

The librarian: fantastic adventures in the digital world

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In the digital world, the librarian is no longer bound and confined by physical location and a physical library. Definitions that equate the function of a librarian with the management of a library are no longer sufficient. 'Building collections' and 'providing access' are being replaced by the creation of user-centered environments, both physical and virtual. In the digital world, individuals have access to many more sources of information than they could find in any individual library. The complexity of the resulting information space has become so great that the particular skills of librarians in connecting people to the accumulated intellectual, scientific and creative wisdom of other people are more necessary than ever. To fully take advantage of the new possibilities open to them, librarians will have to explore roles that take them far beyond the boundaries of libraries.



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Introduction

My title is a take-off on two made-for-TV movies: 'The Librarian: Quest For The Spear', and 'The Librarian: Return to King Solomon's Mine'. The concept behind the shows is that there is a secret library in which all of the great cultural artefacts of mythology and religion are held. The Holy Grail is there, along with the Ark of the Covenant, and King Midas in all his golden glory. The hero, the librarian, has to go out into the world and battle evil doers and engage in feats of derring-do in a sort of Indiana Jones fashion to keep all of these things safe. I think the shows were quite fun, although, as you might expect, they attracted some negative comment from librarians fussing that it is not really the way things are. That is true – but I think they should just relax and have a good time with it.

The reason this is relevant to what I want to discuss here is that the important work that the librarian does actually happens when he *leaves* the library and engages with the world outside. The library is important but what is essential for the librarian to do his job is to leave the library. I think we are at that point right now as a profession, and it signifies the key and critical change that we have to embrace.

How we talk about ourselves

For six years (from 2000 to 2006), I served as the editor of the *Journal of the Medical Library Association*. It was an experience which gave me an opportunity to look very critically at what was being written and published within librarianship; it also put me in the position of being an editor of a small society journal and dealing with the issues of moving from the print world to the electronic world, which gave me a broader perspective than just that of a librarian.

Much of my thinking has developed from the close reading that an editor has to do. I believe that the way that we think about our future is revealed in how we talk about it. When we are sloppy in our use of language it is often indicative of sloppy thinking. One of the things that I started to notice as I was looking at submitted manuscripts was how often authors wrote about libraries as if the libraries were the agents for what we do. The terms 'libraries' and 'librarians' are not synonyms, but we often use them as if they are. It is a significant symptom of the anxiety we feel about what our future as librarians holds that we have a hard time separating our own identities from the libraries in which we work.

As an example of what I mean, I want to refer to a report that came out recently from the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL).¹ It is the result of a round table discussion which was held in November of 2006, when a number of very smart people got together to talk about the future of libraries. It is a good report and it is very worth reading, but I am going to pick on it a little bit, because of the way that they use language.

The report says that “a library’s fundamental purpose has always been to support the process of research and education by helping users find information and ascertain its value”. It says that libraries “have provided the tools and fostered modes of inquiry that guide users through quantities of information and help them identify that which meets particular needs”. They say that *libraries* do this. But, in fact, *librarians* do this, and the distinction is not trivial. That started me thinking about the distinction, about what a library is and what a librarian does. Being a good librarian, I did what we are supposed to do, and went to the dictionary to look it up. I found that the definition in my college dictionary focuses on the library as a place, a collection, a building.² Libraries don’t do anything, librarians do.

What librarians do

When I went to the definition for ‘librarian’, I saw that here, too, there is a strong identification with the library – “a librarian is a specialist in the care and management of a library”. Ergo, no library, no librarian. No wonder we’re worried. But that isn’t really what we’re all about, is it? That’s what we spend a lot of our time doing but we don’t build libraries for the sake of building libraries, do we? We need to have a better definition of librarians, one that more clearly reveals what it is that we do and what the object of our libraries is.

I made an attempt to do this on the blog that I keep when I wrote that what librarians do is “connect people to knowledge. We bring people together with the intellectual content of the past and present so that new knowledge can be created. We provide the ways and means for people to find entertainment and solace and enlightenment and joy and delight in the intellectual, scientific and creative work of other people.”³ That is what we are about; that is what we have been about for

thousands of years. For the last five hundred years we have built great big libraries because that was the best way to bring people and content together, but the library is not the end of what we do, it is just the means. As technologies change, the means are changing.

So let me go back to those quotes from the ACRL report. I would rewrite them to say that a *librarian’s* fundamental purpose has always been to support the process of research and education by helping users find information and ascertain its value; and that *librarians* have provided the tools and fostered modes of inquiry that guide users through quantities of information and help them identify that which meets particular needs. In the print world, the library itself has been such a tool.

Now, with all that is available via the Internet, and with new developments from Google and Microsoft and many others, it is far from the only tool. There are other fabulous tools being created and as librarians who have that important cultural mission we have to recognize that while our libraries continue to be important tools, we need to take advantage of all available tools, and that will necessitate going through a mental shift that separates us from that strong identification with the library.

The relevance of libraries and librarians

If we do that, we can honestly deal with some of the hard questions:

Are libraries becoming less relevant? They are not the first place that people go now because we have all kinds of virtual places to find information. Libraries *are* becoming less relevant. But does that mean that they are becoming irrelevant? Hardly; they continue to be very important. The fact that we now have all these other tools may lessen the importance of the library relative to other sources, but it certainly does not mean that the library has become irrelevant.

Are libraries becoming less essential? Yes, again; people have all sorts of other ways to get to stuff so libraries are not as essential as they were. But are they becoming inessential? Of course not. They continue to be important, they are just not as important as they used to be. But *we* are; librarians are. More than ever within this very complicated information space in which we live, the tools and the skills and the techniques that librarians bring

to the communities that we serve are more critical than ever.

Libraries are very important as places, no question. I run a great big building on my university campus. It is very important to the life of the institution. We spend a lot of planning time and money in trying to make it a more comfortable place, a more usable place. The local public library in the suburb of Birmingham in which I live is a fabulous cultural centre. It is very important to the life of the community, so I do not mean to suggest that library as place is no longer important. But in terms of our cultural mission as librarians, the library is simply not *as* important as it used to be – and that's okay.

Digital libraries/institutional repositories

We see all around us librarians actually doing the things that show us how we might make use of other tools. Consider digital libraries, and how we are seeing the terminology change. We are talking much more about institutional repositories now. I am particularly fascinated at what I am seeing at the University of Utah, where the library is putting much more of their focus into their institutional repository program. They are not doing much traditional cataloguing anymore, or putting major investments into the catalogue. They feel that they can rely on OCLC and Google and others to take care of helping people find what is out there; what they want to do is figure out how to gather the intellectual content that is generated within their institution and organize it and present it to the rest of the world. They are becoming partners of the scholarly process with the people in their institution in a way that they never thought of doing before because they have the knowledge and the skills and the relationships to make that happen.

Information specialists in context

In the health sector we have been doing this for a long time with Clinical Medical Librarian programs. The literature on this goes back to the 1970s, documenting librarians going out into the wards making rounds, figuring out what information was needed to solve a critical clinical problem, and getting that information to the health professionals at the point of care.

In 2000, an editorial in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* coined the term 'informationist', arguing for the need to endow people with clinical knowledge skills along with information management skills, so that they could function fully as a core member of the health care team.⁴ The editorial suggested that part of the reason that clinical librarian programs had not been as successful as some people thought they ought to be, was that clinical librarians were generally viewed as an 'extra'. If a library had some extra money to pay the librarian and put them out on the ward, it would happen, but only as long as there was extra money because the 'real business' was still in the library. The Medical Library Association is now referring to the concept as the Information Specialist in Context (ISIC) — the notion that the primary function of some librarians is going to be working in non-library settings, whether it be with a research team or clinical team or in an educational setting. It may be that the librarian is no longer even paid by an entity that is called the library, but by the clinical department or the research department. What is critical is that it is the librarian skills that are important.

Reaching out

We are making use of all sorts of new cool tools, of course. I have written in the past that I am not a fan of the phrase 'Library 2.0'.⁵ The ideas are important, and the energy is important and figuring out ways to reach out to users is important; what worries me a little bit though, when I look at some of the discussion around the use of these tools, is that I still have this image of a librarian sitting in an office, in a library, interacting electronically. That is all well and good, but second life⁶ is not a replacement for first life. We still need first life.

One of the things we are doing in my library at the University of Alabama at Birmingham that I am really very proud of is spending a lot of time figuring out how to get our librarians out of the building and into the places where people work. One of our most popular features (which I can take no credit for) is that we will bring an ice-cream and cake party to your department. We encourage people to put the 'ask a librarian' button on their departmental homepage. Periodically we hold a draw to pick one of those departments that have done so, and we will then bring cake and ice-cream

to the winning department at a time of their choosing. We feed the faculty and students and just spend some time visiting. It is very informal, but it gives us another way of getting to know the people that we are trying to work with.

It used to be that the reference desk was the best place for the librarian to be because everybody had to come into the library. I have heard Crit Stuart, from the library at Georgia Tech, humorously put it something like this: "The students came in and complained about the faculty. The faculty came in and complained about the department chairs and the deans; the department chairs complained about the president, and that's how you found out what was going on!" The point of Crit's comments is, of course, that you were able to build informal, collegial relationships, just by sitting at the reference desk and talking with the people that came by.

Now, in many cases, those people do not need to come into the library anymore, but we still need those relationships. One cannot build those relationships to sufficient depth solely through second life or instant messaging, as valuable and important as those sorts of tools are.

Building better libraries

To go back, then, to the ACRL report: it ends with this question – "Do I want to be an advocate for the libraries that currently exist, or an advocate for the libraries that might exist in the future?" That's not a bad question; I just don't think it's the right question. I don't think that our job is to build better libraries. I'm not actually very worried about libraries. Libraries will continue to exist and to function to the extent that they are necessary. What I am concerned about is that we as a profession have a particular set of talents and skills and creativity and energy and tools, including our libraries that are critical to the health and well-being and future of our communities. The challenge that we face right now is how to do that most effectively.

Letting go and creating the future

We must recognize that this involves some emotional feelings of loss. I am sure that all of us have an emotional attachment to libraries and we want to see them survive. In the United States,

every time a hospital library closes we treat it as if it is a tragedy. And it certainly may be a personal tragedy for the person who lost their job. But we must avoid the fallacy of identifying the future of any particular library with our future as a profession. Still, it's hard.

It was hard for the monk in the 15th century, who, with his colleagues had spent centuries developing the scriptoria, developing the techniques that preserved knowledge, that commented, that made sure that the texts that they made available to the scholars in their age were handled properly. And he was probably feeling pretty gloomy around 1500, thinking about that infernal devil machine, the printing press, and how it was going to be the end of civilization as he knew it. No longer would he be able to take care of his books the way they were meant to be taken care of. Europe was going to be flooded with all these cheap things and God knows where they came from.

And that was hard and there was a lot of feeling of loss, but that ushered in the great age of libraries. What happened in the next half of a millennium was the development of the great libraries that we grew up with, The British Library, the New York Public Library, the great university libraries and all of the wonderful large and small public libraries all across the planet that have meant so much to so many and that have been so important to our cultural life. There was loss when the age of scriptoria ended and there is a certain amount of loss now, but we are getting ready to move into another millennium in which we have the opportunity, if we are ready to seize it, if we are willing to be creative, if we are willing to work with the new tools and techniques and technology, to build something special and unique and absolutely essential. We are all millenials now. It may be that the great age of libraries is waning, but I am here to tell you that the great age of librarians is just beginning. It's up to you to decide if you want to be a part of it.

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