Against the Grain

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Nighttime Musings of a Sleepless Librarian

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Nighttime Musings of a Sleepless Librarian

by Ann Okerson (Yale University, Associate University Librarian) <ann.okerson@yale.edu>

I probably do not lie awake at night worrying about my job any more than the next person does, but when I do, I talk to myself about our digital futures. The reason for the wee-hours (those hours when problems are magnified) worry is that I’m no longer certain just what we mean by the term “digital libraries.” Are we ever going to “get there” or have we been living in them for years?

Does the term “digital library” mean that all of our collections will someday be digital? Will readers be able to have the full experience of a contemporary library (and more besides) without going near one of our wonderful library buildings? Probably not, for the range and longevity of analog media cannot be readily dissipated. Types of library use may change and digital artifacts may take more and more of the time and attention of librarians and users, but traditional collections will continue to grow and to be used for decades if not centuries to come. Indeed, some of the changes happening around us serve to reinforce traditional structures. That is, without thinking, it is easy to imagine libraries as places for paper books and to imagine that if paper books fade in use and importance, the places will similarly shrink in importance. But these places have long been ones where people go to work, they are quiet and organized, with effective support systems (librarians, for example), where colleagues or fellow students can be found with whom to share at least a cup of coffee or a hallway conversation and perhaps a more structured collaborative and intensive working period.

By the above demanding definition, we are not “there” yet. Yet, if we think about libraries more flexibly, we have been “there,” i.e., in digital libraries, for some time. The advent of online public catalogs and e-journals has already revolutionized work for both librarians and users. One cannot help but be reminded of Anthony Appiah’s statement in his essay “Realizing the Virtual Library.”: “The library I never go to is one of the most important places in my life.” Even the print materials that we now use in libraries are organized and accessed and approached through digital forms, and many are digital-only resources.

So we are in transition, and perhaps we always will be. What is important, what is pressing, what is urgent for the next few years? When I get to that point in the early-morning hours, it is pretty clear that there is much to think about, and I will be awake for some time, possibly in somewhat of a fretful mode.

We all have our own lists of night-time frets, and my list is probably a lot like that of many other librarians with similar responsibilities. We all are juggling resources to meet an ever-increasing demand for a rapidly increasing body of books, journals, and e-resources. It appears to be one of the anomalies of our economics that library budgets tend to grow with inflation (more, or a little too often, less), at the same time as the growth in output of the publishing and information industries is driven by forces that make it unlikely that supply will grow as modestly. In an odd sort of way, it is the modesty of demand — the limited time and attention our readers can bring to bear on their work — that helps to keep the growth of reader needs somewhere in line with the growth of library resources.

Once I have finished (temporarily) fretting about resources, I can turn to some niggling worries. For example, just now one very small online product, at least as measured by number of users and cost to the library, is giving many academic libraries headaches because its entirely worthy, not-for-profit European producer is naïvely insisting on provisions of its license that most American libraries cannot sign. Rights and license issues are significant niggles, even as together we all have made a great deal of progress in the last five years building publishable library relations to the point where it is possible to make a lot of workable agreements for users. There are technological glitches as well as we try to make sure that older resources work well with the most recent computer systems and vice versa. For example, which browser is our campus technology service currently supporting and which online resources will crash that browser? Confessedly, I used to become much more exercised about niggling things than I do these days. Partly, my newfound tranquility stems from the naturalization of e-resources into the library, so those librarians who are responsible for identifying, acquiring, and supporting the resources at a management level see more and more library staff ready, able, and eager to handle the daily operational issues as part of their jobs. If I did have a list of wee-hours digital resources issues posted on a sticky-note, that note would have half a dozen small items on it, but the capitalized logo across the top would be pretty simple:

It’s The Users, Stupid!

I hasten to add that that note would be addressed to myself. Lying awake at night — this is the awful truth — I am mostly worrying that we librarians may have lost track of that one, that we may have gotten too preoccupied by the technology and the process, i.e., the niggling little things. Of course it would be gratifying to think that I am ahead of my time in conceiving such a brilliant strategic principle as focus on the readers, whereas in fact, I am probably running as fast as I can to catch up with everybody else who realized that straightforward principle before I did.

Ten years ago, it was enthrancing to imagining the e-future. Five years ago, it was exhilarating to grab our tools and pitch in to building it. Now all of us librarians are putting down the tools for a break, taking a deep breath, and looking around to see what it is we are doing and why for whom. And the measure of our success is principally in the effect we have on the user community. What is it readers need? Why do they use library resources? What problems do they face? Those are the strategic questions of today. Those strategic questions would have us ponder, in the right way, the appropriate mix of traditional and digital resources. There is no prescriptive answer to what library users ought to want, but there are abundant instances of what actual individuals do want and why they use libraries. Returning to the user as the focus of our choices is a way to control and direct what could otherwise be superabundant energy going in too many directions, without supporting resources for all those directions.

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ATG Special Report: Part II — Libraries In The Cyberage

by Mark Y. Herring (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herrimg@winthrop.edu>

The forums covered here include the conclusion of Clancy's article favoring library filters. Essentially, Clancy's argument is that the disadvantages of filtering are far fewer than those of not filtering. Clancy claims, first of all, that filtering does not impinge upon the First Amendment because it has never protected obscenity and/or pornography. Secondly, she argues that the dangers of unfiltered Internet access pose such grave risks to others that the unfiltered choice is unconvincing.

Libraries In The Cyberage — Filtering, Censorship and the First Amendment: Libraries at the Crossroads

by Carol A. Clancy, Esq. (Senior Counsel, National Law Center for Children and Families) http://www.NationalLawCenter.org

Filtering Adult Internet Access Closes Library Door to Sexual Exploitation.

In New York v. Ferber, the United States Supreme Court stated that:

“The distribution network for child pornography must be closed if the production of material which requires the sexual exploitation of children is to be effectively controlled.

Today, the Internet constitutes a major part of the “distribution network” for child pornography. The Library should use filtering technology to close access by adults to all Internet based child pornography distribution networks.

After a rash of incidents involving individuals using public libraries to download child pornography, the pedophile-monitoring group “PedoWatch.org” made allegations that “on-line pedophiles” were telling each other to use public libraries to download child pornography. PedoWatch director Julie Posey stated:

“Basically what happens out there is that pedophiles on the Internet “network” together. It is much like just about any other interest that a person may have. There are mailing lists, message boards, chat rooms and multitudes of other resources that they use. When a particular pedophile finds that the Library is a safe secure place to view and download pornography, he shares this information with others with the same interests that he comes in contact with. Some libraries won’t allow downloading so that information is passed on too. Remember that before there can be child pornography in the first place, there has to be a perpetrator and a victim. I have seen cases where pedophiles on the Internet use the Library to talk with children and eventually lure them to have a face-to-face meeting. These children are then molested, photos taken and further exploited when he sends the child’s pictures to massons on the Internet.99

The development of computer technology has made the instant, electronic transfer of child pornography in many cases virtually undetectable by present law enforcement techniques, and made it invisible to Library management and staff. Today the entire contents of an illegal adult bookstore can be stored in and transmitted through computer networks. The technical expertise and resources of Internet-based criminals currently far surpasses that of federal and state law enforcement, and that of any Public Library. Internet filters used to screen and block adult access to proscribed materials, can help close the doors of the Public Library to the distribution network for child pornography, and can help deter the creation of “secondary effects” related to the regular and continuous dissemination of sexually explicit pornographic materials. In order for the law to be effective, law enforcement agencies need the support of all public entities — including the Public Library.

Internet Filter Use Advances Important Library Goals.

The “effectiveness” of filter technology has vastly improved since the United States Supreme Court first discussed and indicated support for “user-based software technology” in rendering the Reno v. ACLU decision.70 The implementation of user-based Internet filtering technology directly and materially advances:

(1) the goal of preventing minors from