

Ringin' Changes

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July 2006

I often joke that I've "gone over to the dark side" from traditional to digital libraries, after over twenty years as a professional cataloger (and about seven before that in the support staff ranks). Certainly without planning to become a trailblazer, I've found myself off the well-trodden paths of librarianship. But in some sense, the joke's on me, since in the digital library world I've found plenty of people who think I'm the creature from another, dying planet, or at the very least an over-the-hill traditionalist bent on bringing AACR2 and MARC to the savages. Sometimes that in-between spot is a very uncomfortable place to be, much as I sometimes relish the opportunity to operate as an outsider in those two worlds. But, in the days when my office was in the midst of computer scientists and software developers, I welcomed my twice a year escapes to ALA, when I could be with "my people." The truth is, when all's said and done, I'm a librarian, and still very happy with that label.

I'm sure many people suspect that I've made this transition into these newer worlds because I'm inherently better at dealing with change, unlike the stereotypical cataloger, who is perceived as change-phobic in the extreme. Anyone who knows me well would laugh at the notion that I particularly enjoy change, given that I've worked for the same institution for almost 30 years and most of the career changes I've made have very definitely had their involuntary aspects. Not to downplay the uncomfortable nature of these necessary reinventions, I should say that in general I've benefited from being booted into new challenges, and like my aging cat, still tend to land on my feet when dropped from a not-too-significant height.

The bad news is probably that this experience has not tended to make me more patient with recalcitrant librarians who resist reading the writing on the wall (no matter how large the font). The good news is that I know enough about the old skills to know how to add some new ones on top. For the past few years I've been spending a fair amount of time with librarians who think they'd like to know more about these skills, and I've been attempting to take some of the fear out of the process, and adding a bit of cheerleading to the mix.

One story I often tell in workshops is about a consulting gig I participated in some years ago, when I was one of two hired guns assisting the librarians of a major corporation (trust me, you've heard of these people) take over the company intranet. The intranet had been created by the corporate IT department, and it was, to use one of my favorite epithets, a "dog's dinner." The IT folks had organized the whole thing based on the then current organizational structure of the company, and locked security and permissions down tight--making it very difficult to add things or even find them if you didn't know who'd created them. When the inevitable reorganization came, the intranet was recognized as the disaster it was, and the whole business was turned over to the library to

fix. Frankly the librarians were in a panic, and our main job during our first morning consulting with them was to remind them about what they already knew, and walk them through some possibilities for reorganizing the intranet to meet the needs of the corporation—needs they knew exceptionally well, since they’d been meeting them with confidence for many years. By the time we left, they had a strategy to begin work, and were very excited about the possibilities. I daresay the IT department learned a few things from the experience, too, as they participated in the discussions, and would, of course, be involved in the reorganization.

Many of the librarians I speak to now are very much in the same place: afraid they don’t know enough to survive in a world that has changed much faster than they’re prepared for, with enormous amounts of confusing information coming at them at breakneck speed. They worry that their experience and knowledge won’t translate into a world with few rules, and even fewer signposts.

But the critical question is not whether we can stop change (clearly we cannot), or whether ‘cataloging’ as we now know it will survive (it may, but most likely in smaller enclaves). The most useful questions revolve around what it is that catalogers (or in my case, former catalogers) know how to do, and how that translates into a different future. Like the librarians at the company I met in my consulting trip, many catalogers don’t really understand fully what their training and experience represents, much less what it prepares them to do. Their tendency is to think far too narrowly about both those things, thus talking themselves into a place of fear.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that this different future will not take place simply by substituting other metadata formats for MARC 21 and cutting the umbilical cord to AACR2. How we think about what we do will need to change as well. My colleague Marty Kurth, who heads the Cornell University Library’s Metadata Services Unit, has done some thinking about how the practice of metadata work differs from cataloging (he’s written a really useful article on this which is cited below but as yet unpublished). Marty argues that because catalogers generally work on items one-by-one, they’ll need to re-orient themselves towards looking at collections and projects in aggregation. This reorientation is primarily needed because of the inherent difference between the mature infrastructure underlying the catalog, and the still developing infrastructure for metadata in digital libraries.

“That catalogers do not have to consider the catalog’s context and structures before they catalog an item is thus one of the legacies of the well-documented theory and practice of the cataloging community. The digital resource metadata community, which in its best examples draws on the conceptual foundations and lessons learned from the cataloging community, does not enjoy the same heritage of delivery mechanisms (i.e., the various iterations of the library catalog), tools, and documentation that catalogers rely on in their typical record-to-collection workflows.” [1]

Marty's group, and other metadata librarians at Cornell and in similar institutions, are taking their skills in organizing information out beyond the library, assisting faculty, grant-funded projects and departments as they attempt to make materials that have not traditionally been part of the library's collections and responsibilities available to students and researchers. Some Cornell librarians (and others at institutions across the country) are working closely with faculty who have spent their professional lives amassing collections of data, teaching materials, and other resources, to ensure that the richness of these personal collections will not be scattered and lost upon their retirement, but instead organized, preserved and available to the next generation of researchers and students. This work is tremendously exciting, challenging and necessary, and those library practitioners willing to make the transition will provide the leadership for the next generation, no longer barricaded behind multiple piles of books and materials on book trucks in catalog departments. These changes have the very real potential to revitalize the practice of librarianship, and change cataloging back into "organization of information," no matter the context in which the information will be used.

So, I'm sure you've found all that very inspiring, but how do we get from here, to there? How did these individuals make the leap, and how will others gather the skills and courage to follow? Clearly, part of the answer is increased availability of training focused specifically on making that shift, so that learning new skills isn't just a question of individual initiative and a lot of flailing around on the web. There are efforts going forward to make this happen, among them a number of workshops being developed by the ALCTS Continuing Education Implementation Group [2]. Several of these were presented for the first time this Spring and Summer, and trainers are being recruited to take them on the road.

The good news here is that the courses are good (I say this immodestly, as I've developed Course 2: Metadata Standards & Applications), and use the tried and true two day workshop model developed by ALCTS several years ago to disseminate a broad range of educational offerings. The bad news is that for those without institutional support to travel and take time off for continuing education, the materials and training are unavailable (some institutions ask participants to present what they've learned locally, but most don't).

What we really need is a more broadly organized and sustained approach that addresses broader needs coupled with better use of web technologies as the basis for distribution. This is all about the Web, after all, and we should be "eating our own dog food" by developing curriculum, courses and materials designed for more flexible dissemination. This includes podcasts, screencasts, webcasts (particularly for material re-purposed from meeting and conference presentations), blogs, well-maintained reading lists, and a whole host of materials that can be used independently or in structured contexts by folks who may not have travel support or who prefer to manage their learning on their own.

Without these kinds of approaches, in addition to our traditional ones, we have less impetus to try out the new technologies and integrate them into our working lives, and fewer ways to keep up with what people are doing in these new areas. As in most

professions with close ties to information and computers, the older, print-based journals and books are still around, but no longer as central to the process of keeping up to date with newer technologies and ideas in a world where change happens more quickly than publishing schedules can accommodate.

Clearly, there are challenges around us and ahead of us, and we as a profession need to figure out how to take advantage of new media and new methods to renew our knowledge, our understanding, and our profession.

[1] Kurth, Martin. "Found in Translation: Four Characteristics of Metadata Practice." In *Metadata and the Digitization of Information: A Festschrift in Honor of Thomas P. Turner*, edited by Elaine Westbrook and Keith Jenkins. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press. (In publication.)

[2] ALCTS Continuing Education Implementation Group. Available at:
<http://www.library.cornell.edu/alcts/>