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Star Wars in the Library

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The following is a transcript of a live presentation at the 2015 Charleston Library Conference.

Jim O'Donnell: Good morning. The saga continues. About 15 years ago I delivered myself of some opinions about the future of libraries and librarianship in a book called *Avatars of the Word*. The guilty words are here on-screen before you now. You will recognize that academics are given extra points anytime we can use the words "Henry James" in a sentence. That explains some part of this, but I did venture myself to compare the future of librarianship to the mythic heroes Natty Bumppo and the Jedi Knights of Star Wars. I did not ask permission of Natty Bumppo, of librarians, or of the Jedi Knights before I undertook to say these things, and I thought I had escaped safe and sound. Until last February the Jedi came back for me and informed me that I was being appointed University Librarian at Arizona State University. I took a deep breath. It is one of the most exciting institutions of higher learning in North America. I think and say whatever I get the chance that I think we have the best and most venturesome president in higher education. He has charged us to think big and to do bigger in the libraries, and that is what will be trying to do. At the same time, there are plenty of times when I wake up in the morning and ask myself just what I've gotten myself into and whether this isn't the Jedi's way of coming back to exercise their revenge.

So I enter the saga of Star Wars in "Episode Six: The Revenge of the Jedi." I realize I need to do a small footnote right there because many of you will be remembering right now that you saw a movie called *Return of the Jedi* and you are not quite sure about this one. The true Star Wars fans among you will know, however, that the first version of that film was to be called "The Revenge of the Jedi," and it went very far forward in that direction until George Lucas or someone decided that the integrity and good character of the Jedi meant that they didn't engage in revenge. Well, be that as it may, there are opportunities for librarians everywhere, and one that my colleagues

took at Arizona State University Library was to score a copy of a promotional poster for the original title of the movie to go along with our collection of documents and, yes indeed, Star Wars toys that we have in the special collections at ASU. Collections are often driven by opportunity. "Episode Six: The Revenge of the Jedi" then is the space in which I find myself living and working. I'm mostly going to fast-forward through this part, however. It has many skirmishes and excitements of one kind or another that I'm living. Some of the most inspiring episodes, well, they come from meeting and working with smart and hard-working and open-to-change colleagues in the library and beyond at ASU. The more nail-biting episodes have come from other, somewhat predictable, directions. The one to which I will point as perhaps my biggest single learning at the ground level, operational level, skirmish level of librarianship in 2015 is that whatever we think may happen in the future, right now when it comes to electronic books in our libraries, things aren't working. We're getting products whose functionality is limited and crippled in a variety of ways. On one of the aggregator sites that we use we are told that you can copy 38 pages or print 76 pages of a given book. Eh, what's that about? When was the last time with a print book you said, "I think I'll copy 38 pages?" It hasn't happened to me. We also are finding ourselves limited by things like simultaneous user numbers and checkout periods. You can check out one of our e-books for 14 days. You have no incentive to give it back early so you've used it for 10 minutes and it is kept out of sight for 14 days until someone else is able to use it. This simply doesn't work. The prices aren't sustainable. We have hard work to do in that area and many others. But, I want to concentrate for today on thinking forward to the next exciting episode of Star Wars. You're getting now, here, the special advanced preview of what you will be able to see in the theaters starting in mid-December, and you can reveal as many of the plot details as I give away to all of your friends. I'm not sure how popular that will make you, but I hope it helps.

And so I'm going to talk about what seemed to me to be three very high priorities for librarianship, and then at the end of those three priorities I will ask a question that points further forward into galaxies yet undiscovered. I talk about three because of an old friend who likes to say that if you have more than three priorities, you really don't have priorities. The discipline of three is a way of thinking about what is genuinely strategic and what is genuinely important. In a new job, you are often being torn by all of this week's crises and this week's needs, while you think forward to a future seen only intermittently and only in glimpses. Today I want to look flatly at that future and describe for you how it seems to me as a newcomer to this profession where the central issues for our success for the decades to come may lie. I am by training and practice a professor of ancient classics. This gives me the habit of thinking about the long-term. I am not necessarily always thinking forward 2,500 years, but it is useful, I believe, to look forward 20 or 50 or 100 years and ask yourself where you want to be, where you need to be in that time, and then work backward to what would be the most important things to work on for now.

So, I have three simple principles to enunciate and about which to say a few words. The first is a discovery that perhaps is easier to make at Arizona State University than at some others. Arizona State University has over 80,000 students in what we now call our full immersion programs. We also have over 20,000 online degree candidates, and those numbers are going up rapidly. When you hear the promotions on NPR that count how many current online degree programs ASU has, whatever number you hear is incorrect because we just rolled out another one this week. So, we have to think about those online students, but my discovery is that we are already there in the universe of online students for all 100,000 of our education seekers. Yes, we have gate counts in our main building of 1 million and half a year; on a busy Tuesday or Thursday in term time, more than 10,000 people come into our largest building; about another six or seven come into another building about three blocks away. But if you track those students through our buildings, the use they are making of our material

collections while they are there verges on the trivial. I have been joking that the average number of customers, faculty or students, whom you can find in our stacks of our libraries looking for a book at any given moment is consistently through the day exactly one. Why is that the case? Well, I'm not even in the stacks. I'm still active in my scholarship; my office is on the same floor with history, philosophy, and religion. When I want one of the books from those stacks, yes, I go online. I click a couple of times and I pick it up at the front circulation desk on my way out of the building that evening because it is just plain easier to do. I'm an online student in that regard. But, if all of our students are online students and need to be served in that way, we have important changes to make in the way we imagine our services. With luck, very soon we will have an opportunity to renovate completely the main building in which we work on the ASU campus, and if that comes to pass soon it will be an opportunity to use that as a forcing function to change the way we think of our services. What happens when we don't have a core collection and core users and then supplementation online, but rather we have a library accessed mainly online and physical service points on our campuses that deliver the appropriate services to those who come in the building looking for them, and support the delivery of services for those people and all the others when they are not in the building? It means we need to think about how we can deliver every service we have to every one of our users, wherever they may happen to be. It means we need to build, of course, our discovery tools; that's a "this year" kind of task. I would point very quickly in passing at the work of David Weinberger at Harvard, who's been talking about the library-sized hole in the Internet. There is a library-sized hole in the Internet: We're too hard to find. Our content requires you to think of yourself first, most of the time, as a library user before you begin to get access to it. We need to change that. We need to have tools that are so powerful and so effective that people say to each other, "I'm not doing one of those stupid Google searches again. I'm using the library search because that's where I find the good stuff." And I do deeply believe that we have the "good stuff" in our libraries.

But, I'm particularly concerned in this context about what happens to our traditional, physical collections. I strongly believe that we need to make the content of those collections available to all of those online users. I'm proud to say that right now, if you are an online student at ASU and you want to have access to one of our books that is only available in print, we will in fact mail it to you. It is a little sobering to realize that our demand for that service is running around 150 volumes a semester, but at least at that level we can afford to provide that service. But, we need to get past that. We need to get past that by addressing what I call the "crisis of the boomer books." The books that are themselves baby boomers of the library. The efflorescence of publications that appeared in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, justified the building of our great stack towers, and now have filled our shelves for in many cases more than 50 years. As long ago as 10 years ago, it was discovered by an Ithaca study that 83% of the books in our research libraries are presumably in copyright post-1923. That was using data of 10 years ago. That percentage has to have gone higher. We are now the custodians of huge collections of the cultural heritage of the 20th century, which can be accessed mainly, almost exclusively, only in print, only with the physical artifacts, at a time when information users' behaviors are increasingly focusing on what is available here, now, in my hands. I say that it is a vital strategic task for us as a culture to imagine how our libraries can be genuinely online libraries, not merely by digitizing that content, but by making it available to users. I think, hope, and believe that we are coming to a point where even the most restrictive views of rights holding, and the prerogatives that come with rights holding, will be competed with the recognition that if you are not making your content digitally available, your content will be increasingly invisible and unused. I'm talking to senior scholars of my acquaintance about the challenge they will face as they retire and leave their great books behind on the library shelves if those books are not readily available in some form for a wider audience.

Those books themselves also provide a serious conservation issue, as many of them are reaching that stage of advanced middle-age where they

need to see the doctor just a little more often than they used to once upon a time. I have in mind, for example, a typical best-selling novelist of the 1950s, Allen Drury (*Advise and Consent*). What's become of Allen Drury lately? How many of you have read an Allen Drury novel? Not as many as used to. Of his 25 books, we have 23 of them in the ASU library, I'm happy to say, but only 9 of them are available on Kindle, and Kindle is a lousy format if you want your book to survive. Sixteen are in the collections of HathiTrust, but HathiTrust of course is only able to provide limited search access to them. My example is to say that if anyone wants Allen Drury's books to be known or remembered 5 or 15 or 20 years from now, they will have to cross a bar into the world of digital information. And the challenges of doing that case by case right now are prohibitive. We may indeed soon, fingers crossed, have a new librarian of Congress, and therefore new leadership for the copyright office. I see that as a moment we should all seize upon to bring stakeholders of various kinds together for conversation about what it will take to get us to the end state at which the default for the books that have made up the culture of the last hundred years and before, the default situation is that they be available digitally, accessible digitally, for some price. Of course my favorite price is zero, but for some reasonable price. I think I'm willing to pay the fair market price for a 1950s best-seller novel because I think that fair market price is probably \$.05 or \$.10 and maybe we can negotiate it down in a "big deal." I say the pricing doesn't matter so much as long as the pricing is sustainable. The access is what we need. If all of our students are online students, then we need to deliver information in forms in which they will use it, and in which it is sustainable for us for the longest term.

Second principle: Knowledge is a verbal noun. Now, I need to do a show of hands, and this stage, for those of you who haven't been up here, it is a little challenging for this. So I have a question and I'm going to squint into the lights. How many of you since you got up this morning have engaged in sophisticated text and data mining against very large datasets? May I have a show of hands? Okay. Bad answer. You're wrong. You're all wrong.

I'm going to ask exactly the same question again and I want to see the show of hands. How many of you since you got up this morning have done a Google search? Show of hands? Much better answer. Correct. My point is those two questions are functionally identical. The knowledge use practices we engage in depends, in ways that we've barely come to realize, on access to huge collections of information structured in a wide and divergent variety of ways, accessed with incredibly powerful tools. Google does now against what's arguably the largest dataset in the history of this galaxy that kind of searching all day, every day, and we take it for granted. But think of your practice with a Google search as well. What happened to that Google search you got this morning when that page of results showed up with your first page of hits? Did you get out a spiral notebook and write down and take notes on everything you were finding in your Google search? I doubt it. Do you download all of your Google searches to your own machines and back them up and preserve them for all time? I doubt it. No, you clicked on a link and that Google search and its results disappeared. Or you "X'd" out of that window, satisfied with the information you'd had and those results disappeared. But, at the moment you had those results, at the moment you did that search, that question you were asking and the results that you got was the most important thing in the universe for you. It was knowledge of extraordinary sophistication and now it is gone. Because you were making that knowledge on the fly; you were using it and you were going on to make additional knowledge. If we are talking about flipping models in our libraries, this is the fundamental ontological flip of all flips. We no longer should think of libraries, no longer should think of knowledge, as stable collections of information which can be consulted and used and recorded and preserved; rather, we need to think of our libraries as places in which new knowledge is being made all the time. Many of us are experimenting with so-called maker spaces in our libraries. My argument here is simply that we have always been a maker space, but now we need to conceive ourselves in those terms, conceive the support of our users as people who are making knowledge all the time, and making new knowledge, using our tools. And

we need to know how to compete and keep up with the best tools and the best ways of using. As we talk about renovating our main building, I have been saying I would be satisfied if we just blew out all the walls to the outer shell and left a completely blank, empty space, facilitating modular adaptation over time. We are just on the point of building a more sophisticated geospatial data center, and that is an important thing to be doing now—to connect to a big data analytics center—of course, but I am only too well aware that in probably only 5 or 10 or 15 years from now we'll be looking at each other and saying, "Remember back when geospatial was big? Boy, those were the old days!" We don't need hard carved into our buildings a geospatial research center endowed by the geospatial family to be carrying us forward 15 years from now. We will need to keep up. We will need to adapt. We will need to have the new skills for our librarians in order to support new skills for our users.

Third principle: The printed book has a long and glorious future in front of it. I believe that strongly. Nothing I said before about the need to digitize the printed book should speak against that. We will be preserving, and conserving, and caring well for the printed books in our collections. But when I think forward 20 years, and I think forward to the next provost in 20 years, I can predict this with absolute certainty: There will be provosts in our institutions in 20 years who say, "Excuse me, you have how many square feet of off campus high-density shelving space, air conditioned in a way that seems contradictory to our commitment to support a sustainable global environment? And just exactly how many of those objects are being pulled out of those buildings on a day-to-day basis?" I know well, as well, that when the provost says that 20 years from now, some librarian is going to answer, "Well, um, let me get back to you on that. It's probably not very many." That's not a sustainable future. We need to be thinking now and making an object of our study among academics and librarians what we expect for the print collection of the future. I'm looking to design a position to post in a few weeks which will be something like curator of the print collections of Arizona State University—separate from managing our larger

collections issues, but thinking about how we handle the books we put in our off-campus shelving facilities. But at the same time thinking about which books we have in which buildings on our campus for what purpose. I think that means we need to kind of do a zero-based budgeting exercise about the books that we have in our buildings. Right now, the books we have in our buildings are the ones that we have just bought and the ones that have survived various culls and purges to off-campus shelving based on frequency of use. But frequency of use is a very slippery category. Among other things, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you say something hasn't been used much and you take it out of your main buildings, it will be used less. And if you carry the question of frequency of use to its logical extreme, you wind up with a very simple and jejune and small collection back on your main campus in your main buildings which would not represent well the riches of our collections and the possibilities for our students and our faculty to make use of those collections. Should we be rotating books up to the front of the line? I know of one library where it is said that new Italian fiction always goes straight to off-campus shelving because there isn't much audience for new Italian fiction. This says to me, should we have a 3-month period in which all of the new Italian fiction is put on the front shelves to remind people of the riches of Italian culture and to introduce them to things that they would otherwise fail to see? I'm just groping forward and thinking about this, but it does seem to be an underlying principle that we will need to be intentional, and deliberate, and focused in what we do with our print books as we build the collections of the future. Another thing that is obvious, and others have said it, is that as we move forward the print books that we cherish and sustain, particularly in our main buildings, will increasingly be those that we regard as genuinely special collections. And what will differentiate us one library from another 20 and 50 years from now is not which databases we subscribe to, but what unique materials we have in our libraries, including our bootleg Star Wars posters.

So, those are my three principles. All of our students are online students, *knowledge* is a verbal noun, and the printed book has a glorious

future in front of it. Those each represent huge challenges and tasks for us in librarianship, as all of you well know and recognize. Those are the areas in which I think we should be putting focus for the next 5 and 10 years because those are the areas that will make the most difference for our success in years to come. When we get distracted by the skirmishes of the moment—by, let's say, arguments with vendors about e-book interlibrary loan practices—I think we need to be referring those skirmishes to these major principles as we think about the future we want to build. But let me then point one question further beyond that and ask you what a universal library would be like, the universal library of that distant future. I have one very clear picture of what it won't be like. This is the library of the Jedi from those movies. We live in the 21st century; therefore when this image appeared in the movies, there was a small skirmish of intellectual property in discussion with the library of Trinity College, Dublin. This space resembled, it was said, a little too much The Great Hall of Trinity College. I am proud of the academic profession to say that Trinity College decided to take no legal action on the basis of this. But this is the Jedi library. It embodies two things that I think are absolutely untrue about the universal library of the future. First, it is the collection of stuff all in one place. No, that is not the future. But, more important than that, it was the collection for the Jedi themselves. It was a collection for a defined body of users in a particular place with their Jedi Knight Net ID cards authenticating themselves for access to the building, and the online databases. And you see a little Jedi action going on down on the main floor there. At Arizona State University, one of our leading principles in the last decade has been that we will define our success not by who we exclude, but by whom we include; and it is one of the things that makes me proud of the institution that we have been creative and successful in finding ways to incorporate students and faculty into our university who would not have had those opportunities before. We have tripled, for example, in the state of Arizona the number of Native American students who attend ASU and get degrees. We are now producing more Native American PhDs per year than any other university in history. That comes with effort, but it is an embodiment of the recognition at our

institution that we succeed when we make success possible for all who come from whatever backgrounds and from everywhere.

That means that we need to think forward to what it will take to build that library collection of the future, and I use the singular there. It really is a single library collection without duplication of activities, without duplication of efforts, no longer negotiating 1,000 different licenses for 1,000 different communities, but finding a business model whereby we can sustain publication and access, and make the most universal access possible. And, one more time, flip the model away from imagining that we have many libraries and some collaborative activities, to making the collaborative activity on the fundamentally core collection of library materials and resources the main business, and allow all of our individual libraries to be points of access, points of service provision, points of collection of special collections, no question, in that larger global kind of service.

There are asterisks on the possibility of doing this. One asterisk is the inertial asterisk of wishing to keep control for ourselves of our own material. But even what we collect in our special collections should be made intellectually accessible and, where possible through digital representations more than just intellectually accessible, to the widest possible range of users. Not just those in our university communities, but those well beyond. I joke about Jedi Knight ID cards, but library cards have been the feature of our institutional and social practice for many, many years. We are all in favor of the widest possible access to our materials, and think of your day job. We all keep checking ID cards. We all keep talking about who is authenticated into our system. We all keep talking about the limitations on use, not the ultimate expansion of that use. But I would suggest the principle there are no good reasons—

and I am emphasizing good—there are no good reasons why all of the riches of the best of our university and academic research libraries in the world should not be available to students in community colleges, to students in secondary schools, to people who don't live in privileged first world countries, to people who don't have their Net ID card in any form or another, but still have a fundamental human right to inquire, to explore the results of human inquiry, to learn, to benefit from that, and to make new knowledge. The biggest asterisk on that future will be, of course, that there will be opposition from cultures in places at which the possibility of globalized access to information is unwelcome. I think that if 100 years from now we have come to a point at which there really is a universal access to library information throughout the world, then many other things in the world will have gone well. And I would turn that around and say that if you do not succeed in achieving that kind of collection, that not so many things will have gone so well. Some other things will have gone badly.

If the first three principles I outlined suggest very large, very expensive, strategic tasks for all of us in the immediate and near future, asking this question poses what seems to be the mother of all strategic questions about the future of libraries. And to suggest that, as we go forward as librarians, we need to think that we live indeed not simply on a small speck of dust floating around a particular sun in a particular corner of the universe, but that even in libraries we live in a very large galaxy, among many other galaxies that we know of in the world in which we live.

And so, I come to the end of these remarks by wishing you the very best that I possibly can. When you saw the title of my remarks you probably should've been able to predict what my last words to you would be, and I will indeed utter them now: May the Force be with you!