Against the Grain

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Epistemology — Building Relationships

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Epistemology — Building Relationships

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"Why is **Nonai** still having meetings if he's retired?" That's **Josie**, the 14 year old grand-daughter, downstairs talking to **Lynn**. I'm up in my study getting ready for another Zoom call. Despite being retired I'm still involved with a few scholcom projects and there's a meeting for one or another of them every week or so. I'm in my comfy chair with a fresh cup of coffee. I do a quick check of the lights to make sure the lamp isn't reflecting too brightly off my bald head.

Zoom's the platform of choice these days, at least among the people that I'm working with. It's efficient, easy to learn, has enough features to make managing a meeting easy. I've gone through several different platforms in the years since "teleconferencing" came to mean some-thing more than straining to listen to a disembod-ied voice or two coming through a speakerphone in the middle of a conference table.

When videoconferencing systems first emerged, the hype was that they'd replace physical meetings. No more flying from one city to another, dealing with cabs and hotels and expensive conference food. Techno-hype is always like that. That's why we no longer have movie theaters or radio or live orchestral perfor-mances or printed books. The new technologies have replaced all of those things. Right.

When the breathless predictions die down we start to sort out what the new technologies can do better and what the old ones still have the advantage of. History proceeds, as it always does, in a wobbling spiral, never in a straight line.

Despite the ease and efficiency of online meetings, nobody suggests anymore that in-person conferences are going away. As **Alice Meadows** pointed out recently, there seem to be more all the time.[1] It turns out there is something irreplaceable about getting people together in person.

The **Charleston Conference** is a splendid example of that. Bigger every year, over-stuffed and unwieldy, tantalizing, energizing, and exhausting, it occupies a singular spot in the lives of thousands of the people who care deeply about the roles that librarians and pub-lishers and the people working for the various vendors play. I had an excellent reason for missing the conference this year, but it's the one professional meeting that I expect to keep attending. There are relationships that I've built there that have had an indelible impact on me, and it's for maintaining those relationships and building new ones that it remains important to me, retirement notwithstanding.

The **Medical Library Association's** annual conference held pride of place in my professional life for over twenty years, but it's quite a different sort of affair. Health sciences librarianship comprises a wide array of settings and roles, but the **MLA** meeting is inevitably narrower in scope than **Charleston**. It's a place

for librarians to confer and consult and further relationships with others who are fundamen-tally like them, who share, to a considerable degree, a similar outlook. The vendors and publishers stay in the exhibit hall while the librarians sit in presenta-tions and workshops and committee meetings pop-ulated entirely by other librarians.

At **Charleston**, by contrast, I'm often mingling with people who occupy very different roles in my professional world and have very different perspectives. In one of the first presentations I ever gave at **Charleston** I was bitingly critical of a policy on retracted publications that had been developed by **Elsevier**. The first person to raise his hand during the Q&A introduced himself and said, "I'm the person who wrote that policy." We had a tense (and I'm sure quite entertaining) five minute exchange where I was forced to defend my criticism while he did more explanation of how the policy came to be, acknowledging that it was a work in progress.

That was **Michael Mabe**, who went on to lead the **STM Association**. He and I became friends and **Michael** opened many doors lead-ing to other relationships with dedicated pro-fessionals who helped me broaden my vision. This wouldn't have happened on a webinar.

Where relationship building at conferences has often occurred is the hotel lobby bar, but that illustrious tradition is fading. I was in Savannah recently to see some friends who were attending a regional conference. We were sitting in the bar after the welcome reception. There was a gaggle of librarians down at one end, but no other conference attendees in sight. One of us commented that in years past the place would've been full. People would've come out after the reception for one more over-priced drink with their friends and in the process been introduced to other folks they hadn't known or known well and relationships would've been forged and furthered. I'd been noticing the same absences for the past few years. Where is everybody? Surely they've not all gone back to their rooms already. Someone astutely pointed out that in the age of social media it's easy to find more interesting local watering holes and text a few friends to find places to meet up. Tweet out the location. The hotel bar isn't required as a central gathering place anymore. That same relationship building is going on, but in more hospitable surroundings with cheaper drinks.

There's a similar phenomenon with my granddaughter who, like the majority of her peers, spends a great deal of her time on her phone. They get criticized for this and while some of the criticism is on point, the concerns that the kids are isolating themselves and not socializing enough is the opposite of true. I

hear her in the guest room when she's at our house. She's doing FaceTime with a friend. They're gossiping, doing homework, making videos, all while keeping a running group chat going with others. If I've a grandparently concern it'd be that there's too *much* socializing going on and she doesn't spend enough time alone with just her own thoughts for company. But then, I'm an extreme introvert and she, emphatically, is not. Her facility for maintaining relationships digitally is an extension of getting together with her friends in person. Even when she's not with them, she's with them.

When I started working in academic librar-ies thirty years ago, one of the most important relationships for many librarians was with their subscription agent. Librarians didn't deal with many publishers directly. This was before the big deal and months-long haggling over licenses. The subscription agent was the critical intermediary. You built a long-term relationship with your local account rep and rightly believed they were working on your behalf. The publishers setting prices were shadowy background figures. You didn't need to have relationships with them because you established a strong bond of trust with your rep.

The agents had to work just as hard at developing relationships with the publishers as they did with the librarians, but this web started breaking down with licensing and big journal packages. **Elsevier** insisted that li-brarians negotiate with them directly and other publishers followed. The agents scrambled, trying to take on the role of negotiators for their clients, but they were largely unsuccess-ful. The **Association of Subscription Agents** collapsed and many small firms, particularly European, folded. Those that remain can still provide an important service when the pricing of a publisher's offerings is fairly static, but negotiating the big deals and packages that consume so much of the budget requires li-brarians and publishers to come face-to-face. And they have no history of relationships to build on. Nothing on which to establish trust. That mistrust between librarians and publishers damages the mission of libraries more than anything else I can think of.

My granddaughter knows that you can't build trust relationships without contact IRL. She and her friends use their screens to extend their relationships. They can widen the circle. But the close relationships, the trusted relation-ships, are built in person. Trust is fragile. It can be broken online. It can't be repaired there.

When **Lynn** was a VP with **EBSCO**, part of her job was to take people like me (a library di-rector) out to dinner. She'd invited me several times when we were at the same conferences

before I said yes. During that dinner we said not a word about journal acquisitions. Her job wasn't to sell me something — it was to establish a relationship. (That our relationship has turned into a 25 year marriage is a tactic she only used once).

There are two major conferences in the US where librarians and publishers come together as equals — **Charleston** and the annual meeting of the **Society for Scholarly Publishing**. Too many librarians still see **SSP** as a publishers conference, but the leadership has taken great pains to be inclusive of everyone interested in scholarly publishing. Certainly librarians can benefit from attending and getting involved.

Charleston is a library conference, but it's not a *librarian* conference; a distinction sadly missed by too many of the attendees. Too many librarians don't take advantage of the opportunities afforded there to spend more time with publishers outside of the sessions. There's a lot of mingling, but still not enough relationship building. There's a barrier created by that lack of trust.

Many years ago I was one of the panelists for a program that **SSP** ran every year — a meet the librarians thing. We were five librarians with an audience of forty or so who worked in publishing. The Q&A was great, but what stuck with me the most was the conversations over lunch. It was the first time I'd ever just hung out with publishers. They were passionate. They were curious. Most importantly, they cared about the same things I did, but their perspective was fascinatingly different. That lunch changed my life.

Why do we know what we think we know? How do we unlearn the platitudes that keep us from being creative? When I stopped thinking of publishers as adversaries and started openly listening, I became better at negotiating with them. I became better at disagreeing. I became better at solving problems. Better at relating.

The relationships that we build and maintain are the foundation for all of the good work that we manage to do. Our screens have become an invaluable aid, but the bedrock remains sitting together, breaking bread, sharing a drink, telling our stories, listening. 🌳

Endnotes:
1. **Meadows, Alice**. "Room for one more? (Conference, that is)" *The Scholarly Kitchen.* December 9, 2019. *https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2019/12/09/room-for-one-more-conference-that-is/*

Emerging Tech: To Be or Not to Be? — Content Technologies

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Column Editors' Note: This is the first in a series of articles about emerging trends in content technologies, with special focus on the scholarly publishing community and the companies that serve it. — DA & JC

In a series of articles, the authors will take a look at offerings up and down the supply chain and delivery spectrum to gain an understanding of new options available to accomplish old tasks, and some completely new ways of accomplishing tasks for which there hasn't previously been the right technology. It is a relatively untechnical, high-level view of emerging solutions in the library and publishing markets for everything from content creation to the now-oft-mentioned application of artificial intelligence and how libraries and publishers are using those solutions.

The overview of publishing technologies will be divided into *pre-production, production*, and *post-production* workflow groupings. These groups, of course, vary widely: The pre-production segment includes content creation, manuscript submission, peer review management, and collaboration and editing platforms; production includes digitization services, content management systems, and content enhancement for publication (whether digital or print); and post-production includes distribution, hosting, and enhancement platforms, services like identity/access, analytics and reporting, taxonomy and ontology, discovery, and more.

This topic is increasingly important as recent interviews with a number of mid-sized publishers revealed:

- All are making significant technological changes, either building new systems internally or working with vendors, or both;
- The majority are building internally because off-the-shelf solutions don't fit every need, and in some cases don't meet most needs without significant customization;
- None uses a single system to support all workflow functions, and the number of systems utilized continues to grow and become more difficult to manage;
- All are working on drafting development roadmaps but none has a clear vision as to where they want to be when system construction is complete, although many utilize agile development techniques, building as market demand changes;
- None are 100% satisfied with all vendors supporting workflow functions, primarily because their technologies are dated or limited;
- A driving factor for working with a specific vendor is not only functionality but customer service – relationships can drive many technology choices.

These findings point to a pressing issue facing most content providers today: avoiding technical debt. Because the cost of continually upgrading technology can be both operationally and financially daunting, content providers often go with relatively quick-and-easy solutions without addressing scalability or future needs. Paralleling that, technology/platform providers tend to build on existing platforms or modules in order to avoid investing significantly in R&D or a tech build offering new or more effective functionality.

Vendors utilizing more modern approaches to technology are likely to exhibit characteristics of those approaches with lower-cost, more efficient platforms, more user-facing interaction, and the oft-used term "flexibility." This is not always the case, but the objective of technology is to build a better mousetrap and many emerging vendors — and a few stalwarts — essentially have done just that. (There are older companies, for example, that started off as typesetting and data conversion companies and now call themselves technology companies.) Some are utilizing more modern infrastructure and advancing in technology while others, like some platform providers, rely more on aging stacks.

While some older technologies have been able to extend their lives by including virtualization, which basically means they took their on-premise technology and modified it so it could play in cloud environments, it does not always work well as they are typically inefficient working in the cloud — okay for some applications but not for others. What we refer to as "modern" technologies are usually cloud-based and driven by APIs (Application Program Interfaces), basically interoperability hooks enabling applications to talk and interact with each other. Older applications