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Librarian interrupted! Ur-librarian to un-librarian, or ur-librarian to uber-librarian?

276

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address the dangers and opportunities for a highly trained group of professionals – librarians – in responding to the present and future challenges, for example from the web’s so-called digital natives and from the web’s bare-fisted market forces.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is a general view of the current state-of-play in library management *vis-a-vis* the e-revolution, in terms of the history and future of the profession.

Findings – Librarians are in danger of casting off the primordial and deeply original tenets of the profession (the term “ur-librarianship” is suggested here to refer to this canon of library beliefs). Librarians may well become irrelevant shadows of their former selves by embracing a mish-mash of misdirected and misappropriated ideologies and peripheral priorities from other, newer, professions and undo centuries of hard work (here referred to as “un-librarianship”). In consequence, readers, in a cloud of unknowing, would not understand who librarians are, what they do, and especially, what they stand for. Librarians have opportunities to re-enliven the developmental arc of venerable tradition and to recast agile services to sustain, as in the long past, an absolutely unquestioned place in society (“uber-librarianship”). Is it going to be “Librarian Interrupted!”, or “Librarian Triumphant!”?

Practical implications – Librarians need to brand themselves and their libraries distinctly for a successful and relevant future.

Originality/value – Using practical examples from many years of experience in librarianship, the author states some strong opinions on librarians’ professional futures.

Keywords Libraries, Library management, China

Paper type Viewpoint

“Eight-by-five distinctions”

In April 2007, I presented a paper at the “Academic Librarian: Dinosaur or Phoenix” Conference at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. I spoke on what professional and personal attributes a professional librarian would need as people who make a difference in the next 25 years. As I noted then, the current so-called e-revolution presents professional academic librarians with an ocean of content, which contains many undercurrents and disruptive technologies, possibly undermining all we are trying to do and to be. Assuming there will indeed be libraries and “librarians” to people them over the course of this entire century, I proposed that future librarians would need certain attributes, many of which have actually long been deeply embedded in our traditions as a profession. Perhaps in the manner of Mainland China’s

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penchant for numbers in slogans, I would now wish to characterize these as the “eight-by-five distinctions” (in Chinese: 八五分清 *ba wu fen qing*), in essence, what makes us unique and clearly distinctive as professionals.

Eight professional distinctions:

- (1) ICT-literate graduates ready to move into libraries to build for the generations of readers to come, and willing to embark on a path of life-long learning and teaching. People who interact with ICT professionals on common ground among the professions, but who arrive at any joint meetings with a library service agenda.
- (2) Literate in the older general sense of the word. They need to know something about books and their intellectual history.
- (3) Serious readers themselves. One of the key professional attributes we have is that people think we read a lot.
- (4) Professionally global in perspective. We will need to import best practices and benchmark our libraries continually against others of a similar type anywhere in the world.
- (5) A sense of importance of their work, coupled with a sense of proportion; a sense of humour and a sense of decorum; a sense of their unique place in the university and their university as a unique place; and above everything else, a sense of wonder along with practical common sense. For example, when considering the adoption of new technology, let us be very careful to ensure that: it works; and, it is of lasting and sustained benefit.
- (6) Totally committed to the free flow of information, to open archiving, and to freedom of information, especially in the face of international global market pressures and the commercialization of information over the web.
- (7) Expert in public relations, fully involved in promoting our very valuable services to our reader communities.
- (8) Totally vigilant with our spending of public money when striking deals with commercial vendors.

Five personal distinctions

- (1) An outgoing personality for outreach, true “advocates” of the profession -- we always make a difference when we walk into a room.
- (2) Brave and persistent – proactive people who have not been and cannot be afraid of taking on the argument in spoken and written word.
- (3) Quick-thinking and articulate of speech – such as the need to know how to write position papers on demand.
- (4) Having a very sharp political sense to survive in senior policy committees, to fight for resources against other interests, and to negotiate hard with ever more rich and powerful external vendors.
- (5) Showing a seemingly contradictory combination of steadfastness and humility. By pushing when necessary, pulling back as the situation dictates (Storey, 2007, pp. 495ff).

I now wish to take this matter further into the general field of librarianship (I have never believed it to be, nor wished it to be a “science” – it is for me most assuredly an art). Let us consider some challenges inherent in how we are leading all our libraries into the future, and how we are being lead into that future by forces seemingly beyond our control. Let me state at the outset that my answer to these challenges, as always, lies in maintaining an historical perspective on who we are and who we always were, and what we do and what we have always done – in short, our distinctions.

A matter of definition

Just some explanation about definitions for the words in the title of the article, since I am the first to acknowledge that the title is rather strange:

“*Ur-librarian*”: “*Ur.*” is a German prefix meaning “primitive” or “original”, now much used in cultural studies and literary criticism. No previous reference can be found to its use in librarianship. So, in adopting it here, I am harking back to an original body of thought and deed which constitutes the traditional “librarian” as we have known him or her for centuries, whether it be of our own choosing (the highly literate and IT-savvy adaptable professional) or of the media’s (the shy, retiring, brainy type). Both are valid indicators of what we think we are and how others view us; both views have at least one thing in common: the mark of reliability.

“*Un-librarian*” is used here to indicate the state of not being a librarian, that is, acting (or not acting at all) in a fashion which is contrary to the way a professional librarian should or could. Nichols (1977) used the word “unlibrary” as an adjective to describe operations and practices which librarians may be involved in, which are not strictly mainstream librarianship, such as human resources and so on. Of rather quaint historical relevance now is the meaning ascribed to the expression “unlibrarianish”, first (and once only?) used in the 1970s by Feret. The original article is worth quoting at some length, since it shows how much we have changed, and how much we have not:

It is known, by those who have come in contact with *him*, that the Junior College Reference Librarian is a peculiar species of librarian and is quite distinguishable from others of his kind. He is not at all the sombre scholar of the traditional academic reference desk. In fact, he often carries on in what is sometimes regarded as a very *unlibrarianish* way. Often he is found physically leading a student to shelves of books, or standing before groups of students while waving ponderous reference volumes, or displaying enlarged pages from books in classrooms rather than in the library where he belongs. What is it that makes this librarian act in such a fashion? Why is he such a *crusader*?

We believe the explanation is a very simple one. This person is a *hybrid*. He is not a librarian, but is, in fact, a librarian-teacher. *That’s right, a librarian-teacher. (italics added, Feret, 1977, p. 221).*

Dillon adopted the term “unlibrary” in the title though not in the body of his article, as a seemingly borderless entity where the traditional ecology of information of a library has been technologically disrupted:

Does the library begin where the Internet ends, or does it begin with a child’s first check-out? Is the library wherever the librarian happens to be? Is the library a collection, or a service, or an information organization?

... a library is a focused or organized subset of human information, the opposite of library is the unfocused, unorganized, totality of human information – or in other words, the entire information ecosystem (Dillon, 2002, pp. 49, 56).

Let us cautiously adopt a simple definition here. A “library” is both a place “wherever the librarian happens to be” and where he/she operates professionally and socially with readers, in terms of physical and virtual space, and in terms of the relevant print and electronic “subset of human information” specifically organized for access and retrieval. This is the core of what we librarians do and have always done. If we do not do this, we are acting in an “un-librarian” fashion – iconoclastically denying the roots of the profession, blurring our professional focus and distinctiveness - shedding our library professional’s traditional clothes.

“*Über-librarian*”: the dictionaries tell us that this prefix (correctly in German “*Über*”) denotes an “exceptional” or “archetypal” example – in this case a superior or super library professional. Credit for the first use of this term must, it seems, go to Ginanni (2006) who used the expression “*Über Librarian*” in the title of her NASIG 2005 discussion workshop in relation to finding suitable super people with the over-arching responsibility and deep experience to operate successfully as e-resources librarians. It is used here as a desired and heightened ambition for attainment for all librarians, not just for e-resources librarians. If we maintain and refine the core of what we do professionally and socially in our interaction with our readers in the virtual and physical spaces we occupy, we will maintain our relevance.

Obitus libri: *the natural death of books*

「半畝方塘一鑑開。天光雲影共徘徊。問渠那得清如許，
為有源頭活水來。」（宋·朱熹《觀書有感》）；「讀書之樂樂何如，
綠滿窗前草不除。」（元·翁森《四時讀書樂》）

(A book when opened) is like a small pond with the lingering of daylight and shadow of cloud. When asked why it is so clean and clear, it is because there is living water flowing from the fountain head” (poem written by a famous song dynasty Confucian scholar Zhu Xi). “How joyful is reading? It is like having a piece of beautiful grasslands outside the window (A Yuan Dynasty poem written by Weng Sen on the joy of reading in the four seasons of a year).

Alas, though I am extremely reluctant to admit it, the traditional book – the beloved and user-friendly artifact of anyone over the age of 40, the “codex” of sewn leaves going back over more than 1,000 years spanning the Song Dynasty in China and the European Renaissance – is on its way out as the primary focus of library operations. It all used to be so simple did it not? Readers just loved books and journals and the places they were kept, so librarians did not need to justify their existence and re-examine their services constantly.

“A student’s respect for books and their contents is directly proportional to the amount of ‘outside’ reading that he does”. This is the 1970s talking again to us (Feret, 1977, p. 225). Do students or any anyone else still read print? Well, it appears they do in China – though they may not actually buy the books! Just go into any Beijing bookshop on a weekend and try and negotiate your way up the stairs past dozens of individual readers seemingly ensconced there for the day, or look at the visitor numbers at the 2008 week-long Hong Kong Book Fair: 829,967, an attendance record and an increase of 8.7 per cent over last year’s (<http://info.hktdc.com/tdcnews/0807/08072901.htm>).

In the West, despite the thousands of monographs still published every year in the English language alone (most of these are self-help books, novels, cookery books and

books about librarianship), I now see no future in the book as a medium of communication between the author and the reader for serious academic titles, reference works, and even popular non-fiction. Like the printed journal, it is dying the death. The reason lies in market forces. The market in the West indicates that people under 40 tend not to read much if they read anything at all in book form (a 2004 survey of 2,000 British adults found that 34 per cent did not read books at all). In addition, they do not buy books: an average of seven a year per person in the UK, including presents for others (Hornby, 2008). In the case of students on very busy courses with constant submission deadlines and ever-present hand-held devices, it seems the reading list has delinked them from the simple pleasures of reading:

How did it come to this, with bright young things believing “Grand theft auto” is more fun than “Great expectations”? Wendell Harris (Pennsylvania State) thinks the problem began when reading was divorced from pleasure and got hitched instead to “gender-driven theory”. Echoing Dr Johnson, Harris says, “no-one but the theory-ridden professor reads for any reason but enjoyment”. Pleasure, however, “is the last thing the undergraduate is led to expect”, being made to focus on “racism, sexism, politically objectionable thought, or colonialism” (J.C., 2005, p. 14).

If reading the printed word is on the decline, reading a screen seems now to be ubiquitous to the point of obsession for the whole human race. Following in quick succession from the e-journal revolution, e-books are taking a rapid hold in universities worldwide. For example, university libraries have built up access to millions of them in full-text in a very few years, and e-book acquisition rates are still quickening. So, let us get used to the idea: even though the very word to denote our profession, “librarian”, comes from the Latin word for a physical book – *liber*, we are not solely in that business now. Of course, our libraries will forever contain rare printed books and heritage collections in physical format. However, beyond the immediacy of the physical library, we need to make sure do not stray too far from our ur-library roots. We should limit our focus to the sorts of things we do better than any other profession. In our anxious attempts to be thoroughly hip and modern, our activities seem to be spreading ever outward like oil over the surface of uncharted seas, or like an airliner flying blind through thick storm clouds. We need to secure our unique and worthwhile “brand”.

The cloud of unknowing

“The cloud of unknowing” is a western mediaeval religious text, in which the author, whose identity remains uncertain, says,

What is this darkness? It is the “night of the intellect” into which we are plunged when we attain to a state of consciousness, which is above thought; enter on a plane of spiritual experience with which the intellect cannot deal. This is the “Divine darkness” – the Cloud of Unknowing, or of Ignorance, “*dark with excess of light*” . . . “*When I say darkness, I mean a lacking of knowing* . . . This dimness and lostness of mind is a paradoxical proof of attainment (*italics added*, Underhill, 1922, p. 7).

This ancient text could just as easily refer to the very modern concept of the “global information cloud”. There is nothing new under the sun. A certain “darkness” or puzzlement emanates from the “excess of light” flickering on the Google results screen. As generally predicated by Thomas Vander Wal, the global information cloud certainly incorporates one of the essential theatre of operations of a modern librarian:

- the internet;
- with unlimited access;
- not user controlled; and
- not user organized (www.vanderwal.net/essays/moa/040608/040608.pdf).

As far as our readers are concerned, another “cloud” of relevance here is the “personal information cloud” which is individually controlled and portable:

... a new and interesting way of looking at information, different than looking at a list of key words as a meta or abstract of a data set and different than scanning the data itself (e.g. series of blog posts, articles, other written word formats, etc.). The information cloud is the picture that tells a thousand words. It doesn't matter how large the data set is, the important coverage areas can be seen at a glance (assuming appropriate user tagging) by the size and presence of key words (<http://futurememes.blogspot.com/2005/10/next-gen-information-cloud.html>).

In 2008, a London university survey noted that online searchers:

- Have difficulty in developing effective search strategies.
- Prefer natural language.
- Prefer simple forms of searching.
- Prefer “power browsing” but, crucially:
- Spent little time evaluating information.

Librarians, the survey indicated, needed to:

... reverse the process of dis-intermediation in a full-blown do-it-yourself market place. As they say “we are all librarians now”. For instance, how to sell the key library role of a safe and authoritative information haven and the need for digital information literacy training. Libraries are hampered here by lack of brand ... (CIBER, 2008, p. 33).

What librarians need to do is to steer the reader into understanding that, as a brand:

- we librarians understand how to navigate the global information cloud; and
- in passing on this understanding to the reader, we can be of direct and immediate relevance to assisting them in building and consolidating their own personal information cloud.

There is nothing new in this – we have been helping readers “navigate” huge amounts of information or data for centuries. We have been delinked or “dis-intermediated” from our readers by the likes of Yahoo, Google, Amazon and Alibaba (I sincerely hope temporarily). We need to get that link back - that unchallenged *connection* with our readers.

The un-library: a theme park and value-added commodity

So how are we responding to this disconnect from our readers? We spend time on un-librarianish things, and less and less on helping the users. Optimizing space and losing general professional focus are two obvious examples among many.

I know that librarians have always moved books around (or those of us who have worked as library assistants have), and we have always optimized space – but to the detriment of all other considerations or priorities? We are now at the stage where librarians are appearing at material handling and logistics conferences along with

storage container facility managers. I for one can certainly think of a better use of my professional time. So the physical things we are concerned with, printed and audiovisual materials, and the spaces they occupy, are now commoditized in terms economists can understand and library readers are oblivious about. This situation compromises the collections we have spent centuries building.

We librarians are now asked to justify the dollar amount a month it costs to store one book on a shelf. If we cannot justify the expense, we should discard it (someone else in the world is bound to have it anyway). We redesign the ur-library space for the 16 year old as a theme park, or the 50 year old as a conference centre (Milne, 2005). We are not allowed to fill vacant space with mouldy old books. Since "Use it or lose it!" seems to be the watchword, we justify existing and even additional resources by learning commons and adaptable learning spaces, indicating that we know enough about educational trends to understand that schools and colleges inhabit a whole new world of collaborative learning and evidence-based approaches. The seemingly out-of-date and economically unsupportable ur-library design for solo silent study – the centuries-old cloister of the mediaeval French monk and of the Qing Dynasty scholar – is being quickly jettisoned in favour of cafes, sofa beds, multi-coloured neon lighting, concert halls, and wi-fi hotspots so that the digital native kids can get heavily into Facebook. It is not difficult to imagine the sheer amount of financial investment necessary for this. Let us hope these designs do not look old-hat in ten years time, and need to be radically re-thought again and again and again.

Other than space, let us look at another example of the stuff the un-librarian has to deal with in any one day, which may help us lose our professional focus. We are now operating in an environment where a mish-mash of duties normally ascribed to other professions is clouding our public image. Are we lawyers, because we are so concerned with copyright? Are we hardware engineers, because we troubleshoot PCs in our libraries? Are we teachers, because we want to be recognized as being of full relevance to the needs of our young readers? Of course, we are all of these things, but how does it make us look to outsiders? Are we making our very distinctiveness fuzzy and cloudy?

The uber-librarian: the expanded tradition of the ur-librarian

Derek Law's realistic and common sense view of the last 30 years is to be valued:

What worries me most is the arrival of the a-literate – that group for whom reading and writing as we know it are optional life-style choices and not a necessity. Defining our role with that group is the challenge.

But the profession has strengths and we can redefine roles within areas such as trust metrics and training as well as building e-collections. And, within that, doing it collaboratively is important. Great services like international interlending or Marc didn't just happen. A lot of people put a lot of effort into making libraries a global business. That needs to be continued (Law, 2008, p. 25).

As I said at the outset, the answer to these challenges lies in maintaining an historical perspective on who we are and who we always were, and what we do and what we have always done. In short, we need to emphasize our brand, or more preferably, our distinction, and build on it to reach higher. Do not misunderstand me; I am not arguing for total professional paralysis. Some things will go by the wayside.

So, do lots of new things, don't be afraid of failure, be prepared to ditch the once-cherished tools of the profession if they no longer serve their purpose – and, above all, enjoy! (Brophy, 2008).

The “eight-by-five distinctions” will promote a global dual philosophy of future library content and professional mores. We are all proud to be librarians. If we maintain our ur-library zeal for what it is we do and have always done, people will come to us physically and virtually. Once they come, they will not stay away, because of the sheer range of good things we have on offer. Remember, we have been very popular during the long era of the ur-library:

「我一直到今天，可以說是極少離開圖書館，就如每天必須吃一樣經常而且必須。」（季羨林 1911-，《二十世紀圖書館與文化名人》頁 422）

Up till now, I would say I seldom stay away from libraries. Just like eating in everyday life, I need to visit libraries, I just have to (Ji Xianlin, 1911-).

In moving forward, we need to emphasize the unique “brand” that librarians can offer. We need to look long-term, and look beyond the probably short-lived commercial and social impact of firms like Google and Yahoo. We can stand by our ethics and distinctions and move onwards to becoming uber-librarians. To achieve this professional nirvana, by all means read and digest the enormous number of articles proffering advice on redefining ourselves for the future (Brindley's is one of the pithiest (2006)). I would posit here that the eight-by-five distinctions can be enriched by adding five brand attributes to enforce what it is we librarians do – in short the “eight-by-five-by-five distinctions” (八五五分清 *ba wu wu fen qing*). We will sustain and improve on the following ur-librarians' attributes to achieve uber-librarians' status:

- We will try to be more informal in formally organizing access to and understanding of the Information Cloud;
- We will not dumb down, especially if we are simply trying to invade and influence personal information clouds;
- We will remain non-commercial and/or unbiased. For example, as predominantly public bodies, we will not mount adverts on our web sites. Let us remember that “Ur-librarians did it for free!”
- We will not disclose any personal information such as searching histories, and will make every effort to maintain strict data privacy. The track record of the internet mega-sites has not been impressive in preserving personal and individual search histories;
- We will try to assist in searching for and access to only library-watermarked sites of reputable and sustainable worth. Remember that the mega-sites are commercial operations that can be bought, sold, or go bust. When Google is gone (it is only ten years old (Wray, 2008)), and Amazon is a dried up memory, we librarians will still be here, building on our distinctive reputation.

In sum then, the dangers and opportunities for a highly trained group of professionals in responding to the shock of the new and to bare-fisted market forces should be clear to all librarians. We are in danger of casting off the primordial ur-library tenets of our

profession. We may well become irrelevant shadows of our former selves by embracing a mish-mash of misdirected and misappropriated un-librarian ideologies and priorities from other, newer professions and undo centuries of hard work. In consequence, our readers would not understand who we are, what we do, and especially, what we stand for. Just because we cannot beat the internet mega-sites, does not mean we have to join with them totally. Edmund Burke (1729-1797) said, "Statesmen should combine 'a disposition to preserve' with an 'ability to improve'". We have opportunities to re-enliven the developmental arc of our venerable traditions and to recast our agile services to preserve, as in the long past, an absolutely unquestioned place in our society. As Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) averred, "Subordination tends greatly to human happiness". For "subordination", read the classic ur-librarians' characteristics of "respectful courteousness", or "offering services without being servile". So, let us not forget the passion we have long held for our profession and for what it is that we do. Is it "Uber-Librarian Triumphant!" or "Ur-Librarian Interrupted!"? We are standing at the crossroads and we need to choose now!

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