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At Brunning: People and Technology--At the Only Edge that Means Anything/How We Understand What we Do

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Cloud is your self-preservation strategy.

Well, that's one kind of self-preservation. But what about the other kind of self-preservation?

If you start digging into the Terms of Service of a few of the big operations you're signed up with, it'll make you want to run away, hide, and spend your time washing your hands over and over.

From **Google's** Terms of Service: "When you upload, submit, store, send, or receive content to or through our Services, you give **Google** (and those we work with) a worldwide license to use, host, store, reproduce, modify, create derivative works (such as those resulting from translations, adaptations or other changes we make so that your content works better with our Services), communicate, publish, publicly perform, publicly display, and distribute such content."

It goes on, "This license continues even if you stop using our Services..."

What's more, "Our automated systems analyze your content (including emails) to provide you personally relevant product features, such as customized search results, tailored advertising, and spam and malware detection. This analysis occurs as the content is sent, received, and when it is stored."

That's right, **Google's** bots read your email. If I mention in an email to my astronomy buddies that I'm thinking about getting a new Cat, I'll probably start seeing ads for kitty litter next to

my news. Of course, I was referring to a catadioptric telescope, known as a "Cat" to its aficionados. So maybe what's so annoying about the system is how it is sometimes so transparently dumb. Or maybe it's that I know perfectly well that before long the bots will have figured out the context of my "Cats" and I'll start seeing ads for **Celestron** or **Meade Instruments**...

I don't mean to single out **Google** here — not by any means. These constructions are not substantially different from many you encounter once you lift the lid and peer into what's happening in the Cloud. The first observation of possible import here is the degree to which we permit ourselves to become numb over steady, if incremental, erosion to our boundaries. A person with whom I was discussing this recently acknowledged the incremental "numbing down" of our sensibilities, likening it to a lobster being lowered into the pot of boiling water. It's not to say that it doesn't hurt; only that the hurt changes, travels, and ultimately doesn't hurt so much after a while. It's also difficult to "unboil" the lobster.

So powerful are the preservation capabilities built into the Cloud, and so seemingly irreversible, that something mimicking an entire social movement has arisen around what's being called "the right to be forgotten." The question we face is this: is there a business case for the cloud services to relinquish back to their users the rights the users so readily relinquished to the service? Without a set of reasons to do so that equate to "sound business," why would the Cloud services voluntarily hand over what are, in fact, among their most valuable assets?

Usually, I think, the Cloud services can quiet the conversation down simply by rolling out their next phase of product enhancements, restoring to the Faustian trade its rightful irresistibility.

I have a friend who advocates trading grocery store loyalty cards with friends, acquaintances, and even perfect strangers, every few months. He points out, accurately, that you still get the discounts. But more importantly, he says, it messes with the behavior modeling the cards provide data for. Just when the store was about ready to conclude that people who buy paper products with the word "Nature" in the brand name will also pay extra for oven cleaner with the word "Organic" on the label, along comes a fresh set of data indicating that, no, people who will pay extra for "Organic" oven cleaner also really like snack products that are colored neon orange and whose labels imply the presence of cheese.

This is a noble idea, and possibly useful, at least until the grocery stores catch on and start requiring additional forms of identification from their patrons. We'll give it to them too — and in fact, we probably already do. Who wants to receive coupons for products we are unlikely to buy? Much better to get coupons for things you care about.

I'm reminded of the Gamekeeper from the original Jurassic Park who, observing the Velociraptors hurling themselves against the electric fences, looking for weaknesses, points out, "They remember..."

Nobody remembers as long as the Cloud... 🐘

@Bunning: People & Technology

At the Only Edge that Means Anything / How We Understand What We Do



by **Dennis Brunning** (Director, The Design School Library, Arizona State University) <dennis.bunning@gmail.com>

Life as We Live It Random

Internet kids claim and use random. It's a put down. **Luc Sante** in a *New York Times* Sunday Magazine essay feature brilliantly places random in its exhausted etymology. Like so many words in our hyperactive worldwide Web vocabulary, it has had different usage. According to the 5th edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary* (love it to descriptive death), it means without purpose, design, or method. **Sante** understands this well but expands into its current connotative meaning as "not one of us."

You are "rando" if you cross my field of vision and I don't care. Or you are rando if you intrude on my space and time without introduction. Photo-bombed by a stranger is true rando.

None of us, to us, are random. None of our friends or family are random unless we define them as such.

Sante takes the tour of random (which may to you now be quite rando). It began from the Old French "randir" which meant "to gallop." *OED* indicates then it became associated with impetuosity, great speed, force, or violence." By the 20th century **Bennett Cerf** and **Donald Klopfer**, enterprising publishers, sought to introduce a line of books they'd issue at random. Thus **Random House** was born.

Sante delights in the 163 random definitions in the *Urban Dictionary*. It has become a nonce word (itself rando). He notes that anyone can post a definition to *Urban Dictionary*, yet another random act of unnecessary niceness. It reads like a perfect Eluardian nonsense like when the appropriate response to a ninth grader's exclamation "Elephants are contagious." The rando response: "that's random."

This is insider jargon at its best. You observe and announce what the world in front of you means for you, and it means nothing. Those who get it, agree that it's random, or they nod knowingly. It's defining the other not as **Sartre's** "hell" but just not you and you are center. Others are arbitrary and you are not. You have arrived and no one else.

However this is not so random as **Sante** or your teenager might think. Years ago, in the pre-Internet law library at the **University of Illinois** where I was randomly taking a course in government documents (how rando is that?), my all but doctorate instructor commented to us while rolling her eyes, that jet flight was so random. It was time travel and between departure and destination, between arrival and departure, among passengers, friends, and strangers, it meant little.

Later, after I endured the course, got an A, I called all but doctorate up for a date and we ate pizza at Papa Dell's on Green. We looked at the pizza, like any other pizza, we laughed about the SuDoc system, and we briefly looked each other in the eye. I left her place the next morning really not thinking about random but remember it today and every day since as an entirely random experience.

"Ah, Dad, that's so rando!"

Reading

This summer it's all about robots, driverless cars, shadow work, and no bosses. We range in emotion from **Marc Andressan's** "Software is eating the world" and the robotized underemployed future to how the same technology, done right, can free us. It is about the closed and the open. How you feel after reading depends largely on where you lie on this closed open continuum.

Craig Lambert's *Shadow Work: the Unpaid, Unseen Jobs that Fill Your Day*, explains how we are making ends meet despite slow uptick in employment and what the ungainfully employed are doing. We are working harder, longer hours, more jobs, that fill in the spaces

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Endnotes

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left by jobs that escaped overseas or were turned over to computers and robots. Cleaning services, dog walkers, nannies, grannies as mommies, bloggers, adult Webcam stars — these are but a few of the job categories of the unemployed employed.

It's hard to quibble with **Lambert's** argument because it is less argument than observation. He combines a keen sense of how we work like **Barbara Ravitch** but with less heated disgust. It is what it is. It should be read, though, less as a dire prediction of dystopia than a pragmatic call to honest analysis and assessment of globalization and disruptive technology. It's a sober assessment for all of us to be aware that even our profession may become shadow work as we yield to technology and its economic influence. We should work hard to shine a light into the shadows of our libraries before the robots do it for us.

Rise of the Robots by **Martin Ford** is about computers, algorithms, the senior/surveillance state, and how robots will thrive in this environment. The automation wave brought about by information technology and its adoption by business, **Ford** argues, will demonstrably lower middle class quality of life. It will concentrate wealth in the ownership one percent. They have the means to invest in technology and deploy it. Drones, robots, apps — however much they simplify our life, they are more than convenience. Right now, they allow us to do more with less. But there comes a time when shadow work, convenience, and cheap everything eventually leads to an inability to afford even these.

We can already see how automation has eliminated people from technical services in libraries and has concentrated the need for public services employees to the few. Moreover, there is the larger trend away from the need to pay for intellectual property. The last few years we've limped along with confused notions that we — librarians — have a role in the new order. **Ford** would argue otherwise.

Open Organization: Igniting Passion and Performance by **Jim Whitehurst** is worth reading as a positive view on what *Shadow Work* and *Rise of the Robots* treat negatively. **Whitehurst**, CEO of **Red Hat**, led this open-source **Linux** provider to profits. He leveraged free software to create a smart, cohesive, brilliant workforce that helps companies and organizations to reduce overhead costs of commercial server software and networks but also produce product levels above what one would normally get or expect from open source. **Whitehurst** took an academic product and made it commercial not through technological disruption as much as organizational culture.

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The key is the open organization. Few bosses, flat structure, autonomous decisionmaking, small teams open to risk and nimble enough to build success on failure. Few companies work this way; even fewer universities. **Whitehurst** argues we need enough vertical or top-down structure mainly to deal with a world that is dominated by this military metaphor. But real work that succeeds will emerge from organizations that allow its educated and motivated employee to own accomplishment. As we face disruption from outside in libraries, perhaps we should try more open ways of defending what is good and surmounting what is bad.

Book Info: **Craig Lambert**, *Shadow Work: The Unpaid, Unseen Jobs that Fill Your Day*, Counterpoint, 2015

Martin Ford, *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future*, Basic Books, 2015

Jim Whitehurst and **Gary Hamel**, *The Open Organization: Igniting Passion and Performance*, Harvard Business Review Press, 2015

Rows

It's summer. In the 24/7 seasonless school year, the seldom closed, almost always open library would be less sleepy than in the past. In earlier times, our agrarian harvest schedule contained enough down time when the stacks were empty of people and full of returned books. Fewer circulation student staff might leave piles of books on tables, return shelves, and reshelving. You could do some unobtrusive measures research about reading behavior. You know, books moved equal books used. That research.

No more. Fewer books circulate, fewer students hired not because of lack of funds but the palpable sense we do not need them. Books are online, and although books have only ever served a few — like who really likes to read outside studies or work? — we conclude that we don't need reshelvers. In fact, we don't need books. We employ a few students on either end and a few in between to deliver books to high-density storage, their final destination. And we eliminate books that are already part of a shared repository of pulp.

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Back Talk — On First Looking into My Inbox



Column Editor: **Jim O'Donnell** (University Librarian, Arizona State University) <jod@asu.edu>

I never get enough email. Heaven knows, I try, but whatever I do, I can never seem to get my email total over a couple of hundred a day. I miss the scammers who used to write all the time: made me feel useful, sitting there harrumphing and pounding the delete key, wondering why they didn't make a better effort to suck me in.

But, now that I'm a librarian, I'm finding there are limits after all. No sooner had my appointment been announced than I started to get a stream of warm, friendly messages from people who had just — what do you know? — published books they were sure our library would be interested in. Knowing how considerate these people are in choosing to write to me directly about these fine volumes, you won't be surprised that a very high percentage of them are books with heartwarming stories with no possible audience in an academic library.

I hit the delete key and move on. That leaves room in the inbox for the cold-calling vendors. It's remarkable how many people have got just the solution to our library's needs and would be happy to talk about their offerings sometime in the next week. Since I've rarely heard of them or their companies, it's kind of them to tell me about their revolutionary new technology and to volunteer to sit down to explain it all.

But wait a minute: Don't we have a highly trained and dazzlingly competent professional staff whose job it is to find the right products and services and figure out which of them we need and can afford? Yes, and they know way more about such things than I do. Sorry. I hit the delete key and move on.

There's another layer of mail after that, from the vendors we *do* business with. A surprising number will be at the next library conference and only too happy to see me there, even invite me to special opportunity dinners at really nice restaurants, where the quality of the food and wine will have no effect on my professional evaluation of their products. Me,

I'm a student of the ancient saint who said in his *Confessions* that he was still never sure which temptation he'd give into next, so I take a pass on lots of those opportunities too. I do enjoy getting to know our key partners, but I'm a lot happier doing that when staff have helped me understand how to advance our interests by doing so and not just sit through another sales call. I decline regretfully, then delete and move on.

And what the blazes is this? I've got a LinkedIn notification here, so now I'll click on it. I rarely do more than click "yes" when somebody wants to connect with me (or "no" if it's a complete stranger, of which there are many). But this time it's a vanilla-flavored invitation from a search firm I've never heard of, to apply for a library director job I know little about and am not interested in. Say what? Doesn't this type of recruitment make one feel all warm and fuzzy? Do you wonder if the firm is counting everybody they've sent a robo-message to on LinkedIn as a part of their pool? What are the chances that a real human being at that search firm knows who their contacts are? Well, I'd like to write back and tell them a thing or two, but one has to be nice to search firms: you never know when we'll be trying to persuade this one to think well of somebody or, for that matter, when I'll be back out on the street looking for work myself!

Now the inbox is getting pretty empty, I'm sorry to say, so maybe I'll spend a little quality time on Facebook, catching up with dachshund and donkey videos. And when I come back, if I'm lucky, I'll start getting to the good stuff. One great message arrived a couple of days ago from a department chair who's fuming because something's not working between his faculty and their library contacts, and he wants to talk. I'm obviously not delighted he's got a problem, but I'm thrilled that he thought to write and let us work together to sort out any misunderstandings. Once upon a time in my CIO days, we discussed charging people for

asking questions of their IT support personnel, and one of our smartest wizards said, "Heck, I'd rather pay them for asking" — and that's always been my philosophy. We need to know what the problems are, and I'm happy when they show up in my inbox.

There's even more interesting email behind that: mail from our own Library staff. Sure, there's the usual back and forth with direct reports tinkering with a draft message to send out this week, but prose-crafting gets pretty ordinary after a while. What I find most valuable and save for last are the messages from staff with questions or ideas. Obviously, I can't meddle in operational decisions or become a waiting wall for complaints about co-workers or the like — what has to go through channels will have to go through channels. But ASU library has a couple hundred smart and interesting colleagues, all of whom know at least some aspects of our library much better than I ever could. Nothing brightens my day like a message from one of them, calling an article to my attention or crowing a little about a colleague's achievement, or alerting me to a new opportunity. In fact, we are putting into place an "innovation advisory group" that will help staff contribute ideas (and let other staff help refine those ideas) for ways to improve our services. There's creativity and imagination to be found everywhere in the library's buildings.

So how much is left in my inbox? You can predict that if you ask me two questions: have you traveled lately and what day of the week is it? If the answers are "no" and "Sunday," I have a pretty good chance of being down in the very low dozens. If the answer to the first is "oh, yes," then the number is heading north. We all have different panic attack levels, and mine is around 100. Right now it's Sunday, no travel, and I just got from 59 to 44 and by golly I'm going to stick to it.

But I sure hope I get some email tomorrow. 🍷

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So the stacks, rows of them, are quiet, dark, silent. We hope the volumes that remain will reach out to readers — every book, a reader, every reader, a book — but books are dumb paper unless pulled off-the-shelf and read. And Google has read them once, and they, both Google and the books, stand ready to uncover their secrets at the mere tap of the keys.

So the rows are here to remind us of a once glorious era of the book, a once glorious era of print learning. I wander them and wonder which ones my eye will land upon, which one I will pull from the shelf, which ones I will read, standing alone in a row, illumined by wan light angling from a narrow vertical window.

I smile even as my smile turns to horror eyes as the reshelving robot passes by peeping a warning, a telling warning. 🤖