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Something to Think About -- Retirement is Hurting Us.

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of eBook that goes well beyond the type that exists in the market today, which is not much more than a digital facsimile of a printed book, and even beyond what some publishers are already experimenting with as an “enhanced” eBook, where audio and video clips are used to add new dimensions to a written text and where hyperlinks take the reader to other resources outside the book itself. I have in mind the vision of the eBook elaborated by **Robert Darnton** in his famous essay on “The New Age of the Book,” which provided the intellectual rationale for the **Gutenberg-e** and **ACLS Humanities E-Book** projects that he championed when he served as President of the **American Historical Association**: <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1999/mar/18/the-new-age-of-the-book>. As he explained this new sort of book-like document, “I think it possible to structure it in layers arranged like a pyramid. The top layer could be a concise account of the subject, available perhaps in paperback. The next layer could contain expanded versions of different aspects of the argument, not arranged sequentially as in a narrative, but rather as self-contained units that feed into the topmost story. The third layer could be composed of documentation, possibly of different kinds, each set off by interpretative essays. A fourth layer might be theoretical or historiographical, with selections from previous scholarship and discussions of them. A fifth layer could be pedagogic, consisting of suggestions for classroom discussion and a model syllabus. And a sixth layer could contain readers’ reports, exchanges between the author and the editor, and letters from readers, who could provide a growing corpus of commentary as the book made its way through different groups of readers. A new book of this kind would elicit a new kind of

reading. Some readers might be satisfied with a study of the upper narrative. Others might also want to read vertically, pursuing certain themes deeper and deeper into the supporting essays and documentation. Still others might navigate in unanticipated directions, seeking connections that suit their own interests or reworking the material into constructions of their own. In each case, the appropriate texts could be printed and bound according to the specifications of the reader. The computer screen would be used for sampling and searching, whereas concentrated, long-term reading would take place by means of the conventional printed book or downloaded text.” What printing a user wanted to do could be done by an Espresso book machine located in a library, providing almost instantaneous service to meet the user’s needs for further study.

Darnton himself has been working on such a multilayered eBook for many years, as the culmination of his research on the history of printing, publishing, and bookselling in the 18th century that is largely based on the rich archival resources of the Swiss publisher and bookseller **Société typographique de Neuchâtel**. Imagine, if you would, that **Darnton** early in his career, after discovering what this archive held and what potential it had for providing insight into the “business of the Enlightenment” (to quote the phrase that **Darnton** used for one of his best known books), had put together a presentation on **Kickstarter** or some similar “crowd funding” site and succeeded in raising some funds to get his project under way of building this multilayered document. Initially, it might have taken the form of case studies of various aspects of this business, since presumably **Darnton** would want to get a head start by not immediately creating a digitized version of the archival records themselves, which could be added at a later phase of the project. Gradually, over time, as recognition of the quality of this emerging work came to be known, **Darnton**

could approach some other types of patrons, which might include some foundations that could provide some more substantial funding or even wealthy individuals (like a **George Soros**) who shared a passion for this subject and could seed the project over an even longer term than a foundation typically would, possibly even creating a permanent endowment for it along the lines of what the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is doing. All the while **Darnton** would be adding new layers to the document or amplifying the materials in already existing layers. What we would have, then, is a dynamic book, constantly evolving and growing over many years, which would have no easily identifiable publication date as every increment added might be considered analogous to creating a “new edition” of the work, but there would be no evident resting point between each stage that would justify labeling it as such. Instead, it would probably make sense to assign one ISBN to the entire project (if there were a need for any ISBNs in a world of open-access publishing, rather than, say, DOIs as permanent URLs). Cataloguing such a dynamic, ever-evolving product might pose special challenges, and perhaps so would long-term preservation. But the point to emphasize most is that a scholar’s entire career could be associated with and dedicated to just one such complex, multifaceted, multidimensional work of scholarship, which would endure as a monument to his career and could be evaluated, along the way, for purposes of tenure and promotion. He could even, perhaps, subcontract out parts of the building of this scholarly edifice to other scholars, or to graduate students, making it a truly collaborative enterprise like the construction of a cathedral in medieval Europe. That, I suggest, would be the ultimate realization of the potential for scholarship of the new technologies that the digital revolution has made available. It would indeed be “the new age of the book.” 🌿

Something to Think About — Retirement is Hurting Us.

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Yesterday, a colleague retired, leaving me the oldest member of the staff. Got me to thinking about what happens when we retire. I will soon be retiring for the third time and I think of the information I have accrued, the time I have spent on projects, and the visions I have had for the future. Where will all of those things go when you retire? Since libraries are geared up to do searches and hire after the previous person has left, there is a lapse of continuity and a large knowledge loss. Even if there is another person who will train the new individual, the last person has lived through crises, plan-

ning and thought processes that will never be thought of or remembered again. Is this something to think about? Is it important to the ever-driving technology and changes in our systems? In the next decade from 2010-2020, there will be an estimated 48,000 librarians retiring. Projected time for recovery from that loss is approximately 8-10 years. I’m not sure we ever recover, because that knowledge will not be available for us to retrieve and use again. Has anyone sat down and talked/listened to these people to understand how previous decisions have been made? Of course not! How many hours are spent learning the tricks these people use to save time, energy, and resources? Maybe a few, but we rely on manuals and handbooks that are probably out-of-date. When I retired the first time in 1995, Cataloging gave me an iron embosser we used to process books, that was catching dust in some corner of the room.

I daresay that only a handful of people had ever seen one or knew what the equipment was meant to do. True, it would never be used again for that task, but I look at the poorly identified materials in our libraries today and wonder if that is a problem. Everywhere that book went with the embossing, it could be identified as to its ownership. We used many of these markings to call libraries and ask if they wanted to have their materials returned to them. There was always some hope of return when the materials were seriously processed. The new items we use can be ripped from the materials and leave the book unidentified. Where are the magnetic strips — in the trashcan? What happened to the barcodes? Do we still use bookplates? Mine get sliced from the books.

Beyond the technical aspects left behind in our memories, there are our MEMORIES. How
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Op Ed — Working with Vendors to Improve their Products

by **Steven Shapiro** (Electronic Resources Librarian, Montclair State University, Harry A. Sprague Library, Montclair, NJ 07043; Phone: 973-655-4428) <shapiros@mail.montclair.edu>

Before the era of usability studies and ubiquitous emailed surveys, vendors spent little time consulting with their subscribers in order to make their search interfaces “user friendly.” That has all changed. Gone is the corporate attitude so well exemplified by **Henry Ford’s** remark regarding the Model T, “Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black.” Many database vendors not only listen to customer suggestions for improving their products, they actively solicit feedback. Many even enlist libraries as beta-testers. (We’re in the middle of one right now.) Yet, it is common to hear librarians complain that many of the online databases leave something to be desired in terms of searchability, features (limiters, citation tools, links to outside content, etc.), and ease of use. In addition, there often seems to be an adversarial attitude towards vendors which creeps into the discussion. A sort of “us against them” worldview. I remember once calling a librarian at another institution who mistook me for a sales rep and started hollering at me about annoying cold calls. In contrast, our approach is a little different. We have tried to work closely with vendors in order to try to make material improvements in our library e-resources. In general, I believe that we, as librarians, shouldn’t wait for the vendors to knock on our doors or fill our email boxes with surveys that usually end up in the trash bin. There needs to be more cooperation and less finger pointing.

Recently, when I sat down with a sales rep from one of the major players in the industry, we discussed several of the products that we already subscribed to from the vendor and one we had cancelled some years ago. As the rep demonstrated the updated interface for their education database, I expressed

some ideas for improving their product. In particular, I was curious if they could link from an author’s article in the education database to the biographical and book review content (related to the author) that we already received from the vendor through our current subscriptions as well as visa-versa. The representative thought our suggestions had some merit and agreed to forward our recommendations to the main office.

Earlier in the summer I had an opportunity to talk with a representative at a prestigious university publisher after trying unsuccessfully to generate usage reports for their international affairs e-resource. By all measures, the product was being underutilized. I broached the idea of making the MARC records available for all the eBooks, conference proceedings, and other full text material instead of the limited MARC records currently available. In addition, I pointed out certain deficiencies in the e-resource’s Webpage like the absence of a well-defined link to the country reports/profiles which include political and economic outlooks (as well as economic forecasts) and other key data. In order to get to the information, you had to click on a link titled “Atlas” which, true to its word, took you to a map instead of a list of countries. At this point, you had to click on the map to get another map which was more detailed. The maps obscured the easy-to-use mouse over links on the left side of the screen which listed individual countries. I shared my experiences with the representative, who seemed genuinely sympathetic to my plight.

Another similar encounter occurred during a phone conversation with another prominent university publisher

that was introducing a new set of online bibliographies developed by different panels of subject specialists culled from academia. While I was impressed with the product, I was struck by the fact that the bibliographies allowed for little customization. Local library resources (subject guides, databases, etc.) could not be added to each individual bibliography which, in my opinion, would enhance the value of the service. I mentioned these reservations to the sales rep who took note of them.

One overlooked way of providing feedback to vendors is by participating in a beta-test of a new product. Currently, **Montclair State** is beta-testing a global news database which includes full-text from newspapers, news services, and other news related publications. In some ways this is a superior method for influencing the parameters of a research database, since your input is being handled at the developmental stage. It also serves as a way to try the product for an extended period of time without making a financial commitment. When a sales rep mentions that they’re beta-testing a new product, I make it a point to ask them if we can participate.

Based on the above examples, it should be obvious that there are many ways to communicate with vendors in order to attempt to improve the searchability and usability of electronic resources. There is no reason to accept the status quo. The only requirement is to reach out to vendors in some meaningful fashion. Keep that in mind the next time you’re tempted to verbally flog a sales rep after receiving an unexpected (and often unwelcome) phone call. Just try counting to ten to regain your composure and then offer some constructive advice! 🍀

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have we changed processes over the years? Why? Does it matter? Yes, if you don’t want to explore that trail again or juggle the same problem once more. History is good to document/record so that we explore newer and more prospective ways of doing things. I want to scream that people can’t leave before they share those memories

and ideas with us. What about our visions? Each of us has a feeling where the library world is going, but we rarely share that information either. With the reduced workforce and the many experienced people leaving the field for retirement, there may be more stumbling in our attempts to improve the field. I would never say that there would cease to be improvements, but there will be fewer brains jumping into the discussions. And as I remember the people of today who are retiring with

some grief, I think about more of them who will be gone in a few years. Aren’t they the ones saying how these people won’t be missed? Those phrases will be the “left behind folks” words to ponder soon. Our energy has been sapped over the years, but we succeeded in making items available to our patrons. The challenge has been wonderful! Digital things will not be the savior it’s projected to be. The loss of our history and identity is something to think about seriously! 🍀