the e-book format, so other readers had some ideas that weren't e-books per se, but just regular books that were a little more, uh, electronic.

Cody Hisaw: "OK, keeping track of what page you're on in a book is pretty easy with non-electronic means. But what about keeping track of your place on an individual page? I propose embedding some very low power light-emitting diodes, one for each line of type, near the spine of the book on each page. When you're done reading, you press a tiny raised button that throws a switch in place for the LED on the line you want. Press a big button on the spine of the book, and the selected LED toggles on and off. Viola! You will never lose your place again!"

Christian Schwindt: "Library books already tend to have barcodes: fit them with RFID tags instead. Just request them at the front desk with your library card and robots can find and fetch them, already checked out. You could also find them when they are lost in your house. If you don't know what book you want in advance, you could be given a handheld reader for browsing the stacks: the books could describe to the patrons what their Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress categorization is all about, and individual books could cross-reference themselves. In short, they would create their own virtual card catalog!"

Schwindt may not be aware that a number of libraries *are* adding RFID tags to books—but those RFID tags

generally won't have enough data to "describe themselves" to patrons. For confidentiality reasons, libraries may not *want* them to have that much intelligence.

Max Uplinger has a deeply low-tech solution: "Things change so quickly and there's such a paper glut: for books that need updating every year (dictionaries, phone books, computer manuals), people can subscribe to a service. They're issued a binder with monthly updates. You could put some design work into making the pages easy to snap in and out in blocks. Then you mail the outdated material back to the company for recycling into the next batch of updates. If that isn't high-tech enough, hurry up and finish inventing viable electronic paper to do the same thing!"

The first "solution" isn't high-tech at all; some information services have worked precisely that way for quite a few years, using nothing but print and mail. I'm a bit surprised that it earned "this month's grand prize" (a t-shirt, of course); aren't these exactly the kinds of reference sources that *are* moving to digital form (or already have).

Continued need for print distribution from government

Here's one from Daniel Cornwall, posted October 18 at *Free government information* (freegovinfo.info/node/264). Extensive excerpts, no comments required:

I wanted say a few words about the need to continue the option of tangible (i.e. print and microfiche) distribution for which agencies still produce a tangible product. Print is still used and needed.

"Wait, Wait! Congress decided awhile back that everything was going to be digital only. Besides the gov't can't afford it!"

I'm not talking today about what is politically convenient or easily affordable. I'm talking about needs. For example, it is neither easy nor cheap to provide medical care to the poorest Americans through Medicaid, but the need is there. Our nation may choose not to meet that need, but that doesn't make the need go away. Ok?

So why do I think that government information in tangible format is still needed?

A. Print is alive and well in the general society, the GPO sales program notwithstanding.

Sales of printed materials are rising, not falling in this country. According to the latest figures (2004) from the American Association of Publishers, book publishing is a \$23.7 Billion industry whose sales grew at 1.3% as a whole. The adult trade book segment, the one I regard as closest to government documents grew much faster - Adult trade hardbound gained 6.3 percent (\$2.61 billion), while paperbound sales were also up 2.8 percent (\$1.51 billion). This seems to me to be a sign of a growing market, not a shrinking one.

According to the vendor organization Book Industry Study Group, the Internet is driving a whole new market in used [physical] books... The Internet could do the same for document usage, especially with the Open WorldCat project. For example, a user might come across a government pub on the web through Open WorldCat, like the Pocket guide to the Arabian Peninsula. In an ideal world, people would have their choice of buying the printed guide from GPO, downloading a free PDF copy, or visiting their nearest depository and checking out the book. I believe some people would take advantage of each option.

B. People are still visiting libraries in large volumes and checking out physical items.

Nationwide, people are still visiting libraries in large numbers and often. The NCES publication *Public Libraries in the United States, 2003* reported "Nationwide, library visits to public libraries totaled 1.3 billion, or 4.6 library visits per capita." These users are checking out tangible items. *Library Journal* reports that "Libraries are hardly losing pace with the public, since per capita circulation rose from 8.46 to 8.78 in FY04, an increase of 3.8%." With better inclusion in catalogs and marketing, tangible government documents could be a growing part of this mix.

C. Millions of citizens are either offline or Internet-underserved...

D. Tangible backups of digital materials are still best practice.

...Security and preservation of data is the reason that there is still a healthy Computer Output Microfilm market for large organizations' data storage... I'm expecting a solution to digital preservation in digital formats, if not in my lifetime, then in the next generation. By spreading enough digital copies around the country, I think enough copies will survive media and format degradation long enough for a centuries-long solution to be applied. But at present, only what is tangible is guaranteed to survive into the 22nd Century. All else is guesswork...

People are still buying book and visiting libraries. Tens of millions of Americans do not have effective access to the Nation's electronic information. Preservation current best practice is tangible backup... That's why I think the government has a responsibility to continue to provide tangible items to libraries willing to take responsibility for them *and* to provide electronic deposit of files to libraries willing to take responsibility for them.

Not practical? Is turning our back on tens of millions of Americans while risking the loss of our scientific, cultural and historical heritage practical?

Not affordable? The story of the last five years is that anything the government **thinks** it can afford, it does. It's a matter of priorities. It's up to us and our user communities to remind Congress that disseminating the research and information gathered by our government *at*

our expense, and often under coercion, is a basic responsibility. It is not a handout. It is receiving the products we have paid for with our tax dollars. Once that responsibility is understood, funds will follow.

Minor Comments

Michael Stephens posted “Librarian’s reading list: The future of music” at *ALA TechSource* on October 18, 2005. Stephens admires *The future of music* by David Kusek and Gerd Leonherd; those authors apparently believe in streaming digital entertainment replacing all CDs and DVDs in 10 to 15 years, paid for by subscription “at a rate lower than cell phones” (which may not sound all that attractive to some of us who don’t spend \$40-\$50 a month on music and video!).

I’m amused by one of Stephens’ statements: “Apple’s place as forward-thinking innovator, however, is solid. *What they innovate becomes the norm.*” [Emphasis added.] The iPod was far from the first MP3 player, so it’s more a matter of design than innovation. Meanwhile, Apple *still* has about a 2% share of the PC market, an odd version of “norm” in my book. Apple may have innovated in PDAs, but the Newton didn’t exactly become the norm!

Stephens includes one astonishing statement: “Stephen Abram recently told folks at the Illinois Library Association meeting that CDs and DVDs will be gone from our libraries within five years.” If Abram said that he’s just plain wrong—badly so. This one I’m certain of. If libraries stopped buying CDs and DVDs *today*, they’d still have huge collections of them in 2010—and I’ve seen no industry forecast, even the most aggressive, that calls for CDs to be less than a majority of music sales in 2008, or for streaming video to replace DVDs in some grand burst.

Here’s a flat prediction: Libraries (at least public libraries) in the U.S. will still have significant quantities of CDs and DVDs in 2010—and it’s highly probable, I’d say at the 90% level, that libraries will still be *buying* CDs and either DVDs or one of two possible high-definition alternatives in 2010.

As usual, Stephens says things worth thinking about even if you discount his love of new technology. He’s aware that some libraries *are* finding ways to deal with licensed digital media (if clumsily). He says librarians should “create an identity for the library and ourselves”—but I would hope that, for most healthy communities, the answer to his final question is already “Yes.” That question: “Simply put, does the library have an identity within its community?” It

should—and that identity shouldn’t depend on being the hottest technology service in town.

On the other hand, if you accept Sun’s Scott McNealy at face value (which I don’t), academic libraries are in trouble anyway. According to an October 19 post at *ACRLog*, McNealy’s EDUCAUSE keynote included this statement: “Every library on every campus is at risk to Google. The digital natives are on Google so fast that they don’t even know there is a library.” Sigh. As the blogger notes, “Like many IT experts, I don’t think he has a real clue about what’s happening in academic libraries.”

This is purely anecdotal, but interesting as it relates to the first cohort of the all-digital generation, those now in college. It’s an October 21, 2005 post at *Infomancy*, “Information and pre-service teachers,” based on the writer’s experience teaching a seminar for the education department of a college. Excerpts:

As the professor told us before we began, he was grateful that we were able to come help with this seminar because the students knew so much more than he did. After the class, though, the professor mentioned that he was amazed at the lack of knowledge about technology and information displayed by the students.

What did they know? Basic computer operations (how to turn it on). Word. PowerPoint. The “internet” (read IM and e-mail).

Not so sure? Excel. Searching on the internet (other than Google).

Never heard of it? Blogging. Wikipedia. RSS. NOVEL (New York’s statewide databases for all educational institutions). Librarians’ Internet Index.

[He was there to discuss those five items, so...]

I was very surprised by what I encountered, but reading David [Warlick]’s thoughts it suddenly made more sense. David: “In talking with teenagers and from what some of the research says, I think that kids these ages are technology literate, but not necessarily information literate.” Wikipedia, RSS, Blogging, LII, NOVEL...these are all information tools, not “technology.”

This all sounds right—and needs to be considered when thinking about radical changes.

Then there’s the question, raised at several points in these conversations, of whether libraries (that is, librarians) are ready to handle the changes that *are* coming. Here, I refer you to Andrea Mercado of *LibraryTechtonics* (www.library.techtonics.info) and her October 20, 2005 post “Not so easy questions to answer.” She tries to answer two questions that the Massachusetts Library Association asks on a conference scholarship association: How are libraries adapting to

life in the 21st century? and What is the role of the library in promoting literacies?

She begins the first answer, “Slowly, but almost surely.” She notes that, given her technology background, the transitions seem “almost painfully slow”—but, as she explains with an interesting example, it’s probably true that “libraries seem to be adopting tech at about the same pace as the more *average* patron.” That may not be good enough: “I do believe that libraries and librarians have an obligation to be *ahead* of the curve.”

On the second question she notes, “[A]t one point, libraries were pioneers...but somewhere, libraries seemed to fall behind...” She notes libraries and librarians that “have embraced technological advantages on the cutting edge” but finds these “exceptions, and not the rule.” She thinks libraries need to “get ahead of the curve and anticipate needs.” I’m not sure I’d agree that “even our lowest common denominator patrons...are learning a new world of customization, portability, flexibility, and anticipation of needs”; a pretty sizable chunk of most public libraries’ user population doesn’t much care about any of this stuff. But it’s true that *most* people (I think) are involved with *some* of these trends—and that librarians need to pay attention to that.

If you believe a study reported on at *Government technology* on October 20 (www.govtech.net/news/news.php?id=97018), quite a few public libraries *are* out ahead of the patrons, for better or worse. The final bullet from a short list of generally-positive notes:

Increasingly, public libraries are viewing themselves as places to introduce new technologies to the public. Centers that introduce new software and hardware have increasingly become part of the public library mission and are major selling points in raising new funds for libraries.

One note I find unfortunate in the commentary: That some libraries may be *eliminating* non-automated checkout once they add RFID, and that “all of those that had taken the latter approach were glad that they had.” Seems to me that forcing those who are uneasy with technology, including some of a public library’s most loyal patrons, to use automated checkout is both dehumanizing and, in the long run, a false economy.

Finally, consider *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8-18 year-olds*, a March 2005 report from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation (www.kff.org/entmedia/). It’s an interesting report based on an up-to-date survey of more than 2,000 kids. Do the kids these days

still read? Absolutely—and *ignoring reading for school purposes*, as all school-related media were ignored in the report. In a typical day, 47% read a magazine; 46% read a book; 34% read a newspaper. (Pay attention to that last number—*more than a third* of preteens and teenagers read daily newspapers.)

They don’t spend huge amounts of time in non-school reading, but after all, there’s a lot of school-work to do. Still, figure 43 minutes reading—just a bit less than they spend on videogames (49 minutes). That’s *print* reading, separate from the hour spent using a computer. Some 19% spend more than an hour a day reading print. (For the whole study, one interesting thing is that kids spend more time with several different media, but don’t really spend more *total* time with media: Instead, they’re “multitasking,” semi-watching TV while semi-listening to music and maybe semi-reading.)

“In a typical day, nearly three out of four young people report reading for pleasure.” Maybe reading isn’t quite dead in the next generation. And maybe, just maybe, public libraries that *build* on a healthy collection of books with a thoughtful set of web services—as so many good public libraries are doing—will do just fine in another generation, or even another century.

Masthead

Cites & Insights: Crawford at Large, Volume 5, Number 13, Whole Issue 69, ISSN 1534-0937, a journal of libraries, policy, technology and media, is written and produced by Walt Crawford, a senior analyst at RLG.



Cites & Insights is sponsored by YBP Library Services, <http://www.ybp.com>.

Hosting provided by Boise State University Libraries.

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