Collection Development in the ~~Age~~ Day of Google

By Mark Sandler

This paper sets out several challenges for libraries and collection development librarians as they seek to remain relevant in a rapidly changing environment. These include changes in ease of information access, increasing interest in unmediated access, ubiquity of similar (even identical collections), and the need to develop unique collections that meet local needs and interests and to develop and promote tools that enhance the use of these collections.

Change is hard to pin down. It can be as jarring as an earthquake: dislocating, disruptive, cataclysmic. More commonly, it is as slow and unexceptional as watching grass grow: glacial, evolutionary, but relentlessly steady. Both kinds of change—sudden and gradual—are natural. What is unnatural is the human predilection, despite all evidence to the contrary, to plan social systems as if they are forever. In the heyday of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, Mario Savio famously dubbed "an end to history" the bureaucratic worldview that led campus administrators to act as if our systems of higher education had evolved to a point where further fundamental changes would be unexpected and unlikely.[1] Ignoring the precedent of all that has come before, humans too often lay their plans as if the next best thing will be the last thing.

"Sameness" encourages "saneness"—it is an enabling assumption for daily life. We wake up each day blanketed in the comfort of the familiar, assuming that our homes, family relations, cars, offices, and computer desktops are the same as we left them when we drifted off to sleep the previous night. In fact, none of these are likely to be the same, but sane people choose to overlook the differences as inconsequential—not worth the time and energy required to recalibrate our understanding of our surroundings. While this is a normal, natural, and efficient human response in the short term, it can become dysfunctional in the long term, as small changes accumulate into more significant changes that require adaptation or, at the very least, recognition.

Books, for a Change

It is a challenging question as to when, or if, recent changes in our information world have aggregated to such a level that libraries need to become fundamentally different institutions than they were twenty years ago. Sociologists have coined the term "tipping point" to characterize that moment when quantitative or incremental change crosses the line to become qualitative change.[2] The changes affecting libraries have been driven by incremental technological developments, but technology is always wrapped in a social and economic cocoon that nurtures innovation and gives it license to take root and flourish. More than technology

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per se, the changes in social and cultural values that surround technology are what trigger a fundamental shift in institutions like libraries and education. The ubiquity of the personal computer, the development of the Web, the emergence of Web commerce enabling and responding to consumer desire to access goods and services online, and the hegemony of a digital culture as the defining characteristic of a global generation of young people, are the kinds of fundamental social changes tugging at our libraries. For some, these changes are perceived as a revolution—a shaking of foundations of the nation's libraries. Others see it as business as usual; change is a constant, and librarians have been continually adapting for centuries, sometimes themselves driving significant change.

However, a vocal group of observers—and these are the scary ones—view the contemporary changes in technology and culture as inconsequential; a tide that could be turned by eloquent rhetoric. They encourage librarians to eschew emerging cultural patterns, urging us instead to celebrate and invest in yesterday's technology as the path forward. This atavistic group, some who speak from the rostrum of high office in our professional associations, would allow our libraries to fall out of step with contemporary culture in deference to a nostalgic view of the libraries they remember from their youth. They confuse the joy, excitement, and social importance of learning with one particular manifestation of how learning takes place—reading a printed book. I cannot imagine that persons old enough to be working librarians need to be reminded of the importance of the printed book in world history, no less in their personal histories. I cannot imagine that librarians need to be reminded of the lives that have been changed through interaction with the now aging legacy collections in our care. Surely librarians recognize that print books are still being published (at the rate of a million a year), still being consumed, and still affecting our lives. It would seem a waste of ink and paper to write editorials telling librarians that books are useful—after all, *libre* is the root word for the profession. And yet, our professional trade magazines run these articles like so many Norman Rockwell paintings, paying tribute to an idealized past that never really was.

The discussion of change in libraries should not be about the role of the printed book in cultural history, but about the diversity of learning channels available in the present and going forward. For our libraries to stay relevant, they need to facilitate communication in all its forms. Libraries are not about books; they were, are, and will be about facilitating communication across time and space. Books have been a way to do that historically, but today there are other, often better, ways to accomplish this. Libraries need to become facile at supporting all sorts of media, and they must continue to embrace the new, or face the consequences of losing relevance to the mainstream culture.

Shop Local

Many people reading this paper grew up in an era when most retail trading was local. One could stroll down Main Street America and shop for meat, bread, shoes, clothing, hardware, and pharmaceuticals. Financial services were delivered by a local bank, insurance by a neighborhood agent, and goods by a series of specialized shopkeepers. No one can deny that the predominant means for delivering goods and services in America—retail trade—has changed markedly over the past fifty years. Department stores, discount department stores, outlet malls, mega-malls, mail order establishments, box houses, chain stores, and Internet retailers have drawn shoppers and consumer dollars away from Main Street. Those wishing to deny change can find solace in the undeniable—that Main Street still exists in most American towns and still supports at least some stores, and, against all odds, new stores open on the heels of closures and failures. Small retail operations do persist, but they are largely marginal in terms of overall market share, and represent but a pale reflection of their former prominence.

The decline of local retail outlets is a cautionary tale for America's libraries. The retailers themselves, noting challenges from other kinds of outlets, at first argued—more for their own peace of mind than to convince others—that they would compete and prevail because they knew their customers' needs, could fill them conveniently and in a pleasant atmosphere, and that their customers would be willing to pay a bit more for the knowledgeable service that local retailers provided. They also believed, or at least hoped, that most shoppers would recognize that *less* could be *more,* and that a well-selected inventory is preferable to overwhelming the busy customer with choice. Underlying this view was the belief among tens of thousands of retailers across America that they had better taste than their customers, and a higher knowledge of merchandising, value, and quality. In short, these small retailers believed they knew best what their customers needed, even if the customers themselves might have been expressing other wants and desires.

Why is the walk down memory lane—or Main Street—relevant to today's librarians? Because so many of our library colleagues are putting forth the same kinds of rationalizations that shopkeepers of yore did when challenged by a more competitive retail environment. Many of us want to believe that the local library can withstand the onslaught of such national delivery channels as Google, Amazon, GPO, Elsevier, JSTOR, and a few dozen other large aggregations of content that can be delivered to users in real time, and in the convenience of their homes and offices. These wistful librarians wish to believe that their knowledge of local users—a view not necessarily shared by these same users, needless to say—will trump the convenience and comprehensiveness of national providers. Further, they believe

that users will be frustrated, overwhelmed, and burdened if asked to choose from a wide range of alternatives, so will willingly leave the choosing to a friendly, not to mention professionally trained, intermediary.

Many examples around us today call into question this perception of librarian centrality in the chain of serving up information to users. We have seen in recent years the emerging preference for self-trading over traditional brokerage houses, the willingness of house hunters to search multiple listings on their own, and a preference among most travelers to search for flights themselves rather than leaving it to an travel agent. All of these are time-consuming, and users are undoubtedly clumsy searchers at best, but the feelings of controlling one's own destiny, and the pure pleasure of interacting with the information in one's own time and way, seem to trump arguments for optimizing efficiency through mediation. If Google makes good on its plan to digitize and serve up fifteen million books, it is likely that users will enjoy searching through them for the items they believe they want. Librarians may be right that professionals are more efficient searchers and more discerning judges of the results. Nonetheless, the opinion that matters here is that of the end users, and they seem quite satisfied with their search strategies and the results they retrieve.

Speaking of recommendations, information recommending services likely will grow up all over the Web, and one would think that librarians would be credible players to fill such a role. They will, however, be challenged by a thousand amateurs expressing their own "epinions," and asserting the authority of an academic degree to dominate this space will not be enough. Rather, preeminence will go to those sensitive to the tastes of readers and their preferred manner for receiving information. There are no entitlements in the world today—libraries and librarians have to prove their worth like everyone else.

Collection Development

To get closer to the world I know, consider the status of collection development activities in a research library setting. In years past, great research libraries relied upon a cadre of skilled bibliographers to bring together in a single locale large quantities of scholarship from all over the world. These bibliographers would profess to know not only the international book trade, but also the needs of local users whom they were charged to serve. This latter contention was subject to question, given persistent findings that so much of our research collections went unused.[3] Nonetheless, there were considerations other than use for building large local collections, so the practice persisted, not only tolerating redundancy of information resources but redundancy of the staff needed to acquire them.

Fast-forward now to a world where a single digital copy of an article or book can be delivered to multiple users, anytime, anywhere. This is a world in which publishers can deliver in real time the books or articles as needed by users—electronically or in print—rather than libraries or retail booksellers stockpiling the content on consignment; a world in which a user can locate and buy a print copy of almost any known book—new or used—and expect delivery the next day; a world in which a single catalog of books (and non-books) can be searched at the word level, leading users to library holdings and purchase opportunities. This is the world today, or the world that we know to be close at hand. It is potentially a world of disintermediation for libraries of all types, but especially for those research libraries that have historically defined themselves in terms of the extent of holdings rather than the relevance of their services.

The Web world is a world of networks and communities—a world that supports cooperation through the speed of communication and the transparency of access. If a network (regional or international) of libraries agrees to make a resource available, where it is actually housed does not matter. Location is transparent to the user and, in such an environment, both redundancy and hoarding are irrational. Yes, there are questions of long-term archiving and the trust required to rely upon others in perpetuity. And yes, certain users have specialized needs that should be locally supported. Recognizing all of the arguments for being wary about relying upon others to serve up resources of enduring value, it would still be judged irresponsible if the library community were unable to muster the will and means to cooperate in an environment so conducive to collaboration. In fact, not only could and should research libraries be pursuing an agenda of cooperation, they should be making their resources accessible to the world with little or no expectation of *quid pro quo*. Unlike the physical world of borrowing and lending articles and books, sharing electronic files involves no discernible cost, no loss of local access, and no degradation of local service.

Do not get me wrong here. I believe that the local library—or at least some local libraries—will survive and thrive in the future, but they will only do so by remaining relevant and continually revamping their roles and priorities. Local collections, and the infrastructure to build them, will be much less important going forward. That is not to say that local collection development will not occur, but it is to say that the core resources that serve 80 percent or more of users will be selected and served up centrally; with local efforts focused on truly local needs, such as geographically focused collections (for example, Wisconsin circuses), institutionally branded collection strengths (such as Africana at Northwestern), collections that address specific program needs in an institution or community (such as computational linguistics at MIT), or demographically relevant collections

reflecting the age or language distribution among a local user community. It is also the case—or I hope will be the case—that libraries will be more attentive to their special collections, aggressively seeking out manuscript and archival resources in areas relevant to their specialized users.

Special collecting in most academic and research libraries has been left to a relatively small group of rare books librarians and archivists, while much larger cadres of subject specialists build collections of routine material. Going forward, we need to begin integrating that larger group of subject specialist in shaping our special collections—those collections including published print, manuscripts, popular ephemera, images, and electronic resources. In particular, our subject specialists should be helping to decide which datasets should be incorporated into an institution's repository for universal access and archiving in perpetuity. Likewise, they should be identifying and acquiring the papers of significant contributors to a discipline, working subsequently to organize, make accessible, and preserve such collections, and our subject specialists should be trawling the Web to identify sites of significance or interest that should be harvested and preserved for access and analysis by future generations of scholars.

In addition to subject specialists participating in building special collections, we expect that their roles will be more focused on customizing and marketing collections held elsewhere than building generic onsite collections. Subject specialists should become less attached to the producers of content and more attuned to the needs of those who consume it. Rather than knowing everything there is to know about specific publishers, distributors, or national bibliographies, our specialists need to learn all they can about our users. This would include a deep knowledge of their content needs and how this content is being used. Selectors need to determine which works should be enhanced (for example, better images, edited searchable text, structural encoding, or rich tagging of elements needed by geographers and linguists). Attention should also be paid to the kinds of tools and interfaces required by specialists for their teaching and research, and this too is very likely to vary from campus to campus, even if the target content (for example, Shakespeare, public laws, civil war diaries) is the same.

Finally, different scholars mix and match content in different ways, and our specialists should be helping to build portals and virtual collections that reflect these widely varying understandings of a subject corpus. Presently we leave this to scholars themselves to assemble, but the act of capturing and reflecting these "scholar's bookshelves" could become an important expression of an institution's research legacy.

So, while I believe we are moving toward one or several universal libraries, I still see hundreds of great research libraries continuing to flourish by redeploying their subject specialists to cater much more closely the needs of local scholars. This is no longer a world of libraries serving as high inventory retailers—Wal-Mart or Sam's Club—standing ready to serve any and all comers. Rather, the day is approaching of the library as elegant boutique, with a small but committed clientele. That clientele is committed because it is pampered and libraries cater to it. It is the cosmetic counter of the campus, where somebody cares if your skin is oily or your pores are larger than average.

At top-tier universities, faculty members are national and international engines of creativity and discovery. They cure diseases, create things of beauty, generate economic value, and advance the social good by recognizing a higher understanding of the forces that shape our lives. Allying with this mission is to change the world. In the aggregate and over time, this is the stuff of human progress, and that is where libraries of all types—academic, school, public, and special—need to be investing their money, their time, and the energy of their best staff.

Concluding Thoughts

Speaking of investment, libraries need to be investing more of their budgets in cooperative and collaborative efforts that produce ever-greater value for our users. We should be investing in shared print storage facilities, solutions to archiving electronic resources, shared server farms to manage large-scale datasets, 24/7 chat reference services, mass digitization of our retrospective collections, and myriad other activities that no longer depend on space or locale. Nobody argues against the importance of libraries, but there are lots of important institutions in our society and limited resources to cover the costs. Vision is worthwhile, but affordable vision—achievable vision—is priceless. The future vitality of libraries is dependent on their ability to first, design desirable services for users; and second, to deliver those services in a cost effective manner. Cost effectiveness will require eliminating operational redundancies, and here we have a tremendous advantage over the private sector. Libraries can cooperate, share, and support each other in ways unavailable to commercial firms. That is a great strength made possible by digital delivery of information. We are no longer standalone operations that need to do it all; we can focus on doing some things well and rely on others to take care of the rest. The best library in the country will be the library that can satisfy user needs by calling upon the resources of all the rest.

America's libraries and librarians are poised to embark on a wild ride over these next few years. Our catalogs will change dramatically, our information services will be delivered off-site and online, and our selection will done by users. Such profound changes can be unsettling, but we should be comforted by the knowledge that our libraries will

reach more users than ever before, serve them better than at any time in our past, and do so at a lower unit cost than has been possible under current arrangements. Change is sometimes progress, and I believe that is the case for the work presently being done in and around libraries. While not quite the source of an earthquake, libraries and librarians are well placed to rock the world. With so many resources available to be delivered quickly and conveniently, who can doubt that our profession will successfully adapt to the new opportunities presented by economic, technological, and cultural change?

References

1. Mario Savio, "An End to History," speech given in Berkeley, Calif., Dec. 2, 1964; available from the Free Speech Movement Archives, www.fsm-a.org/stacks/endhistorysavio.html (accessed July 25, 2006).
2. Morton Grodzins, *The Metropolitan Area As a Racial Problem* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Univ. of Pittsburgh Pr., 1969).
3. See, for example, Allen Kent et al., *Use of Library Materials: The University of Pittsburgh Study* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1979).