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In Praise of Librarians

By John Lombardi October 19, 2011 4:01 pm EDT

I had a chance to participate in a recent meeting of the Association of Research Libraries, the famous ARL.

Before commenting, let me clarify how I come to praise librarians. I am not neutral on this subject. When engaged in real academic work, I am a historian, and historians of my ancient generation lived dependent on our librarians. Moreover, my life as a reader began in the Carnegie Library in my neighborhood of Los Angeles, where periodic visits showed me the miracle of discovering books I could read on the shelves of the stacks and later the serendipitous pleasures of the multiple drawers of a card catalog. Mother and sister, librarians, and my career as a college student and then academic historian dependent on a succession of exceptionally able and wise librarians, conditioned me to turn often to the library and its people for guidance.

So I come to today's digitally confused world of information from what is now a reasonably obsolete perspective. When I agreed to show up at a library meeting, I expected to be unhappy with the new digital universe and

dismayed by the changes in my beloved library world. Fortunately for my psychic tranquility, the librarians are ahead of me, they are on the case, they are transforming our world of information with creativity and imagination.

These ARL librarians, no doubt like their counterparts elsewhere in the academic library universe, understand that they have been called to deal with a host of exceptionally difficult challenges associated with the transformation of our information universe. They know that we expect them to continue to manage the libraries as places of record for the physical artifacts of our intellectual world, books, journals, manuscripts, some of which may well be digitized, but others not. Some of these may be digitized badly, and we'll need to do it again when our technology gets better. We want them to collect these materials today and tomorrow as they did yesterday, but we also know that we have less money to support those collections. Recognizing the dilemma, the librarians work to construct methods for collaborating on collections, identifying what materials everyone needs and what objects only some libraries, archives, or special collections need. This strategy, easy to say but difficult to implement, will nonetheless permit the objects to exist in a physical form somewhere if needed, but not everywhere, leaving digital versions to serve us wherever we are unless we have a special reason to inspect the actual artifact.

The librarians also know that the traditional handicraft tasks of the library require constant and continuous modification to match advances in computing power and tools. They also know that for all the versatility of technology, it does not necessarily adapt to the purposes of scholarship without intervention applied by librarians and others. They struggle with new methodologies, trying them out in difficult university contexts and reporting on their successes and failures to their colleagues to inform the development of what will surely become standardized tools for the management of information.

They know that our information world, previously limited by physical constraints of time, space, and expertise, is now limitless, bounded only by bandwidth. This data-rich environment, which looks endlessly attractive from some perspectives, holds dangers and challenges. When we can see and keep everything in some digital form, how will we know what is valuable, important, and worthy of curating and managing? Some believe the search engine is the new daemon of relevance and selection, capable of sorting the important from the ephemeral, but our librarians know that search without purpose or criteria produces more chaff than wheat. We can Google for a zillion hits in seconds, but as our librarians remind us, most of those results are irrelevant or worse, plain wrong. Does a visit with the ARL librarians produce the sense of calm that comes from confidence in the stability of knowledge and authority? No. But the ARL librarians and their colleagues give us confidence of another sort. It is the confidence of observing expertise applied to important and significant issues; the confidence derived from engaging people who know what they are doing both for themselves and for us. They do not have all the answers or even all the

questions, but they ride the wave of technological and informational transformations with the commitment of professionals, without fear of the future.

I left the meeting happy, when I expect to leave discouraged. I do not have to worry about these issues myself, it turns out, because these librarians have the problems and the opportunities well in hand.

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