

“Between Now and 2020, Libraries Should...”

By: Stephen Rhind-Tutt

The digital forces affecting libraries are inexorable and getting stronger. They’re driven by industries outside our own – such as telecommunications, law, travel, advertising, software, and retailing. Products and services like the iPhone, Amazon.com, e-discovery, and Google drive new innovations and devices and condition all of us to expect more.

This can make us feel as if we’re no longer in charge of our own destiny. But it’s true only if we chose strategies that ignore or are in conflict with these forces. If we accept that these forces are part of our environment, then we’re free to evolve in new ways.

These forces are largely predictable. For example, in ten years:

- Will the amount of information increase or decrease?
- Will Google improve its search capabilities and add more content?
- Will Wikipedia improve its authoritativeness?
- Will remote education increase or decrease in popularity?
- Will computers and bandwidth be cheaper or more expensive?
- Will labor and space get cheaper or more expensive?
- Will the functionality of digital content improve or decrease?
- Will we become more or less international in our perspectives?

The answer to each of these questions is self-evident. Yet we continue to behave as if these forces are going to go away or stay static. Libraries continue to invest in physical media. They create multiple instantiations of the same catalog record. Some librarians prefer to disparage Blogs, Wikipedia, Google, Facebook, *et al* rather than work out how to build on them.

Organizations and initiatives that embraced these forces years ago show us that it’s not only possible for us to respond, but that in responding we can shine.

- In 2000, OCLC’s mission¹ ran to 7 lines beginning “Establish, maintain and operate a computerized library network and to promote the evolution of library use...” To the outside it seemed like a cataloging company, threatened by the emergence of the Web. Its current mission² is distilled from the original to “Connecting people to knowledge through library cooperation.” Clear thinking

¹ OCLC’s Mission from March 2000 can be found at <http://web.archive.org/web/20000301164556/www.oclc.org/oclc/menu/mission.htm>

² Captured on 12/7/09 at <http://www.oclc.org/about/mission/default.htm>

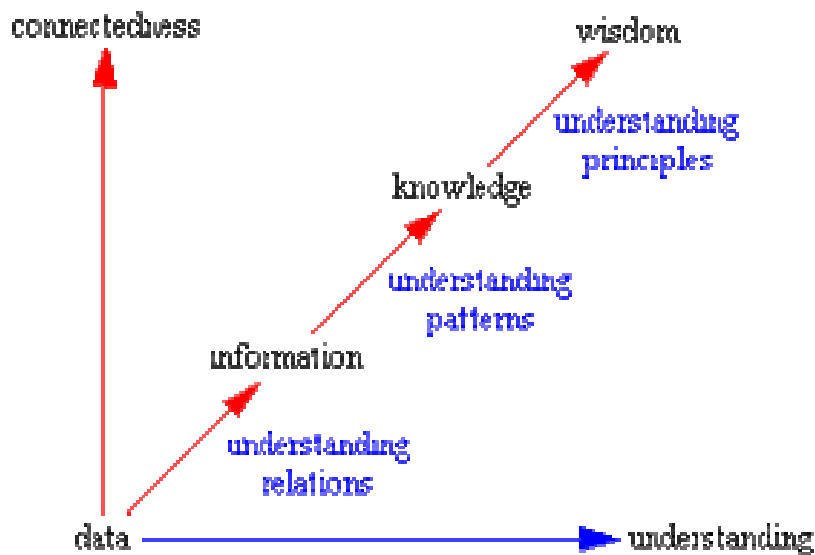
about where the Web is headed, what OCLC's unique advantages were and how they fit together allowed them to reinvent themselves.

- PhilPapers, LibGuides, LibraryThing, NINES, The OAISter, DoHistory, The Roman de la Rose Digital Library are just a few examples of smaller projects that are aligned with the inexorable forces we all face.

The value that libraries bring is obscured by their physical presence, by their history, and even by their name. It is easy to think that the value of libraries will disappear when we think in these terms. If we think instead of the projects above, it becomes clear just how much libraries can contribute.

Libraries and publishers are both engaged in an effort to make it easy for all of us to be wise. Content is not an end in and of itself. Its value is in how it educates, how it entertains, how it helps us understand. It's about allowing each of us to communicate across space and time. Computers, like books before them, can help us in this, but they're a long way from taking over.

Russell Ackoff, a systems theorist and professor of organizational change, posited that the content of the human mind can be organized as follows³:



The graphic⁴ makes clear just how far we have to go before machines will replace us.

³ Ackoff, R. L., "From Data to Wisdom", Journal of Applied Systems Analysis, Volume 16, 1989 p 3-9.

⁴ From Data, Information, Knowledge, and Wisdom, by Gene Bellinger, Durval Castro, Anthony Mills. www.systems-thinking.org. Captured 12/7/09.

Yes, the mission of libraries has clear overlap with Google, but there is so much more to do for libraries.

In 2020 this will be more evident than it is today. Scholars in disciplines ranging from the analysis of traffic to the study of climate will either notice that no one curated the data they now need, or be thankful to librarians. Students will either drown in an avalanche of information, or be thankful that there are librarians to help guide them through it. Academics will grow to realize that if they use the same tools in the same way as everyone else they will discover little, and they'll be thankful for librarians who show them how to achieve more. Librarians will realize that they need to participate and help automate every aspect of the research process, from data collection, to analysis, to distribution.