

**FUTUREtakes**

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### From the Desk of Tim Mack, President, World Future Society



This is another *FUTUREtakes* column where I summarize one of the briefings that WFS regularly does for organizations around the world concerning issues and trends affecting them. Recently, the Southeast Florida Library Information Network held a conference to address the challenges in libraries and WFS delivered the keynote. While incremental improvements of library workflow, user services, technologies, innovation strategies, and branding may have been sufficient for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the level of social interactivity and complexity has grown to the point where broadening the vision of libraries' futures is imperative, if only to better understand their present.

James Billington, Librarian of Congress, has been backing a World Digital Library (WDL) [www.worlddigitallibrary.org](http://www.worlddigitallibrary.org) initiative, launched through a partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and its 190 member countries. Google gave USD3,000,000 to build the launch prototype of the WDL which was recently displayed to UNESCO in Paris. The initial version will be free and in seven languages (English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Arabic, and Portuguese). It allows content searches by time, geography, topic, and format (including books, photographs, movies, audio recordings, musical scores, architectural drawings, and maps). Unfortunately, Google's independent National Library Project has already seen complaints about poor scan quality, faulty metadata, and truncated access to the public domain, so the process may not be smooth.

This WDL is expected to offer content to users by early 2009 (starting with a few hundred thousand US items) and build from there as other countries digitize and upload their own content. Other supporting partners include Egypt's Bibliotheca Alexandrina, but there are also opponents, including France and some developing countries, who feel that the US has long been dominating the Internet to spread its own culture. Other points of WDL contention include: finances, design, national and global politics, privatization or nationalization of the Internet, cultural variations (among a range of preservation techniques and philosophies), and the necessary political will to complete the project.

But it is not just a world library that is facing challenges, and they go all the way down to the local level. For example, there are a range of major trends and challenges that affect US libraries, including:

**Technology:** Libraries as 'thriving technology hubs' is a strong and positive image for local planners, but the cost of continued updating and enhancement of those hubs is a financial and logistic struggle. The shift of many library users into the virtual world seems to require libraries to follow and support these users, especially the younger ones. Digital content on demand is certainly one step up from lending DVDs, but nowhere near the demands required by full digital data curation: This includes digital

preservation, metadata creation, and data validation of a constantly expanding digital universe. And many cataloguing issues are still matters of intense discussion, such as the comparability of semantic and ontological definitions of data sets.

One critical question is, how wide a range of services can libraries afford to deliver to users on Mobile Devices? Offering free WiFi use in library space is only a first step. Librarians in Second Life, e.g. Info Island and a virtual reference desk approach, would be a more aggressive approach, but the real question is the role of video conferencing and other tools in creating intellectual community centers. This would include using library webcasting for job interviews, translation, training, community news and so on, with Web 2.0 tools such as: blogs, wiki, instant messaging, RSS, social networks, screencasting, podcasting, gaming, photo sharing, streaming media, and mashups (combining and remixing services into new combinations). However, the excesses of technolust are always a challenge when seen against the 'sanctuary' concept of the library, where technology is merely enabling. Accordingly, how will the open culture of social networking software and personalization interface with library traditions on ethics and privacy?

**Engineering:** Thousands of libraries in the US and elsewhere, have reached, or are nearing, their maximum physical capacity. Digital collections take up little space and are less expensive to assemble and maintain. While the growth of the virtual library can offset this limitation, the in-house ability to add computers, electrical outlets, cabling etc. are also reaching a ceiling on continued growth in many places – tied with the costs of broadband, software and hardware upgrades. Multitasking ease is also becoming important in physical design – the laptop culture needing unassigned and flexible space (well lit and inviting) designed around human versus technological needs, i.e. creative space – different types for different types of people – mixing work and socializing for collaboration, etc. This means quiet space as well as social spaces e.g., variety spaces (group effort and individual work, as appropriate, while keeping resources close at hand).

**Culture:** Reading is becoming a cultural issue. Significant segments of potential library users now see reading as a diminishing 20<sup>th</sup> Century pastime. According to the National Education Association, under 15% of the US population read more than 20 books annually (and over 65% read less than 10) – but if magazines and Web site reading is included, over 65% read five or more hours weekly (and over 30% more than 11 hours weekly). E-books have been slow to gain ground, but that the technology is not close to maturity... Sony Reader Digital Books are not yet comfortable to use, but the upload capability is growing. Amazon Kindle is an improvement, BUT dedicated content is still too limited... However, digital technology is part of the on-demand revolution, and instant gratification is a formidable force changing the way we consume media. The Google-driven decline of visitors to the reference desk has led to remote sites for academic libraries, i.e. going to where work is being done. "Showing up" consumes resources, effort and money, i.e. "the economics of presence" concept. The Second Life version of the Newseum in Washington DC includes flying between exhibits. But digital library advocates also ignore the perseverance of the communal experience (why people still go to football games in person) which may lead to the end of traditional library restrictions [no talking, food, drinks, cell phones] to empower library-based social networks.

**Economics:** The need for increased public support to underwrite the increased public service role of libraries remains a critical challenge – one of public education and benefits documentation. One of the community benefits received from libraries can be seen as economic development services, i.e. job services. Three quarters of US employers accept on-line applications and a significant number accept only on-line, but only 20% of public libraries report adequate computer equipment and connection services. This has to change. The challenges of budget and space limitation continue to hamper library growth but that has not hindered advocates for cloned Barnes and Noble and Borders services – allowing talking, coffee, cell phones and easy chairs among lots of books. The goal of building a reputation for good

service copies what independent bookstores have done to resist larger chain book stores. However, half of independents are now gone and the survivors continue to concentrate (perhaps futilely) on the ‘experience place’ – relaxation, coffee and food, performance etc.

The more important question is what is the business of libraries? Lending books? Providing success in life for users? Meeting the desires of consumers to enhance self-image and meet ‘higher’ needs through self-actualization is a rather endless pursuit, and competing with entertainment or tourist attractions is misunderstanding the library concept – far better to adopt changes that fit with the values and highly durable culture of libraries, e.g., connecting users to information to assist in meeting their goals.

**Education:** How do people keep up with change...understand the trends...make choices about careers, resources, even lifestyles...? They need information from a trusted and neutral authority... The strategy of ‘dumbing down’ the library to keep the user numbers up ignores the educational core to libraries. There is intense concern, discussion and disagreement about priorities and the role and contribution of learning resource institutions within society – with no common consensus on methods of measuring achievement. While issues around the National Education Association report *To Read or Not to Read* and the future of reading (regardless of the media used to present the material) are important, the real question is will humans continue to read in some manner and the answer is clearly yes....and then the follow on is...can libraries help them, regardless of the media?

**Demographics:** Not just the elderly boom in users, but a youth one as well. Libraries are still exploring: child raising roles beyond the biological parents; the needs of non-English speakers and cultural integration. Much of this is driven by changes in how socialization and integration now occurs and in the patterns of singles and families. Many of the digital social networks are used primarily by persons under 30 years of age. Social media dialog can act like a never-ending focus or therapy group...including the negative feedback. Should the library system be a vehicle for social activism – moving users from curiosity to interest to insight to action...? Does this include targeting specific communities of need?

But things could be much worse domestically. The level of favorability concerning physical libraries is greatest among developed countries, and borrowing print books is still the number one activity while research in reference books is second. In spite of all the hype, computer Internet use is only 7<sup>th</sup> overall among library patrons. Interestingly, it is US college students who use more parts of libraries than any other group. In descending order, their uses from study at 48% to Internet, database use, reference books, borrowing print books, research assistance, reading journal articles, and reading best sellers at only 8%.

**Conclusion:** Essentially, it becomes clear on examination that libraries are not a dying breed but one that is changing and growing. Given the chance and the resources, one can only imagine what libraries could become, utilizing new technologies, being guided by new metaphors, images, energies... Libraries have always been beacons of hope and aspiration, and they can continue to do so well into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.