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Finding Community:

Civics, Cyberspace and Change in the Age of Integration

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*Adaptation of Keynote Address: Oregon
Library Association Annual Conference, April
19, 2007.*

I want to thank the Oregon Library Association for the opportunity to deliver the keynote address at the annual conference on April 19, 2007. I especially want to thank the audience for allowing me to share my worries, fears and optimism about the importance of libraries and our changing roles. In addition, I appreciate the opportunity to attempt to translate my talk into a brief article.

Having worked as a librarian for nearly three decades, I'm closer to the end of my career than the beginning. Thus, perhaps I worry more that my life's work will ultimately mean so little to the world than someone who is closer to the beginning might. We live in a world where communities can decide to let their public libraries close their doors, where obtaining a degree can be done entirely without setting one foot inside a library, let alone actually talking with a librarian, and where in middle class communities, people who should know better dismiss the library with comments such as, "I buy my books and I have a computer with Internet access."

Technology is increasingly becoming more and more integrated and customer expectations are constantly shifting, so what's the role for libraries? Do we have one? Given funding for libraries and the lack of innovation from our primary vendors, what chance do we have to keep up with changing customer expectations, especially when the news announces that a 13-year-old girl just won \$25,000 for spelling "supercallifragilisticexpealidocious" faster than her closest competitor, a 21-year-old?*

Integration

What is integration anyway? My favorite definition comes from a futurist named Pip Coburn who describes integration as "making things work really well together ...complexity can become simple ..." To me that is pretty much the opposite of how most technology in libraries actually works. While our customers thrive with life with eBay, use PayPal effortlessly, and routinely pay their bills online, the basic technology used by libraries, our integrated library systems, are built on platforms that have not essentially changed in more than two decades. It's only a matter of time before the vendors who depend on our survival will truly need to worry about theirs. Instead of making things harder for us, shouldn't they be working with us to innovate?

A Different Kind of Integration—How Do We Have a Place at the Table if We Can't Find the Table?

Librarians are very good at talking with one another but seem to be missing the mark with initiatives that might allow us to thrive in the bigger world. One such example is the "Every Child Ready to Read" initiative developed by the Public Library Association. It is meant to promote libraries and librarians as leaders in helping very young children develop the skills they need to start school. A visit to the ALA Web site confirms that ECRR is a "joint project of the Public Library Association and the Association for Library Service to Children." While many of us have incorporated ECRR into our strategic plans and methods of service delivery, it has already been overshadowed by another joint project, "Born Learning" (<http://bornlearning.org>), an initiative developed through a partnership of United Way of



America and United Way Success By 6, the Ad Council, Civitas and Families and Work Institute. The tools are bright, colorful, easy to use, and mention libraries exactly once. Thus, several years of effort on the part of libraries (and probably several hundred thousand dollars) have brought us little or no attention, and not even acknowledgement that we might have something to share! What were we thinking? Why weren't we at the table?

So What is Our Real Business?


It might be 2007, we might increasingly be managing a downward spiral, but there really is hope! Libraries and librarians are still in the business of fostering engagement, excitement, enthusiasm, curiosity and passion. Most of us are passionate about what we do and treat our work as a calling rather than a job. We need to be open and vocal about our value in a healthy vibrant world, and we need to help our communities, whether we serve in an academic, school or public library setting, engage with ideas, debate and excitement about what the future holds.

If our vendors won't help us, what if we help ourselves? What if libraries worked together to build the systems we really need to deliver the goods the ways our customers want? Surely it would be cheaper for all of us to collaborate and cooperate and build the systems we need together. Do we dare explore open source? Do we dare understand and promote the creative commons? Do we dare follow eBay's lead and assume that people are mostly good (it would be easier than some of the supposed safeguards we have in place)? Do we dare make things more convenient for our users? If not, why not?

I believe with all my heart that libraries are meant to be the keepers of the flame. We must be the saviors of the idea, and be proud that we are defenders of democracy.

What is Our Future?

I believe that there is strength in partnerships and that partnerships are limited only by our imaginations. From modern dance performance to celebrating our "one book one city" efforts, to working with pediatricians, schools, radio stations, and healthy community initiatives, we can do anything, and in the doing, can demonstrate that libraries are alive, lively vibrant centers to our communities. We can consciously choose to make libraries the engaged, fun centers of human thought they were meant to be, and we can choose to help our users feel smart the moment they access us online, walk through the door or call. We can make dynamic connections that help people see the world in all possible ways, and we can celebrate!

Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Grey Panthers, used to say, "Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes." I can think of no better advice if libraries are going to survive and thrive. 

*NOTE: The Associated Press reported the story of thirteen-year-old Morgan Pozgar, of Claysburg, PA, who was crowned LG National Texting champion on April 21, 2007 after she typed "supercalifragilistic-expialidocious" from *Mary Poppins* in 15 seconds. The wire story began, "-OMG!"

