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Beyond the Hybrid Library: Libraries in a Web 2.0 World

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9.1 Introduction

In a recent talk, Reg Carr commented:

“Almost 20 years ago, I published *An Introduction to University Library Administration*, with Jimmy Thompson, the Librarian of Reading University; and I was inordinately proud of that book, which for a few years at least became a standard library school text. But re-reading the book today is like drifting through the galleries of an ancient museum: it bears virtually no relationship to the book which I would write if I were writing it now. It describes, quite literally, another world that is dead and gone. The writer L. P. Hartley put it perfectly when he said that ‘The past is a foreign country’: they did things differently there. And the biggest change that I detect between then and now is the radical change of culture that has come about in our environment in the last ten years.” (Carr, 2006)

It was the same Jimmy Thompson who had memorably, but wrongly, predicted the end of libraries in the face of computers, in his book of the same title, he concluded that:

“The Librarians and Libraries that do not accept the change will inevitably be victims of the evolution. For the dinosaurs it will indeed be the end.” (Thompson, 1982)

He also quoted Fred Lancaster:

“We are already very close to the day in which a great science Library could exist in a space less than 10 feet square.” (Lancaster, 1978).

That day has arrived. But what we may look back and see is that it was Thompson’s timing rather than his premise which was wrong. Library literature over the last decade has tended to focus on how we should respond to or use technology. It has tended to focus on what users want from those technologies rather than wondering whether users have changed. Even supporters of libraries would have to conclude that neither the academy nor academic
Librarians have a crisp notion of where academic libraries fit in the emerging 21st century information panoply. Increasingly libraries seem to resemble “Miss Havisham”, dressed in their wedding pomp and finery but living in an empty house waiting for the lover who will never come. The concept of the hybrid library has been a useful way station in developing our thinking on the future path of libraries, but it is an already dated concept which assumes evolutionary rather than revolutionary change.

Although there is growing evidence of the need for a fundamental rethink of the role and place of libraries, most of such debate takes place on the electronic lists, journals and blogs which all too few librarians read. (Peters, 2006) Traditionalists reach for the comfort blanket of the library as place and for the precedents of history. The library as place has been invested with a virtuous glow which paints it as the last remaining substantial social space in universities; as the last remaining public place of trust in society, in the case of public libraries a place where young children can be left in the care of story-telling strangers while parents shop. The fireside myths of library history tell of a resolute four thousand year journey through change: from the oral tradition through the great library of Ashurbanipal with its tablets of stone to papyri then the monastic scriptoria. Then we moved on to Gutenberg and the printed word and further development into sound and film collections. The profession comforts itself that throughout these four thousand years we have often been buffeted by the great waves of change, but never yet capsized. Librarians are adept at finding comforting statistics showing that the slumbering power of libraries remains real. A recent report from OCLC (OCLC, 2003) recorded that:

- there are five times as many library cards as Amazon users
- there are more libraries than McDonald’s outlets in the USA
- one person in six in the world is a registered library user
- there are over one million libraries and over 700,000 librarians worldwide.

However true those figures are, they do not matter if they represent the past and ignore the fact that there has been a fundamental shift in both users and the content they seek.

9.2 The New Users

The worry for librarians in the Web 2.0 world should be not that technology is changing rapidly, but that a generational change is affecting users in quite fundamental ways.

“It is now clear that as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors.” (Prensky, 2001)

Prensky developed the concept of digital natives to describe individuals who have grown up in an entirely internet world.