Introduction: What Have the ~~Romans~~ Librarians Ever Done for Us?

ANTONY BRYANT

In 2013 IFLA released the succinct and evocative document *Riding the Waves or Caught in the Tide? Insights from the IFLA Trend Report.* It was part of a strategy that was intended to encompass "more than a single document —it is a selection of resources to help you understand where libraries fit into a changing society" (IFLA 2013).

The trend report identified "five top level trends which will play a key role in shaping our future information ecosystem":

1. New Technologies will both expand and limit who has access to information.
2. Online Education will democratise and disrupt global learning.
3. The boundaries of privacy and data protection will be redefined.
4. Hyper-connected societies will listen to and empower new voices and groups.
5. The global information environment will be transformed by new technologies.

I have used the report as part of my Information Management (IM) Masters module *Managing Information in the Digital and Global Economy* (*MIDGE*) for several years, requiring students to select one of these trends as the basis for a report discussing aspects of contemporary IM. The topic chosen most often by my students is online education (trend 2), closely followed by privacy and data protection (trend 3); but the one on empowerment (trend 4) has proved to be the basis for many of the most stimulating discussions, with many students expressing initial surprise that librarians might be associated with such topics. Obviously their view of librarians is somewhat outmoded and in all likelihood based on Hollywood caricatures such as the Rachel Weisz figure in *The Mummy*—well at least at the outset of that film.[1]

Trend 4 concerns *empowerment of "new voices and groups" in hyperconnected societies*, and, for this issue of *Library Trends*, I was particularly keen to encourage contributions that developed this theme by addressing ways in which what the report termed "our future information system" does or does not recognize, incorporate, and empower new voices and groups. As such, the Call for Papers made mention of submissions with a focus on Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and specific topics such as

- the sense in which certain groups or forms of internet presence are "listened to," and whether this goes any further toward actual empowerment;
- the extent to which certain groups are ignored, discounted, or worse;
- empowerment and disempowerment—the upsides and the downsides of empowerment;
- the struggles for control and openness across the internet;
- the internet as a site for struggles around class, race, gender, and sexuality; and
- issues for libraries and archives.

The four papers that now comprise this issue encompass many of these aspects, each deriving from specific studies that include university libraries, cell phone use in rural Africa, the social protest movement around the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the evolution of the information literacy curriculum in an American community college. Together they provide the basis for consideration of empowerment, hyperconnectedness, and the ways in which libraries, librarians, and librarianship are both adapting to and influencing a globalized, mobile, networked society.

The paper by Jie Huang and Jinchi Guo stems from their research into the use of WeChat in a number of Chinese university libraries. WeChat exemplifies the ways in which sociopolitical forces effect our supposedly globalized—i.e., universal—networks. WeChat now has around 900 million users, but outside China it remains almost unknown.[2] In many respects it offers facilities superior to those of Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. The study looks at how WeChat is being used by Chinese universities as part of the government-led strategy to develop universities in China meriting the label "world-leading"; striving to offer "international excellence" in services for students and researchers. Taking up a range of earlier studies, the authors look at how organizations such as university libraries have learned to utilize this key social media platform; essentially offering a case study in the maturing of the ways in which university libraries have developed their skills in seeking to harness social media in this context; adopting and adapting their use of WeChat, with a concomitant impact on their own practices. In part the authors see this as a move from an information-centric to a service-centric role for users.

It might be assumed that the users of a university library are a fairly

restricted sample of the population, but Huang and Guo point out that WeChat is seen by university libraries as a way of enhancing service to existing users and attracting new ones. They are also clear that libraries are a critical point of entry for those seeking to use the internet—specifically the web. In the highly mobile age, with smartphones seemingly becoming all-pervasive—albeit far from universal—the role of librarians in assisting people with information management has grown in scope and significance.

Sylvain Cibangu's paper on the use of cell phones in rural Congo provides a case study highlighting the different ways in which people are "connected" to what Castells (1996) has termed The Network Society. Current figures (as of May 2017) state that around 46 percent of the world population "has an internet connection" ("Internet Users" 2017) and that smartphone use is around 2.1 billion—28 percent of the population ("Smartphones Industry" n.d.). Both figures are expected to grow significantly by 2020, but, even so, by that date a significant proportion of the world's population will still not be "connected," and as Cibangu's study illustrates, "having an internet connection" may be highly tenuous and intermittent, and often nothing like having twenty-four-hour connectivity via one's own smartphone—hence the sections of his paper that engage with issues of inequality, access, and affordability. In addressing three key issues of "connectivity, empowerment, and development," Cibangu's paper engages with a number of key social and political aspects of "digital modernity," some of which are highly specific to this context, but many of which have been part of modernity from the start, albeit having mutated and taken on a range of forms in its ensuing stages—e.g. exploitation, manipulation, and commodification. In his concern to expose what Frank Land and I have termed "the dark side of technology" (Coakes et al. 2011), Cibangu points to the ways in which connectivity can easily perpetuate existing forms of inequality, inequity, discrimination, and powerlessness—puncturing the zeal with which many technophiles hail the development of the internet, world wide web, and mobile technologies. In this sense his study concerns those who are more "caught in the tide" than "riding the waves." Furthermore, his study highlights the context within which cell phones are used in rural Congo, including aspects that perhaps he did not expect. Most notably, his respondents did not come to him as individuals but as family groups, usually parents; their use of cell phones is imbricated with a range of daily and communal activities; the relationship between "development" and "connectivity" is complex and can often work against those currently most disadvantaged or underserved.

One of Cibangu's concerns is to open "the door of the academy so that the voices of oppressed people can be heard and honored and so that others can learn from them (Denzin and Lincoln 2018, 33). Voices are heard and become multiple and authentic when structures of dominations are

removed." The IFLA trend refers to the need for hyperconnected societies to "listen to and empower new voices and groups." This is not something that will happen inevitably simply as a result of the technological potential being present. Gaining empowerment will require struggle and determination, and the other papers exemplify this in two US-based contexts, demonstrating that even amidst one of the most highly connected societies, many voices are excluded or effaced at the level of entire communities and social groups.

Hayley Johnson's paper focuses on the social protest movement at Standing Rock, North Dakota, that seeks to bring attention to and curtail the building of the access pipeline. Johnson's account of the protest highlights the important role of social media and hashtag activism, but locates this within a context of contestation between social groups and far more powerful interests, particularly corporate ones, which in many cases are aided and abetted—perhaps unwittingly—by more mainstream media. Thus, protests such as NoDAPL have to fight against media-perpetuated stereotypes of American Indians, as well as the responses by large corporate interests, both on the ground and on the web. Hyperconnectedness has both costs and benefits, although increasingly the availability of wireless technology and mobile access has allowed previously excluded groups new and enhanced forms of participation. Although there may be advantages in living off the grid, this is often hardly a matter of choice but rather something imposed by lack of access. Johnson notes that since the NoDAPL protest site is remote and lacking in internet access, the protesters eventually established a site that they dubbed "Facebook Hill," a spot close

> to the camp where cell signals could be picked up. Activists or "water protectors" would frequently travel to Facebook Hill to post videos to Facebook or other social media platforms to get images, videos, and first-person accounts out to the world about what was transpiring at Standing Rock. Because of the isolated location, there was a period of little news coverage of this event in major national media coverage. Many people equated the scant coverage to a news "blackout." Videos from supporters on the front lines were the main way that information was communicated to the outside world.

This is the mainstream media exemplifying what has been termed "the streetlight effect," i.e., acting like the drunk found searching for his keys at night under the lamppost, not because that is where they were lost, but simply because that is the only place with light; in the NoDAPL context this would refer to the place where it is easiest to set up a camera and reporter.

The response from the authorities to the highly effective social media activities of the NoDAPL protesters was to update their own web presence, aiming to counter, undermine, or drown out the narratives and statements of the protesters. This contest has been, perhaps, less imbalanced than

would have been the case before the advent of easily accessible social media and hyperconnectivity; but it still has the makings of an unequal contest; favoring law enforcement and corporate interests. Johnson locates the NoDAPL protest against a wider contemporary context that includes Black Lives Matter, and also the earlier civil rights movements. This enables her to portray the issues of hashtag activism and connectivity as ones of knowledge contestation, where librarians can "serve as community first responders during times of division and unrest"; something that is advocated by the American Library Association (ALA). Although her paper was largely written before the 2016 US Presidential election, and the ensuing media trope of "fake news," Johnson's argument offers a far more persuasive and profound understanding of the ways in which different groups can harness social media, often with malicious or mendacious intent. Moreover she is adamant that libraries must

> become a community safe haven that provides access to all available resources on a given topic. In a hyperconnected society, it is important to have an unbiased information hub where citizens can seek out information to learn more about the things they see and read about on social media. Open, unbiased, and freely accessible resources found within libraries are integral to the ability of individuals to filter through and make sense of the barrage of information obtained via social media. Libraries are important *information advocates* that provide tools for citizens to make sense of the new hyperconnected and information-saturated environment of today. (emphasis added)

This characterization of libraries and librarians is enhanced in Kim Morrison's paper reporting on her experiences as a teacher of information literacy, a professional role in which she is intent on engaging with "the assets students bring with them to college and into our critical information literacy class." The paper might be seen as challenging and perplexing in some ways, as Morrison writes in a style that deliberately sidesteps and contests "the dominated form of presenting information." Her "subheadings are a form of Rap and Hip-Hop, a genre and culture that translates and reinvents language construction and use." In this way she is deliberately reversing the usual situation where the nonacademic readers have to gird themselves to engage with the text and language, and general assumptions and practices involved in academic writing. Any difficulty or discomfort on the part of readers of *Library Trends* presumably only offers the merest glimpse of the position all too often experienced by African Americans encountering the college curriculum.

Morrison's approach encompasses autoethnography, and consequently she refers to her own formation and the important role played by her "mentor librarian"; "this 'old white dude,' balding, who wore a bowtie." He got her "hooked on information literacy by having me research and write on something I already knew something about—an asset I brought

with me to college, a cultural knowledge. He sparked in me for the first time in my life in an education setting, a thirst for learning *and the realization that I was not in deficit of anything*" (emphasis added). Again the role of librarians as mentors and advocates is brought to the fore. In this specific case, aiming to ensure that students whose backgrounds would not necessarily have fostered an understanding and predilection for college and research are made to feel that nothing about them is deficient, but, on the contrary, that they have valuable assets that can be brought to, and enhance, an environment where knowing, learning, and information are understood as encompassing a wide and multifaceted range of forms of expression and experience. Her guiding aim "as a librarian/ educator/ scholar/producer of knowledge . . . is to build upon previous liberatory practices developed to promote transformation in the lives of those whose experience is marginalized."

If one response from nonlibrarians to the IFLA report, and particularly to trend 4, was along the lines of my students—i.e. "what have the ~~Romans~~ librarians ever done for us?"[3]—then taken together, these four papers provide a wide and varied rejoinder. I have already remarked on the ways in which some of the papers provide the basis for an understanding of the issue of "fake news," and as the papers were being reviewed, in May 2017, I came across an intriguing article: *How to Weather the Trump Administration: Head to the Library* (Kipen 2016). Channelling many of the ideas behind the IFLA report, the Call for Papers, and the four papers in this issue, the author opens as follows:

> Even now, in this riven country, after this whole entropically hideous year, most Americans still agree on at least one institution. Mercifully, it's the one that may just save us: the public library.
>   Hear me out. In small towns and large, in red states and blue, libraries poll better across the political spectrum than any public trust this side of the fire department. (Kipen 2016)

Writing just a few days after the election, in November 2016, Kipen starts from what we now know is a totally erroneous supposition; he takes Donald Trump at his word; but he does so for rhetorical effect to the extent that if POTUS#45 really does "mean to invest in infrastructure, then America will need to build more than just roads and bridges," he should start by "strengthening our intellectual infrastructure"—specifically libraries. Referring to his own extensive experience in reporting on, working in, and visiting numerous libraries, Kipen argues,

> If all these experiences have taught me anything, it's that librarians may be the only first responders holding the line between America and a raging national pandemic of absolutism. More desperately than ever, we need our libraries now, and all three of their traditional pillars: 1) education, 2) good reading and 3) the convivial refuge of a place apart. In other words, libraries may be the last coal we have left to blow on. (Kipen 2016)

Kipen's article is a rich and evocative encapsulation of the vital importance of libraries and librarians in the twenty-first century, echoing many of the key themes of the IFLA Report and the papers in this issue. As the founder of Libros Schmibros[4] and other innovative initiatives in and around libraries, Kipen is clear that libraries have to evolve, and indeed are doing so. Although he warns that "things always get delicate when *they* redefine themselves as 'more than just books' because to some of us 'just books' will always sound like 'just oxygen'" (emphasis in original). Libraries are taking on a whole host of roles, in many cases offering "stopgap solutions to way too many of society's problems" (Kipen 2016).

Kipen uses the phrase "first responders," as does Johnson, each in their own way pointing to the importance of librarians and libraries in an age where information is seemingly always readily to hand, ostensibly obviating the need for information specialists and special places. Johnson's context is that of the social protest around NoDAPL, although she also draws parallels with other contexts of social unrest and contestation, where libraries can serve as safe havens, and librarians can act as information advocates. Kipen extends this point in arguing that "refuge-wise, libraries are the ultimate 'third place,' the urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg's 'sanctuaries beyond the realms of home and work.'" Oldenburg's work dates from the late 1980s and early 1990s.[5] The concept of a third place is somewhere other than home, first place, or work, second place. A third place is then somewhere where people can get together in a relatively informal and neutral setting, seeing old friends and making new ones; examples include community centres, coffee shops, barber shops, pubs, and shopping malls; libraries, of course, are another.

It might now be claimed that social media offer a form of virtual third place. Indeed one of the most widely known platforms, predating Facebook, was *Second Life*; initially evolving from earlier "massively multiplayer online role-playing games" (MMORPG), but quickly dropping the game-playing aspect in favor of a far more open-ended and interactive one. *Second Life* still exists, but its active user base is below one million, and even its claim to have more than 20 million registered user accounts is still dwarfed by Facebook's user base of nearly 2 billion—25 percent of the world's population. For some users of MMORPGs and Facebook it may be the case that they offer, in their various ways, something along the lines of a virtual "third place," but it is clear from the four papers in this issue that there is no substitute for face-to-face interaction. In China, WeChat is used for booking desks in libraries and seminar rooms for meetings; cell phones in rural Congo are used as part of family and community interaction. Social media and hashtag activism are seen as a key to engaging people directly in social protests and political activities on the ground, and supporting and developing information literacy in community colleges is not something that can be done online.

The title of the IFLA report, *Riding the Waves or Caught in the Tide,* perfectly encapsulates the ambivalence of empowerment and hyperconnectivity, and the papers in this issue exemplify this double-edged nature of connectivity and mobility. In the IFLA 2016 report updating their earlier one, it was noted that "libraries around the world need to empower people for their own self-development, offer access to the world's knowledge, and provide opportunity for all," but such aims, noble as they are, can also play into the hands of the "gig economy," where most people have no job security (e.g., zero-hours contracts) but always need to be at the beck-and-call of current or potential employers—devoid of any third place, and even any clear distinction between home and work.

Johnson refers to Libraries Respond, set up by the American Library Association Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services in the light of the contentious and divisive 2016 presidential election, offering a "space for us to help keep current events in conversation with libraries' ongoing work in and commitment to *equity, diversity, and inclusion.* This page will be a resource for the library community to share information, find resources, and connect as they serve their communities" (ALA n.d.; emphasis added). Johnson further notes that

> Libraries Respond has its own hashtag, #librariesrespond, which librarians can use to discuss current issues on social media. ALA's Office of Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services also created a blog titled Intersections that "highlights the work of library and information science workers as they create safe, responsible, and all-inclusive spaces that serve and represent the entire community, as well as initiatives and projects supported by the office that promotes their work" (ALA n.d.). ALA recognizes the importance of having a voice within the social media environment and through these initiatives is encouraging all librarians to advocate and discuss issues via social media platforms.

Soon after the Call for Papers went out for this issue, I noticed a small news item in the UK reporting on one of President Obama's last appointments, the new Librarian of Congress, Carla Hayden: not only the first woman and African American to be appointed, but also only the third librarian to hold the post. I did email her to ask if she might be able to contribute something to this issue, but, not surprisingly, I did not get any response. In the meantime, however, she has taken up her post, and, in an interview in January 2017, she does in fact cover some key aspects that echo and amplify the rationale for this issue as well as the papers that follow. The interview is worth reading in full (see Hayden 2017), but here are some of her responses (interviewer's questions/statements in bold):

> **Maybe I'm a romantic, but I do think of librarians as inherently radical. There's something political about access to information.** And it has been throughout history. Frederick Douglass said, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free." If you can absorb information yourself and make your own decisions, that's a freedom. And for so many times in history, being able to read and access information has been part of it, especially in my case, with African-Americans.

In the past, you've taken what some people would consider political positions. You previously served as the head of the Baltimore public library, and one of the most notable things you did was to keep a branch in the middle of the conflict open during the protests over Freddie Gray's death. It was a haven. People could get online; they could apply for jobs. By the end of the week, we were the food center, because there weren't places open.

It seems as if you might need to teach information literacy to members of Congress. If they start as children, I think there's hope.

The IFLA report (2013) and update (2016) in combination with the four papers in this issue, together with the various studies and literatures from which they are each derived, offer an important resource in developing widespread and critical understanding of "our future information system," specifically the ambivalent nature of the technological advances and potentials that contribute to and feed off these trends and developments. This resonates with the quote on the cover of the IFLA update report (2016) from Henri Poincaré: "It is far better to foresee even without certainty than not to foresee at all."

Kipen (2016) concludes his article by noting that although some people may assume that US presidents always take their oath of office on the western front of the Capitol, this only started with Ronald Reagan in 1981. In any case, taking the oath at "the front door of Congress, perhaps the least respected institution in the country, might not be the best place to start." Why not go across the street to "our great secular national cathedral, the Library of Congress," where Carla Hayden of Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library has been confirmed as Librarian of Congress? As someone who has "actually worked a reference desk and staffed a story hour, Hayden can set a new national agenda for libraries and reading in a country that critically needs one." Hayden should roll out the red carpet and "welcome the new president to her front steps." Kipen's hope and advice was that "our next president should deliver the inaugural address from nowhere but the steps of our national library. And then, turning his back on the cameras, the polls, and even the electorate, he should step inside."

I doubt that Kipen thought even for the briefest moment that this would ever come to fruition, but the fact that it did not, together with all the ensuing actions of the new administration, simply underlines the continuing and increasing importance of libraries and librarians as first responders, information advocates, engaging with hyperconnected societies to ensure that new voices and groups gain their voices and are able to control, sustain, and build upon their connectivity and empowerment.

NOTES

1. The website http://movielibrarians.com/ lists a vast number of films in which librarians appear. For the most part the depictions are entirely misleading and erroneous; reinforcing all of the most banal and annoying stereotypes.
2. AliBaba is another example—essentially operating in a manner similar to Amazon, but again restricted almost entirely to China.

3. The original—referring to The Romans—comes from the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*, directed in 1979 by Terry Jones (UK: Handmade Films, Python [Monty] Pictures), http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079470/.
4. See Libros Schmibros Lending Library website, http://www.librosschmibros.org/.
5. For a profile of Ray Oldenburg, see the Project for Public Spaces website, https://www.pps.org/reference/roldenburg/.

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Antony Bryant is currently a professor of informatics at Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK. He has written and taught extensively on research methods, with a particular interest in qualitative research methods, and the Grounded Theory Method in particular. His book *Grounded Theory and Grounded Theorizing: Pragmatism in Research Practice* was recently published by Oxford University Press (2017). He is also senior editor of *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* (SAGE, 2007)—coedited with Kathy Charmaz—together with whom he is preparing a new, companion edition due to appear in 2018.

Professor Bryant has supervised over fifty doctoral students, in topics including formal specification of software systems, development of quality and maturity frameworks, new forms of business modelling, and various aspects of e-government and e-democracy. He is currently working with Professor Frank Land, who worked on the first commercial computer (LEO 1951) and was also the first UK Professor of Information Systems, on a series of "conversations" planned for publication that will cover issues in the development and impact of computer technology since the 1950s.