June 2009

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Recommended Citation

Horava, Tony (2009) "Op Ed -- The Implications of "Good Enough" and the Future of Libraries," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 21: Iss. 3, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2310>

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Op Ed — The Implications of “Good Enough” and the Future of Libraries

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“The perfect is the enemy of the good.” **Voltaire’s** words from *The Philosophical Dictionary* have a particular resonance for libraries today.

There are huge challenges that we face: adapting our services to new user expectations and learning styles; handling systemic budget challenges; building dynamic collections based on formal and informal scholarly communications in a variety of formats; recruiting and retaining staff that will help shape our future; re-engineering our technical service workflows to be output-centered and technology-driven; and managing the library in ways that reflect best practices and demonstrate strategic value to the parent organization. The octopus-like advent of **Google**; the rise of mobile computing; the shift towards open access paradigms for content creation and distribution; the fundamental transformation in scholarly communications; and the pervasive influence of social networking technologies — these are a few of the major factors influencing our landscape.

As a profession we have often focused on doing things in the most comprehensive, perfect way possible; we are famous for our attention to detail; our ability to analyze issues and consult with user groups and stakeholders; and for our anxiety over our future in a world where information is available via many alternative sources. We are known for the quality of our face-to-face encounters and problem-solving with individual patrons of all types and ages; for carefully nurturing the growth and management of our collections; and our dedication to service values of literacy, pluralism, and privacy. We engage our communities and promote the library in political, social, and cultural spheres.

Today the pressures on the library are enormous, and it is important to consider not only how to be effective, but what is good enough. This opens a Pandora’s Box of values, assumptions, and priorities. We like to measure our performance by the standards of our profession or by indicators specific to our organization or to our library sector.

And yet if we start to consider this from the perspective of organizational effectiveness, what is actually “good enough?” The recession and its effects on budgets have forced libraries to critically examine their operations and question long-held assumptions. For example, should we discontinue manual check-in for some or all print journals?

Should we continue to bind paper monographs and serials? Discard unsolicited serials issues without review? Should we expand the outsourcing of cataloguing and adopt brief cataloguing for certain types of materials? What is good enough? Many of these issues were raised at **ALA Midwinter** by the large **ARL** research libraries as potential cost-cutting measures. Other issues surfaced. Should we continue to invest time and energy in local classification schemes? How far can we expand the outsourcing of cataloguing? How much can we afford to focus on special projects? While the particulars will vary according to type and size of library, the basic issue remains the same — what is good enough in relation to the library’s strategic goals and benchmarks of success? How should an optimization analysis affect the decisions we make and the priorities we choose? This question cuts across all library activities — reference service, information literacy, hours of service, collection development, acquisitions and cataloguing. Examining workflows, outcomes, and service expectations is becoming more crucial as the economic meltdown is forcing a rethink of the library’s role in the parent organization. We all know that libraries are put under the fiscal microscope in times like these, sometimes with terrible consequences. It is gratifying that library use has increased significantly since the recession took hold, but this doesn’t resolve our challenges.

This challenge looms large in another sense — the fact of information abundance and the read/write Web that empowers a wide range of social communities to create and share their own knowledge. Not that many years ago it would have been impossible to imagine a world in which information is so abundant and time so scarce. In the era of **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **MySpace**, and **Google**, the value of just-in-time, customized 24/7 service has never been greater. Reinventing the library’s role in light of the ultra competitive information landscape has never been more important; the economic crisis is a catalyst for refocusing our energies. Hand-wringing and prognosticating about our future is a time-worn trait of librarians, and much ink has been spilled over it, but there is little doubt that the economic climate has

added a sense of urgency and immediacy to this professional reflex.

Re-evaluating the strategic plan is a good starting point; most of us have one. Do its goals and objectives still align with our strengths and with the mandate of our parent organization? Was it crafted in a different era, i.e., more than five years ago? It would be a valuable exercise to go back to our basic assumptions of how we can best serve our communities. This could be a challenging but revealing exercise. It is not only a question of adjusting to material circumstances (e.g., constrained budgets) but of re-imagining how we make a difference to our user community, given the complex world of information supply, the transformation in tools, research habits and learning styles of users. Trying to be all things to all people is an unspoken assumption that isn’t a viable option anymore. The issues of quality and quantity challenge us to seek a measured balance — and to not sacrifice one for the other. Making such choices is no easy matter. Innovation needs to play a key role in how qualitative and quantitative indicators can help us move forward with creativity and purpose; and this process needs to include planning for a different future.

This is also — but not primarily — a matter of doing less with less. On one level, it is a cost/benefit analysis of our operations and services, and most of us will have to do more with less. It is also a risk scenario exercise — if we don’t seek out new opportunities to be of greater purpose to the end-user, what is the eventual risk to the perceptions of the library by senior administrators? What are the risk opportunities and costs? The field of opportunities and threats — economic, technological, and organizational — seems greater than ever before. We need to scan our environmental horizon and shrewdly look to where we can increase our impact on the different user communities we serve, and what we have to give up in order to make the best investments. To what degree are we making a difference to the average undergraduate, or grad student, or faculty, or alumnus? To what extent are we willing to make difficult decisions that we would never have considered in the past, and re-imagine our future? In

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an era where Web search engines are widely trusted as the path for information gathering (think of the OCLC Study on the Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources) how do we remain relevant to the Millennial generation? How do we visibly and persistently insert ourselves in the information flow of our users, if the “book” is our one and only brand?

There has been much talk (e.g., the ICOLC Statement on the Global Economic Crisis and its Impact on Consortial Licenses) on the need for more flexibility in vendor pricing models, the importance of tradeoffs between features and pricing, and better dialogue between vendors and libraries to find creative solutions for sustainability of licensing arrangements. This also feeds into the issue of what is good enough in our business relations, it being understood that we need to preserve the best of what we have attained in our partnerships and practices. What is good enough for libraries today could be quite different from what it has been in the heyday of healthy and expanding budgets.

What is good enough for an electronic resources management system? Many of us have struggled with commercial products that function below our requirements, while not

integrating with our existing workflows. As there is no ideal ERM that can address the myriad of issues that we would like to resolve, the question becomes, which system best meets our core requirements, and integrates with future workflow planning in technical services? And if we develop our own ERM — or discovery layer tools or content management systems, for that matter — what standards are good enough?

What is good enough for participation levels for institutional repositories? This question is fraught with political and logistical issues in the academy. At some point, though, we need to accept that full participation is unlikely, and that we need to focus our efforts strategically — this would first mean defining a realistic benchmark of success, and partnering with those who can help us achieve it. Similarly, we will never reach all students through information literacy programs, no matter how zealous and proactive we are. How, then, do we determine our yardstick of effectiveness? How do we determine the outcomes and decide what is good enough? The research literature makes it clear that reference service is never as effective as we would like it to be. What level of effectiveness can we live with, particularly as we try to balance our efforts and limited resources across many library services and initiatives?

While **Voltaire** didn’t work in a 21st century library (and certainly wouldn’t recognize it as a library!) he could teach us a thing or two about the problems of reaching beyond our circumstances. Yes, we do need to dream about how we could provide a range of outstanding services, programs, and collections, but in an era of fiscal restraint and fundamental reassessment in many libraries, this is an opportunity to make critical decisions about focusing energy on high value services that offer the greatest impact for the dollars available, in terms of how we conceive the library in three, five, and ten years time. What will be the library’s role in ten years? Do we have a reasonably clear consensus in our libraries on this point? I think that much depends on our assumptions here. In what new ways will we be enabling learning and collaboration, for example? To what extent will new forms of scholarly communication be driving our collections budget?

Which brings me back to **Voltaire** — “The perfect is the enemy of the good.” Once we have distilled the nature of “good” in today’s context we can focus on tangibly achieving it. Many of us have been down this difficult road of reassessment before, but the social and technological complexity in our landscape is on a scale far greater than anything we’ve seen before. It will require a quantum leap in vision, courage, and leadership. 🐘

From the Reference Desk

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Some reference works appear to be too specialized for broad application. The *Encyclopedia of the First Amendment* (2009, 978-0-87289-311-5, \$285) with its narrow sounding title, seems like it might fall into that category. However, first amendment rights are so essential to the freedoms and liberties that we enjoy, nothing could be further from the truth. The freedom of religion, the press, and the right to assembly and petition the government are core elements in the political, cultural and historic development of the nation giving this work wide ranging relevance.

An initial examination of this two-volume set reveals the scope of the topics and issues covered. In more than 1,400 entries, issues ranging from affirmative action to intelligent design to zoning laws are covered. There are also entries

dealing with specific legal concepts like the separation of church and state, censorship, the equal time rule, gag orders, prior restraint and tolerance theory. Added to this, there are numerous articles that treat relevant court cases, documents, laws, and government entities as well as related organizations and influential people.

However, one might argue that equally germane are the seven essays that serve as an introduction and overview. These essays place the establishment and free exercise of religion clauses, as well as freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the right to petition and assembly in historic context. They also discuss how these rights have been incorporated into the due process clause of the fourteenth Amendment as well as worldwide attitudes about first amendment rights and its possible future impacts and interpretation.

The set also has a number of high quality value added features. Providing additional assistance to readers is a topical table of contents, a legal case table of contents, a chronology, a list of online resources, a select bibliography, and individual case and subject indexes.

The *Encyclopedia of the First Amendment* is an important and unique scholarly contribution. Editors **John R. Vile**, **David L. Hudson Jr.** and **David Schultz** have proven track records and their expertise is on full display

in this set. They have assembled a thoughtful and comprehensive treatment that students and scholars who are concerned with issues related to the first amendment, the Bill of Rights and the U.S. Constitution will find invaluable as a background resource. This set will find a welcome place next to core titles like **Macmillan Reference’s** *Encyclopedia of the American Constitution* (2000, 0-02-864880-3, \$817).

The *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* (2008, 978-0-313-33441-2, \$299.95) is a three-volume set that deals with a growing area of scholarly interest. Folk and fairy tales are part of almost every culture and the *Encyclopedia* reflects this “global context.” And while editor **Donald Haase** admits that given space limitations, coverage is “representative and not comprehensive,” nonetheless, he and his contributors attempt to survey the discipline “from antiquity to the present” using a multidisciplinary approach that mirrors today’s scholarship.

Regarding actual content, the 670 entries in these three volumes can be grouped into eight distinct categories. There are articles that cover specific genres like ballads and legends as well as those that deal with cultural, national, regional and linguistic groups ranging from

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