

## Against the Grain

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### Lee Dirks: An Appreciation

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# Lee Dirks: An Appreciation

by **Clifford Lynch** (Executive Director, Coalition for Networked Information) <cliff@cni.org>



On August 28, 2012, our community suddenly lost **Lee Dirks** when he and his wife **Judy** were killed in Peru in a tragic auto accident. I was asked if I would write an obituary, which I felt unable to do; while I knew Lee quite well professionally, I knew only that he had two young girls, that he cared passionately about them, and that he struggled to balance not just the demands but the dual calls of career and family. Instead, I offer this brief appreciation of some of Lee's professional contributions, as I knew them.

One of the first things I think of when I think of Lee is his personality: his energy, his enthusiasm, his humor, his easy friendship and generous encouragement, his willingness to help, all in a larger-than-life, force-of-nature package. In remembering this wonderful personality, it's easy to overlook how much Lee actually accomplished. Lee's professional and scholarly interests were broad, deep, and often passionate. Further, he made many of his most important contributions working in various groups, committees and task forces, his individual voice submerged and integrated into the collective reports from these efforts. He also changed our world by making introductions, acting as a catalyst, and launching and enabling collaborations.

He was deeply interested in how we would preserve digital records for future generations, in questions at the various intersections of librarianship, archival practice, computer and information sciences, and society and organizations. One of the first times I met him was through a group he was helping to convene with **Betsy Wilson** (University Librarian at the **University of Washington**) that was looking broadly at challenges in archiving born-digital materials (including business and engineering materials, software, data, etc.), and that was exploring the proposition that business, government, and academia all had ideas and insights to bring to bear on these challenges. This is a theme that ran throughout his work. In more recent times, we worked together for several years on a multi-disciplinary task force funded by the **National Science Foundation**, **JISC** in the UK, the **Andrew Mellon Foundation** and others (see [brtf.sdsc.edu](http://brtf.sdsc.edu)), dealing with sustainable digital preservation, where the focus was expanded to consider economics, organizational responsibilities, and broader social structures relevant to preserving our digital cultural and intellectual heritage. Lee thought very hard about these challenges, and contributed greatly to the work of this task force.

Lee was fascinated by the ways in which scholarly communication were likely to evolve in the coming decades, and frequently frustrated that this evolution wasn't happening fast enough to suit him — he was always looking for opportunities to accelerate this evolutionary process and to explore the places it might lead. He wanted to know what the scientific article of the future would look like, once we got over the requirement that it be reducible to print on paper, and he understood it to exist in an environment of computational tools, data, and interconnections. Here, he worked at the juncture of scholarly publishing, information technology, libraries, software development, the sociology of science, and cyberinfrastructure, and he became well known and well recognized as one of those very unusual individuals who could constructively convene conversations and bridge across these diverse and unruly communities. I had a chance to work with him on a number of these efforts.

Inextricably linked to his interests in the future of scholarly communication were his interests in the changing practices of scholarship, of information technology and data intensive scholarly work, and to the role that cyberinfrastructure could play in supporting these changing practices. He worked with scientists and scholars in a very wide range of disciplines trying to gain insight and spread understanding about these developments. He played a very important part in the creation of the landmark book of essays *The Fourth Paradigm: Data Intensive Scientific Discovery* published by **Microsoft Research**; I think his role was central in ensuring that the linkages between changes in scholarly communication and scholarly practices, that so fascinated him, were fully represented in this book and in subsequent initiatives.

Cyberinfrastructure to support teaching and learning, as well as research, was an area of growing interest for him in recent years. He and I served together on a **National Science Foundation** task force chaired by **Chris Borgman** of the **University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)**, that looked at Cyberlearning, at how the evolving cyberinfrastructure, "big data" (though the term hadn't come into popular usage at the time of the committee report) and analytics, computer aided instruction, and other developments, could change the way we do teaching and learning at all levels. I think that this is an area to which he would have been drawn back in light of current developments, including massive online courses, which had clearly caught his eye, and which we discussed in one of our last chats.

There were other aspects of education that mattered a great deal to him. He was a graduate of the **University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, School of Information and Library Science**, and that remained an important connection; he was engaged and energized by the questions surrounding both skills and jobs for the current and the next generation of information professionals, about what the libraries of the 21st century would be, and what skills would be needed to create and operate them. One of the many projects that he was involved with at the time of his death was a National Academies study, chaired by **Margaret Hedstrom** of the **University of Michigan** and funded by the **Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)**, to examine workforce issues involved with the emerging emphasis on data management and data curation.

Lee also believed very strongly in building alliances and collaborations between corporations like **Microsoft** and academic researchers, librarians, cultural heritage organizations, publishers, educators, citizen-scientists and other groups that shared common interests. Rather than just speculating about the possibilities, or complaining about the lack of progress, he actually did something about it, working with like-minded colleagues like **Tony Hey** at **Microsoft**. Lee was amazingly successful at building these bridges and connections to a depth and breadth that I've never seen done by any other major corporation. This was certainly an important theme of his work and his career, and one in which he genuinely led the way to an extraordinary degree; indeed, I think he changed the way that many people think about what is possible in this area. In the course of this work he did an unbelievable amount of good, some of it in very modest settings, and some in very high-visibility and high-impact ways, for our communities as a whole, but also for **Microsoft** specifically, though I suspect that it will take some years for the scope of his contributions, and the number of important conversations that he initiated, to be fully understood and appreciated.

Thanks Lee, for all that you did for us. You will be greatly missed. 🍷

*Editor's Note: See more about Lee Dirks in Greg Tananbaum's column I Hear the Train A Comin' — Remembering Lee Dirks, ATG v.24#5, November 2012, p. 85. — KS*

## Acquisitions Archaeology — What Are Our Obligations (These Days)?



Column Editor: **Jesse Holden** (Head, Acquisitions, USC Libraries, University of Southern California) <jholden@usc.edu>

**Joyce Ogburn**, looking at the controversy of hardcover vs. paperback purchasing by libraries, posed a basic question in November 1993: "What are our obligations?"<sup>1</sup> In searching for an answer to this seemingly simple question, **Ogburn** lays out some of the complex but "subtle expectations" at work within the book market, paraphrased as follows:

- Publishers rely on library purchases of hardcover to support the paperback market.

- Libraries are expected to subsidize scholarly communication, perhaps at the expense of local user population.
- Librarians are expected to expend their content budgets wisely.
- There is a precedent for pricing differentials between hardcover/paperback books established by individual vs. institutional subscriptions.

These expectations generate three further ques-

tions about our obligations. Though posed somewhat rhetorically, any answers have implications for determining a library's obligations in the book marketplace. These questions can be generalized from **Ogburn's** discussion as follows:

- Should librarians be concerned about long-term effects of change on vendors?
- Should publishers sell differently formatted and priced versions of a work?

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