Dennis Dillon

BORN & LIVED: Born in California and grew up in the Carolinas, Minnesota, Massachusetts, and Florida.

EARLY LIFE: I lived in Minnesota where I used a hand pump to get our water from a well in the back yard, as well as in the California desert where the nearest phone was a mile down a dusty dirt road. This gave me an early appreciation for the magic power of networks (water networks, phone networks) which I have never forgotten.

FAMILY: My wife is an artist, and my two sons, like everyone else in Austin, play together in a local band (I can get you tickets).

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: I’m the Associate Director for Research Services at the University of Texas Libraries, as well as the administrator for the University of Texas System Academic Library Collection Enhancement Program. Pretty much everyone I work with knows things I can never hope to learn or understand, which helps keep things in perspective.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE: Mexican food, baseball, repairing the boat (the local lake is 65 miles long), running, reading, worrying about the cost of tuition for the son who is still in college, local music, caring for aging parents, one car doesn’t have AC and the other doesn’t have heat, etc.


PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: That there is no place on this form to quote the classic Austin dance hall lyric: “I bought the shoes that just walked out on me”.

PHILOSOPHY: As Sam Cooke said in another context, “change is gonna come.”

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: The most memorable moment of my career was the release of Mosaic, the first Web browser, which I downloaded from the NCSCA FTP site one noon in late 1993. Once installed it was immediately obvious to everyone in the room that libraries would never be the same again. Everything since has just been editing the details.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I have to confess that even after spending a dozen years as a reference librarian I still don’t use the advanced search feature. I really don’t know who, or what it’s for. Looking ahead five years I can almost guarantee that the industry will be confused and in an uncomfortable transition as it continues to struggle with the economic realities of a much more competitive and much more fully networked world. Personally, I have no plans to be confused myself in this future, and I hope I can reduce my contribution to the confusion of library users by reducing the number of boxes, barriers, boundaries, and black holes that we librarians tend to set up to “help” our users, (the traditional four B’s of librarianship) unless I am absolutely forced to by circumstances beyond my control (and save me from the extra “special” help provided by special shelving locations, rooms, rabbitholes of various kinds, interfaces, etc. — the library is confusing enough already. I just want to reduce the clutter. Finally, if you’ve read this far I’m sure your ideas are good ones and you may be the savior of librarianship in the 21st century. My advice? Try to be less controlling, embrace the network, and don’t forget it’s all about your neighbor who lives four houses down from you on the left — go ask her what we should do.

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RR: Today’s libraries are already adapting to the growing range of sources of content, utilizing Google, working directly with publishers, reframing existing library content, and turning to tools like federated search to deliver content to users. So, the recent Google Book Search settlement continues to accelerate these changes as the race to make digital content available and accessible grows increasingly urgent. All of these options have both advantages and shortfalls. Ultimately, consumer demand will help libraries determine how to best distribute content.

ATG: Many of the trends that are impacting our world are problematic for libraries and especially their budgets — at least the way we have always done business. I am talking about print-on-demand, pay-per-view, access-to-portion of digital content. How can/will libraries and library administrators cope/adapt?

DD: I suspect that we will all eventually realize that we can’t buy our way out of this problem. The world of networked information is simply too big, and in the age of Google, every faculty member and every student on campus knows all too well what resources are potentially available. Networks and bad economics have a history of being ruthless efficiency generators, and both tend to squeeze out excess and red tape. Unfortunately, both consortia and libraries are in a sense middlemen, since they both sit in the supply chain between the publisher and the reader. Part of the challenge going forward will be — how can each of us add sufficient value to networked information to prevent being bypassed.

Part of the answer will lie in the series of different business models that we can expect to see over the next few years as the economy weakens and as publishers begin to adapt to a primarily digital distribution model. In the end however, I believe that a metering model based on the way we currently use electricity will increasingly win out. If the 80% of our information needs can be met with validated information that essentially comes out of a modernized Internet wall socket just like electricity, then we’ll happily pay our bills, comfortable with the knowledge that at least everything we are paying for is being used. For many libraries, selecting a few channels from the digital pay-as-you-go information wall socket (for example: “give me two STM journal aggregators and a million eBook history collection”) may be sufficient for most needs, while research libraries are likely to still need separate, highly specialized, efforts to capture the more esoteric material required to support their programs.

Of course, one of the critical issues with pay-per-view, print-on-demand and other flexible pay as you models, is that a library can’t be confident of its eventual costs unless they have a realistic handle on campus information costs.