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Back Talk-The IFLA Trend Report

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Back Talk
from page 94

Now at New York University’s Shanghai Campus, about 99.9% of the materials immediately accessible by our students and teachers are digital. Certainly the first trend, new technologies expand and limit who has access to information, is correct in our case. Our students can enjoy the opportunity to access nearly a million volumes of eBooks, tens and tens of thousands of academic journal titles, have excerpts of millions of other books scanned for them from NYC, and can electronically place requests for other books to be delivered from the home campus using a courier service. Because of this, we are cognizant of our need to make sure our students are trained to take full advantage of all these information riches. I am still not so sure about the second trend about online education bringing about an end to traditional forms of education. In China, at least, there is an enormous amount of online education (my 2001 dissertation focused on the library and information needs of the hundreds of thousands of Television University students in China), but they clearly want flesh-and-blood teachers and are willing to pay premium fees to get them.

With all the news about Edward Snowden and NSA snooping into databases, and the amount of time and effort spent in some countries of the world to control access to information, I don’t think I need to say much about the boundaries of privacy and data protection, the

continued on page 89
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n November of 2012, IFLA initiated “a comprehensive literature review which
surveyed recent studies and reports on emerging [information] trends and compiled an
extensive bibliography of relevant documentation.” They recently published an overview of
the conclusions reached by panels of experts who have examined these materials: “Riding the
Waves or Caught in the Tide? Navigating the Evolving Information Environment. In-
sights from the IFLA Trend Report.” http://
trends.ifla.org/files/trends/assets/insights-from-
the-ifla-trend-report_v2.pdf

Their purpose in publishing this preliminary examination of these documents is to invite the
international library community to read and react and to indicate what it all has to say about the
future of libraries. Over the course of the next
year IFLA will be helping organize sessions
around the world to do just that. They want us to
indicate how we feel “libraries will develop to re-
main relevant in the new information landscape.”

Having just read it, I am not sure how to
react. It is filled with both dire and exciting/ hopeful predictions. Among the more worri-
some ones are the following:

- Governments and companies can now “follow someone in their daily
  life simply with image recognition, their mobile phone, their credit
card and their Internet use,” and Facebook, YouTube, Second Life
platforms are currently magnifying these capabilities.
- Library e-lending data provides an enormous amount of information about
  how people are learning and thinking.
- People trust automated search tech-
ologies, but everything is revealed about the information habits of read-
ers when such databases are hacked.

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react. It is filled with both dire and exciting/ hopeful predictions. Among the more worri-
some ones are the following:

- Institutions like libraries and univer-
sities are being replaced by online
  information providers and Massive
  Online Courses (MOOCS).
- Local content is ignored by the global
  Internet.
- Advances in automated machine
  translation opens the door to those
  who want to limit or twist what is
  translated.
- The Internet allows fringe groups to
  organize and disrupt society in ways
  that were not possible before.
- Knowledge that was preserved for
  thousands of years, when converted
to digital formats, is susceptible to
  “bit rot.” “The great pace of techno-
  logical change has left its information
pathways littered with the likes of old
formats, outdated software, broken
URLs, corrupted Webpages and
discarded files.” (p. 8)

The Trend Report also shines light on the
wonderful things taking place in our digital space:
- “In 2010, the quantity of information
  transmitted globally exceeded one
  zettabyte for the first time, and is
  expected to double every two years.”
  (p.3)
- “The amount of new digital content
  created in 2011 amounts to several
  million times that contained in all
  books ever written.” (p.3)
- Web-based education greatly enhanc-
ethe teacher’s ability to understand
what students are learning and what
they are having problems compre-
hending.
- Increased communication between
  competing peoples holds the possi-
bility that conflicts and wars can be avoided.
- Mobile technologies make it possi-
  ble for more people to access digital
  content than ever before.
- Machine translation erases bound-
aries that prevented international
  communication for so long.
- “Access barriers for the elderly, the
  visually impaired, new migrants, and
economically disadvantaged can be
  reduced.” (p. 8)

The Report itself identifies five key trends
identified by a panel of outside/non librarian
information science experts: (p.4)
1. Because of the information literacy
   skills required, and the knowledge
   and abilities needed to commercially
take advantage of the opportunities
   provided by this new “digital uni-
   verse” are so critical, “new technol-
   ogies will both expand and limit who
   has access to information.”
2. Because of its rapid growth, “online
   education will democratize and dis-
   rupt global learning.”
3. Because as we all take advantage
   of all this digital information, informa-
tion about our use patterns and
indeed about ourselves is collected
by companies and governments,
“the boundaries of privacy and data
protection will be redefined.”
4. Because the amount of commu-
nication between peoples in our
new digital universe has increased
exponentially, “hyper-connected
societies will listen to and empower
new voices and groups.”
5. Because the number and variety of
   mobile devices and sensors built into
the infrastructure around us, “the
global information economy will be
transformed by new technologies.”

Frankly, as I read through this Trend Report,
I wasn’t sure if this wasn’t just a “Henny Penny
story in which the “sky is falling” and the world
is about to end. We know that we are doing
things differently because of changes in the
breadth and depth of the digital universe, but will
these changes result in whole segments of society
being disenfranchised? Will universities disap-
ppear? Will governments and companies deprive
us of all privacy and perhaps take action when we
participate in activities seen as wrongful? Will
our political systems fall into chaos because all
the old power groups are disenfranchised? The
other thought I had was maybe I should start
reading old Kurt Vonnegut Sirens of Titan
novels and focus all my free time reading science
fiction in order to gain insight into the world in
which we are about to live.

But let’s get back to the purpose of IFLA’s
sharing the report: They want us to indicate
how we feel “libraries will develop to remain
relevant in the new information landscape.”

continued on page 93

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