
Are We There Yet?: Facing the Never-Ending Speed and Change of Technology in Midlife

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ABSTRACT

THIS ESSAY IS A PERSONAL REFLECTION on entering librarianship in middle age at a time when the profession, like society in general, is experiencing rapidly accelerating change. Much of this change is due to the increased use of computers and information technologies in the library setting. These aids in the production, collection, storage, retrieval, and dissemination of the collective information, knowledge, and sometimes wisdom of the past and the contemporary world can exhilarate or burden depending on one's worldview, the organization, and the flexibility of the workplace. This writer finds herself working in a library where everyone is expected continually to explore and use new ways of working and providing library service to a campus and a wider community. No time is spent in reflecting on what was, but all efforts are to anticipate and prepare for what will be.

INTRODUCTION

One of the strange and whimsical things about entering a profession in middle age is that one's baggage is very different from that of those who were socialized into the profession while young. I became a librarian just as library literature was blossoming with laments about the demise of traditional librarianship. Would reference work disappear? Is copy-cataloging a proper choice? Do we need more or less storage space? Are we all suffering from burnout? Even those who were putting into print their worries and their advice about ameliorating the consequences of change seemed to be contributing to the uneasiness and uncertainty. Self-fulfilling prophecy is a strong force and one which seems to be dissipating in this decade. Other occupational groups were and are undergoing similar technological

changes and are not generating as much angst about the technology itself. This angst seems to have lessened in the last year or so, but was very much in the literature and electronic discussion groups in the 1990s.

The very thing which attracted me seemed to be the source of heightening anxiety. I became a librarian just as the electronic age of librarianship was coming into full bloom. I am not experienced, nor perhaps burdened with having practiced librarianship any differently than I do now. The baggage I carry includes studying and teaching about human development and a personality which enjoys novelty and constructing intellectual, physical, and virtual objects. I confess to an academic bent, already possessing three degrees before adding the master's in library and information science in 1993.

In fact, I have truly enjoyed every job I have had. My work life has been spent in academia where I taught at all levels from preschoolers through medical residents, working in the U.S. and Australia. Along the way, I did paid and unpaid library literature reviews for several researchers because I enjoy the process. I never felt I was leaving a job or occupation because it was no longer satisfying, but instead I felt I was taking advantage of new opportunities and ways to contribute that built on past experiences. Perhaps some might say that I was not as committed to a single occupation as I should have been, although I am very committed to my discipline. Human development is my discipline, and all my jobs, including my current occupation, have been about understanding how humans develop over their life spans and about assisting them with the academic and intellectual part of that journey.

After living in Australia for a number of years, we reached a point where we needed to decide to stay or return to the U.S. Family responsibilities pulled toward the U.S., while love of the Outback kept us in its thrall. We finally decided to return and then planned for our reentry. One thing I had long had on my list to do one day was add a degree in library and information science. As there seemed to be many library reference jobs advertised in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in the early 1990s, we decided that I pursue an M.L.S. while we were deciding where to live. I completed the degree in eleven months in 1993, started my present job three weeks later, and have not felt the need to go on to something new. Shortly after I became a reference librarian, one of my sisters commented, "Well, I see you are finally doing what Mother suggested while you were in high school."

THE SITUATION

I wonder and marvel at what is possible because of computer technology in libraries. How many times do most workers in this world get to construct their own job descriptions? Librarians are fortunate that the ever-changing technologies with which we work are not immutable but allow our jobs to be described not in tasks, but in products and services produced by

skills and tools which are forever evolving. My job description is very short. Essentially it says that I am the reference librarian and that I provide research services, ready reference, and instruction to the college. The details change from day to day and minute to minute. Thank goodness.

Perhaps some of the anxiety being expressed in the library literature of the 1990s was due to job descriptions. The very narrow, uninspired job requirements, which are said to stultify workers and cause burnout, could be eliminated. Narrow job descriptions involving a limited set of tasks are (or in my opinion, should be) replaced with the possibility of using, matching, and changing tools and tasks to accomplish the larger goals of librarianship. These are collecting, organizing, preserving, and providing access to cumulative knowledge, all the time teaching about the process, its importance, and the uses of this knowledge. What could be more intellectual fun than creating and solving the puzzles these tasks involve? Yes, there are legitimate worries about budget, space, and materials, but I do like the tools at our disposal to create and solve these problems and provide service to our users. I often wonder if job descriptions or control and separation of tasks into fiefdoms may have created the milieu in which people became uncertain about their work identity in midlife.

A day hardly passes without our automation software, the Internet, or some productivity application providing an example of a new way to solve a problem, create a new product or service, answer a query, accomplish a task, or to make one of these possible as it never was before. Whenever one can make a machine or its instructions work in new ways, one can be reassured that no HAL (from *2001: A Space Odyssey*) or similar machine will organize our world and work for us.

We all repeat the platitude that change is threatening, unnerving, exhausting (take your pick). In the same breath we should also be saying that growth (like progress) is change, while remembering that the opposite is not always so. Change will occur. Therefore, we must do our best to make change be growth and progress. I sometimes wonder why a profession which espouses lifelong learning for its clients has some practitioners who worry so about their own requirement to be lifelong learners. One change I am pleased to see is that in the time I have been thinking and working on this essay, library literature is moving away from the anxiety about new technologies and is focusing more on ways to stay ahead of the curve and to lead lifelong learners in innovative ways.

The recent book *Faster* (Gleick, 1999) is a thoughtful analysis of the acceleration of change, particularly technological change. While casting a critical eye and pen (word processor) on the subject, he also acknowledges that change just "is." Some genies cannot be reinserted in their bottles. While technological change is wafting its seductive perfume in the genie's smoke, the degree to which we get a whiff varies. How many people, not usually librarians, who lament the card catalog are avid users of the televi-

sion remote control? I suppose there is technology and there is technology; work versus leisure use. Just as we endeavor to teach our library users the underlying principles of asking questions that can be answered, along with those for locating, evaluating, and using information, we might apply the same techniques to ourselves and our interactions with new technologies and methods. What can this do for me and my job in broad as well as narrow terms?

I wonder also how many of us can define the "traditional values" that are supposedly being lost to change and to technology in libraries. When in library school, I asked this question and did not get a satisfactory reply. The library literature is no help. There is very little mention of the phrase in scholarly papers, and even in these the phrase is not well defined. I suspect that we librarians are just as guilty as most in remembering a past which did not exist. Traditional values probably involved gate-keeping more than expanding users' horizons. What I perceived as traditional values of librarianship before I became a library professional are values that may not have been intended as such.

My own experience as a lifelong library user is probably not unique. I had my own library card before I started school. The sweet, stereotypical, small-town librarian spent a lot of energy keeping me away from material which was "too old" for me because she knew my "liberal" parents would not. I still recall the day I was allowed into the adult section without a parent present. In high school, I was a member of the library club, so I learned by helping others find reading material. In reality we were more study hall proctors than library assistants. As a university freshman, I recall being thoroughly intimidated by the surly, arrogant student workers who guarded the closed stacks at the main library. I wanted to learn more about many things, and I would not wish to duplicate for my student patrons or other library users those first stumbling efforts to figure out the enormous card catalog and fill in the request perfectly, only to be sent away because I had missed some bit of information on the request card. There were no bibliographic information sessions, just a tour. I fled to one of the branch libraries with its open stacks, which I came to know well, but I do not recall talking with any librarian beyond checking out items. The only time I went back to the main library was if an assignment required an item which could only be found there.

In graduate school, I acquired the privilege of having a carrel in the stacks. There I experimented and taught myself the basics of library research with no assistance from a reference librarian. None was available. ERIC was a relatively new technological advance. I stood before a tall reference desk window to ask how one went about getting an ERIC search done and was told to fill out a form and come back in ten days. There was no offer of assistance in forming the question or choosing some subject headings and key terms. I came back to get the printout of largely useless citations, and

no one asked if the finds appeared useful. I believe these recollections are probably similar to those of a significant number of faculty members of my generation who do not appreciate what the librarian can do to help.

I make the next observation cautiously because I do not want to be drummed out of the profession I thoroughly enjoy. I think one of the stresses of technology in libraries is that it is forcing librarians to really provide full service for what may be the first time. If we (our society and the publishing industry) are going to store important search tools (indexes) and full-text documents electronically on a universal scale, we have to know how to use them and how to teach their use. Library users are certain to ask for assistance. I believe that we must help people with the software and hardware so that they, and we, get to the core issue—finding the desired information. This is a central, hopefully traditional, value of librarianship in action.

We live in a consumer society that is growing continually, and people really do need more help, in spite of the hype which leads the unsuspecting to believe that everything is end-user intuitive and compatible. Because our society, including librarians, is composed of neophytes experiencing the increasing rate of change, someone must accept responsibility for serving those in need. Librarians say we are best equipped to fill this important service role, so we should get on with less anxiety and a bit of bravado.

Whenever I see discussion on various library e-mail groups about the number of hours one is assigned to the reference desk as if that is an impediment to getting real work done, it makes me sputter. I suppose it is a response to the demands of learning and teaching with and about library technology.

I believe that most reference librarians should be “on the reference desk” most of the time. I am available for reference work whenever I am in the building, and someone can find me even if I am away from the reference desk that is my scholar’s workstation. I do much of my reading, writing, and committee work at the reference desk. I do not have a computer in my office, which is adjacent to the desk. As well as modeling scholarly and professional behavior for students by working where they can see me, I also get to observe and keep up-to-date on campus activities. I can keep my eye on students who may be tentative in learning to use the tools and can approach to help.

As much as I enjoy hunting for information, helping people articulate their needs, guiding them to think about the ethics, politics, and economics of information as well as the specific information they are seeking, I must admit to becoming bothered by some of what I see from this vantage point. I rarely become irritated with the person in front of me, but I do get cross at the lack of guidance provided by some instructors and the results of the hype in the media about information access. I then must remind myself that we are all victims of the idea that information is easy to locate and that people will intuitively know how to seek, find, select, organize, and use information. An instructor in library school often said, “people are not born

knowing how . . .,” and she was correct. In the intervening time, the news media has succeeded in convincing people that the young automatically know how to use computers for academic pursuits, and consequently teachers teach less about the information process, while it has become more complex.

Another source of anxiety involves the concept of professionalism. If one expects to be treated as a professional, one should act like one. By definition, professionals are those who follow skilled or learned occupations, are motivated by the challenges of their jobs, and desire to serve their communities and their disciplines. They have a vocation or strong calling to do what they do and often the ability to facilitate what others want to do. I consider myself a professional who came to this particular profession in middle age. I want my work to be valued and to be considered worthy of being found by all our users who expect professional service. Again, I wonder if job descriptions and bureaucracies continue to be impediments to true professionalism in librarianship. Regarding oneself as professional may mean changing some of the barriers within the job before those outside the occupation will respond. Considering myself a professional librarian allows me to teach, to guide, and to assist novice and full-fledged scholars, thereby contributing to the larger virtual and real intellectual and physical worlds. And that is the kind of stress which invigorates and sustains focus in this increasingly fascinating occupation.

In conclusion, I must say that we are not quite there yet. Since beginning this essay, the speed of technological change in our library continues to accelerate as it does everywhere. That is good, because I believe that being at the forefront of the changes on our campus will keep the library relevant and librarians among the valued service and educational providers. The opportunities to do new and even more interesting tasks involves the college portal, where a partial facsimile of Vannevar Bush's scholar's workstation (Bush, 1945) is starting to take shape. The library and its resources, course materials, personal schedules, etc. are an important part of this idea, still in its infancy. Certainly there is a bit of stress, as we sometimes say, "of course, there is probably a way to do that on your portal account, and we'll get back to you shortly" to a faculty person on the phone, and then scramble to figure out how as soon as we put down our phones. But it is truly personally and professionally satisfying to be part of the academic and cultural process to use information and information technologies to augment what we already do while working at the place where people and books (or their surrogates) touch—the library. That has not and should not change, so in a sense we are almost there.

REFERENCES

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