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Doing well by doing good: how libraries can reclaim their role at the center of the information universe

Over the past two decades, a tremendous gap has emerged between the media experiences delivered by consumer companies like Amazon and Apple and those delivered by the library. The reasons for this are many, including a perception by library vendors that libraries themselves move slowly and feel no sense of urgency to innovate on behalf of patrons. The ever improving consumer media experience is the biggest competitor to the role of the library in the future. There are clear steps both public and academic libraries can take to remediate this, including demanding faster innovation from vendors, finding new roles for themselves in the content value chain and finding balance between the practicalities of 'running a media business' and the larger mission of the library.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, media has been unshackled from the means of production and distribution. Something that was once difficult and expensive (getting information from point A to point B) has become relatively simple, affordable and exponentially scalable.

As information becomes more open, accessible and abundant, publishing as we know it is perishing. In a media world that is faster and increasingly mobile, libraries and academia also face brand new challenges. In many ways the library is the perfect cultural institution to manage this information abundance. But currently, libraries have very little presence in the minds of 'consumers', who under other circumstances would be 'patrons'.

Consumer media companies like Apple, Amazon and Google (that most of us love and use; dare we be tempted to make their innovation and hard work the root of the problem …) have radically changed the whole notion of media consumption. This trend will not reverse; nor should it. Never has so much information been available to so many people in so many ways for so little money.

But between the library and consumer world a huge gap has emerged. The library is not even mentioned as part of the general consumer media experience. Why? Because generally, the platforms libraries use to deliver content lag far behind the web and mobile interfaces consumers use regularly to discover and consume media of all sorts. Every day this gap widens.

How should libraries react to this? What is at risk if libraries cannot keep pace with the general media experiences being delivered by consumer companies? What is holding libraries back in terms of being a meaningful participant in engaging patrons in the manner they expect?

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> "As information becomes more open, accessible and abundant, publishing as we know it is perishing."

Reclaiming the library's place

Below are three themes/ideas on the opportunities for the library to reclaim its place at the center of a community's relationship with media. For the sake of this article, I speak

interchangeably about the role of public libraries and academic libraries. Even though the role of each may be different, the challenges and risks each face are similar enough that I see no benefit in thinking one is more important than the other in terms of long-term (economic) viability and mission.

1. The library is a user interface: escaping from Crazytown

A recent CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) *Spark* audio segment entitled *'e-Library Letdown'*[1] described the experience of journalist Peter Rukivina trying to digitally 'check out' items from his public library. The accompanying blog post was appropriately entitled *'Welcome to Crazytown: Public Libraries Confront Digital Objects'*[2].

The article reads like parody as the author explains the multiple steps, hoops and frustrations he endures to eventually end up with two DRM-free MP3 files on his desktop. The plot thickens when he tries to 'return' the audio book. It is sobering to read the experience of a 'real person' trying to make sense of current library content delivery systems.

Rukivina concludes, "As near as I have been able to determine, I may be the only person who thinks this is an absolutely crazy system for the public library-mediated circulation of digital objects… we must demand better, more rational systems from our library, if only because we're making up systems and processes here that will be with us for generations."[3]

> "The general perception among library vendors is that libraries move at a glacial pace …"

Of course, he is not the only person who thinks it is a crazy system (as substantiated in the comments to the article appearing on the same blog), but he makes clear the challenge the library has on its hands. Developing world-class media interfaces is complex, time-consuming and expensive. The development of such interfaces is not necessarily aligned with the mission or skill sets of academic institutions or libraries.

The general perception among library vendors is that libraries move at a glacial pace and that vendors don't feel they need to innovate any faster. That will change the minute libraries demand the same technology that the consumer is getting for free from companies like Apple and Amazon and then vote with their dollars to adopt that technology.

2. Leverage the long tail: libraries as publishers

By now many are familiar with the 'long tail' theory put forward by Chris Anderson in his book, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business Is Selling Less of More*[4]. The idea, in a nutshell, is that the media distribution business is no longer about 'hits', but rather is about selling small amounts of lots of things. For instance, an overwhelming number of books sold on Amazon on any given day are not even in the top 100,000 selling books on the site, which would be utterly impossible in a brick and mortar world (where even the largest stores can hold only 25,000 or so books).

As Anderson's book points out, "Up until now, the focus has been on dozens of markets of millions, instead of millions of markets of dozens."[5]

> "… high platform costs (capital), and low to non-existent variable costs … make it possible to deliver anything profitably …"

I was part of a team of people that contributed heavily to this long tail revolution as a founder of BookSurge in 2000. Amazon now uses the self-publishing and print-on-demand technology created by our company to make available millions of books around the world that they do not have to keep in inventory; books that otherwise would be out of print and unavailable to readers seeking a print copy.

Extrapolating this trend to digital distribution, Amazon, iTunes, Netflix and thousands of smaller players (including our own company) operate in a new world of high platform costs (capital), and low to non-existent variable costs that make it possible to deliver anything profitably – regardless of how small the demand for each individual item (as long as in the aggregate there are sufficient items to defray the capital cost). This is a powerful concept that can be leveraged by the library.

We have worked with the British Library in our current business (BiblioLabs) to put back into print over 65,000 19th-century books using print on demand. None of these books taken alone would have sold enough copies to justify a publication process. However, we invested the time up front to create a system that would provide 'mass customization' as the books were programmatically packaged for distribution. With this approach, we were able to publish them in an intelligent and efficient way that removed an enormous amount of cost.

Three years into the project, over 14,000 different titles have sold a little over 35,000 units. The bestseller is *The Hangman's Daughter*, which has sold 86 copies. But of the 14,000 that have sold at all, 8,000 of those have sold only a single copy.

Think, for a minute, if the only predictive data points on this project three years ago had been the following – from the publication of 65,000 books:

- less than 25% of the books will have sold even one unit

- over 60% of the books that sold at all will have sold only one unit

- the bestseller will have sold only 86 copies.

In an old way of viewing the world, bringing these books into print would have seemed a ridiculous exercise. But in a new view of the world it is a great annuity business with no ongoing overhead. The books look great and customers love them. These books, many of which had previously been out of print for over 100 years, will now be in print forever. They are available for 24-hour shipment through tens of thousands of retailers around the world. This partnership cost the British Library nothing and they receive a percentage of sales each month that, in a time of budget cuts, can go to covering project overhead.

We continue to leverage the work we did early in our partnership with the British Library by using it in collaborative digital projects as well. First, we released the British Library 19th Century Books App in 2011 with access to all 65,000 books. And more recently the same books have been curated into thematic anthologies within our BiblioBoard ecosystem launched earlier this year.

The 19th Century Books App has been downloaded over 500,000 times since launch, with tens of thousands of active users, and won a Publishing Innovation Award in 2012[6]. In an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald* entitled, 'Libraries have a bright future in our brave new world', John Birmingham wrote, "Increasingly libraries will not be about shelf space. They will still hold the past in physical form, bound between leather and cardboard. But libraries will also become places, both physical and virtual, where the public accesses information and creates meaning, in the purely digital realm. What might this look like? … It will look like the amazing app that the British Library has just put out"[7].

Our more recent collaboration on BiblioBoard received two industry awards (Publishing Innovation Award for Quality Design Excellence[8] and *Charleston Advisor* 'Best New App for Libraries'[9]). The first review of the product in the *School Library Journal* called it 'inspiring and overwhelming'[10]. In all three projects, a transparent and open partnership between private and public parties striving for the same goal created transcendent projects that work for everyone involved, including patrons.

Pushing this idea further, in the United States, thought leaders like Rush Miller of Pitt and Charles Watkinson at Purdue are leading a charge for libraries to become publishers. The Library Publishing Coalition (LPC)[11] is a group of over 50 academic libraries committed to expanding the role of the library in publishing high value streams of content.

In a sense, libraries can 'skip landlines' as they move into this publishing role. As legacy publishers try to shed the vestiges of a dying industry, libraries can step right into the tools that allow them to be effective 21st-century publishers. Tools for the simple curation and ubiquitous, global dissemination of historical archives, special collections, dissertations and theses, new publications, course materials and other multi-media exist today.

"As legacy publishers try to shed the vestiges of a dying industry, libraries can step right into the tools that allow them to be effective 21st-century publishers."

Libraries should demand publishing platform vendors who can provide both a comprehensive approach to distributing their digital content today whether text, image, audio or video, and a commitment to 'future-proofing' their systems so the end-user experience remains state of the art even as technology evolves. This will ensure the library can apply intellectual resources to editorial production and not have outdated products a year or two later. Vendors should also be agnostic as to the device and platform of the patron. A library should be able to deliver an Apple or Amazon-like experience whether the person is using an iPad, a Kindle or something else.

3. The business of doing good

Two recent studies by the Pew Research Center show how much goodwill libraries are leaving on the table in the potential relationships they could develop with patrons. The first, *Library Services in the Digital Age*[12], showed 91% of Americans think libraries are important to their communities. A second study, the *Internet & American Life Project*[13], showed 94% of parents in the United States think libraries are important for their children.

"Sustainability, in a world of shrinking budgets, is only possible through generating revenue."

First – and I say this as an American – this is a rather staggering statistic, because there is really nothing on which 94% of Americans can agree. But more importantly, how does this translate into patron engagement and quantifiable data to support the funds being invested in libraries? A start-up business would look at this and say, how do we convert that brand loyalty into financial support of our goals and ambitions? What can we give them that they would be happy to pay for?" Libraries should look at it in the exact same way.

I talk to many leaders in the library world who want libraries to be more entrepreneurial. If libraries are going to break the funding cuts and the grant-to-grant survival cycle, they must create independent sources of cost-recovery revenue. Sustainability, in a world of shrinking budgets, is only possible through generating revenue.

Consider this idea – the library as Groupon

For decades, libraries have played the role of group media buyer for their constituents and patrons. As a taxpayer, I contribute to the purchase of media by my county library. Yet, I buy all my media from Amazon and Apple. Why? Well, for many of the reasons we have talked about earlier in the article. But assuming libraries could deliver a competitive media experience, they could build a critical mass of users and negotiate completely different deals with content providers. They could demand services that would actually be better and stronger than current offerings in the marketplace. When this happens, libraries will become a powerful media co-op forcing publishers to adopt models and pricing more aligned with the modern world and expanding access to more people.

There is another reason libraries are well suited for this role. As abundance has become the norm, it is no longer the individual pieces of media, but rather the user interface and services surrounding the content that become the 'business'. The user interface guides the user to what they are interested in. There is no better definition of what a library does than this.

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Netflix or Lovefilm do not sell movies. They sell a service by which you watch movies they have licensed, organized and made available for easy viewing. Spotify provides equivalent services for music and Amazon's Kindle Online Lending Library does the same for books. All provide simple access to content in a business relationship that benefits both parties and which the 'customer' can terminate the very moment they are not happy.

There is no doubt talent exists within libraries and academia to provide similar publishing, licensing, curation and distribution services. What is required (in addition to better technology and user interfaces as outlined earlier) is a commitment by institutions to the 'business' of the long tail. This requires moving at the pace of the market and seeing

developments in overall consumer media distribution as competitive with the library and its long-term mission and role in society. To ignore this is to say that those unable to buy media on Amazon or Apple will accept a diminished user experience to access good information from a library, instead of simply bypassing the library and accepting whatever Google result they receive. Libraries should believe that at their peril.

The New York Times Book Review ran a four-page letter from Digital Public Library of America (DPLA) founder Robert Dartnon at their launch this spring. The letter laid out a grand vision for the DPLA, which is an important and fantastic project. But on the topic of sustainability, it included only a short paragraph, best summarized as 'relying on the sympathies of grant giving organizations'.[14]

> "The potential before us is immense."

If libraries are going to be more entrepreneurial, they are going to have to consider models that place their long-term survival beyond the 'sympathies' of anything out of their direct control (including tax or government funding). It shows a lack of imagination to believe running a business that generates revenue and meeting the library mission to provide content access to those who can least afford it are somehow at odds.

I also believe once a proven track record of 'seed + cost-recovery' is established, the library's ability to raise money from multiple sources will vastly increase. One need only look to the crowd-funding phenomenon to support this position.

Conclusion

Entrepreneurs are impatient by nature and this article was written from that disposition. Hopefully, the contemplative debate over a perfect answer will not win over implementation, experimentation and a loosening of the traditional lines between 'business' and 'mission' in the future role of the library. The potential before us is immense. Let's hope the right alchemy of private + public partnerships can provide solutions that place the library back at the center of the information universe. As an old friend of mine told me many years ago, you cannot walk around a swimming pool and hope to jump in at the perfect spot. You have to just jump in, and swim to the right spot.

> "… you cannot walk around a swimming pool and hope to jump in at the perfect spot. You have to just jump in, and swim to the right spot."

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