

10-1-2011

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Citation Details

Emery, Jill (2011). Heard on the Net: Fear & Self-Loathing in Libraryland. *The Charleston Advisor*. 13 (2), 61-62

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ADVISOR REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Heard on the Net

Fear & Self-Loathing in Libraryland

doi:10.5260/chara.13.2.61

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The library pundits are saying be afraid, be very afraid for your job, the future of librarianship is in peril, and hope is futile and librarians are not doing enough to maintain our professional relevance in the 21st century. These pundits speak loudly and carry catch phrases that get picked up by all our news channels and repeated over and over again. It started with the Taiga Forum in 2009 and has picked up momentum over the past three years with the latest provocative statements reeling like death knells: [<http://taigaforumprovocativestatements.blogspot.com/>],¹ the echo of these pronouncements was picked up by ARL with their envisioning research library futures: [<http://www.arl.org/rtl/plan/scenarios/index.shtml>]² and most recently the echo has been rebounding from the Education Advisory Board in their webinar entitled “Redefining the Academic Library” that is currently being presented to university provosts and administrators.³ Amidst the various concerns to be grappled with in regards to the librarian punditocracy stuck in this refrain, is that the majority of them are rhetoricians and not practitioners.

In a recent ReadWriteWeb post there was a report regarding the future Internet by UK’s national innovation agency, Technology Strategy Board. “The report defines the future Internet as ‘an evolving convergent Internet of things and services that is available anywhere, anytime as part of an all-pervasive omnipresent socio-economic fabric, made up of converged services, shared data and an advanced wireless and fixed infrastructure linking people and machines to provide advanced services to business and citizens.’” [http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/the_future_of_the_internet_is_converged_services.php]⁴

In Figure 1 illustrating the Internet development, the mix becomes machines, people and services and is labeled the Internet of People and Things. What a great space in which to be an information professional! The opportunity within this space for librarians and the library are numerous and here’s a small sampling of how librarians are already beginning to converge with their communities.

The Orbis Cascade Alliance in the Pacific Northwest is in many ways at the forefront of convergence with various initiatives currently underway.⁵ In addition to the member libraries participating in the Western Storage Trust (WEST) with the University of California and other Western U.S. institutions to create a shared print repository, a pilot project for shared demand driven e-book acquisitions is underway and so far looking like a successful way to partner with other academic institutions to leverage the buying power for patron requested material. The Alliance is also proceeding with a RFP for a shared ILS and has begun to share cataloging expertise of non-Indo-European language material starting with CJK languages (Chinese, Japanese, Korean). What the Alliance exemplifies is leveraged expertise can be capitalized upon to reward multiple institutions. [<http://www.orbis-cascade.org/index/strategic-agenda>]

In 2010, the University of Calgary created a new campus unit entitled: Libraries and Cultural Resources bringing together the University Li-

brary, Archives, Special Collections, The Nickle Arts Museum, and the University of Calgary Press under one administrative unit.⁶ The purpose of this organizational change is to “provide a key strategic advantage to researchers and makes information - regardless of format - readily available.” [<http://lcr.ucalgary.ca/>] Instead of each individual component having to compete for budgetary resources, now there is a single management structure for supporting scholarship and learning at the University of Calgary.

HathiTrust is a prime example of the convergence of librarians to leverage not only resources but expertise to provide shared collections and a digital framework for ongoing preservation of information resources.⁷ Their announcement last year regarding the tracking down of copyright permissions for orphan works speaks to the core values of our profession. [http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/home/887388-264/hathitrusts_copyright_detectives.html.csp]⁸ However, the Authors Guild begs to differ and has now brought a copyright infringement lawsuit against HathiTrust for the “unauthorized use” of copyrighted works and even questions the security of the digital files.⁹ [<http://chronicle.com/blogs/ticker/authors-guild-sues-hathitrust-5-universities-over-digitized-books/36178#top>] This is definitely a development to watch to see which is the greater crime, the proposed breach of copyright or the “intolerable digital risk.”

LOCKSS/CLOCKSS is yet another example of how librarians have converged with scholarly publishers in order to provide collective management of electronic resources to maintain digital access to resources.¹⁰ [<http://www.lockss.org/lockss/Home>]

Last but not least, the one rhetorical theme that has been overplayed and potentially does some of the greatest harm to our profession is the continued call for the reduction of professionals dedicated to cataloging library resources. Calling for any one arm of a profession to be diminished is a threat to the profession as a whole; noses and faces come to mind as a metaphor here. This theme is usually paired with the supposed “capability” to outsource the work these professionals perform. It is time the pundits learned that the reason why OCLC provides the largest catalog of resources is by and large due to the fact that our catalogers contributed the majority of the records found there. It can be argued that WorldCat is the single greatest achievement of convergence by librarians. WorldCat did not spring fully populated from the heads of the OCLC board of directors. Once this segment of our profession is minimized then the contributions for quality metadata also diminishes to all the initiatives listed above. OCLC does not hire enough personnel to perform the cataloging for every major academic research library in the United States of America. Furthermore, in their own words, OCLC laid off personnel in 2010 partly in response to the budgetary declines at the institutions utilizing OCLC.

[<http://www.tmcnet.com/usubmit/2010/06/02/4822558.htm>]¹¹

The argument that vendor supplied records are “good enough” has been proved time and time again to be untrue. In fact, this is one area

where it has been shown that Google™ does not trump libraries. The access problems that have been outlined with Google™Books have shown this first hand [<http://chronicle.com/article/Googles-Book-Search-A/48245/>]¹² and even more recently, Rick Anderson pointed out that a part of the implementation problems with the Espresso Book Machine at the University of Utah was due to bad metadata; “The real problem with search in EspressoNet isn’t the inflexibility of the interface, but the abominable quality of its metadata, much of which comes from Google Books.”

[<http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2011/08/02/the-good-the-bad-and-the-sexy-our-espresso-book-machine-experience/>]¹³

If MARC is to be replaced by a RDA-friendly container, our colleagues who are most proficient with metadata standards and controls will be needed more than ever.¹⁴

Librarians and library administrators in the 21st century do need to make changes and it comes as a no shock to any practitioner that many of these changes are underway. The core values of our profession are as relevant as ever and there are many more opportunities to be explored than threats to our existence. Now if we can get the punditocracy to pay more attention to convergent efforts underway as opposed to lamenting the loss of our 20th century practices; the rhetoric can catch up with the practice. ■

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