
Cultural Tenacity within Libraries and Publishers

MICHAEL JENSEN

ABSTRACT

Libraries and book publishers coevolved during the period of information scarcity, and developed cultural traits that are affecting their strategies in the new era of content abundance. Both industries are under threat. The author examines the interdependencies, the similarities, and the different agendas of the two cultures; explores likely speciation within the new ecosystems; and frames reasons for both optimism and concern for the near future.

Libraries and publishers need each other to survive, as we evolve in the next five years. We've spent a century developing a codependent ecosystem, which has strengths that are important, but that are not necessarily robust. Both industries, in the era of vast book and content repositories, and the more general environment of content abundance, could be made functionally moot, if we each simply go our merry way.

I've been working the tectonic shifts of the digital world since the late '80s; I helped build Project Muse, back in the mid-90s, and I've participated in the many earthquakes in book publishing since then, at the National Academies Press (NAP), the first book publisher to make its material openly accessible online (in 1994).

The biggest shifts we're facing now are the standard litany: the technical revolutions (the shift from dial-up to broadband, the rise of plug-and-play Web software, the explosion of connected devices), and the social revolutions ("content is king" to "comments are king," social networking, new forms of "web authority," the move from information scarcity to information abundance). I won't dwell on those, nor predict whether e-ink or web-on-a-placemat or virtual avatar software might be the next big thing to affect libraries and publishers.

Instead, I want to simply compare and contrast, from the perspective of twenty years in the publishing and digital world, the cultures of libraries and publishers. Each point below is quibblable, depending on sector, profit vs. nonprofit, public vs. academic, etc. But I think the broad strokes are necessary, to get at the characteristics of our two cultures, and how they will be challenged by the fundamental elements. Then I'll use that broad brush to paint some landscapes, regarding the book within the content abundance environment, and within our two cultures.

CULTURAL FRAMEWORKS

Libraries are pragmatist socialists. They treat every book as functionally equal, and in need of consistent, fairhanded organization, in order to maximize utility for their users.

Publishers are pragmatic capitalists. They want to actively promote their books as better-than, newest-of, best-written, most-discipline-changing . . . all the better to sell it. They want a meritocracy, because they believe they're the best judges of what the marketplace (of ideas, of products) wants.

Library systems don't understand customers, they understand users and patrons. They receive their budget, and make good use of it, but without economic feedback, there can be no "customers." While certainly there's been a move to boost "service" in recent years, it's not fundamental to the culture—in fact, the restrictions to retaining personal data on patrons prevents customer-centricity.

Publishers don't understand customers, they understand markets. Historically, almost no publisher has sold more than a few percent of their books directly to individuals. The marketplace of salespeople, distributors, wholesalers, libraries, and bookstores was where 95+ percent of the sales were made. There were virtually no drivers for true "customer service" to the individual, and thus that skill set isn't much valued within publishing culture.

Librarians are organizers, fine-grained catalogers, topic identifiers, but are not raters of quality. Apart from personal assistance, library systems don't say which Civil War history is "best," only what array of holdings are available. They believe in deep, fair metadata.

Publishers try to be raters of quality (in order to acquire authors), but have little interest in fine-grained categorizations, since it limits the marketplace. (If that Civil War history is bought by sociologists, all the better.)

Publishers don't want to take risks, because the penalty for failure is so high. Conversely, libraries are expected to take continuous, calculated risks, but with other people's money, and without much penalty for failure.

Most publishers fail at providing high-quality reading experiences online because we don't understand customers, only markets. They put reading barriers up to their potential purchasers, push people off to Amazon or Barnes and Noble to purchase, and do little more than allow a peek at their precious resource. This, in a world of content abundance, with the rest of the open world as competition. Further, they don't historically "do" technology, whether printing, binding, or XML, so they don't have creative technologists on staff.

Most libraries fail at providing high-quality reading experiences online because they don't understand customers, only users, patrons, and metadata. Nearly every library-generated online reading experience I've had provides an interface that only a librarian could love. The ones that are interesting, engaging, and compelling are generally built outside both of our communities.

So, now that I've alienated every publisher and librarian out there, let me address how this will likely affect the near future—the next five years—of libraries and tangentially, publishers.

PHYSICAL VS. DIGITAL

Physical centralization—be it via bookstores, or via the stacks—of resources is no longer necessary, nor terribly rational economically. But both our cultures were developed in response to physical centralization and content scarcity, developing complex and elegant solutions to problems that no longer exist.

Digital centralization of resources, however, has been shown to be economically smart. Those digital resources can be a library's holdings, or special collections, or Amazon, or Google Book Search, or Open Content Alliance (OCA), or the National Academies Press's 3,700+ free online books.

Fundamentally, twenty years from now, I don't think that publishers or libraries are likely to exist as we currently understand them. We can limp along without much change for probably ten years, since print books will appeal to a sufficiently large population that we will still be reshelving books, and taking returns from bookstores, in 2018. But that doesn't mean that libraries or publishers will be maximizing our missions if we continue to maintain our existing cultures. And, we'll be ensuring that we become ever-more tangential.

Nor am I sanguine that our existing cultures, if carried forward, could avoid being made moot: nearly all of the changes necessary depend on something our cultures are bad at: *attention to the personal—the customer, the citizen, the individual*. Publishers, like libraries, need to spend the next five years understanding the nature of their relationships with individuals. For libraries, that means recognizing that folksonomies may matter more than

taxonomies, and figuring out how to maintain privacy while harvesting the wisdom of their crowds, all the while dealing with physical and digital repositories. For publishers, it means giving their readers something in return for their attention, their bloglinks, and their ratings. It means attending to specific individuals who care about the kind of books the publisher produces.

In a world of vastness, islands—even small continents—of confirmed quality will bring visitors. That said, any island can become isolated.

Both cultures need to accept that our respective existing cultures, even our respective DNAs, may not be optimally suited for this new digital environment. Rethinking fundamentals is not easy for either culture, but is fundamentally required to prosper in this new environment.

SPECIATION, WHEN ECOSYSTEMS CHANGE

The hardest part, for publishers and libraries, is change. It's harder still, when we're not sure exactly where the culture should be going.

In nature, what happens when ecosystems change is speciation and extinction. That's evolution, and we're in it. Our climate has changed—is changing—and we all want to survive.

I expect we'll see dramatically divergent strategies in the next five years: publishers who, like the NAP, leverage openness, digital opportunities, and customer service to maintain sustainability; publishers who find small niches with deep pockets and nurture relationships; publishers who broadcast content with advertising paying the bills; publishers who focus exclusively on the exclusivity of print. We'll see public libraries keeping voluntary databases to assist predictive customer desires; corporate libraries going all-digital and applying domain-specific search tools for their patrons, and providing tailored alert services; and commercial, vertical-market libraries charging for access to specific high-value or rare resources. And both publishers and libraries will be battered and delighted by the increasingly sophisticated tools provided by Google, OCA, Thomson, JSTOR, Nokia, Apple, the open source community, and more. That's all happening now, but we're just toddlers, learning to walk.

THE LIMITS OF SPECIATION

I'm not sure that speciation will be wholly sufficient to sustain the "quality ecosystem" that results from our current cultural habits around books—regarding selection, quality assurance, organization, and filtration. Nor am I hopeful that either camp will be flexible enough to make change. But if we speciate too far, we may tatter the codependencies we've evolved over the last hundred years: the silent, virtuous conspiracy to select, centralize, archive, and distribute quality content. I'm not sure that's a good thing.

Successful speciation can lead to eventual extinction just as easily as success. We must respond to the overall environmental change—not just this year’s new niche, which may be transitory. We need to shift our ecosystem’s interdependencies, as well as our individual responses to the environmental change.

In my best hopes, a new kind of virtuous relationship between book publishers and libraries arises, one that takes advantage of the most positive elements of both cultures and helps expand the proportionate use of valuable content within the vast repository world.

Even—perhaps especially—with massive content abundance, the intellectual selection and filtration done by both publishing and library cultures has significant value. The unique characteristics of long-form publication itself are worthwhile for significant audiences worldwide. The information-centralizing value of libraries, especially of physically shared items, will still be important. The care and tending of authors’ works will still matter.

In an ideal future, we’d be able to harvest the collective intelligence of all the smart people working in our fields, *especially* because we have a world of information abundance and a billion people who might be really happy to have the advice of thousands of librarians and publishers.

Perhaps we can go a step further: Academic and public libraries, as a collective enterprise, might produce an “academic *del.icio.us*” system—perhaps Scholarlicious—that they encourage their readers, their scholars, their grad students, and their students to use by making it a really wonderful system.

Make it public, make it voluntary, make it open, and give it an API. Make sure each participant is identified as an individual, with all sorts of individually tailorable tools. Allow branded widgets from the API, allowing “university brands” or “community brands” or even “company brands.” This would allow communities to bolt on specific add-ons to the basic data set for all sorts of things: “what Toledo’s reading and liking,” “what Indiana University was watching today,” “what articles on bat collapse have been read by more than 100 grad students or professors” and “what books on the Civil War have been checked out the most in the public library systems.”

Further, this gives publishers something to explore—identify trends, upcoming writers, the zeitgeist—and to make publishing decisions to sell high-quality physical or digital versions. And it gives them something to participate in. Book publishers market books, and thus can affect the quality of what is marketed. What is marketed tends to have a gamble behind it. That’s a very high-value tag: not just a vote in blogspace, but a giant vote with investment. Without publishers, libraries’ scalpels would be blunted.

Right now social tagging is almost exclusively in the private sector, except for a few local experiments. That’s natural speciation, but if we are

to sustain a virtuous ecosystem between the publishing and library industries, we need to consciously adapt together.

With a Scholarlicious system, the academic, scholarly, and reading communities could become actively beneficial social networks, conferring authority and quality by its collective, selective attention.

THE FINAL METAPHOR

For tens of thousands of years, the expansive High Plains was a gigantic ecosystem of prairie grass and buffalo, ideally suited for low rainfall and weather extremes. It had survived, even prospered, in an environment of water scarcity. As Timothy Egan writes in *The Worst Hard Time*, the late 1920s was a period of seemingly boundless prosperity. New machines made it really easy to plow the High Plains sod under, for a few years of bumper-crop wheat, corn, and turnips. Within a decade, the winds and weather were blowing mountainous black clouds of High Plains dust as far as the mid-Atlantic.

We need to be careful how we plow this new frontier of sod. There are lots of ways we can proactively respond as individual sectors within the information ecosystems that are evolving. But we should also recognize and promote the valuable interdependencies that have developed over the last century.

Publishers and libraries—selectors, producers, collectors, organizers, and disseminators—should acknowledge their mutual dependence. Each sector could be made moot by the book aggregation, repository, social networking, scholarly tagging, and open content initiatives. And our culture would be the poorer for it, I believe.

Librarians and publishers are professionals, paid to intellectually engage with content and ensure the availability of ideas to our society. We currently add value beyond “the repository,” and we can in the future, as long as we work together to sustain what we currently value: an ecosystem of organized, sustainable quality that can weather extremes of all kinds.

In 2007 Michael Jensen was appointed director of strategic web communications for the Office of Communications of the National Academies and National Academies Press. Prior to this appointment, he served as director of web communications for the National Academies (2002–7), and director of publishing technologies (1998–2007) at the National Academies Press. This pioneering website makes more than 3,700 books (more than 650,000 pages) from the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, the Institute of Medicine, and the National Research Council fully browsable and searchable online for free (www.nap.edu).