

What will become of us? Looking into the crystal ball of serials work

Based on a paper presented at the 29th UKSG Conference, Warwick, April 2006

Is it possible to predict the future of serials work? Not with perfect accuracy, of course – but to do so imperfectly is both possible and imperative. We need to be looking ahead and asking questions like these: What are the implications of the open access movement for serials staff? Will the information economy of the future be driven by problems of scarcity or problems of abundance, and what does each scenario mean for the library? The areas in which we work are especially volatile, and both we and those we serve will benefit greatly if we learn how to anticipate and prepare for change, rather than simply reacting to it after it happens.



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My purpose with this paper is to try to make some predictions about the future. Now, as we all know, predicting the future is a sucker's game; the road of history is littered with the exquisitely embarrassed corpses of people who predicted confidently a world completely different from the one in which we now live. But at the same time, anticipating the future really is a significant part of our job as professional librarians. We have been entrusted with large amounts of money, and with that money we are expected to equip our library users for the future, so to a very real degree it is incumbent upon us to have some idea of what the future might hold. So, for what it's worth, I would like to offer my best attempt at reading the crystal ball and seeing what it says for the future of acquisitions work in general and for serials practice in particular.

First of all, we need to recognize some things that have happened already in the information environment, most of them quite recently. None of these will be news to any of us, but I think they bear bringing up to establish a context for what I will discuss thereafter.

Three things that have already happened

1. *The end of information scarcity.* Our libraries were set up to help patrons deal with the problem of information scarcity. It was not very long ago that you had no choice but to go to the library if you wanted to do any kind of advanced or detailed research. Even very simple research queries, such

as the name of the fourth king of Belgium or the current population of Buenos Aires – queries that we now answer for ourselves in several seconds using Google – could until quite recently only be answered by making a trip across town and, often, having a conversation with a professional librarian. Today, however, most of the information that most people need most of the time is almost literally lying around on the ground for them to pick up whenever and wherever they want it. And finding the particular piece they want is almost always easy, because of highly sophisticated tools like Google that lead people very quickly to the information they need even when their search strategies are unsophisticated. Only ten years ago, we were saying that 'content is king'. Today having good content hardly gives you an edge, because content is cheap, ubiquitous and easy to find.

This is not to say, of course, that all content is actually free – but the reality in which our patrons live and in which they do their day-to-day work is one in which information *feels* free, or at least cheap, and in which it is functionally ubiquitous. It is our patrons' perceptions of the information environment, not necessarily its absolute reality, that will shape their behaviour. And it goes without saying that our patrons' behaviour is what will shape the future of libraries.

2. *The attention crisis.* The second significant recent development in the information environment

comes as a logical consequence of the first. As the amount of cheaply and easily available information has increased, the length of a day has remained, stubbornly, at 24 hours; thus, the amount of time and energy available to devote to any particular unit of information has correspondingly decreased. This means, in other words, that as content has become more abundant and therefore cheaper, time and attention have become relatively more scarce and therefore more expensive. People are more reluctant to invest time in information gathering than they were when the relationship between time/attention and available information was differently balanced. I want to emphasize that this reaction – this growing unwillingness to invest (expensive) time in the quest for (cheap) information – is not a sign of laziness on the part of our patrons; it is a sign of basic rationality.

3. *The online presumption.* What has caused this significant shift in the value balance between time and information is not only the massive migration of content into the online environment, but also the fact that the online environment has become, for almost all of our users, the default location for information gathering. We librarians love to share horror stories with each other about patrons who

are uninterested in pursuing any information resource that is not fully available online. But again, we need to come to terms with the fact that such an attitude, while by no means always perfectly effective, is nevertheless a reasonable response to the reality of a fundamentally changed information world.

In that regard, I want to share a particularly vivid example of the effects of these changes in one research library. Between 2000 and 2002 I was surprised to notice that our library was actually seeing a relatively steady number of circulation transactions from year to year, and I wondered how that could be, since it was obvious to the casual observer that patron traffic was moving dramatically away from the printed collection. I expressed that puzzlement to my boss and he responded that if circulation numbers were staying strong, it was because registration had been increasing substantially from year to year. I felt rather foolish for not having thought of that explanation myself, so in a spirit of contrition I decided to take the registration figures from the previous decade and compare them to circulation data.

Figure 1 (consisting of two tables) shows what I found. Between 1994 and 2005 the annual number

Table 1

Year	Enrolment (headcount, undergraduate and graduate)	Total circulation transactions	Circulation transactions per enrolled student
1994	12,379	349,578	28.2
1995	12,047	328,358	27.3
1996	12,279	347,294	28.3
1997	12,442	296,554	23.8
1998	12,303	287,722	23.3
1999	12,532	245,030	19.6
2000	13,149	211,327	16.1
2001	14,316	239,212	16.7
2002	15,093	249,280	16.5
2003	15,534	---	---
2004	15,950	224,098	14
2005	16,336	198,943	12.2

Table 2

Year	Enrolment (headcount, undergraduate and graduate)	Number of items checked out	Items checked out per enrolled student
1994	12,379	258,854	20.1
1995	12,047	250,780	20.1
1996	12,279	271,373	22.1
1997	12,442	227,726	18.3
1998	12,303	208,175	16.9
1999	12,532	181,312	14.5
2000	13,149	165,540	12.6
2001	14,316	200,277	14
2002	15,093	211,805	14
2003	15,534	---	---
2004	15,950	204,231 (184,240)	12.8 (11.6)
2005	16,336	182,296 (157,670)	11.2 (9.7)

Figure 1. Circulation trends in UNR Libraries 1994–2005

of circulation transactions *per enrolled student* fell from 28.2 to 12.2, a drop of about 55%. Now, it is important to bear in mind that the transaction figures themselves are artificially high because they include renewals, so the second table in this figure indicates the number of items checked out per enrolled student. That trend has also gone down – not quite as dramatically, but still very significantly. Furthermore, the decline is even steeper if you remove the circulation of DVDs from the equation (as represented by the figures in parentheses in the second table). The reason it makes sense to take DVDs out of the equation is that in 2001 we established a popular collection consisting of best-selling fiction and non-fiction, audio CDs and feature films on DVD. The statistics indicate an uptick in circulation in 2001 and again in 2002, but even with sustained heavy use of the popular collection (which, incidentally, now accounts for about 15% of all of circulation in the main library) our overall circulation numbers had resumed their decline by 2004.

Now, I suggest that these numbers should cause us concern. They do not mean that our patrons are making less use of library services, but they do tell us that the materials they are using and the ways that they are using those materials are both changing dramatically and quickly. And if we do not believe that this trend has serious implications for such issues as technical services staffing and materials budgets then I think we're whistling past the graveyard. One thing I can predict with confidence is that this trend is going to continue. The question is, how much further will they fall before they stop? And perhaps even more important, what will form that hard floor of materials that continue to be used? The answers to these questions will clearly vary from institution to institution, and I do not for a moment assume that every library is seeing exactly the same trend that we are seeing at the University of Nevada. But I hope that seeing these numbers will make you want to go back to your institutions, if you have not done something like this already, and look at your own local trends, and ask yourselves what they might mean for the future of your own institutions.

Three things that will definitely happen in the future

Moving on to actual predictions, I should like to start with three things that I feel confident in saying are definitely going to happen in the future.

As you can surely anticipate, my level of confidence in these predictions is inversely proportional to their specificity.

1. *There will be more and more free, high-quality information.* First of all, the amount of high-quality information available at no charge to the public is going to continue to increase. I think we can all agree on that. As time goes on there is going to be more, not less, good content available online at no charge to the public and, despite the dire predictions of librarians, it is going to get easier, not harder, to find the particular pieces of it that you want. When it comes to prognostication I think that there is really only one hard and fast rule: follow the money. If someone can make money doing something, eventually that thing will be done by someone. If there is one thing that people have figured out quite well in the last decade, it is how to make money by putting free information online.

2. *The percentage of high-quality information available for free will never reach 100.* The second thing I feel fully confident in predicting is that the percentage of high-quality information available at no charge to the public will never reach 100. Free access is like Zeno's arrow; it will keep approaching 100% without ever actually hitting that number. The amount of content freely available to the public online is going to continue to grow and I think it will even continue to grow explosively, but *everything* that *everyone* wants is never going to be available for nothing. Furthermore, I am convinced that the open access movement will continue to grow and develop, but I remain deeply agnostic as to whether it will become much more than what it is now – basically a boutique phenomenon – let alone become the default setting for scholarly publishing in the foreseeable future. This is not to say such an eventuality is impossible, only that I remain to be convinced that it is very likely.

3. *Of what remains, we will continue to purchase the wrong things for our patrons.* My third confident prediction is that, of the content that remains – the content that people rely on libraries to purchase for them, – we are going to continue to misjudge our patrons' current needs and to mis-anticipate their future needs. Now, I honestly don't say this in a spirit of gratuitous bashing; I do not think that we are really terrible at collection development. But I honestly do believe that the traditional model of collection development is a significant problem

and, furthermore, that it always has been. During the print era, when information was primarily provided in books and printed journal issues and was therefore difficult to locate and expensive to transport, and when it moved with painful slowness from place to place, the only way a library could serve its patrons' needs well was to do its best to anticipate those needs; if we failed to do so, our patrons were generally left without reasonably affordable or time-efficient alternatives. The problem, of course, was that our ability to anticipate patrons' needs was always far from perfect, which meant that we frequently bought the wrong things and failed to buy the right things. In fact, I would argue that one of the largest elephants in the rather crowded living room of our profession is the very significant amount of money that gets spent every year on content that no one is ever going to use. Research libraries, at least in the United States, have always avoided discussing the elephant by saying, "Well, we're a research library and someday somebody may need this book for her dissertation." I don't think we can get away with that for much longer. It is past time for us to deal with the elephant. If we fail to do so, and if current trends in journal inflation and patron usage patterns continue, our various funding bodies are going to start seriously re-evaluating the way that they give us money, as well they should. Today, information is easy to locate and access to it can be obtained almost instantly; the arguments for traditional collection development are losing their strength with every passing day.

Three things that will almost certainly happen

Now we come to the predictions about which I am substantially less certain, but still fairly confident. The first has to do with laptop computers.

1. *Laptops will replace desktops.* Laptop computer sales have been rising quite dramatically in the United States – I assume they are in the UK as well – and desktop computer prices are falling drastically. So, while laptops are not going to completely replace desktop computers among the general public in the next year or so, I do believe this will happen to a substantial degree in the foreseeable future. The trend will be particularly pronounced among students, who place a special premium on being able to carry their projects (and their Internet connectivity) around with them. Indeed, this trend

is obvious already: ask yourself how many laptop computers you saw in your library two years ago compared with two weeks ago. If we think that laptops replacing desktops has no serious implications for us as serials librarians, then I suggest that we are simply not paying attention (and I am going to expand on that point in a moment).

2. *Something like Google Book Search will take hold and become well established as a resource tool.* Google Print, now known as Google Book Search, ran into some legal roadblocks in the last year, which was inevitable. But again, remember the first law of prognostication: follow the money. If it is possible to make money doing something then someone is going to do it, and Google has demonstrated in the most dramatic way possible that it is possible to make a lot of money by giving people free access to other people's content. Eventually the legal issues will be clarified and resolved, and someone is going to make something like Google Book Search work. This may be done in partnership with publishers, though it may turn out that it can be done within the bounds of fair use/fair dealing, in which case the participation of publishers will be unnecessary. This possibility implies that publishers might be wise to get on board sooner rather than later, and we have seen some movement in that direction. Yahoo's nascent e-books project and Amazon's Search Inside the Book feature both involve publisher partnerships, and both have had a noticeable effect on the way people search for book content.

3. *Journal inflation will continue, and library budgets will not catch up.* My third prediction, one that I think should not be terribly controversial, is that while journal inflation rates are variable and subject to various kinds of mitigating influences, inflation itself is a fact of life and is unlikely to go away. The question is whether inflation is sustainable at current rates. We can all agree, of course, that it is not, but our agreement on that point is not going to stop inflation from continuing at some level. Furthermore, I promise you that our budgets will not keep up. They have not done so in recent memory and I see no reason to wait hopefully for the great day when all taxpayers rise as one and insist that their civic leaders give us 20% library budget increases every year. And the implications of ongoing high rates of inflation are obvious: as the cost of maintaining access to heavily-used journals continues to rise and as we start paying

closer attention to the fact that our books are getting so little use, our book budgets are going to be eaten away gradually by our serials budgets – and perhaps not even gradually. (At my institution we had a flat budget this year compared to last year, and one of the first things that we did was cut our monographs budget by 20% in order to protect our subscriptions. That is not a gradual cut.)

I had an interesting and really quite sobering experience in this regard just a couple of months ago. I am working on revamping our whole approach to collection development at my library, trying to figure out whether there are things we need to do in a fundamentally different way, and I thought that perhaps others in the profession might have some good ideas along those lines. Not having found much of interest in the literature, I sent out a message to several acquisitions- and serials-related online discussion groups. I asked for responses to the question: “What would you do if you came in to work tomorrow and found that your materials budget had been cut by 50%?” And I have to say that I was a bit shocked and rather disappointed by the responses, almost all of which were variations on the theme of “Well, you know, we’d really look at usage statistics, and I think we’d cancel some of our lower-use serials.” Look: if your materials budget is cut by 50% you are going to have to do more than cut low-use subscriptions. This would be a radical change in your funding, and it seems to me that it would call for a truly fundamental reconsideration of some of the most basic and cherished assumptions we have about how to provide content to patrons. (Several respondents did surprise me by saying that they would stop buying books altogether.)

Implications for the future

If these predictions do in fact prove accurate, what do they mean for the future of acquisitions work in general and serials work in particular?

1. *More laptop computers means fewer patrons in the library.* Getting back to the question of laptops: I would suggest that an accelerating uptake of laptop computers has very significant implications for us as librarians. Laptop computers are now almost invariably Wi-Fi ready, and more wireless access means fewer people needing to come into the library to use the computer workstations there. In some libraries this might not have a noticeable

effect, but in most I think the effect would be dramatic. To get a general idea of how it might impact your own, think about your current gate-count; then imagine that number declining by the number of people who come into the library primarily (if not exclusively) to use your computer workstations. Now, the temptation is to reassure ourselves by saying that even if people stop coming to the library physically that does not mean that they will not be using our services. And this is certainly true. But when it comes to funding, perception is paramount. Remember that people do not pay – and administrators do not provide budget lines – for actual value. They fund *expected* value and they then continue to fund *perceived* value. An empty library will have a very difficult time justifying its staffing, and perhaps even its existence as a separate entity on campus, even if it truly is providing valuable and highly used services.

2. *More free online content means a harder sell for materials budgets.* Obviously, the problem of justifying funding is compounded by the constant increase in the amount of high-quality information that is freely available online, which makes it more and more difficult to explain rich materials budgets – especially when higher education funding is getting tighter in general. In fact, I suspect that we are in a situation that may turn out to be a perfect storm, as far as library budgets are concerned. We have higher education funding getting tighter and tighter, journal prices rising at plainly unsustainable rates, physical gate-count in danger of falling through the floor as wireless access becomes more and more ubiquitous, and increasing amounts of good, high-quality information available freely to the public. In this context, library staffing and materials budgets begin to look like slow, fat targets to administrators who are desperately casting about looking for places to cut. If we want to keep our budgets, we need to be prepared to make compelling, empirically justified arguments in their defense.

3. *Google Book Search means OPAC flight.* One major implication of the Google Book Search project, if it really does take off as I think it will, is going to be an accelerated rate of OPAC flight. We need to be honest and blunt about this: the OPAC is a terrible research tool. It is, in fact, a much cruder tool than Google. I realize that that may be a counter-intuitive thing to say, because, as we tell ourselves over and over, Google is just a full-text

index, whereas the library catalogue is the result of sophisticated work done by highly trained professionals. The problem is that it is not really true. Google is actually much more than just a full-text index: it is also a tremendously complex and highly effective system of ranking and selection presented through a deceptively simple but actually quite elegant and very customer-centered interface. The OPAC, by contrast, takes sophisticated inputs and turns them into much less effective outputs, presented to the patron through an interface that manages somehow to be simultaneously both crude and complex, and one that is almost actively user-hostile. Everything about the OPAC, it seems to me, whispers to our patrons that they really are not very smart and probably do not really deserve to use the library.

4. *The persistence of important and expensive information will mean that patrons will still need well-funded brokers acting on their behalf.* Some information is always going to be expensive, and our patrons are always going to need somebody to pay for it on their behalf. But I think the relevant (and perhaps frightening) question for us is whether those brokers really need to be librarians. And if they do need to be librarians, how many of us are needed? Are the skills that we have developed going to continue to be the ones that are necessary to intermediate access between our patrons and the expensive information that they want in the future? In an information environment that makes it possible for individual patrons to find quickly and easily the information that they need, how many librarians does the university or municipality need to act in the role of information broker? A few years ago in Nevada, we brokered state-wide access to a number of good research databases and as a result every citizen in the state now has access to them. I was involved in the process of putting that deal together and I can tell you that very few librarians were needed. It makes me wonder if I am seeing a trend.

5. *Speed and ease of access are genuinely needed, not just preferred.* As librarians working in an information universe that has changed radically over the past decade, it is essential that we recognize a fundamental truth: the profusion of freely available information and the corresponding decline of the amount of time each of us has available to search for information means that our patrons need, not

just want and not just prefer, faster and more targeted access. Whatever the future does hold for acquisitions and serials librarians, it will have to involve finding ways to make those processes faster and easier. If we do not get over the idea that a difficult searching experience is better for our patrons' souls than an easy searching experience then we are going to lose our patrons with sickening speed, and so we should.

Conclusion

To sum up, then, what does the future hold for us? It should be obvious that in the future, more information will be more broadly and easily available. The future holds for us less usage of printed materials and a continuing explosive growth in use of online content. There will be more remote use of library resources, which is of course one of the primary benefits of online access, but also carries with it dangers for library staffing and funding. There will be substantially less use of the online catalog, to the great rejoicing of our patrons, and more difficulty in defending staff levels and materials budgets. Now, all of this is not necessarily to say that we will be unable to justify our staffing and our budgets, but it does mean that we need to be prepared to actually do so in a rigorous way. I suggest that we will not be able to rely on sentimental arguments about the library being 'the heart of campus,' or what we in the States call 'Mom-and-Apple-Pie' arguments – ones that are designed to make the person holding an opposite view look like a bad person for not believing in good things. We have relied on such arguments to some extent in the past, and we will not be able to in future. We will have to offer hard evidence that our staff and services really do provide good value for money, and that, I think, is the great challenge that all of us face as the information world continues to develop in its current direction.

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