Reaching Out from the Other Side of the Reference Desk: A User's Perspective on Evolving Library Services

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Introduction

Good morning. It is a pleasure to speak to you today. My talk will focus on the user's view of the library and on the user's perspective of the ever quickening evolution of library services. Playing on the conference title, I have titled my paper "Reaching Out from the Other Side of the Reference Desk". Effective reference, as indeed any effective library service, is a two-way process – a dialogue between librarian and user.

I like to think that I have a considered perspective on the issue of interaction between librarians and users in an environment of change. While I am not a librarian I have sat, and do sit, on both sides of the desk so to speak. As mentioned in Julia's introduction, over the last twenty years I have been a student, researcher, and employee within the library.

Saying it out loud – "twenty years" – makes it sound longer than it really is. First as a student working towards one's degrees and then as an employee consolidating one's career – twenty years flashes by in a blink. But if nothing else leaves an impression, the one thing that does is the level of change that those twenty years have brought. When I was an undergraduate first entering the university library in 1988 that library was in the process of phasing out its card catalogue. For the first year or so of my degree I used both it and the on-line system, either typing away at a terminal, or searching the card catalogue for those really old books that were still classified using Dewey. Towards the end of my four years I bought my first modem, a 2400 baud internal modem, which, I am proud to say, I was able to install into my IBM-XT clone. This computer was

my workhorse, on it I wrote my term papers for both my BA and MA degrees and my MA thesis. It faithfully chugged away and never, to my memory, crashed. That is more than I can say for my current laptop and its *diabolic* Windows operating system. But that is a topic for another paper, for today it is sufficient to say that I bought my first modem specifically to access my university's library catalogue from home. But before you start thinking "Geek", in my defence, in 1991, email wasn't what it is today, there was no Facebook or instant messaging, you couldn't download movies, music, or porn, and the world wide web was still a year or two away. However, with my modem I could connect to the library's server and do my searches from home, avoiding the inconvenience of standing in line at the small handful of terminals then available in the library. I simply needed to show up with my list of titles and call numbers, bypass the lines, and head straight for the stacks.

Today, as I am again a student, it is possible to bypass the stacks as well. Almost all of the journals and articles that I use in my research are online. I need to enter the library building far less now than I did as a student before. Infact, with my university library halfway around the world I don't enter it at all. All my interaction with Edith Cowan University Library is via the internet. Other resources I draw from the University of Regina or the Regina Public Library. That I am able to conduct so much of my research electronically is truly a revolution. This is a revolution both of academia and of the academic library. What does this do the physical concept of library and the concept of the desk that we are peering at each other across?

The Academic Library as Place

A library building sends signals to everyone entering its doors and, just as importantly, the space creates expectations in those who enter. A well-designed webpage can do that too, but not as completely nor as impressively.

When I walk into an academic library today, the message I receive is inviting. The typical library has redefined its physical place into a modern and comfortable study space for students and staff. There are computer workstations, comfortable sofa chairs, classrooms and study labs. Public libraries too emphasize comfort with meeting areas and in some instances they even have places to buy coffee. I am certain that more consideration goes into the design of

these areas than into the design of the stacks. I understand the reasoning behind these changes. As more and more resources go digital, there is less and less need to visit the library. Witness what I said about my interaction with the library of Edith Cowan University. As turnstile and circulation statistics decline, libraries struggle to transform themselves from destinations you have to go to (as a student or researcher), to destinations you want to go to (to study, meet friends, or buy coffee).

I sometimes fear that the Library as place is changing but is not fully sure what it ultimately wants to be. Is it a café? A computer lab? Or is it a study hall? My high school library was little more than a study hall and that didn't fair it well, judging from the fate of teacher-librarians and school libraries in places like Saskatchewan and Manitoba. I'm not confident that library as study space is the answer. I have seen university libraries with spacious and modern sitting areas and group study rooms on the one hand, then I have gone up a couple of floors to see cramped book stacks with little or no room for expansion. That to me is ineffective planning at best, a crisis of identity at worst. The currency of libraries is books, magazines, journals, audio and visual resources, archives, special collections and the like. These resources can be both in traditional and digital format. They are the heart of the library, they are what librarians manage, they are the tools librarians use when acting as information specialists. These resources take precedence over group study space or coffee bars. The extras are nice, but core responsibilities should be resourced first. That is my thought as a user on library as place.

The Library and the Internet

If physical space sets your impression of a library, then the layout and design of its webpage does so as well.

How things are presented, explained, and ordered on the webpage is vitally important and libraries pay close attention to these factors in the design of there web resources. I have participated in enough webpage design and redesign committees to attest to that. User participation in design is an interesting idea, but I can't see typical library users wanting to subject themselves to this drawn-out committee process. Surveys and other methods are ample for drawing in user comments, feedback, and suggestions. They are the frontline for discovering your

user groups and can serve to establish a strong dialogue with them. Nothing is more disheartening for a user than participating in a survey process and then seeing little if any outward change in the library. Following up with participants is important, inviting their further comments on developing changes and having them participate in focus groups is also a good idea. It creates a sense that they have a stake in the library and its future.

More and more spectators want to be players on the internet. And more and more these informal participants are leading innovation in the fields to which they contribute. Technology allows groups of amateurs to do what professionals exclusively did before. Witness the re-emergence of amateur participation in astronomy. Here networks of people, connected via the internet and with access to increasingly sophisticated amateur equipment, are making important discoveries mapping the night skies. Technology has had a profound impact on the practice of journalism. The rise of blogs has given voice to a much wider range of views than that covered by the established media. Think also of how many times you have seen video shot by amateurs on their camera-phones on the evening news. The execution of Saddam Hussein or the recent riots in Burma are two of the most prominent examples.

These participation models are both social and dynamic. Authorship is open and joint. Knowledge is created by constant interaction. That is the Wikipedia model. But it is also the model for open source software systems such as Linux and OpenOffice – two systems that are mounting a serious challenge to Microsoft Windows and Word. These participation models are capable of producing highly technical results that until recently, organizational experts believed could only result from tightly organized hierarchical institutions.

Libraries should belong to this world. To a certain extent they do – indeed they have even foreshadowed it. Libraries have long been open models where information has been freely available to researchers to use to construct new ideas and objects. Engaging further in this online socially-networked world will increasingly redefine the library as idea. Some of the pitfalls of the earlier redefinition of library as place, which I spoke of earlier, need to be avoided. Principally, I believe that libraries must steer away from the digital equivalent of being cafés, study halls, or places where their chief claim-to-fame is that they have the most comfortable seats. I have been told that three guiding principles of

libraries and the library profession are (1) a democratic right to information, (2) storing and perpetuating knowledge, and (3) that access to information is a public good. These principles should inform every decision in redefining the library as idea. These principles should be the foundation of every project to extend a library's precedence on the Internet.

My Ideal Library

My ideal library is one that is social and dynamic. It provides more and more information in digital format, but it allows me a choice in the format I wish to use. In my work as a researcher the ideal format of information is a function of what I intend to use that information for. I read journal articles online (because that is the quickest and easiest way to access them), but I will not read books online (because they are far too long to read at a computer screen). A digital book is useful to me when I need to reference something. Thus if I am writing a passage of my thesis and I need to confirm a quote, I logon and find the digital copy of that book, search for the text, and presto – I have my quote. The digital book is the best format of the information I need for the function of quick searching. But if I want to sit down, read the book from start to finish, think about its argument and absorb it – for that I want a physical paper copy. Am I being old-fashioned in my preference? I'd venture to say that many researchers are like me, the format they want critically depends on the use they have for the item. They will desire differing formats of the exact same work depending on the differing circumstances and uses they have. Sometimes the desired format will be that will be book, sometimes a PDF for their laptop, sometimes information on their PDA.

And as I'm writing (usually at 2:00 in the morning) the digital resources I use must be highly intuitive. I can't be confused by a database, or e-text, or a webpage as I won't have access to a reference librarian until the next day. The advancements in this area have occurred by leaps and bounds. I remember days not that long ago when there were lists of databases and each had to, in effect, be searched individually. This is no longer the case, the Edith Cowan University Metaquest system allows me to search simultaneously across every database I need. Users can easily participate in the intuitive design of library tools. Feedback models are in place in many libraries to serve this purpose.

One of the most effective catalogue tools that I use today is the LibraryThing website. I use it to find books connected to my research topic that I would never come across in a traditional catalogue. The tagging model of LibraryThing has thousands of users participating. As users build descriptions of their personal libraries they have an option to add subject tags, of their own creation, to each book. Taken together, these tags create a highly descriptive and high accurate subject description for a book. A subject description for a single book may be the result of tagging by thousands of users and these tags, I have found, are highly effective in creating lists of related books, books with related sections, or books that are only marginally related but broaden your thinking on a given subject.

If there are any cataloguers in the room, please don't start throwing things at me, but I believe that the option of having user-generated catalogue information somehow connected to existing library catalogues could be an indispensable resource to users and add a great deal of value to the current catalogue setup. Think of all the amateur expertise that could be utilized in creating a library catalogue. Or all the professional expertise of historians, scientists, and others that could be added to a catalogue. As an example: A few years ago we had a researcher in the Archives studying documents we have relating to espionage during World War II. This researcher was passionate and well-read, we got to talking, and the next day he presented me with a hand written list he had drawn together the night before on 30 or 40 books relating to Canadian, British, and American spymasters during the war. The list included books on the conduct of the war, foreign policy, and biographies of figures one would never associate with the art of spying. Such a list I could never recreate, no matter how skilled I may be in the use of library catalogues, I'm sure that it would take a history Master student years to develop such a broad-based list of seminal books. Imagine the quality of research serious students could produce if they could pull such a list together using this man's expertise and others like him through and expanded catalogue search tool.

These collaborative catalogues are beginning to take shape and they should be a priority in coming years. Given the popularity of sites such as LibraryThing, they will draw many users into participation in the library.

One of the central principles I spoke of earlier was access. Here lies,

another highly visible and important collaboration for libraries and users. While catalogues are being drawn together with federated searching, users still face differing access rules from different providers once they enter into databases and digital resources. We have to type passwords and authentications here and there over and over. My hope is that this will become as seamless as searching is now. In a perfect world it should not matter from which computer and what IP address I choose to request access. I realize this is a tall order and that there is much that must happen behind the scenes to make this seamless access possible. But it should be project to pursue.

This opens up a whole group of issues. Libraries need to pressure the companies that provide online resources for simpler access regimes. Why is it, for example, that certain digital resources can only be used by one patron at a time? There is no technical reason for that. Libraries, and the consortiums they belong to, are the principle customers for these companies – surely that clout can negotiate better access regimes.

Other models can be developed. Harvard University Library, for example, is a keen proponent of open access. More and more academics are publishing outside the established models moving toward open access journals, creative commons, and GNU licences. Libraries need to sit at the vanguard of copyright and intellectual property issues – not just knowing about them and explaining the rules to patrons, but affecting them on behalf of the interests of users. Library professional associations should be more visible in these efforts and develop a core expertise that individual libraries haven't the time or money for. This is another great collaborative arena for libraries and users.

Some Examples of Digitization

One of the most important tasks that the new library performs is digitization. In addition to major collaborative projects, such as Google Scholar or J-STOR, many libraries provide digital access to unique materials in their collections.

Among the more impressive is the Northern Research Portal project, at the University of Saskatchewan Library (http://scaa.usask.ca/gallery/northern). This site includes interpretive exhibits on specific themes. These are directed at

various audiences – in fact the project has been designed to have different parts of the site and different materials accessible to different groups. The target groups are school children, the general public and advanced researchers. The website includes course materials for classes offered through the University of the Arctic, a cooperative international network of universities, colleges, and other organizations committed to higher education and research in the North. The site is designed with:

1. the ability to browse all materials by subject or by geographical location;
2. a section for on-line resources, including both interpretive exhibits and other resource sites;
3. a database of photographs;
4. finding aids to archival collections, linking where appropriate to the digitized resources;
5. a bibliography of resources, linking to the digitized resources;
6. overall site search capability;
7. a section for teachers; and
8. quick access links for the three identified user groups.

Another example of an excellent library digitization project comes from Australia. There the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library offers access to primary and secondary source materials relating to Australian Prime Minister John Curtin (at http://john.curtin.edu.au/). Curtin held office from 1941 to 1945 and led the country through the height of World War II. The collection includes photographs, documents and oral histories. Practically all of the collection is available on-line. Researchers may discover documents using a keyword search and then navigate from the document to others contained in the original file. Other files and other series are easily linked to as are photographs and audio or video files.

The third example I wish to give today is entitled "The Empire That Was Russia: The Prokudin-Gorskii Photographic Record Recreated" (at http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/empire). This impressive site features photographic surveys of the Russian empire made by photographer Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii between 1905 and 1915. Of the 2,607 distinct images in the collection held at the United States Library of Congress, over 1,900 glass negatives, 700 prints (for which there are no negatives), and album pages showing all prints in the

collection have been digitized. The most amazing thing about these images, that document daily life across the vast Russian empire, is that they are in brilliant full colour. Prokudin-Gorskii used a photography process where three black-and-white negative exposures were taken at one time. These exposures were made through blue, green, and red filters to produce photographs that could be printed or projected in colour.

The site provides extensive technical details on his photographic process including information on the equipment used by Prokudin-Gorskii. There is also a biography of him and his ambitious plan for a photographic survey of the Russian empire. His project won the support of the Russian Czar and Prokudin-Gorskii spent numerous years completing photographic surveys of eleven regions of the empire, travelling in a specially equipped railroad car provided by the imperial ministry responsible for transportation. There is further information on the site providing historical context on the Russian empire during the time these impressive photographs were taken and information about how the collection came into the hands of the Library of Congress in 1948.

Further technical details on the digitization process employed by the library are provided. Once scanned the images were reproduced through an innovative process known as digichromatography. The website details this process showing examples of an image in its three black and white stages, how the original colour image would have looked, and the image as it appears cleaned up through the library's innovative process.

A detailed database links all images. Links in the database place each photograph in the context of the album from which they originate, as well as link to other contextual and technical information. The user may search the database directly, navigate through the various series of the collection, or view an exhibition of the photographs.

I have gone into the structural details of these several websites because I believe that the context that they provide make their information that much more valuable as research tools. The colour slides of Russia are interesting in themselves, but once one knows that they were taken at a time when colour photography, as we later came to know it, did not exist, they become utterly fascinating. The technical complexity, and thus the work involved in making

these images, becomes clear only in the contextual information that goes along with the images. This was not some guy farting around the country side taking snaps; it was an involved process that required a large investment of time and resources. Although the text on the website doesn't allude to it, such an intensively planned photographic project probably didn't leave its subject matter to chance. It is only logical that the images captured were also carefully planned. You have a sense of this in images of various ethnic minorities dressed up in their finest ethnic costume, or the extra-ordinary cleanliness of the factory floor in one set of images. Contrast this to another set of photographs, this time taken in rural Saskatchewan in the 1950s and 1960s (by grain agent Everett Baker), and you see a somewhat more candid representation of rural life (at http://www.shfs.ca/baker.php). The ease of the technology and its reduced cost makes the more relaxed images of the 1950s possible. But there surely are other factors to consider, factors such as differences in culture and even politics – remember the czarist government sponsored Prokudin-Gorskii, we see no colour images of strikes or revolutionaries.

These are questions for scholars, but they cannot be answered, or even formulated, without the extensive work of librarians. Had the Library of Congress simply scanned Prokudin-Gorskii's photographs and made them available with little context few online researchers would be able to ask considered questions of the materials.

Digitization is thus more than the scanning and mounting of material in the fashion of Google Scholar. It involves the provision of context that makes it possible for researchers to ask questions. In 2005 Canadian archival educator, Tom Nesmith, of the University of Manitoba, outlined what such a contextual system could look like. "There could be," Nesmith wrote, "a series of essays… these essays would be a guide to thinking about and using the wide range of contextual information… that could be useful to researchers".

Essays could be available on the history of the library itself, its collection development policy (an important essay to read if your scholarly interest is on how photographs taken for a Russian czar ended up in Washington DC). Essays could be available on societal contexts, creators, mandates, relevant laws, functions, record-keeping systems and processes, organizational cultures, information technologies, custodial histories, and a whole host of other relevant

access points. These essays would not only prepare researchers for using the metadata created by a library in its digitization projects, but would help the researcher go beyond the materials to the less visible and complex ideas and trends behind them. A researcher could always go directly to the materials and avoid the essays at will, or choose to read some and ignore others. The essays may be especially valuable in working digitally where increasingly large numbers of users can gain access to library resources without ever having direct access to a librarian. An essay could point to related literature by other scholars as well. And, as my discussion topic today is about user's reaching out to libraries, a researcher could also contribute to these essays by sharing interesting facts learned during research. In this manner existing essays could be updated or new essays written.

Indeed scholars and other experts could be commissioned as part of the digitization project to write these contextual essays. The short essays which accompany the digitized diary of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King (http://king.collectionscanada.ca/EN/default.asp) are embryonic examples of the work proposed by professor Nesmith. Nesmith envisions a formally developed stream of contextual essays written and vetted by experts. But that needn't always be the case. These essays could just as easily follow the model of the short user-generated book reviews and book suggestions found on such sites as Amazon.com or LibraryThing. They may evolve as a Wiki connected to the digitized resource. Ultimately there may be different levels of participation and different tools to serve different functions for the same digitized resource. We may see a more open tool for general users to post their comments and recommendations, and a more scholarly peer-reviewed one for in-depth expert opinion with the ability of users to move effortlessly between the two.

Finally, I'd like to touch on one more point. How we authenticate digital materials specifically, and how we authenticate libraries in general.

In the absence of comparison between digital and original materials – an absence which may become more common as familiarity of all scholarly researchers with the digital medium grows. We may see a shift in the authentication process away from a rigorous examination of the item, to an examination of the credentials of the library or archives or other institution that digitizes it. Without access to the original it is difficult to determine if all the

pages of an item where scanned. Or if the color reproduction of an art work is close to the original, or its proportions are correct. Without ready access to the original how can the scholar know that the digital item is an accurate representation of that original? The scholar must trust that it is so. To trust it, he or she must be confident that the digitizing institution followed a rigorous process in producing the digital item. Contextual essays on how collections were chosen for digitization and how that process proceeded with all the technical information present is the way to build that trust. Add to that further essays written by experts in the field and the level of trust grows. It grows to the point that over time, simply citing the name of a rigorous institution is enough to elicit trust. This is exactly what happens in the publishing industry. Which publisher would the classical scholar turn to for the most trustworthy copy of a Latin text – some small under-funded, little-known publisher or Oxford University Press? Selection, review, and editing at an academic publishing house are rigorous. Furthermore selection, review, and editing in the scholarly publishing model are user driven. It is academics who select, review, and edit the works of their peers for publication. It is quite possible that the library that wishes to position itself as a scholarly research institution in the future will, in a sense, have to replicate the instruments created by scholarly presses. Materials cannot simply be digitized and mounted on the Internet, they will need to be subject to careful selection, to a quality digital reproduction process, and provide a high level of contextual and metadata information. Like the publishing process, on which it is based, the whole process will involve many professionals – librarians, computer technicians, scholars, and other users.

This collaboration serves not only to build the authoritativeness of a library in the digital materials it provides, but to build the authoritativeness of the library itself. Having an active, involved, and supportive user community and having active and involved ties with other professionals shows the library as useful, innovative, and effective. All these features are incredibly important for library administrators when they approach their parent institutions and funding agencies.

Conclusion

I've enjoyed sharing some of my ideas with you today. I'm sure the trends I see are self-evident to those of you working in Libraries. I'm also sure that many

of the suggestions I've put forward aren't necessarily new to you either, nor, are they necessarily right. Nevertheless I hope that in raising them today I am providing impetus to think about them anew. I'd enjoy hearing your thoughts and engaging in discussion for the time we have left in this session.

Thank you.