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People Profile: James A. Jacobs

Editor

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by government agencies, commercial vendors and other “content” distributors.

To me, this suggests that librarians will be analogous to travel agents who, because they deal every day with the complex, difficult, disparate, unconnected systems, are better able than the traveler to navigate these systems and find the best flight at the best price. So librarians, in this view, will help casual information users navigate a variety of complex, difficult, disparate, unconnected, public-freely-available and proprietary-and-licensed information systems. Just as travel agents have no control over what flights or trips are available or what they cost or what restrictions are placed on them, so librarians will have no control over what information is available or what it costs or what restrictions are placed on its use.

In this view, librarians will not manage collections but will license the right to read from those who control information. Whether the license comes in the form of designation as an **FDLP** library, or from a contractual “partnership” with **GPO** (which **GPO** is promoting as a substitute for **FDLP** deposit), or from payment to a commercial vendor for a license to access information, or by the granting by the **Google Books** legal department of permission (and restrictions) on use, the result is the same. A recent article in *Library Hi Tech* summarized this view succinctly: “In [the] future, librarians will no longer manage media, they will manage rights.”¹

This view reshapes the role of librarians from information providers to information gatekeepers; from information curators to business officers who sign contracts and pay bills and police contracts for publishers. It is not clear that such a role is either desirable or that it requires a librarian.

The Role of Libraries

Those who believe libraries need not have digital collections apparently assume that, because there is information available on the web, there is no need to duplicate it locally. Librarians should be the first to understand that current availability of any given piece of information does not guarantee its availability or usability in the future. Librarians who understand the difficulty of finding information on the Web today should look to building digital collections to solve these problems rather than playing a never-ending game of catch-up with shifting information and then hoping that users will recognize them as indispensable service providers.

There are many organizations, institutions, and vendors that have information on the Web that they will give or sell to you. But, the word “library” does not mean “I have some information.” If it did, bookstores would be libraries and publishers would be librarians. We need libraries in addition to publishers and bookstores and information vendors and government agencies that distribute information as a by-product of their primary mission. Scholars, journalists, economists, historians,

against the grain people profile

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HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: My optimistic view is that libraries will identify and act on their role in the life cycle of information by selecting, acquiring, organizing, and preserving information from digital and non-digital sources, and will provide access to and services for that information, each library acting for a specific user-community. Libraries will become the trusted source for users of all kinds of information in all formats. Users will bookmark and tag library copies of information because they know the information is valuable, usable, and will not move. 🐼



lawyers, physicians, engineers, and citizens of all kinds require a continuing, complete record of information, not just a temporary flow of contemporary information. Who will ensure long-term, free access to the information they need if libraries do not?

The issue we face is not simply understanding the role of libraries but also understanding the role of information creators and distributors. For us to assume that producers and distributors will have the same values and ethics and practices as librarians is to confuse the role of producers with the role of curators. In the life-cycle of information, the role of producers ends with users, but the role of libraries begins with users.

It's About Control

Let's be clear. Even in the paper and ink world, libraries and their collections were about wresting control of information from producers and distributors and granting control to local communities and information users. A publisher could take a book out of print, but a library could keep it available. A user could pay for a book or a magazine subscription, but could choose instead to use the information for free at the library. Libraries leveraged economies of scale for the benefit of the community, enabling every community member to have benefits of access to information that no individual could possibly afford.

The need for wresting control away from those who wish to control the access to and the use of information has not changed in the digital world. But the battle lines have changed and we need librarians in the fight to keep free, open, usable access.

“Content providers” want to replace copyright with license agreements. Distributors want to impose **Digital Rights Management (DRM)** technologies that tie content to par-

ticular technologies that make the information harder to preserve and difficult or even impossible to reuse or repurpose. Producers want to charge for every single use and dictate who can use information, under what conditions, and in what way. In addition, the proliferation of requirements to register to read or use information portends a world in which people will not have the right of privacy when reading or even when searching or browsing. Governments are not immune to these realities. Governments want to be able to control information they create; they want to be able to alter and even withdraw information after it has been released. Governments increasingly want to view their information as a commodity, which they can use to generate income. And governments are constrained by laws and regulations that prohibit them from “competing” with the private sector, a fact that puts all government information at risk of being constrained by commercial interests.

It is ironic that, given technologies that enable almost unlimited use and re-use of information and that enable information to be distributed and used and re-used almost without cost, we face producers who want to limit access, charge for every use, restrict re-use, and look over our shoulders to see what we're reading. Librarians should be the first to recognize that the interests of readers and user-communities are different from the interests of information producers; libraries and library collections are a way to bridge the gap between the two.

The Optimistic View

Even if one takes an optimistic view and assumes the best intentions on the part of politicians and bureaucrats, it would be irresponsible to assume that government agencies will be

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