Against the Grain

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Op Ed--Future Through the Past--Is the Future of Libraries "The Library of the Future?"

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Op Ed — Future Through the Past

Is the Future of Libraries "The Library of the Future?"

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Greetings. In submitting my first column, I recognize that my words will be reaching informed and sophisticated readers who, in the best tradition of the **Charleston Conference**, often have a special interest in pragmatic solutions to functional problems, perhaps more than in blue-sky brainstorming. But since I've just now received a new emailed announcement regarding yet another conference about the proverbial "library of the future," I'd like to share some musings about that broader topic in my kickoff column today.

In a recent symposium on the future of libraries co-sponsored by **ALA**, futurist **Thomas Frey** proposed that the future role for libraries may be to formulate and nurture "a liquid network for ideas." I won't attempt to describe **Frey's** interesting vision in detail because readers can find his own description at: *http://www.futuristspeaker.com/2014/08/the-future-library-a-liquid-network-for-ideas/#more/4315.*

Reading **Frey's** blog about the future, my first reaction was to think of the past: specifically, of a 1978 symposium of librarians held in North Carolina's Research Triangle, when a futurist far more famous than **Thomas Frey**, by the name of **Isaac Asimov**, gave a talk about his own vision on this same topic. **Asimov's** remarkable speech (titled "Of Past and Future Libraries") is today almost totally forgotten. Even the archived audiocassette tape once held by the **State Library of North Carolina** was reportedly damaged beyond recovery. But at the time of **Asimov's** visit in 1978, I was then just out of graduate school in my first library job, and was so keenly intrigued by **Asimov's** topic that I smuggled in a small cassette recorder. I have since converted my own audiocassette to a digital sound file, which is apparently now the only existing copy of **Asimov's** 1978 speech. I am now making that soundfile available to readers of this column from my cloud repository at this link: *http://belmontabbeycollege.demo.libguides.com/c.php?g=518286&p=3544185&preview=ff14c33b4d64b69e622e2d54b4fdd906.*

I also discussed **Asimov's** speech in my 2007 presentation, "Visions Going Forward," for the TRLN Information Commons Symposium. That complete forum site, with active links to all presentations, can be found via the Internet Archive here: *https://web.archive.org/web/20080724061912/http://www.unc.edu/~pmpittma/InfoCommons/InfoCommons.htm.*

I want to revisit **Asimov's** vision today because it seems to have been an early example of a long parade of such "library of the future" presentations that continues to this day. Yet, it also seems to have established the peculiar precedent where such presentations seem then to quickly fade into a sort of collective limbo of neglect, amnesia, or irrelevance. Some of this, of course, is due to the pace of technological innovation. As I will describe in a moment, **Asimov's** 1978 speech was shaped by the technologies of that time, and while **Asimov** was justly famous for casting his vision to the far future in science fiction novels about interstellar and galactic exploration, the future of library technologies seems, ironically, to have been somewhat harder to visualize.

Some of **Asimov's** predictions were very acute; lasers were very new in the late 1970s. **Asimov** clearly saw potential for storing and transmitting vast amounts of information with modulated lasers. Some were more routine; **Asimov** predicted a vast library computer network that would put all knowledge at everyone's fingertips. Notions like that had become fairly routine by the 1970s. **Asimov's** network model, however, was very clearly constrained by the mainframe cpu / dumb terminal paradigm of his day. His worldwide library network posited a central mainframe, presumably in Washington D.C. at the **Library of Congress**. **Asimov** posited some august committee to determine what would be stored in that mainframe as "knowledge." Average users would only download — not individually contribute.

So we can easily understand how the mainframe computing model of 1978 shaped what **Asimov** envisioned for the library of the future: a mainframe computer model of knowledge dispensed to the masses via dumb terminals, essentially setting up a system of passive retrieval from a centralized storehouse. We can now, with benefit of hindsight, contrast this with what really developed: the Internet / WWW peer network model of knowledge, where we see active and interactive shaping of knowledge growth through active user involvement.

Today, in this column, I would like to share some thoughts about how **Thomas Frey's** 2014 vision of the "liquid

network for ideas" could relate to the evolutionary development of current systems for knowledge creation, digital curation, and Web-scale learning being deployed by academic libraries and the colleges and universities that act as their hosting institutions. In point of fact, I have been thinking and writing about this evolutionary process for some twenty years. 2015 was the 20th anniversary of the **Apple Library of Tomorrow Grant** I received in 1995, a grant I used to create what one reviewer called "a pioneering digital humanities project," titled the Charleston Multimedia Project (CMP). Although hampered by the primitive development tools available in 1995, the CMP attracted international attention: for instance, it was featured in the book *Great American Websites* published by **Osborne McGraw-Hill**; it was profiled in the "Libraries of the Future" column in *Computers in Libraries*. But that was only the beginning.

Last year, **ACRL's** digital humanities group (dh+lib) invited me to post a three-part blog describing how my mid-1990s work on CMP propelled me to the **Universty of North Carolina–Charlotte** and there, to develop **UNCC's** Information Commons. For anyone interested, that blog (introduced by **Sarah Potvin** of **Texas A&M**) can be found at: *http://acrl.ala.org/dh/2014/01/30/digital-humanities-in-the-research-commons-precedents-prospects-3/.*

My key point is that the CMP and **UNCC's** IC were related projects, even if the evolutionary interconnections may not seem overtly clear. And the nature of those "hidden" interconnections foreshadows the developmental processes that would be necessary to move **Frey's** "liquid network for ideas" from yet another limbo-bound prediction doomed to follow **Asimov's** 1978 speech, to a tangible reality that could also play a key part in redefining the role of academic libraries in student learning. I will briefly note three source publications where I have explored this in greater detail.

In 2001, the **Indian Association of Library & Information Science** (then based in Kerala) invited me to do an article for their journal on "the future of the online catalog." In my article ("Digital Libraries & Dialogic

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Classrooms") I proposed extending and enhancing the online catalog into what I called a "discovery system." I am not sure whether my 2001 article was the first to use that term, but "discovery systems" are today common in libraries. But none are yet as sophisticated as what my article proposed, because it was (and is) my view that a library discovery system can and should be meshed with what today are often called "adaptive or personalized learning systems." The details of that meshing are too complex to describe here; for more, IJLIS has kindly given me permission to scan my 2001 article to a cloud archive, linked at: *http://belmontabbeycollege.demo.libguides. com/c.php?g=518286&p=3544185&preview=ff14c33b4d64b69e622 e2d54b4fdd906.*

The last piece of the puzzle I will mention today relates to software for visualizing the dynamic structure of knowledge. This is again its own exciting and fast-developing subfield, but only some strands of knowledge visualization relate at this time to **Frey's** notion of a "liquid network for ideas." I would simply again point to yet another interconnected project I spearheaded in 2002-03, the "Scholastica Project," when my library at **Belmont Abbey College** became the first library to successfully field test and do focus group assessments of what was then called VisualNet software. For details, the interested reader can find my D-LIB article at: *http://dlib.org/dlib/june03/ beagle/06beagle.html.*

To summarize, if **Thomas Frey's** "liquid network for ideas" is to ever become a tangible reality, the concept must be translated from **Frey's** abstract "top-down" perspective as a futurist, to a real-world "bottom-up" perspective that builds upon the evolutionary potential of the existing sociotechnical systems and processes in today's libraries, and in the colleges, universities, and other institutions that host them. If that never happens, I suspect that **Thomas Frey's** "liquid network" will follow **Isaac Asimov's** "mainframe computer storehouse" into the ever-mounting stack of libraries of the future that never make it out of the past.

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and lively discussion and Q&A from the audience. Food is not provided (unless specified in a sponsored event), but attendees are welcome to bring a bag lunch.

Concurrent Sessions — The workhorse of the conference is a standard 30-45 minute session from a single speaker or group of speakers in a traditional presentation style.

Shotgun Sessions — Moderated by a time keeper and presented in only 6 minutes and 40 seconds each, these succinct, "Pecha Kucha-like" sessions are scheduled during a 45 minute concurrent session timeslot with 5 presentations back to back. Time is provided at the end of the session for Q&A with all the presenters.

Innovation Sessions — These 30 minute sessions focus on innovative or entrepreneurial thinking in libraries — new ways to solve problems, new technology or existing tech utilized in new ways, etc. Innovation sessions are held on Saturday during the conference.

Poster Sessions — Presenters will be available to answer questions and narrate their posters on display at the Courtyard by Marriott. Running concurrently with the poster sessions is a "Happy Hour Networking" event with appetizers and a cash bar. You can mix, mingle, get a bite to eat, and visit the posters all at one time.

Can you believe the next issue of *ATG* will be in your conference tote bags? Eek! In the meantime, check the "News" section of the Conference Website (*http://www.charlestonlibraryconference.com/news/*) to stay current or email me with questions. See you soon in Charleston!