BABEL FISH BOUILLABAISSE

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Barbara Fister

Gazornum

St. Peter, Minnesota

INTRODUCTION

As part of a sabbatical project, I have collected some things I've written into a lightly-edited, open access, Creative Commons-licensed volume. Some of this material comes from my personal blog, where I've been posting thoughts about books, publishing, and how online reading communities function (the actual subject of my sabbatical research). Much of this bouillabaisse comes my writings at *Inside Higher Ed,* which is a born-digital news organization that combines sharp education journalism with a slate of bloggers, columnists, and guest commentaries. I'm lucky enough to be one of their bloggers.

In putting this collection together, I should add a caveat about links. They won't appear in the print/PDF version, and I decided not to try to construct a proper reference list because links can be found on the html version. That said, some of them won't work because of link rot. Rather than hunt down every broken link, knowing more would break tomorrow, I decided to live with the digital reality of unstable source material. (I warned you this would be lightly edited.)

The title is a little odd, so I thought my inaugural post

from June 2010 might help. Here it is, along with my home-made blog header image inspired by . . . well, you'll see.

I'd better start by explaining the fish.

I hope in this space to explore the intersections of libraries and technology and the ways academic libraries contribute to teaching and learning, with the occasional shout-out to the open access movement as one of the ways we can sustain scholarship as a collaborative, evolving, and inclusive conversation. You might even find me preaching the gospel of liberation bibliography from time to time.

But first things first. A blog needs a name, and a lot of the good ones are taken.

Casting around, I remembered Jorge Luis Borges's story, "The Library of Babel," first published in 1941 in *The Garden of Forking Paths.* His narrator describes a vast library that has no boundaries and no center. It's filled with an infinite number of books, many of which are imperfect copies of other books. It's a feverish library, and a frustrating one. All knowledge is there, somewhere, but whatever you are seeking is always in some other part of the library, tantalizingly close but constantly slipping away. It's a place that is both exciting (wow! Look at all that stuff!) and massively depressing (wow! Look at all that *stuff!*) It's a great metaphor for

the yin/yang of research. Abundance is wonderful, except when it isn't. It also seems to offer proof that Al Gore didn't invent the Internet; Borges did. Score one for librarians.

Given my mind tends to play hopscotch with ideas, I immediately jumped from the Library of Babel to the Babel Fish from *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy.* The babel fish is small, yellow, leechlike, and one of the oddest things in the universe, able to transform brainwaves into a lingua franca. If you stick one in your ear, you can understand anything said to you, in any language. Though this doesn't guarantee world peace (removing barriers to communication just gives people more ways to disagree) it seems like a handy accessory for the Library of Babel.

Once fish came into it, I had to invite the Library Society of the World's Cod of Ethics to be part of this. Though the Cod arose spontaneously out of a typo, it's an appropriate mascot for the peaceable anarchy that is the Library Society of the World, a seriously playful group of library professionals who network using Internet tools and a healthy sense of humor. This loosely organized collective is a terrific example of how we can do what scholarly societies were created to do, minus the formality, membership dues, publication lagtime, or committees. Cod knows we don't need any more committees.

So I settled on Library Babel Fish, thinking I might try my hand at translating some of the complexities of academic libraries. Libraries are in a weird state of flux these days. On the one hand, they continue to have their traditional role in preserving culture; on the other, they change constantly. If

you thought you finally grasped the fine points of searching a particular database, think again; its interface was probably "improved" in the past week. Feel comfortable finding your way around the website? Must be time for a redesign. To use a library is to wade into a stream of change. It's never the same twice – yet we look to libraries for continuity, for coherence, for an opportunity to exit the fast lane and coast into a more contemplative state of mind.

However contested its nature, one thing the academic library continues to be is the common ground for its institution. It's the one place on campus, both in its virtual and traditional forms, where all the disciplines mingle, where ownership is shared, where ideas are meant to collide and quibble and procreate. It's an organized free-for-all where students and faculty can interact with ideas, drink coffee, check a reference, check Facebook, take a nap, or make a breakthrough.

I hope this collection of thoughts will be little bit like that. With fish.

ANARCHISTS IN THE LIBRARY

SOME ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LIBRARIES

From *Library Babel Fish,* January 2, 2014

Joshua Kim started the year off with a challenge to examine our assumptions. Here are some of mine about the purpose and nature of academic libraries, in no particular order.

Learning how (and why) to explore ideas independently is an important goal of higher education, and libraries enable and inspire that kind of learning. A corollary to that assumption is that when we explore ideas, we are willing to have the information we encounter change our minds. An enigma wrapped inside this corollary to an assumption is the notion that people want to have their minds changed. Wayne Bivens-Tatum questions that notion usefully, suggesting information literacy is an "unnatural" activity. Yet, as Dana Longley points out in a comment, this suggests education itself is an unnatural act. If it is, I'm all for it. I'm pretty sure Wayne is, too.

Sharing knowledge advances knowledge. Libraries enable sharing and should help build and fund infrastructures for sharing while resisting every effort to disable it, whether those efforts are encoded in copyright law, business models, or academic cultures. This can be tricky. In the effort to enable maximum sharing for our local communities we willingly disable it for those outside the community. We should, at the very least, insist on the right to share works among libraries as we have always done. When we traded ownership for greater and more convenient access, we inadvertently supported withholding knowledge in order to fund the current system, one that institutionalizes inequity. It also includes enormous inefficiencies such as the generation of large profit margins for a handful of large corporations which now own the legal rights to the contemporary record of an enormous proportion of academic knowledge. In most cases, these rights are not exclusive, but academics have so far shown little willingness to add to their busy agendas the task of uploading their publications in draft form to the web so that they can be freely read. It's extra work and the rewards are not obvious. Libraries need to take more responsibility for fixing this problem which is, in large part, our doing because of the trade-offs we made.

Libraries are not, or at least should not be, engines of productivity. If anything, they should slow people down and seduce them with the unexpected, the irrelevant, the odd and the unexplainable. Productivity is a destructive way to justify the individual's value in a system that is naturally communal, not an individualistic or entrepreneurial zero-sum game

to be won by the most industrious (with the slightly-less-industrious thrown under the bus). Taking the measure of academics by counting publications is harmful. I don't know when the word "productivity" became so entangled with the work academics do to advance knowledge, but that was a bad day. Productivity is the enemy of open-mindedness and reflection. We should run it out of town on a rail.

The order libraries create must invite disorder. This is something that is particularly important when it comes to helping students learn how to use libraries. Our systems, which were made that way, are broken by definition. (In case this sounds convoluted, I'm riffing off "the system isn't broken, it was made that way.") If we truly thought knowledge could be nailed down in a system, there would be little use for libraries. Students could simply be taught the right answers and that would be that. As I've said elsewhere, we put books on a shelf together only so they can have a good brawl. Our orderliness conceals anarchist tendencies. Likewise, we need to recognize that the order we create can be oppressive. We need to ensure that the library is open to all, that we recognize publicly that what rules we have are flawed and negotiable. We operate within cultural, social, and economic systems that are unjust, so we need to be alert to ways in which libraries may appear (and may even *be*) exclusive and inhospitable – so that we can change. (Nina de Jesus has some interesting things to say about this.)

Libraries are for the common good. Period. This is what sets us apart from other popular institutions that provide information. When we wish our libraries could be more like

Google and Amazon, we are doing it wrong. Google and Amazon have two things they want from you: your money and your life. Granted, Google's multiple search engines and Amazon's ability to connect scholars to a wealth of books quickly are extraordinarily useful, and libraries have learned some helpful lessons about how to make catalogs and indexes better, or at least less awful. But the fact is, we will always be a disadvantage to these behemoths because we do not gather and use personal information to improve the search experience (and make gobs of money). That's because we feel, like Edward Snowden, that privacy matters, that it is necessary for freedom. Luckily, libraries are not really about search. They are not an information shopping platform hobbled by inferior technology. Rather, libraries are common ground where knowledge and culture can be shared and nurtured. Protecting the commons while inviting people to use and contribute to them is what librarians are for.

Or so I assume.

THE SHOCK OF EXCLUSION

From *Library Babel Fish,* August 9, 2010

Ever since I read an essay, "The Shock of Inclusion" by Clay Shirky in *Edge*, I've been pondering the implications of one of the stickiest concepts in the essay: he argues that publishing is the new literacy. He doesn't mean that we need to add yet one more "literacy" to the list of things we're supposed to teach, but rather that the internet's ability to lower the boundaries between the published and the unpublished, between the mediated and the impulsive, between the specialized and the everyday, has makes publishing a very different cultural event. In a pre-literate Europe, scribes made a living putting the words of others into writing and books were for the few who could read. Today, anyone can publish anything, and in venues like this, the writer who kicks things off is not the only author. I pull things in from other writers (thanks, Clay!) and those who comment add to what

I have started. (This, of course, happens whenever one reads or writes, but now it's much more visible and immediate.)

But now I am also thinking about this new idea of literacy in light of the news that Camden, New Jersey, which opened its public library in 1905 with a grant from that old scoundrel Andrew Carnegie, faced closure last week in the wake of a 70 percent budget cut and now may be rescued by being adopted by the county system. Not long ago, it was Philadelphia's libraries that were in the cross hairs and in Jackson County, Oregon 15 libraries had their doors locked for six months in 2007 when the county manager said there was no money to keep them open and voters rejected a tax increase. (They reopened with reduced service and their management outsourced to a for-profit company based in Maryland.)

Earlier this summer, Fox News in several cities, including Chicago, ran exposes on how much libraries cost tax payers. "They eat up millions of your hard earned tax dollars. It's money that could be used to keep your child's school running. So with the internet and e-books, do we really need millions for libraries?" A camera crew entered the Harold Washington Center downtown and filmed books that were *not being read* to illustrate the appalling waste.

Commissioner Mary Dempsey's letter in response is a model of evidence-based reasoning. Not only are Chicagoans using the libraries (and their books) quite heavily, but citizens who can't afford monthly bills for Internet service or computers rely on public libraries so they can

apply for jobs and fill out government forms that can only be submitted online. A map Tim Spalding created using LibraryThing Venues demonstrates, too, that libraries are distributed throughout the city regardless of income levels; bookstores don't do that. As for libraries and ebooks, there's an important synergy there not well understood by publishers who think sharing is a bug, not a feature; even so, public libraries are finding ways (at a significant cost and without violating copyright laws) to loan ebooks, and in large numbers.

Public libraries tend to have a lot of local support, emotional if not always financial – far more than one might expect of an institution that might be viewed warily as an elitist institution that competes with the private sector, run by professionals whose knee-jerk devotion to in privacy led one unnamed FBI agent to call them "radical militants." What if the public library movement were launched today? I'm afraid it would be a political non-starter. Though Dennis Baron once joked that nobody complains about "socialized literacy," using public funds to offer free public access to books and the Internet would be a tough sell today.

When Al Franken recently made claims that net neutrality was critical for free speech, a number of comments claimed net neutrality was, in fact, an attempted government takeover of the Internet. One commenter speculated that this was an effort to "socialize free speech." I don't think he was joking.

The more the Internet enables sharing across borders, both geographic and ideological, the more there seems to be

an impulse to throw up barriers with digital rights management, copyright extensions, and the substitution of licensing for ownership. Traditional library values and functions – to serve all people regardless of their ability to pay, to preserve culture, to provide information on multiple points of view, to resist censorship, to defend all people's right to inquire and to read in privacy without fear of being judged by association with what we read – that's all up for grabs. Now that texts can be altered at the flick of a switch and what we read is monitored for money (just read the alarming series in the *Wall Street Journal* for the details of how that's done) we need the values embodied in libraries more than ever. When inclusion and mass participation is matched with behind-the-scenes profiteering and tiered or tethered access, it's hard to know how inclusive this brave new world will really prove to be.

OPEN TO ALL: PRESERVING LIBRARY VALUES IN A DIGITAL WORLD

From *Library Babel Fish*, October 21, 2010

As Open Access Week comes to a close, I thought I would share some ideas that bubbled up last year in a weekly column I write for Library Journal's *Academic Newswire*. I had been thinking about a host of issues: the difficulty that good academic monographs have finding their audience now that library budgets are tight, the implications of using most of our library funding to rent temporary access to journals that come in miscellaneous and constantly mutating bundles full of publications we don't particularly want or need, the ways that the arts of self-preservation and self-interest are inculcated in graduate training, but the funda-

mental value of openly sharing knowledge is not, the fact that leaving publishers in control of a digital environment undermines longstanding and philosophically crucial library values . . . and it all came together in the form of a manifesto inspired by the concepts behind liberation theology.

I had to do a bit of research first, and found a handy brief guide to liberation theology in the form of an article that (as it happened) was written by a colleague in our religion department, Mary Solberg. She wanted to explain why she thinks it's effective to teach this approach to connecting religious principles to social justice in her courses. Since the article is intellectual property that belongs to a multinational corporation, I can't link to it here, so you'll have to take my word for it.

(Handing the copyright to a company seems an odd way to share good news about liberation, but it is standard academic practice to trade copyright for the privilege of being published. The unexamined assumption is that a library will subscribe and set it free – though that freedom extends only to individuals specified in a given license. If you lose your job at a subscribing institution, graduate, or have to drop out because you can't scrape up tuition for the next semester, you're out of luck. It never fails to amaze me that academic authors are content to publish their work under conditions that seem guaranteed to cast them into obscurity, but I digress.)

After translating these ideas into library terms, I came

up with these principles for my Liberation Bibliography manifesto:

- Liberation bibliography is not born of a desire to get more for less or out of frustration that things just aren't organized as well as they might be. It's not about saving money, it's about honoring the empowering nature of knowledge. It's based on a belief that knowledge shouldn't be a luxury good available only to the few. It is born out of outrage at the injustice built into the present system.
- Liberation bibliography must be informed by the struggles of communities that are seeking liberation, not just geared toward satisfying the needs of a few academics and librarians who want to improve conditions for our already-privileged communities.
- Liberation bibliography recognizes that the world can't be divided cleanly between the scholarly and the ordinary. If knowledge matters, it should matter beyond the boundaries of our campuses and the enclaves of our scholarly societies. If it doesn't, there's a good chance we could be doing something more meaningful with our time and resources.
- As librarians and scholars, we must acknowledge that we are implicated in systems that often benefit us, even if we think they are unjust. When librarians agree to nondisclosure agreements, promising to keep the crazy costs we pay for

databases secret because we're afraid we'll be punished with higher prices, we are implicated in the system. When we trade access for ownership as a cost saving measure, even when we know we are unable to offer privacy, a necessary condition for intellectual freedom, we are implicated in the system. We need to own up to our responsibility for the important things we have bartered away.

- Liberation Bibliography takes seriously the slogan, so often inscribed over the doors of older academic buildings, that the truth shall set us free – and that should mean freedom for all of us, not just a select class of academics and currently-enrolled tuition-paying students.
- Liberation Bibliography recognizes that our libraries don't merely serve our institutions' immediate needs, but their higher ideals, those values typically announced in mission statements but neglected in day-to-day practice. As important cultural institutions, we need to resist treating access to knowledge as an exclusive member benefit for our community only, but rather as a fundamental right.

I know this all sounds vague and unrealistic and perhaps a little out of touch with reality. But the growth of the open access movement, slow though it is, makes me hopeful. As Nobel prize-winning economist Eleanor Ostrom wrote, with her co-author Charlotte Hess, "collective action and

new institutional design play as large a part in the shaping of scholarly information as do legal restrictions and market forces."

Though we seem stymied at times by the insatiable economics of publishing and by ever-tightening copyright restrictions, I'm cheered to think we can make change through collective action.

I still have faith.

ADHOCRACY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF LIBRARIES

From *Library Babel Fish,* April 19, 2011

I've been mulling over a couple of documents that have generated a lot of chatter in my online circles in the past couple of weeks. First, Ithaka surveyed library directors and found that only about a third of them agree with the statement "my library has a well-developed strategy to meet changing user needs and research habits." Two thirds don't. That's kind of scary. A majority of library directors think ideally their community members' research should start at the library, yet we know that's just not what happens, and it happens less all the time (and you know what? *That's okay!*) Also, library director's priorities don't jibe very well with

what faculty think libraries are for. Library directors overwhelmingly think teaching and learning is what libraries are about. Overwhelmingly, faculty believe the library's most important function is opening its wallet and paying for access to publications.

Given how differently library directors and the faculty they serve interpret what libraries are for, I suspect one reason library directors don't feel they have a clear sense of where they are headed is that where they think they should go is in direct conflict with what faculty want. But do faculty understand how unsustainable the current system is? Though a wide majority of directors think the library should be actively educating their communities about open access, only a third of directors think faculty are aware of the cost of materials. (I'm guessing this might be the third that has a plan for the future.) Half of the survey respondents couldn't even venture a guess as to whether faculty were aware or not, which either means libraries are doing a poor job of communicating the issues or faculty aren't listening.

In short, library directors by and large don't have a strategy and faculty don't have a clue. This is not good.

The other document was a controversial talk given by a Canadian library director who was invited to speak at Penn State. He was asked to be provocative, so he spit on his palms, tapped his bat on the plate, and hit provocative right out of the park. Jeffrey Trzeciak of McMasters University is ready to take the future by the horns. He has done away with the reference desk, eliminated a third of the library's

staff, fired several senior librarians, and recommends face-to-face teaching by librarians be replaced by more efficient and engaging online tutorials. But the statement in his talk that got the most attention was that he doesn't plan to hire librarians in future, but rather bring on board IT professionals and post docs. Many librarians took that as a vote of no confidence in their profession, its values, and its knowledge base.

Mita Williams, who blogs at New Jack Librarian, had an interesting gender twist on the issue: men with radical ideas are golden boys; women are at best Cassandras. (And apparently librarians are neither; they are shrewish women who are angrily shushing people or bun-wearing seniors holding on to outmoded technology.) Williams connects these transformations of libraries that include radical librarianectomies with the outsourcing of collections to corporations.

Amen, sister. You are onto something.

I tend to think that the problems in many library organizations is that the 19th century management structures they operate under simply don't encourage the kind of invention and creativity that libraries need, that librarians need. When change is imposed from above, it can be brutal; when change agents have to seek permission from their superiors, it can be stifled. We don't have to do it this way.

What reminded me of these two documents was something that happened at a department meeting late last week. We weren't happy with our reference desk. An intern had done some research and showed us some alternatives, none of them exactly what we want. We decided to go out to

the reference desk and take a look. We ended up fetching tools and dismantling it. We dragged over other furniture and tried various combinations. What we ended up with is a temporary fix, but it puts us side by side with the students we're helping and while it's hardly perfect, it's a worthwhile experiment. We decided to do it on the spur of the moment at the busiest time of the semester *because* it's busy. What better way to find out if it will work? By the end of the semester we'll know what our new reference desk should look like.

This didn't take a visionary leader. It took a moment of inspiration and a joint willingness to try something new on the fly. It also helped that we didn't have to ask anyone's permission. We just acted.That's how we roll.

One of my favorite articles from *College & Research Libraries* in recent years points to four models for organizational leadership. The one that librarians ready to engage in transforming libraries tend to favor is not traditionally hierarchical, market-based, or run by consensus. Rather it's "adhocracy" – an environment that allows for creativity, innovation, and outward-looking transformation.

I'm fond of the word "adhocracy" but I tend to think there's another, less trendy phrase we could use, one that's been in use in universities for a long, long time. It's "shared governance." And when it works, there's really nothing that works better.

YOU ARE NOT A TINKER TOY

From *Library Babel Fish*, September 27, 2011 and October 4, 2011

When I read "Library Limbo," a news story about library staff members being laid off the University of San Diego, I had to resist adding a comment because I needed what preschools sometimes call a "time out." My first responses were strong, but not measured, and in stories like this there are always layers of complexity that the best journalist in the world cannot represent. Rarely are personnel decisions of any kind easy to describe, and some of the key information is usually not publicly available. Often what is described as the elimination of a position becomes suddenly not discussable because it's a *personnel matter*. A personnel matter that can't be discussed is not about a change in a position but about the performance of the person in the position, which

is a different . . . hang on, I apparently need to go sit quietly in the corner for a few more minutes . . .

Okay. So let's not talk about that particular situation at the University of San Diego because I don't know enough about it to comment meaningfully. Instead I want to propose a few general things about libraries, change, and organizations.

If we had to hire new people in libraries because job descriptions changed, we'd be hiring an entirely new staff every six months or so. Our jobs change; that's probably the only thing that is not going to change in libraries. The good news is that people change, too. They learn. People working in academic institutions should have faith in this principle and live by it.

If your library has inflexible job descriptions and structures that box people in, you either have a failure on your hands or an optical illusion. Quite often job descriptions and organization charts are boxy and limiting, but they don't describe what actually happens day to day; the library functions in ad hoc ways without observing the official boundaries and constraints. If you work in a library and happen across your job description, chances are it will seem like an artifact from a time capsule, quaint and amusing. Wow, was I really doing *that* last year? Mostly, they don't get looked at unless someone new is being hired, at which point, after some hilarity, they are rewritten. On the job, people figure out what needs doing and they do it.

Libraries only work if there is a lot of learning going on among the staff, and that learning needs to be supported

with continuing education opportunities, both formal and informal (e.g.what I come across on Twitter and FriendFeed is a huge portion of my professional reading). It requires free time and rewards for risk-taking and growth. Given the inflexible nature of salary pools and job grades and whatever constraints obtain, the rewards are not likely to be measured in increased wages. An unfortunate feature of the way most library staff positions are structured is that there is no career path within a given role. You only move up if you move out – by taking a different job. So the rewards for growing in place have to come in a different currency: being part of an organization that is doing interesting things, feeling personally effective in your work, having the opportunity to make change.

Of course if learning is a requirement of the job and an employee refuses to do it or does it only under such duress that it's more work than it's worth to coax them to learn something new, that's a significant problem. I can imagine a situation in which such a conflict becomes so intractable that the only solution is for the staff member to leave the organization. But frankly, it's rare for things to be that bad.

Usually when there are problems, there's something missing, something overlooked. A staff member hired to do a job many years ago really should be doing a different job but hasn't been encouraged or even given permission to do so. People in that kind of stagnant situation are often anxious as the work they once did withers away, and that anxiety may make them insistent that the work they do is *really, really* important, even as the volume of the work dwindles.

But given the opportunity and the right conditions, they might be perfectly able and willing to do the new work that needs doing. That's the thing about humans: they can learn.

In fact I would argue most people who work in libraries *want* to learn. They know things are changing and they want to be involved in making the decisions that affect their working lives and they mostly are quite capable of being involved in those decisions. If people working in a library have utterly opposed ideas about what libraries are for, those decisions will be tricky to make jointly. But in reality most people who work in libraries don't have wildly different definitions of what libraries are for. They only disagree about the details. And those disagreements are the stuff of working together.In fact, it's the fun part.

If your institution needs to lay people off because there's no money to pay their wages anymore, or someone higher up wants to allocate those wages to people in another part of the institution, that's a shame, but so it goes. What I cannot accept is the idea that it's perfectly all right for a library worker to be turned out of a job because the job they once did is no longer needed. When did that job stop being worth doing? Yesterday? Probably not. Who's fault is it that a long-time employee has been suddenly discovered to be doing unnecessary work? Why has it only now been noticed and why wasn't that person given a chance to do something more meaningful before it got to this point of no return?

HR practices may perpetuate the notion that an organization is a structure made of positions assembled like Tinker Toys, and the people in them are parts that are popped into

place and, if the position changes shape, popped out so that a differently-shaped piece can be inserted. Library leadership often treats reorganization the same way, as a structure that needs to be taken apart and rebuilt in a different shape and with different pieces. In reality, library positions are not boxed sets of tasks. They are a set of interconnected and flexible responsibilities woven together to meet the library's goals. The tasks involved in meeting those responsibilities will change constantly. And so will the people with those responsibilities – given the opportunity.

There's another dimension of complexity here that is much more significant in libraries than in other parts of academia – the distinctions made between librarians (who may have faculty status or an administrative appointment or some kind of "academic professional" identity and who typically must have advanced degree credentials of some kind) and staff (who may be hourly employees or administrators and who do not need advanced degrees, though they may have them).

Tinker Toy Story II

What do you do if you are new to an organization that needs change but the staff doesn't want it? It takes time and patience to change a culture, and the years it takes to nurture new attitudes could easily occupy the entire college experience of many students. Sometimes you have no responsible choice except to go with the total upheaval

option. Nobody at the CAO level should let a library get to this point. Sadly, it happens – a lot.

There are administrations that have ignored the library for years but suddenly realize, often thanks to a director's retirement, that the world has changed but their library hasn't. They may want change right away, but without upsetting anyone. That puts a new library director hired to usher in change in an impossible position. I mulled that over at *Library Journal* last week, imagining a parallel universe in which a college administrator puts in a call to the Change Agency to get some help and finds out it's not so easy to get the budget-neutral, non-controversial, instant library makeover he wants.

These conundrums will sound familiar to a lot of faculty. Many new hires find themselves in the dicey position of bringing new areas of research and new courses to a department full of near-retirement faculty who are ambivalent or even hostile to those new forms of scholarship and who feel compelled to defend their expertise by disparaging the new. It's a miserable situation for the new kid on the block.

Technology adds another kind of competitive anxiety that may also sound familiar to faculty. Either you're technologically adept, but feel what you do is not valued by your elders, or you're bad at it and have a strong suspicion all those youngsters are laughing behind your back. In libraries, learning new technology is inescapable, but that doesn't stop some librarians and library staff from trying.

So we library folk have the usual forms of friction, but

there are a couple of things that make libraries different than other academic departments. First, though librarians will defend intellectual freedom to the death, they don't seem to expect it in their own places of work. Organization charts may flatten and include more teams, but most academic libraries remain stubbornly hierarchical and much more managerial in their design than faculty relationships, which are based on apprenticeship-based confidence in and respect for one another's expertise. Librarians new to the field who want to do things get frustrated when they find out they have to first ask the boss for permission and then have their idea worked on by a committee. For months. It's infantilizing and frustrating – and unnecessary.

Second, a library staff has different classes of workers with different levels of pay and prestige, but with plenty of insecurity to go around. In the past there were two major categories – librarians and support staff. Over the past fifty years, there has been a blurring of roles between these categories, and that has caused friction: *why does she get paid twice as much as I do when we both perform critical functions? Why is it that decisions that affect my area are made by librarians without even consulting me?*

Hierarchical structures based on preserving status don't adjust well to change. There's little incentive to take on new roles when you have a fossilized job grade and pay scale. On the other hand, there are also jobs that once were critical to a library's functioning that are less necessary or time-consuming now, but still exist, while new tasks – such as creating and populating digital collections or data curation

– that are embraced by library leadership as a badge of innovation, but then starved of resources. People asked to take on these tasks may well wonder why there isn't more resource reallocation, but that requires that decision-makers to do some scary things, like explaining to people who doesn't want to hear it that the work they do is no longer as demanding or important as it once was, and they will need to do other things now. HR processes often make this difficult – like insisting that if the duties change, that job has to be advertised. That's a great way to make people fear change: you have to learn new things. Oh, and you have to compete for your job, since your position just became a new one.

Added to the old class system is a new kind of class conflict has been introduced as PhDs are hired to do professional work in libraries. Before we had a hashtag for this kind of #alt-ac worker, James Neal called them "feral librarians." More recently, Jeff Trzeciak, library director at McMasters University, said he would henceforth hire postdocs and IT professionals instead of librarians, a statement many librarians took as vote of no confidence in their profession; in the backlash, highly-qualified folks working in libraries without the traditional credentials felt a bit cornered and devalued. In short, there's no shortage of umbrage to go around – trapped inside a traditional organizational structure that doesn't have change in mind.

People who work in libraries need to become skilled at reorganizing, taking on new roles, learning new skills, and letting go of work the only way to make change is to wait

for retirements – or put people out of work. I think what libraries need is shared governance. The caveat is that it needs to be shared governance that actually works.

As a colleague and I wrote in a conference paper some years ago:

> *The self-regulating, self-organizing, dynamic collegial model of peers working together, sharing their expertise, balancing individual curiosity with a common goal of advancing knowledge provides a rich blueprint for library organizational architecture. And it is one uniquely suited to what libraries do: sustain and enrich the ongoing conversation that creates new knowledge.*
>
> *The curious thing is that many libraries already operate this way in spite of bureaucratic and unhelpful organizational structures. They simply ignore the hierarchy, find workarounds, or create unofficial structures that work better—a marketplace of ideas that is more or less a functional black market. It is the nature of those who work in libraries to serve, to share, to innovate. Our culture is already collaborative and responsive to our users. We have nothing to lose but our chains of authority.*

ENCODED: GENDER, TECHNOLOGY, AND LIBRARIES

From *Library Babel Fish*, March 8, 2012

I keep thinking about a couple of blog posts Miriam Posner wrote on gender and digital humanities, particularly on the male privilege that invisibly influences the value surrounding learning to code and the encoding of cultural exchanges that will determine who feels comfortable in geek culture. It's easy to fail to recognize how a community can make people feel welcome or feel excluded, and it's not always obvious how gender intersects with prestige. The objections people raise – well, if women aren't doing it, it's because they don't want to; what's stopping them? etc. – crop up in any number of situations, from the dominance of males among Wikipedia editors to the depressing findings

of the Vida project, which charts the gender imbalance in high-profile magazines and book reviews.

Bethany Nowviskie responded with a good post, "Don't Circle the Wagons," and Mita Williams added some complexity of her own, particularly reflecting on the changes technology has wrought in the craftwork of libraries and the ways we talk about the future.

My field, librarianship, is a shot through with contradictions, and a lot of that has to do with the fact that it has long been perceived as a women's profession. In the popular imagination, libraries are charmingly backward places that face extinction in the digital age. Even librarians are prone to talk in doomsday terms – but in reality libraries have been early adopters of technology and are generally pushing envelopes well before the students and faculty they serve can catch up.

Libraries are also places that tend to be collaborative rather than competitive. There's a niceness about library organizations that innovators often find stifling, and a tendency toward caution and conservatism in decision-making. Yet in spite of that, think about how much has changed in libraries in the past two decades! That didn't happen because library workers were timid and change-averse. And it didn't happen because leadership fearlessly strode forward, pulling the reluctant workers along. It happened because there was work to do.

Bethany Nowviskie points out that people who get things done in digital humanities are in a funny place; they don't tend to valorize theory over practice, yakking over

hacking. They enact theory by making useful things. She writes, "coding itself has more in common with traditional arts-and-crafts practice than with academic discourse." Library work is also about making useful things. Yet the technological sophistication required for nearly every library job is underestimated and discounted because it's done by women. It might as well be cross-stitch or embroidery.

When I look at IT departments and the kind of credit their members get for being skilled and capable, there's little question these are valuable employees doing important work. Yet when I have to argue for a library position, one that may involve setting up link resolvers, monitoring copyright practices, managing licenses, figuring out how to make the contents of new digital subscriptions visible across systems, transitioning from one complex system to another, or digitizing analog collections and making them discoverable online, I'm given the impression that these jobs are basically clerical. Though it's not said out loud, the subtext is that library work is women's work and therefore whatever technology is involved is just stuff clerical workers everywhere have to use. Like typewriters.

Too often, library workers are seen as passive drones doing uncomplicated and routine tasks that require no decision-making or learning. Library work, after all, is service performed for others. Libraries are just as innovative and forward-looking as IT organizations, and we are responsive to our users, perhaps to a fault. Yet it's not because we are by nature passive. It's because we know the library

is not there for *us*, it's there for the community we serve. That may be how IT folks think of their work, but I don't get that impression. They seem to be seen as entrepreneurial problem-solvers and engineers with special skills.

There's a lot of frustration in libraries with co-workers who are reluctant to take on new tasks or learn new technology; as Mita puts it "are those with web skills *obliged by management* to do the digital work of colleagues with no skills?" There is too often a tendency to think digital projects are frills that can be carried out by a few employees with little support. There is also too much deference to authority in our organizational structures that sometimes do not encourage risk-taking or taking credit. All of these things have some basis, I suspect, in gender issues.

Yet I am proud of the service culture of libraries. I'm happy that we take the needs of students and faculty seriously. I'm glad that we are more likely to work together to sort out problems than to compete with one another. I'm pleased with the strides we've made, even if at times we aren't all adapting to new conditions at the same rate.

I don't think library workers get the credit they deserve for the way they've managed change. But there's one thing you can say about working in libraries: it's never boring.

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM AND THE LIBRARY AS A WORKPLACE

From *Library Babel Fish*, June 5, 2012

One of the online communities where I lurk and occasionally shove in my oar is a listserv for writing program administrators (which, lucky for me, is inviting even to those who are no such thing). It's a virtual water cooler where people who teach writing talk about all manner of things, from what readings might be appropriate for a literacy narrative course project (I took notes) to what kinds of researched writing assignments are most appropriate for first year writing courses (pass the popcorn!) Graduate students and TAs rub elbows with some of the most distinguished scholars in

the field. It's a nifty place, egalitarian, smart, and full of cool ideas.

One recent thread was about a perceived trend among higher education administrators to doubt that faculty will perform their jobs adequately without lots of supervision and rules. This conversation went in many directions, but one comment by Doug Downs, who teaches rhetoric and composition at Montana State University, really struck me as containing a key to many of the frustrations that bubble up in libraries. He wasn't talking about libraries, but rather about the "two cultures" of faculty and staff/administrators.

He wrote, "one of the things I like about being faculty is 'academic freedom,' which more or less faculty at my institution still enjoy. To me, academic freedom includes deciding what's important to teach, deciding the best ways of teaching it, having a near-absolute free-speech zone in my classrooms for all participants, and being able to reasonably speak my mind regarding issues related to my field, to higher education, and to culture."

True: we grant faculty a great deal of autonomy because we think it's really important to protect the freedom of a class a people who think (and teach others to think) for a living. We want them to be unafraid to follow an idea into dangerous territory, so we set things up so that their jobs are not in danger for saying the wrong thing or annoying powerful people outside the university. This is also something librarians defend, only we think *everyone* should have that freedom because it's healthy for all citizens to be able to pursue knowledge into scary places. We call it "intellec-

tual freedom." It doesn't come with job security, but it does at least mean that librarians will have your back when law enforcement comes asking about what you've been up to in the library.

But Doug went on to point out other ways that academics are traditionally free – free to set their own deadlines, work from home, work odd hours, choose their own priorities, negotiate departmental priorities, and even dress however they like. These are luxuries that most of the other workers at a university – or workers in general – don't have. Even decisions as simple as when to have lunch are often not theirs to make.

People who have little freedom in their work lives are, not surprisingly, a bit irritated when faculty take these not-so-academic freedoms for granted or, even worse, as perks for being intellectual royalty. Holding a PhD has little to do with wearing jeans to work (unless, perhaps, you're a geologist), yet the granting of academic freedom would seem to confer that privilege. (Some faculty seem to think it also confers the right to ignore deadlines, to fail to follow simple instructions on forms, or to park in designated spaces. Not cool.)

In academic libraries, we run into these cultural issues all the time. Some of it is the second-class citizenship librarians often hold, which has twisted into its DNA the issue of gender, because librarianship has always been to some extent a women's profession. Sometimes faculty in other departments treat librarians as their handmaidens and personal assistants. Sometimes librarians avoid making deci-

sions or confronting an issue because they don't want to risk upsetting a powerful faculty member. ("We can't drop that $10,000 journal that nobody reads; Dr. Touchy would have a fit.") Sometimes library administrators make big decisions and hope nobody on the faculty notices because consulting them first might derail an initiative that seems too important to abandon, yet the expertise informing that choice is too fragile to expose to negotiation. This isn't healthy.

Even more unhealthy is the way that relationships within the library are so often handled along a factory floor model rather than on the basis of shared governance. This is really curious, considering the work done in libraries and the values we supposedly uphold. You'd be hard put to find a library director who didn't support vigorously the concept of intellectual freedom. But you might be a bit challenged to find a library that practices it wholeheartedly in their own organizational structure. It would seem shocking indeed in many if not most libraries to believe that all those who work there should be allowed to speak their minds and decide what work to do, based on their professional judgment – or to set their own deadlines, work from home, work odd hours, play an equal role in negotiating departmental priorities, dress however they like, or even make their own choice about when to eat lunch.

Does it take a PhD to have the expertise to make these decisions? No. Are those things uniquely pertinent to teaching scholars? Not really. Is shared governance something that only academics with PhDs can handle? Not at all. It

could work in any organization that held high standards, respected its workers, and developed a culture of shared responsibility and shared vision. Libraries often talk about those things, but set working conditions differently.

Academic libraries, in spite of their tradition of defending intellectual freedom, have organizational structures that date back to early-twentieth-century bureaucracies and, when adapting to new conditions, seek inspiration from corporate management culture rather than the academic values they defend. I really can't figure out why, other than that academics themselves have rarely made a strong case for shared governance as an effective organizational principle. Perhaps simply trying to hold their ground as it's eroding under their feet is all they can manage. As Doug Downs pointed out, this friction between the free-wheeling faculty and the rule-bound administrators leaves the unprotected and fast-growing ranks of adjuncts in a dicey place, with a foot in faculty culture but their actual working conditions determined quite differently. Under these conditions, the triumph of "run your organization like a business" may seem inevitable and the idea of shared governance some sort of golden-age legend.

Libraries have, perhaps unwittingly, bought into the idea that managers are a special category of people who are able to see that things will get done and that those they manage cannot or would not manage their own work without direction from someone in a higher pay grade. In reality, most library work gets done quite well without oversight, but when something unexpected happens, infantilized

workers are likely to think dealing with it is above their pay scale – or they may just not care, because the workplace doesn't care about them. Why do we do that to people?

As Doug put it, "I'm allowed by my institution the freedom to create an environment that best helps me be the best scholar I can." Wouldn't it make sense to give library workers the freedom to do the best work *they* can?

UVA, THE CULT OF CHANGE, AND THE USES OF FEAR

From *Library Babel Fish*, June 20, 2012

I am getting a bit obsessed with the news coming from the University of Virginia. It is frightening, and it's all too familiar a scenario. A group of political appointees decide to take the very real power they have and use it under the mistaken impression that they must know better than anyone else how to run a university because, well, they've been given that power. Surely that means manifest destiny is on their side.

Those who defend their actions seem to think the faculty are incapable of seeing the big picture, that they are only out for their own interests, that they are tweed-wearing fuddy-duddies who are constitutionally opposed to and incapable of change – or all three. They say it's time to wake

up. This is how the world works. But it looks to me more like this is the way valuable things get badly broken because in the face of challenges, the people in charge decided recklessness is the best option. Change becomes a religion, a fire-and-brimstone religion based on fear. Change demands blood sacrifices.

The phrase "strategic dynamism" sounds like a cult or an expensive workshop series for CEOs or perhaps a previously undiscovered work by Ayn Rand. It doesn't sound like any way to run a university or any other complex enterprise.

Libraries have a weird relationship to the fire-and-brimstone cult of change. On the one hand, librarians are often too risk averse, too timid for their own good. On the other, calls for change are usually demands that libraries embrace corporate solutions under banners bearing corporate slogans. I've been a librarian long enough to remember TQM. Then we were urged to throw fish. Cheese was moved. These management fads are curiously awkward fits for an institution that doesn't make money. We spend it, huge wads of it, and we don't spend it on ourselves. Sure, we have to do a lot of analysis of community needs and spreadsheet voodoo to make sure that we're spending that money on the right things, given there's a limited amount of it, but we aren't trying to increase our profits or destroy the competition. We're trying to do something that is weirdly anti-corporate. We're trying to hold onto a piece of the commons that corporations have been trying to enclose for a long time. But since to do that we give our money to corporations, we get a little confuzzled.

I'll be going to the American Library Association meeting later this week. I'm on a panel on academic and public libraries' efforts to promote reading. I will also do some tabling for a non-profit I am involved with, Sisters in Crime, somewhere in the vast and scary exhibit hall that is a temple to the corporatization of the knowledge – or rather the "information industries." I find it almost as unnerving as the Mall of America, which is to me a circle of Dante's hell that Virgil left off the tour. I will not be going to the Association of College and Research Libraries meeting, which is just as well since I don't have to wrestle with the moral dilemma of attending a conference that thanks Elsevier for its sponsorship on its website.

Yes, libraries need to be able to deal with changing conditions in publishing, in higher education, in student populations, in the ways that libraries organize their work. But they need to do it with confidence in their core values, not by seeing change as a fearful force that must be appeased with bloody sacrifices.

Dean Dad raised a really good question in his confessional: is the fire and brimstone religion of change the answer we deserve when the collegium throws up its hands and refuses to make hard choices? We need to have communities that work together well enough to address budget shortfalls, enrollment changes, a hostile political climate and many other problems. We need to sometimes stop doing things that some people feel are necessary even when the evidence suggests they aren't. That does not seem to be the case with the German and Classics departments at UVa,

but I know even thinking about ending a major is hard. It's also sometimes necessary, just as its necessary to say no to new programs that an institution just can't support without new revenues. But unless the faculty has totally fallen down on the job, and I have no reason to believe that has happened at UVa, those are their decisions to make. To make those decisions, they need integrity, a sense of shared purpose, and good information. The last bit is what is often what's missing, and that makes having a shared purpose harder and good decisions impossible.

I do not believe that faculty by and large lack integrity. Most of them care about the institutions they serve, as do most people who work in libraries, as do most administrators. We don't need trendy management theories to figure out what changes need to be made. We need information. It's power, and it works best when it's shared. Isn't that one of the things we try to teach our students?

WHAT LIBRARIES SHOULD BE: A VALUES PROPOSITION

From *Library Babel Fish*, September 19, 2012

I am finally getting around to reading Andrew Delbanco's *College: What it Was, Is, and Should Be*, and was struck by a list he provides in his introduction of "qualities of mind and heart" that are necessary for citizenship and which colleges should help their students develop. Quoting them in their entirety, they are:

- *A skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past.*
- *The ability to make connections among seemingly disparate phenomena.*

- *Appreciation of the natural world, enhanced by knowledge of science and the arts.*
- *A willingness to imagine experience from perspectives other than one's own.*
- *A sense of ethical responsibility.*

As I read them, I thought "oh, but this is also what libraries are for." They, too provide opportunities to connect past and present, to encounter the knowledge of diverse disciplines, to explore new perspectives, and – while many library users may reduce library ethics to "don't write in the books" and "return things on time" – to open minds while valuing the even-handed evaluation and application of evidence.

Though it is in the classroom and while completing assignments that most students gain experience with these habits, the library can and should provide a laboratory or studio in which to practice them. Wandering beyond assigned readings and textbooks gives students a chance to exercise their own judgment and make it stronger. Encountering conflicts in sources sharpens students' critical senses. Exploring unfamiliar things provides a sense of the vastness of the world, made less intimidating as students find fragile filaments of connection. And even the humblest of public libraries offers its community the chance to experience the world through fresh perspectives, one of the functions and delights of reading for pleasure.

As I was reading Delbanco's list, I was also thinking about the fights over who decides what education should be.

That was a battle at the heart of the University of Virginia's recent unpleasantness. A handful of politically appointed board members felt (based on *Wall Street Journal* articles and their experiences in business) that they knew better than the university president what the university should be. Fortunately, the community rallied, the state grew embarrassed, and the president was reinstated. That was a completely unnecessary and unhelpful attempt to exercise power while showing contempt for those who actually work at the university.

I was thinking, too, of the Chicago teachers' strike, which seemed at least in part an attempt by teachers to insist that they should have some say in the matter of what education means and who should decide. The shorthand for this came down to the use of test scores as a measure of teachers' competence and in decisions about which "low performing" schools to close (which are – imagine that! – ones located in the poorest neighborhoods of the city, where teachers can't work test-score magic no matter how good they are).

In the case of libraries, I worry that we are abandoning or at the very least absent-mindedly mislaying our values and our capacity to improve the lives of those who use our libraries by taking too utilitarian an approach ("our job is to deliver the information people want"). We design our systems to deliver the goods and bolster "productivity," but not necessarily to encourage making connections or thinking deeply and critically. Consuming and producing take the place of creation and contemplation (such old-fashioned terms). As Don M. Randel put it in a recent issue of *Liberal*

Education, "The Market Made Me Do It." We compete against one another as businesses and sports teams do and, in the process, we contribute not to the habits of mind and heart that Delbanco lays out, but instead to widening inequality. When we put delivery of information to our communities first, we neglect our broader interest in equalizing access to information.

We librarians seem anxious to prove our value these days, but what we really should articulate more clearly and loudly is our *values*. When we focus on defending our existence to our administrators, we end up (as Meredith Wolfwater points out) with a focus far too narrow, too parochial, too myopic to ensure that our values inform what libraries should be.

ORDINARY AMERICANS

From *Library Babel Fish*, June 10, 2013

Abuse thrives on secrecy. Obviously, public disclosure of matters such as the names of intelligence agents or the technological details of collection methods is inappropriate. But in the field of intelligence, secrecy has been extended to inhibit review of the basic programs and practices themselves.

Those within the Executive branch and the Congress who would exercise their responsibilities wisely must be fully informed. The American public, as well, should know enough about intelligence activities to be able to apply its good sense to the underlying issues of policy and morality.

Knowledge is the key to control. Secrecy should no longer be allowed to shield the existence of constitutional, legal and

moral problems from the scrutiny of all three branches of government or from the American people themselves.

When I was a child, I though it very likely I wouldn't live to adulthood. Maybe all kids think that. But I had an excuse: I spent my childhood in a world in which I was reminded regularly that we teetered on the brink of nuclear annihilation and it would take very little to set it off. Everything that happened anywhere on the planet nudged the balance one way or another. Every person in the world was either for us or against us. And everyone was afraid of J. Edgar Hoover, who seemed more powerful than the president, who was afraid of him, too.

So I'm wary of people who insist on secret legal interpretations that give secret agencies secret powers. I am skeptical whenever someone tells me that only with these special powers can our intelligence services keep us safe. And whenever I hear some official reassure us that "ordinary Americans have nothing to fear," I start to worry. How is "ordinary" defined? Who gets to decide?

When I hear someone say (and I've heard it a lot in the past week) "I don't have anything to hide" I want to say "that's not the point. This isn't about me. It isn't about you. It's about *us*." We can't be a free people if we are constantly watched by the state. It's as simple as that. (That's apart from the fact that most people who use these technologies are not US citizens and are presumed to have no rights. That doesn't seem right.)

Librarians were vocally opposed to provisions of the

PATRIOT Act when it was hastily passed and public officials made fun of us for it. "Why would we care if people are reading James Patterson?" I recall someone high up in the Bush administration saying. They didn't want to acknowledge the issue at stake, so made light of libraries and those who use them. (Also: women with buns and glasses! Ridiculous!) That didn't stop them from wanting to seize records from libraries. This may have happened infrequently, but we can't be sure because it's secret. We know it happened in Connecticut, and some brave librarians stood up and challenged a gag order that came with a National Security Letter served on their library records. At the time, it wasn't clear if people served with an NSL could even consult with a lawyer. They did, and a lower court judge found the gag order unconstitutional. The FBI dropped their complaint rather than let it reach a higher court. Meanwhile, the PATRIOT Act was reauthorized. People served with NSLs were effectively silenced in the debate.

In the late 1980s as my local public library system went online, I remember citizens at a public meeting voicing concerns about the government keeping a history of their reading. Librarians designed their systems to erase records when books were returned, because they were concerned, too. After the PATRIOT Act was passed, we all double checked to make sure that records were being expunged as quickly as possible.

Since then, public attitudes about privacy have changed. There was an outcry against a government intelligence program, Total Information Awareness, and Congress

defunded it in 2003. That was a year before Facebook was founded. We share a lot, now, and we know that what we share is gathered, sold, analyzed, and used to advertise things to us. On Twitter, Dan Sinker (@dsinker) pointed out that visiting the *Washington Post* to read about the NSA initiates 50 commercial data trackers. Our addiction to free access to an Internet hall of mirrors paid for through micropayments of personal information has made it perhaps inevitable that the state will use that trove of data. But the US constitution sets a higher bar for the state than it does for private entities.

I'm not sure how the legal interpretations that the state is using to justify its behavior get around the fourth amendment. I can't tell because those justifications are secret.

How could a legal argument about constitutional law be so sensitive that it's protected from view and public discussion? I can only imagine it's because the state wants to protect itself from people who might reasonably object. And that's un-American.

An example of how much this secrecy screws things up: the Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, refused to hear a case about warrantless wiretapping because the plaintiffs couldn't prove they were personally affected. They couldn't because – ta da! – that information was classified.

"Calm down," we are told. "It's only metadata. Nobody is listening to your phone calls." Metadata is powerful. What you say on your phone may be less important than the totality of the record of who talk to, when, for how long, and where you were at the time. Combine that with other infor-

mation gathered from your email, your credit card records, and what websites you visit and a pretty full picture of what you're up to and who you hang out with forms. (There's a fun example of this concerning Paul Revere using actual historical records at Kieren Healy's blog.)

Metadata takes a lot of cleanup – and that means there will be false positives. Ordinary people will cease to be ordinary through innocent mistakes. (Have you watched Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* lately?)

I've also heard people say "This is nothing new" often accompanied by a virtual shrug: there's nothing we can do about it.

I suspect when I was younger, people said the same thing, but there was at least an attempt to rein in abuses of state power in the 1970s. The quotes at the beginning of this essay come from Frank Church, who chaired a committee in 1975 that exposed illegal surveillance practices of the FBI, CIA, and military, hearings that led to the creation of the FISA court intended to provide some judicial oversight of intelligence activities. (Currently, the Department of Justice seems to be arguing the court is subject to DOJ authority when it comes to releasing information.) Chris Dodd, then a senator from Connecticut, read them as Congress debated giving telecommuncations companies retrospective immunity if they allowed the state to access communications secretly – basically saying "you won't get busted for breaking the laws we tell you to break." In spite of his efforts, it eventually passed and it's in force now.

I'll quote more from what Frank Church wrote decades

ago, since what he said about illicit government surveillance seem so relevant today.

> *Americans have rightfully been concerned since before World War II about the dangers of hostile foreign agents likely to commit acts of espionage. Similarly, the violent acts of political terrorists can seriously endanger the rights of Americans. Carefully focused intelligence investigations can help prevent such acts.*
>
> *But too often intelligence has lost this focus and domestic intelligence activities have invaded individual privacy and violated the rights of lawful assembly and political expression. . . . intelligence activity in the past decades has, all too often, exceeded the restraints on the exercise of governmental power which are imposed by our country's Constitution, laws, and traditions.*
>
> *We have seen segments of our Government, in their attitudes and action, adopt tactics unworthy of a democracy, and occasionally reminiscent of the tactics of totalitarian regimes. We have seen a consistent pattern in which programs initiated with limited goals, such as preventing criminal violence or identifying foreign spies, were expanded to what witnesses characterized as "vacuum cleaners," sweeping in information about lawful activities of American citizens.*
>
> *That these abuses have adversely affected the constitutional rights of particular Americans is beyond question. But*

we believe the harm extends far beyond the citizens directly affected.

Personal privacy is protected because it is essential to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Our Constitution checks the power of Government for the purpose of protecting the rights of individuals, in order that all our citizens may live in a free and decent society. Unlike totalitarian states, we do not believe that any government has a monopoly on truth.

When Government infringes those rights instead of nurturing and protecting them, the injury spreads far beyond the particular citizens targeted to untold number of other Americans who may be intimidated. . . . Secrecy should no longer be allowed to shield the existence of constitutional, legal and moral problems from the scrutiny of all three branches of government or from the American people themselves.

UN-AMERICAN AFFAIRS

From *Library Babel Fish*, July 8, 2013

Has my country changed so thoroughly that we're beyond the point of no return?

On Sunday, when I wrote on Twitter "A secret court where only the govt can appeal. no checks, no balances. This is un-American, NSA" (linking to the frightening New York Times story about the massive secret body of law that the FISA court has built up in which the only possible appellant is the government), a friend responded that she wished it were possible to call it un-American. She thinks this is what America has become.

I really hope she's wrong.

Today I read Daniel Ellsberg's explanation of why he supports Edward Snowden even though he fled the country. Ellsberg writes that he lived in a different America. After releasing papers he copied surreptitiously to the press,

he was initially released on his own recognizance, and later, though he had to put down a $50,000 bond and faced a possible 115-year prison sentence, he was able to speak to the press, make public presentations, and be part of the public discussion that ultimately led a president to resign. Today? He believes he would have been imprisoned, held in solitary confinement, and at best silenced. At worst – who knows?

Ellsberg released classified documents when we were embroiled in a conflict in which over 58,000 Americans died. That war was part of a decades-long standoff between superpowers that threatened the world with nuclear annihilation. "Everything changed after 9/11" seems incredibly ahistorical to me. Yes, I take the threats we face seriously, and I appreciate that the government has a heavy responsibility for the nation's safety, but it's hardly the first time we've faced serious risks. I simply can't buy the notion that the threat today is so much greater that we should no longer expect the government to be anything but secret, brutal, and all-powerful. That security is more important than the Bill of Rights. That sweeping laws approved by secret courts should be allowed to change our legal framework fundamentally. ("Judicial oversight" that is so thoroughly hidden from view is turning out to be an oxymoron.)

Odd though it may seem, I'm going to bring this around to my professional responsibilities as a librarian.

We want students to learn how information works: where it comes from, how to usefully pose good questions, how to sort through and evaluate the results of a search, and in how to engage with knowledge in an ethical way. That

most often boils down to "don't plagiarize" but it includes "use evidence with integrity, examine sources of information with an open mind, acknowledge positions that you may not agree with, change your mind if the evidence persuades you you're wrong, conduct your own research in ways that honor the pursuit of truth."

It shouldn't stop with individual responsibilities, though. It should address wider civic issues. What can we do to reduce unequal access to knowledge? How can citizens enjoy the conditions that allow them to produce and share knowledge? What are the moral and ethical considerations that should guide information policy, including intellectual property law, access to public information, and – yes – privacy, that condition which is necessary for the right to inquire and the right to dissent. I'm wondering how we can steer our information literacy efforts away from mere training in information consumerism and toward a deeper appreciation of the role information (and how we decide to share it) plays in our everyday lives and in the public interest.

What our government has designed and put in place is a powerful technological and legal architecture for oppression. Whether we trust our current administration is entirely beside the point. So are the external threats we face. These are internal existential threats, and they are grave.

I like to think these threats to the constitution and to our civil liberties can still be defined as "un-American," that we are better than this, that we will work on fixing this and might even succeed. I hope I'm not deluding myself.

TAKING A LONGER VIEW

From *Library Babel Fish*, January 30, 2014

I'm working with a group of liberal arts college librarians to explore the question of whether we can contribute something valuable to the open access movement by founding a press. This puts participating librarians on the horns of a dilemma because it would involve taking money that we use to provide our local communities access to published scholarship in order to publish scholarship anyone can access. The practical and the ideal are in direct competition for resources.

This is an example of what Mita Williams meant when she addressed the question of "why librarianship is difficult and contentious." Of late, we have sacrificed the larger question of the value libraries have for society for the smaller question of what the library can do for its institution and its immediate constituents. This is something happening in

education generally during our age of austerity. The underlying assumption is that what benefits society generally will be revealed by competition when we run the numbers, because the market knows best and numbers don't lie.

As the demand to justify every move we make with metrics trickles down to the day-to-day operations of the library, an obsession with metrics that Jonathan Rochkind warns can (mis)lead us to focus on only that which can be easily measured and/or that which will make us look good, Mita charges library directors to do a better job of articulating the broader mission of libraries. Those broader goals are far more universal and enduring and, in the end will be our saving grace.

The more business-like our approach to education, the more each thing we do is measured by return on investment, the harder it is to reconcile local, immediate and broader long-term needs. For example, when I have time with students to help them understand how information works, I can spend that time stepping them through the mechanics of our system so that they can harvest five scholarly articles from library databases, get that paper out of the way efficiently, and enhance their GPA. Or I can spend some of that time raising their awareness of critical issues: what is peer review and why does it matter (and does it really work)? Why do we care what the experts think? How do we justify the choices we make when two experts disagree? What role does this kind of knowledge play in society and what is the individual's relationship to knowledge? That's more interesting than "click here to limit your search to peer-reviewed

articles," and it won't hurt the grade, but for a student who is working full time and needs a good GPA to keep her financial aid, that kind of long-term learning may be a luxury. Being able to harvest articles from a database may not be valuable in the long run (especially considering that we will cut off her access as soon as she leaves the institution), but speed and efficiency may have short-term value that trumps deeper learning.

Scholars face these trade-offs constantly. Do I give myself time to ponder a complex and difficult problem, or do I knock out another bunch of articles using data I already have? I can't guarantee that pondering will pay off, but those articles can go right on my CV. Do I gather a longer time-series of data or report my results now, before my experiment has a chance to give me additional information that may not line up nicely with my hypothesis? A little knowledge may be less valuable, but more knowledge won't help me right now and could hurt me if it complicates my theory. Do I support my discipline by reviewing articles, or do I invest that time in doing what the T&P committee values?

So there are all kinds of incentives to take the short-term benefit, and meanwhile we are going mad for metrics. What is done with those numbers? Let's say we can prove (because we have the data!) that students like the library, that use of our databases is up, that students are better this year at distinguishing between popular and scholarly sources than they were last. What of it? The ax keeps falling on the budget, and it doesn't check the numbers first. So far as I can tell, the only benefit is that we have followed orders and

have been spared for another day. We are allowed to continue to exist.

The student does the efficient thing and doesn't lose her financial aid. The scholar has a longer CV and isn't fired. The library isn't closed. We've survived for one more day.

What long-term value is there in what we do? I don't know. Who's counting?

That's my cynical side talking. In reality, it seems what can't be counted easily matters most and lasts the longest. In an age of austerity, survival is the name of the game, but it's a rigged game and a distraction from what we're here for. It's how we ended up with a precarious faculty, a rented library, and indentured students. We need to focus further out, more broadly on what all of this is for, and see how to align what we have to do to survive for one more day with what we want the world to look like five years from now, or ten. Because working toward a healthy future – which may mean sacrificing immediate local need for a longer-term good – is the only way we'll have one.

PRESENT IMPERFECT, FUTURE TENSE

From *Library Babel Fish*, February 6, 2014

I was a bit taken aback by responses to my thoughts about short-term versus long-term thinking as libraries make decisions. I see libraries making practical trade-offs all the time without always considering how those decisions may bite us a few years from now.

As an example, we traded print subscriptions for Big Deals. This made sense. We had to trade hand-picked subscriptions of local interest for what came with the Deal, but we could get a lot more for the money. Then, as we knew it would, the prices went up, and we were over a barrel. When we couldn't afford the Big Deal any longer, we canceled it

and started buying one article at a time. That's cheaper and people get exactly what they want, but the library (and the institutions they serve) have no lasting assets and nothing that can be shared. That's a lot of money poured into satisfying individual needs with temporary information (and sustaining a system that isn't working). Shouldn't we think through the long-term consequences of our sensible decisions and weigh the tradeoffs? That's what I was trying to get at.

But I'm guessing from responses that a lot of people are sick of being forced to bow down before a hypothetical future. Sometimes we are asked to wreck good things we're doing now in order to accommodate someone's beliefs about what we will be doing in future, or we are told by somebody powerful that X *is* the future, like it or not, and whatever people say they want from the library today is just a nostalgic obstacle standing in the path to a better tomorrow. Apart from these kind of destructive renovation exercises, we've all been through the dispiriting process of crafting long-range plans that take months and endless committee meetings but never are used by the Central Planners, who get more inspiration from an article in the newspaper if it aligns with their prejudices.

The future can be used for all the wrong reasons. The language we use about libraries and the future is often dystopian and apocalyptic, full of death threats: adapt or die; libraries are screwed; embrace disruptive innovation or resign yourselves to irrelevance. "Change" is often invoked as a millennialist prophecy of a moment that will divide the

ready and the unready. This is a narrative of fear that has been used to make outsourcing, austerity, and scarcity seem a natural law of the universe, an inescapable force that must dismantle public institutions in favor of for-profit entities that will do a better job of managing things for us. And even if they won't make things better, so what? It's inevitable.

No wonder people are leery of being told they should focus on the future.

But the future (as John Warner recently reminded us) is not a blind force of nature, it is built out of choices we make.

Librarians share some long-term values that hold up pretty well and can help us make good decisions. We think equal access to a wide range of information is important. That privacy matters. That people should be free to pursue questions even if they lead into controversial or uncomfortable territory. That we should oppose censorship and support intellectual freedom. That we're not just information brokers, but a cultural institution that preserves the past and helps its members learn and explore and create. These values, which go far beyond fast and efficient customer service, can help us strike a practical balance between a choice that will work for now and its long-term consequences. They can help us know when to say no, and help us explain why. And they can give us a scaffold for building within our communities a better understanding of what's at stake for all of us.

THE PRICE OF "FREE"

From *Library Babel Fish*, March 6, 2014

You've probably seen the news. Getty (not to be confused with *the* Getty) has made millions of their photos free.

Well, not exactly. You have to use their embedded code which includes branding, a bit of surveillance, and other money-making potential. Getty figures since people are already using their photos without paying, this is a way to get some control over those uses and montetize it. When you embed these images, you're giving Getty access to information about who sees the image on your page and you provide them ad space on your site, a little virtual real estate where they might someday put up billboards.

Also, it's not quite accurate to say that they are making *their* photos free. Many of the photos don't belong to Getty. The copyright for many of them belongs to photographers who contract with Getty so that people who want to reuse their photos can discover them and pay for that use, with Getty pocketing a percentage of the fee. As photographer

Peter Krogh points out on his blog, Getty was bought by a private equity firm a while back, and they want to enhance its sale value. Private equity is kind of like combining a feedlot with an abattoir. You acquire companies so that you can fatten and butcher them. Phototographers who fear this will lower prices across the board aren't too thrilled.

So it's more complicated than it appears. As Jen Howard, a writer and *Chronicle* reporter, pointed out on Twitter: "Increasingly it seems like free/notfree is too blunt a distinction for a lot of web-hosted creative content."

The problem is that "free" today is viewed as both a low, low price and as a lucrative business model, and that has influenced how we think about culture and society.

When I started out as a librarian, doing new things usually involved figuring out how you could carry it off, given the constraints of limited budgets and time. But now you need a business model. You need to study the market. You need to justify the return on investment. Previously, we didn't have to justify everything in dollar amounts. It all depended on how well it supported the common good. The sustainability of common goods wasn't constantly in question. We sustained them because they were good for all of us.

As Cory Doctorow said not long ago, some things don't carry price tags for a reason. Some things should be common goods. How we imagine our technological future and the ways that we will share digital culture is at a critical point. "We are presently building the electronic nervous system of the modern world," he told museum folk. We

need to do so without assuming that our cultural heritage has to fed into a business model and monetized. We need not-a-business models for a free, open, and fair digital future.

When free is thought of as a radical price, it generally means we're paying for whatever it is using a different, sneaky currency. We make micropayments of personal information that get aggregated, sold, bundled like high-risk mortgages, repurposed, and used – and not just by businesses.

As we've learned, this data made in exchange for "free" stuff is being collected and mined by the state in unprecedented ways. No need for warrants. No need for probable cause of a crime. The price of free, it turns out, is our freedom. And we're losing it at a terrifying scale.

On the Media, a remnant of the free press that is actually free, thanks to donations and other support, does a fantastic job of covering these issues and more. Their most recent show was devoted to what's happening at our borders, and you *really* should find time to listen to it.

It turns out you can be detained at the border without the right to contact anyone and without cause and you will never be allowed to know why. You can have your electronic devices taken from you and their contents copied without recourse. You can be taken to a hospital, handcuffed to a bed, and searched in a manner that amounts to sexual assault, and if you don't sign a paper saying that's okay, you will be sent medical bills for thousands of dollars just to teach you a lesson. You can have all of these things done

anywhere near a border, because it turns out the border extends 100 miles into the country. You can be shot by border agents, but you can't read their policy on use of force because it's secret. And nobody will explain any of this – not to citizens, not even to congress. I find this incredibly scary.

This doesn't have anything to do with business models or embedding stock photos in your blog posts. It's just another indication that we've gotten far too comfortable letting others determine in secret what being free is going to cost us these days. Because apparently nothing is really free anymore. Not even us.

Unless we remind one another that "free" used to mean more than a business model and the price we have to pay for security – and act accordingly.

THE EVERYTHING LIBRARY

From *Library Babel Fish,* June 3, 2014

I've had a couple of my buttons pushed recently. (Yes, it is known to happen. I am practically an accordion. Press my buttons and watch me swell with indignation and make noise.) One was a discussion on a library Listserv that I haven't been participating in regularly, so I missed much of the texture of the conversation but couldn't resist chiming in. The question was whether college libraries should be called "learning centers" since now they so often house such a rich variety of learning support – writing centers, advising, media production, tutoring, and so forth. As you might expect I don't like the idea that "library" is an inadequate name, just as I felt in 1969 when my high school tried to get us to call the library the LRC (since "learning resource center" was such a mouthful). It had more than books! It had loads of AV and machines that would turn us into speed

readers! Somebody made a bunch of money on that scheme. As I recall, we still called it the library. The other popular term (which I suspect makes the rounds of the Listservs that academic deans and provosts read) is to call the library a "learning commons" now that "information commons" sounds dated. A friend who earned her degree in Scotland is confused by this the word "commons" which she associates with dining halls and vending machines. Which during finals isn't inconsistent with our library, where studying requires an extraordinary intake of calories, but still, for her it's not an improvement.

Then I happened on an opinion piece in Library Journal titled "Beyond the Maker Space" that for a moment I thought was satire. Providing "maker spaces" in libraries is a hot trend, and it's a fine idea. A maker space is a common area where people can share knowhow, equipment, and socialize over making things – mostly technical things, but some also have sewing machines. (The Noisebridge hackerspace in San Francisco is a good example.) I suspect in part and perhaps unconsciously it's an opportunity for libraries to seem more hospitable to young men by adding some geekery to counter the idea that libraries are for middle-aged women and small children. A particularly trendy piece of maker space equipment is the 3D printer. As cool as these gizmos are, it's a little vexing how much libraries have seized on acquiring one as badge of relevance.

John Mitchell, the author of the LJ piece, thinks we should go further than simply adding maker spaces to libraries and welcome into the library all kinds of infor-

mation, not just the kind found in books. He argues that we should consider creating magnet libraries that provide performing arts spaces and science labs. It would not only broaden our view of what information is, but would entice non-library-users into libraries. And cure that public notion that libraries are about books rather than information in all forms.

Librarians have always struggled to define what a library is (unlike library patrons who seem to have a pretty clear idea). The great American public libraries that were symbols of municipal pride were meant to help people educate themselves as free men and women, but were also a civilizing mission for communities being flooded with immigrants who needed to be made into proper Americans. In addition to the iconic "Free to All" inscription over the doors of the Boston Public Library is a statement of purpose: "The Commonwealth Requires the Education of the People as the Safeguard of Order and Liberty." Some early library leaders wanted libraries to be domestic spaces, places that welcomed children and provided the gentle civilizing presence of women. John Cotton Dana spoke out against libraries as intimidating temples of books or "mortuary piles" and wanted them to be considered workshops, offices, and factories. That was in 1897.

So these debates are nothing new. I'm all in favor of thinking broadly about what libraries are and can be. I understand that for many public libraries who bought into the hype that they should try to be more like Barnes and Nobles stores (which were designed to look like really big

libraries with cash registers) are now realizing the limits of tying their identity to a particular kind of mass bookselling that is now threatened by another kind of mass bookselling. But we can't be the Everything Store either.

Public libraries are beloved by their communities and are arguably held in higher regard than any other social institution. Academic libraries, while librarians fret about irrelevance, are used by nearly all college students, even when the Internet is more familiar and easier to use. Public libraries want to be as good as Amazon and academic libraries want to be as good as Google, but in reality libraries *as libraries* matter because they are one of the rare places left in our society that stands for communal sharing of knowledge for the common good.

Libraries are places where knowledge is shared and ideas are born and things get made and students can play with ideas and learn how information works. But libraries are not the only places for making and creating. We shouldn't pretend that classrooms, laboratories, garages, studios, arboretums, workshops, garden allotments, performance halls, practice rooms, and kitchens aren't also important sites of knowledge-making. Arguing that libraries need to somehow house and host everything because being a library isn't enough is insulting to all of the other places where ideas thrive. And, in a weird way, an insult to libraries and those who value them, too.

THE LIBRARY ISN'T FLAT

From *Library Babel Fish,* June 12, 2014

One thing that a faculty member said a few weeks ago when we were discussing threshold concepts may have actually been a threshold concept for me. These concepts are the ones that are troublesome, irreversible, integrative, and transformative. It takes you a while to wrap your head around them, and they may disturb the way you think about the world, but they can also change the way you think in some profound way. This new insight of mine may not seem all that profound, but it put a burr under my intellectual saddle and is really making me think. She said that Google seems to flatten knowledge.

Wow. Yeah. Wait, what?

This clicks with my concern that, in trying to emulate the convenience and simplicity of Google and Amazon, libraries are (once again) putting too high a value on volume

of information and too little on curation. We have told vendors that we want as much full text as possible in the databases we subscribe to, which has made it harder, not easier, for undergraduates to use a database like Academic Search Premier and find articles they can understand that have been published in journals whose titles their teachers will recognize. Librarians tend to assume that access to more information is always a good thing, and it's an understandable position to take. Access is important. It is also understandable that librarians have lost faith in their own ability to curate wisely. Most academic libraries in the past bought large numbers of books that nobody ever used – 40 percent isn't unusual. When money was flush, use was irrelevant; the size of a collections mattered. But now, that kind of more-the-merrier collection building in print seems both filter failure and a gigantic waste of resources. If the same percentage of digital resources we subscribe to aren't used, at least they aren't taking up space. Subscribing to bundles also relieves us from the time that curation takes and the risk that we will become censors, choosing not to include in our collections things that are on the fringe, not mainstream. If someone else does the curation, that's their problem.

But it also snaps into place with my bemusement about the way we make our collections discoverable. When we ported the contents of card catalogs into databases, we kept the same data structures. We could search by authors, titles, and subjects, and included bits of description and local location information. The same thing happened in the shift

from indexes and abstracts to database retrieval. The only index that did things differently was the Science Citation Index. That tool, originally printed in tiny typeface on tissue-thin paper, tried to make knowledge discoverable through the citation network – tying together work that was related because authors cited or were cited by other authors. The Web of Science reproduced that as a database, but it really only became simple and a highly visible function when Google Scholar was built out of publishers' records and linked citations. What's funny about this is that we have always known how absolutely fundamental to researchers the web of citations is at curating and showing relationships among texts. Why did we never think of building our systems around those links? We somehow assumed that the literature indexed itself (to use Stephen Stoan's memorable phrase) in an obvious and self-contained way and the library's catalog was a finding aid for local collections. We didn't change that assumption when we went digital.

The current vogue for discovery layers – licensed software maintained with a great deal of local labor by librarians that allows library users to search both the catalog and licensed databases all at once – is at least in part an attempt to flatten the library's collection of knowledge just as Google does. Rather than search multiple places, you can search once and get a load of links to books and articles and other materials accessible through the local library, though sometimes only through the interlibrary loan service. Each library has to decide which software package will work best

for them and how to set it up without really knowing how the system works, because (like Google's algorithm) that's a trade secret. But unlike Google, we have to pay a lot and put a lot of staff hours into it to customize it for a local collection.

This is a far cry from what Vannevar Bush imagined as the future for information management. In 1945 he published "As We May Think," in which he described the memex, an imaginary machine that could store scientific literature that scientists would mark up with "trails of association." Those trails could be shared and followed by others. Though this is an amazingly prophetic vision of the way the Web would enable us to create trails through links, the Web doesn't work that way anymore. The Internet that was once a publicly-supported network of government and university nodes became a publicly-supported platform for commerce, and in that transformation the relationship between web users and the platforms they used changed, flattened, became both a shopping mall and a surveillance system. We curate and share on the Web like mad, but through platforms that encourage us to be self-branding entrepreneurs who are at once consumer, producer, and product

Academic libraries, likewise, have left it up to publishers and aggregators to curate and control access to the record of scholarship, with knowledge produced in something of a scholarly sweat-shop, ideas as piecework. And academic librarians everywhere have worked hard to ensure that their libraries come as close as possible to being an information

Wal-Mart. Access has been transformed into consumer choice, without enough thought about the overall health of the knowledge ecosystem. That's what it's like when the world of knowledge is flat.

But knowledge isn't flat. It's a set of ongoing conversations among human beings who share and build on and deconstruct and quibble over what to make of the world. We consider it ethical to trace those conversations in our scholarship and are pleased when our contributions are acknowledged and built on. It's a shame that when libraries devise discovery systems they're adapting to Google but not to the memex. Discovery layers are great if you're approaching research as a consumer – I need five peer-reviewed articles and two books on the subject of neoliberalism. Done in five minutes! But flattening the world that way makes it look as if nothing is connected, that sources are things produced through some mysterious process that are selected put in your shopping basket for checkout.

Is there some other way that libraries could enable discovery that is less flat, that helps make the communities of inquiry and the connections between ideas easier to follow? Is there a way to help people who want to join those conversations see the patterns and discern which ideas were groundbreaking and significant and which are simply filling in the details? Or is curation and connection too labor-intensive and inefficient for the globalized marketplace of ideas?

DISRUPTION AND THE VALUE OF SMALL THINGS

From *Library Babel Fish,* June 18, 2014

Disruption. Creative Destruction. Innovation. Entrepreneurship – terms we've heard constantly in recent years, with certain irrelevance and the total collapse of the world as we know it as the inescapable alternative. We're supposed to think like a startup, though given the failure rate of startups, I'm not sure why – maybe that's the destructive part of this version of creativity. The message always seems to be "you can't do things the same way anymore, and if you don't change really fast to anticipate the future, you're doomed," regardless of what the change is or whether it's positive or simply a malign force, like an asteroid hurtling toward Earth, that cannot be avoided.

Jill Lepore traces the history of this notion of "disrup-

tion" and takes it apart very intelligently at *The New Yorker*. She faults Clayton Christensen, the Disruption King, for the way he lays out his argument in his popular book, *The Innovator's Dilemma*:

> *The strength of a prediction made from a model depends on the quality of the historical evidence and on the reliability of the methods used to gather and interpret it. Historical analysis proceeds from certain conditions regarding proof. None of these conditions have been met.*

Later, after taking apart the case studies upon which Christensen's theory is built and putting it all in a historical context (which the theory had avoided doing), she points out that a theory of business success shouldn't be applied to everything.

> *Faith in disruption is the best illustration, and the worst case, of a larger historical transformation having to do with secularization, and what happens when the invisible hand replaces the hand of God as explanation and justification. Innovation and disruption are ideas that originated in the arena of business but which have since been applied to arenas whose values and goals are remote from the values and goals of business. People aren't disk drives. Public schools, colleges and universities, churches, museums, and many hospitals, all of which have been subjected to disruptive innovation, have revenues and expenses and infrastructures, but*

> *they aren't industries in the same way that manufacturers of hard-disk drives or truck engines or drygoods are industries.*

Curiously, this is where a Slate writer faults for overreach, suggesting she's just sore that her own field, journalism, is being disrupted. But following that paragraph, she points specifically to *The New York Times*' Innovation Report, focusing on the separation between the news side and the business side of any news operation. She questions the recklessness of making it more permeable, as the report recommends, because it will threaten the very reason the paper is in business: great reporting. Without that, there will be no product to sell, no brand to promote. It's a very good example (and one I've mulled over myself) of what's dangerously deluded about this highly-influential theory that has no clothes.

Two years ago, I did a little and totally unscientific experiment. My association, ACRL, puts out a list of trends every couple of years, a list of what appears to be emerging as hot topics in academic libraries. It's not as futuristic or evidence-free as the hyped Horizon Reports, but is more of a finger on the pulse of the profession. The trouble is that it seems to be taking the pulse of large libraries with large staffs, so for those of us in smaller libraries (which make up a large percentage of all academic libraries), these trends feel like the movement of the planets, or perhaps the movement of the planets with some asteroids hurtling toward us.

That said, I know librarians at these smaller, less-well-funded institutions are always trying new things, experi-

menting, sharing ideas – I would say "innovating" if I didn't find that word awkward and vaguely distasteful. So I put out a little survey and found that indeed, the things little libraries do are often small-scale and not the shiny new things getting all the buzz. They're often things other libraries already did. But they are non-remarkable things that make a difference, a big difference to the people inhabiting those small institutions. And they are being done often in a hostile environment, one in which money is short, staff have been cut, and there's either little support for trying new things or there's constant organizational restructuring that makes it hard to get anything done.

What's troubling is that these small changes that make a big difference don't seem to matter because *people* don't matter except "at scale" (another phrase I'm beginning to hate). They totally miss the smaller, human-scale changes that matter. The student who struggled with organic chem suddenly connects because the department decided to throw out their lab sequence and try something different, more risky, but potentially better at giving students a genuine feel for science. It took months of planning and has made everyone involved in the course work like demons to iron out the glitches, but for this student, it has made all the difference. She suddenly gets what it feels like to be a scientist. She can see herself as a scientist for the first time.

The historian who's given her syllabus a good shake and is trying out a new way to engage students with history has spent the summer delving into the holdings of the county historical society (which is understaffed and trying to raise

funds to fix the leaking roof), then working on a completely new set of assignment prompts, learning how to use new tools so that her students can create digital exhibits. She's had to drum up funding for software and has discovered two days before classes start that the instructor workstation isn't set up like the rest of the computers in the lab, and the projection system was upgraded over the summer and nothing is working right. But she puts out all the fires and meets with her students who have a million anxious questions about these new assignments and she wonders if she's making a big mistake until she sees her students present their projects months later. It was a daunting amount of work, but they're getting it, really getting it, and it suddenly seems worth it.

The librarians who threw themselves into a mixed-methods ethnographic research project, which seemed at times to be more a form of mixed martial arts, are working through the implications. They now have insights into how their website should be redesigned, how new group study spaces can be created if they withdraw runs of bound periodicals that duplicate what's in JSTOR, and if they can rescue some spare furniture from the college's storage rooms, because there is no budget for new furnishings, though they might be able to manage a couple of whiteboards on wheels. So the serials manager runs a report to see what can be withdrawn and works with student employees to shift the collection and members of the space committee visit the storeroom to find some tables and the web committee bones up on responsive design and pools their self-taught knowledge

of CSS . . . and it's all a lot of work for a dozen people, who are simultaneously running a library, but when it's all done the library is a better place. They know, because that assessment plan they had to put together is coming in handy.

None of this work registers as valuable because it isn't disruptive, it isn't shiny, it isn't new enough. It isn't a radical answer to all of the threats that are poised to render their institution extinct any day now. In fact, the administrators at this institution, busy with financials and accreditation and regulations and fund-raising, may not even know it's happening. If told, a hotshot VP for something is likely to dismiss it as rearranging deckchairs. All it accomplishes is making the conditions for learning better for the students in those courses, using that library, at that one institution, now and those enrolled in semester to come until further changes are needed. But for those students, it matters, and all of that work is what we do, all the time. It's our job.

A critical assumption of the innovator's story line is that anything that isn't disruptive is stasis, complacency, lack of direction, a commitment to doing the same deluded thing year after year. While the things we do may be small, that presumption of complacency and inertia isn't. As lies go, it's pretty big.

LEARNING TO DO RESEARCH THE HARD WAY

From *Library Babel Fish,* August 6, 2014

One of the issues that came up as librarians on Twitter kicked around the pros and cons of tenure for academic librarians (a conversation started in a blog post by Meredith Farkas and followed up by Maura Smale, Anne-Marie Deitering, and Wayne Bivens-Tatum, among others) was that we lack research training. That may seem odd for people who so often provide undergraduates with . . . well, a kind of research training, but our fairly short and generally practice-focused graduate programs don't typically include much training in research methodology. I don't blame the programs. There's only so much time and few librarians would argue that we should spend more years and money getting credentialed as librarians. Many academic librarians have

advanced degrees in other fields that may have immersed them in research methodologies, and LIS programs often offer or even require some sort of methods course. (For me it was statistics, taught by a professor who seemed a little weary after years of facing so much resistance from proto-librarians who were convinced they were bad at math, would never need to use statistical analysis, or simply found it disconnected from their idea of what librarians did for a living.) But we don't typically get the kind of immersion in the methods and practice of research found in other fields, and our interdisciplinary leanings mean we don't really have a well-established methodological framework for conducting research or an apprenticeship doing it.

A conference on assessment methods for librarians generated another intriguing Twitter conversation, this one partly about research ethics. Librarians are exploring the potential for using learning analytics to study how libraries contribute to student learning, both to fulfill assessment mandates and to actually do what assessment supposedly is for – to improve student learning. This potential for gathering and querying large data sets is a hot topic in education right now, and the promise that we can use data to pinpoint problems and intervene at the individual level is pretty thrilling – and harmful to my knees. Because these conversations make them jerk a lot. Being advised that librarians shouldn't be afraid of privacy concerns makes me toss some words around – because I think we should be concerned about privacy fears.

I've weighed in on why privacy matters elsewhere and I

won't critique the ways that data mining for education has the potential to replace human judgment and one-to-one interactions with algorithms. Other people have done that better than I can. But I was struck by an interesting intersection of these two conversations. Scholars who receive extensive training in research methods are schooled not just in how to gather and interpret data. They learn how and why it must be done *ethically*. They know how complex it is to conduct research involving human beings without putting them at risk – and they know why privacy matters.

Librarians who are largely DIY researchers have two models in front of them: the scholar's way and the corporate way. We're used to learning how to improve web designs from tech blogs. We've designed surveys based on the advice of marketing gurus. We know that Google and Amazon and Facebook violate privacy in troubling ways, but since they set the standard for UX we sometimes think it is time we stopped being so fussy about privacy. So knee-jerk. So cautious.

For some, the pushback against the recent PNAS article describing how Facebook manipulated people's timelines to influence emotions was overblown because it happens constantly. Some argued "that's just how the Internet works," confusing the companies that currently dominate the Internet with the Internet, which actually doesn't work that way. Others felt a prestigious journal should have higher standards for research ethics (and PNAS itself issued a "statement of concern.") There's clearly a different set of rules for

scholars than for corporations, and I favor those followed by scholars.

The conversations on Twitter were especially intriguing to me in the way researchers trained in anthropology methods pushed back on some librarians' enthusiasm for learning analytics and the ways privacy concerns were sometimes described as "knee-jerk" obstacles to progress. They know how much work it is to use student data ethically. They know it can be done. They have been trained in how to design research that doesn't make IRBs flinch, that doesn't abuse the trust of research subjects. Although some assessment projects are exempt from IRB oversight, that doesn't mean they should be exempt from ethical practices.

As DIY librarian researchers like me learn to do cool things with data, we need to learn how to gather and analyze it according to scholarly, not just industrial, standards. I hope when we look for ways to improve our research skills and methods we learn from scholars like these. Maybe it's the hard way, but it's the right way.

MOMENTS AND MONUMENTS

From *Library Babel Fish,* August 11, 2014

Andy Woodworth, a public librarian activist and professional thought-provoker, sent out a tweet last week that really made me think:

> *The semi-profound question that is haunting me this morning: are libraries moving toward building monuments or moments?*

He was responding at least in part to an article in the *Boston Globe*. it's one of an entire genre of articles, raising the alarm about books being weeded from public libraries to make space for other things such as newer books and space for new programs. It sounds pretty alarming to "purge" up to 180,000 books, though it's worth bearing in mind that there are 23 million items in Boston Public Library's catalog and

132,000 volumes are added each year. A photo accompanying the story shows empty shelves. Empty shelves look sad and disturbing, but it takes time to properly weed a collection, so shelves sit empty for a time until whatever renovations are planned can happen. It sounds as if every book taken off a shelf based on how long it hasn't been checked out will be examined by a librarian so keepers will be put back, but some neighborhood branches will reportedly lose 25 – 40 percent of their books. There are deadlines and quotas and to some it all seems like a betrayal of what libraries are for – which, in many people's minds, is books.

To Andy, this is a pantry theory of libraries – people feel reassured if the pantry shelves are full, even if they are full of dusty things that have been pushed to the back of the pantry shelves and are well past their expiration date. (However horrifying it may seem to believe a book has lost its value, sometimes they really have.)

As it happens, there were three other stories that popped up in my Twitter feed within an hour of Andy's comment that all had a different take on what libraries are. There was an update on the fact that public libraries have patrons who are homeless. Hey, everyone is welcome, including the over 600,000 Americans who happen to not have a fixed address at the moment. There aren't that many places in our society where everyone is welcome, so it's not surprising that libraries may be the most likely place for a middle class resident to be in the same room as someone who is homeless. Some libraries try to provide more than a safe place to hang out – they help connect people with

available resources. Philadelphia's central library has a café. That's hardly newsworthy; what's somewhat unusual is that it's staffed by homeless people, who also keep an eye on the restrooms to make sure they aren't being used for bathing or washing clothes against the rules. This hasn't displaced books – system-wide, over 6 million books and other media were checked out last year.

Then again, maybe the public library can be your office. Fast Company evaluates whether, now that we're all entrepreneurs, working from the library might be a nice alternative to working from home or paying to rent loft space with other urban creatives. The story covers different approaches to these innovations. Some librarians welcome new identities like this one, arguing it's time to shake off the book fetish because information is so much more readily available these days and it's much easier than it used to be to purchase from an online retailer those long-tail books that hardly anyone but you wants to read. Some non-librarian library defenders disagree and think adding extra programs and services is foolish mission creep; if you want a place to use your laptop and drink coffee, why go to the library when there's a Starbucks on every corner? For one woman in the Fastcompany story, it's a lot better to pay for a shared office space because you can network with the right people, and the right people don't hang out at public libraries. But I loved what a real estate agent said, working in the Brooklyn Public Library between showings: "It's inspiring . . . I see all kinds of people doing all kinds of things, and it motivates me."

Monuments are usually designed to inspire. But here's a large and impressive building that is inspiring to this individual because of what happens in it.

The story ends with the warning that "trying to accommodate everyone in a finite space is just begging for a turf war." Yes, that does sound familiar. But then, conquest itself isn't always pretty. In the same issue of Next City, which has a feature about the future of "the fustiest of urban amenities." (*Fustiest*? Seriously?) Adam Feldman has a dissenting opinion. He critiques Bexar County's famous "bookless library" which opened last year and prides itself on having no printed books, because it's the future and everyone needs to learn technology and also it will be cheaper. (Tell that to Random House, which will allow a library to license an ebook that only one person at a time can read for five times the cost of a printed copy.) The bookless library is a monument of sorts – a monument to a particular view of what is in the past and what the future will be. Feldman (who, as it happens, works at Philadelphia's Free Library) thinks it's a mistake. He makes a case for books (which Phil Bradley has responded to in a blog post with which I concur in part and dissent in part). But he also makes the case that libraries are not about books or computers. They are about learning that's available to everyone throughout their lives.

> *The meaningful life-changing core of the neighborhood branch is and remains the radical, flexible, dynamic education model that librarians build using every electronic, physical, and human resource at hand . . . We librarians are*

> *the tenacious masters of this planet's most effective freedom school, but we can never really seem to explain it to anyone outside our ranks. Librarians, whether public employees or private academics, are as a profession collectively fighting to make sure that when someone wants to know, there are no barriers to satisfying that emergent curiosity.*

So, what are we building? Sometimes we build monumental structures that reflect a particular view of what knowledge and community are about. But the buildings themselves and the way that they lock a particular perspective in stone or steel and glass are symbols of something that is fluid and shared and made of a mind-boggling number of personal and shared moments, the varied experiences of a vast number of people who use libraries throughout their lives for different things – and for the same thing. They are inspired to participate in a commonly-owned space that is dedicated to the value of freely exploring the world. The idea of a library – the *radical* idea of a library in an era of individualism – is a monument to those common moments of comfort, delight, discovery, and curiosity. It doesn't change. It always changes.

GET CRACKING

From *Library Babel Fish,* November 5, 2014

I'm trying to read a book titled *The Triumph of Emptiness* because it sounds as if it channels so much of what I've been mumbling to myself incoherently for years. In it Mats Alvesson connects the dots between consumerism, the fact that having more doesn't make us happy (by design – how else will you encourage more consumption except by ensuring we aren't satisfied?) and how this plays out in higher education and the way organizations generally work today. It's all about the shiny surfaces, the intense competition to stand out (while actually not caring a fig for the actual expertise or learning represented by the shiny surface) and how this emphasis to position ourselves as consumables that must be marketed relentlessly is putting our efforts in all the wrong places, leaving us with an awful lot of shiny surface to polish as what's inside empties out.

This may not be the best book to read the day after a midterm election that seems to have demonstrated that sys-

tematic disenfranchisement is turning the clock back beautifully. Having my inbox barraged with demands from the party I support left me feeling pretty empty, myself (though Al Franken's sometimes made me crack a smile, at least, before I hit delete). Then there's that warning we keep trying to pretend we're too busy to hear: the planet is not okay. It's almost too late. Hello? Is anyone listening?

Don't bother me! If I don't polish the shiny faster than others I'll be outshone and I can't let that happen.

This seems entirely connected to the ways technology – that magical time-saving, tree-saving, empowering thing – has turned into a vast shopping and advertising desire-machine that has ballooned the amount of shiny surfaces we have to polish, the amount of stuff we create, the increasing demand to attract attention to our stuff so that it can be consumed. And it takes the joy out of everything.

I spent a lot of time with colleagues yesterday hammering out a statement of concern from one volunteer organization to another. This wasn't a matter of wordsmiths quibbling over wording, it was negotiating how to interpret and respond to an unintentionally sexist decision. I've written about it elsewhere, but it reminds me of how pervasive the combination of raised productivity quotas (measured in quantity and dubious reputational metrics of quality) coupled with the need to be spending a substantial amount of our time promoting our personal brand through multiple social channels is making it hard to do anything other than produce and polish that shiny surface like mad. No time to think, or learn, or listen. We can't do those things because

producing and polishing the shiny takes all of our time and we're *scared*. Scared we'll fail. Scared we'll be overlooked. Scared we won't make the rent. Scared we won't have a future.

We should be scared. The planet is telling us in no uncertain terms that we won't have a future unless we stop polishing and start paying attention to the cracks and the fissures opening up all around us. But who has time for that?

In higher ed, we pitch ideas for slots at conferences we can't afford to attend and can't afford *not* to attend because jobs and grants are scarce. In the world of genre fiction, you might hit one out of the park, but mostly you don't and more people are trying, so you hope to get a spot at a fan convention where you might get some exposure, but chances are you'll mostly meet other people looking for exposure, and this makes it hard to listen to each other or think about what somebody else is feeling and why they feel that way. Word among genre writers today is that a book a year is so over. Two isn't enough. Three isn't enough. Did you hear about the 25-year-old who got a billion downloads and a movie deal? Get cracking!

We're cracking.

When we are responsible for making ourselves consumables in a competitive market, we can speak, but we can't listen. We can write, but we can't read. We can post and anxiously check to see who favorite or retweeted because metrics! Also, have I walked enough steps today? Dammit! I have to fit that in, too, at my treadmill-desk. This is madness.

Spoiler alert: I skipped to the end to see how it turns out. Alvesson doesn't have an answer – except to encourage us to recognize the emptiness of our grandiose surface-polishing and think more critically about what we're doing to ourselves and each other.

Aren't we all sick of this? The planet is.

RENT CONTROL

From *Library Babel Fish,* April 27, 2015

Did you hear the one about John Deere tractors? That when you pay for one, you're not buying it, you're licensing software that happens to come with some parts?

Unfortunately, it's not a joke, and the same property argument is being made by automotive corporations, coffee pot makers, and manufacturers of kitty boxes. Oh, and publishers, of course. You've probably realized by now that when you click on the Buy button to purchase a Kindle book, you're not buying anything – you're paying for a license to use a digital file but only in ways that the actual owner allows. When the library subscribes to a journal bundle, it's paying for one year of access at a time, not for the stuff itself, which will vanish if the rent isn't paid. (Yes, there are exceptions to this – but it's the norm.)

In the case of cars and tractors, you do own the hardware (just as you own the Kindle reading device, though not its operating system or the content you download). But

because those vehicles depend on software to run, and the manufacturer owns the copyright to the software and has slapped on some locks, you have no right to try to improve it or fix it if something goes wrong – even if the lock is a flimsy little thing that falls off when you try to take a look to see what's wrong.

As we boldly go into the much-ballyhooed Internet of Things, we'll own less and less. We'll have the temporary use of things that, thanks to proprietary software, are owned and controlled by others. If a coffee pot maker can insist that you only use its coffee pods and no other brand, why couldn't a refrigerator maker strike a deal with Coca-Cola, Tyson, and General Mills that favors authorized food products? Paranoid? No doubt – but food is one of those things affected by intellectual property laws in ways most people don't consider. The seeds a farmer plants in many cases aren't his – they're full of intellectual property in the form of genetic code (code designed to work exclusively with its corporate owner's fertilizer and pesticide). The farmer's options for selling their licensed products is narrowing, too, thanks to consolidation of food processing corporations.

In the academic library world, we've seen what happens when we give up ownership. We have a lot of convenience (one big bundle o' stuff, one invoice, no more fiddling around with acquisition decisions) and seemingly more choice, but the rent goes up steeply and if we can't pay it, we lose every cent we invested. Publishers consolidate and our intellectual heritage becomes intellectual property that we neither own nor control. The internet itself and the com-

puters we use to access it have provided us with great potential, but as corporations control the "last mile" of access and the devices we use to connect become locked down, what we can do becomes seriously limited.

When we depend on corporate philanthropy for the public good, we're being foolish. Facebook's seemingly altruistic plan to provide the Third World with mobile internet connectivity comes with built-in limits. It will provide access to Facebook and other selected sites, but if you want full internet access you'll have to pay. Is this better than nothing? Perhaps. But why is nothing our only alternative?

Intellectual freedom (as we librarians like to call it) involves both the right to speak and the right to access information. When we give corporations both control of the content and the right to distribute it, we forfeit the right to ensure equal access to the digital public square. If we assume that we cannot pool our resources to ensure the preservation of those rights – because raising funds through anything other than market forces is off the table – then we're handing our freedom off to corporations to decide for us what is in the public interest. Billionaires will decide the future of health care and education as well as who gets access to the public square and what we're allowed to do there.

It's not that I think corporations are evil. I am sure that the Fortune 500 corporation located in Ferguson, Missouri, did not set a strategic goal of oppressing the poor. But it was happy to get a tax break that left the city with a need to col-

lect operating revenue not based on property but on fines, erecting a system that is unjust and oppressive, not to mention bizarrely inefficient.

When it comes to the ways intellectual property ownership is reshaping our right to speak and our right to access information, including the ways we are allowed to use the devices we need to create and access information, it's not just that the rent's too damn high. It's that when the choice is between paying the rent or nothing, it's no choice at all.

There are alternatives. We have to consciously take them.

PRIVACY FOR THE PUBLIC

From *Library Babel Fish,* June 10, 2015

Libraries are getting some welcome positive attention lately. The Ferguson Public Library has just been named *Library Journal*'s Library of the Year for being a creatively hospitable public space for a community in crisis. Scott Bonner, the library director, keeps sharing the warm glow by reminding everyone that this is what public libraries do every day. (What a class act.) During the recent debates about the PATRIOT Act and the dramatic showdown in the Senate, a number of media outlets have pointed out the ways librarians have stood up for privacy as a condition for intellectual freedom ever since the act was passed. On the Media, for example, recently ran a segment about the way librarians were consistently critical of Section 215, which became known as the "library provision" after "hysterical" librarians irritated the attorney general by objecting vigor-

ously. (It actually covered all kinds of records; this was the provision used to justify the massive collection of telephone metadata.) So libraries have been getting some good press lately for doing what they do.

I was thinking about how the public perception of libraries compares to that of higher education, sparked by John Warner's excellent blog posts analyzing the fallout from the changes in Wisconsin law that give boards greater power over tenured lines and decision-making about academic programs. But there are obvious differences. Nobody is told they will have no future if they don't use a library. People don't have to assume personal debt to use it. Few people feel libraries in general are elitist or bent on indoctrinating their children or are an intimidating and overpriced burden.

That's not to say libraries aren't suffering from budget cuts that reduce hours and collections. In many cases, staff have been let go or replaced by cheaper labor. You can lower the requirements for library jobs to a high school education and the hourly rate to minimum wage, knowing that some highly-qualified people are likely to apply anyway. But most people seem to think well of libraries. It's a rare social institution that everyone feels is open to them, regardless of age or social status, and is a public good that doesn't have to be made private to be made valuable. Yes, some communities have outsourced their public libraries to a for-profit company, but it's not a widespread practice in an era of privatization.

Curiously enough, librarians are far less sanguine about libraries. We fear irrelevance. We feel that we're in compe-

tition with Google and Amazon and have to scurry to catch up because they are killing our market share. We need to provide an improved user experience even if that means letting go of outdated shibboleths about privacy.

Well, guess what? Privacy is in. A recent poll conducted by researchers at the Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania found that people are not okay with the way companies collect their personal data. They just feel powerless to fight it. Likewise, Mitch McConnell misread the way the winds were blowing and assumed reauthorization of PATRIOT Act provisions would be a piece of cake, as usual. He was wrong. Maybe, instead of feeling we're behind the times, inconveniencing our patrons if we stand up for privacy, we're offering an timely alternative to people fed up with having to surrender their identities to be aggregated and used in unpredictable ways whenever they go online.

Worrying that if we don't adopt the values of Silicon Valley, people will abandon libraries and turn to other, privacy-disabled sites is a red herring. We're not going to get Amazon's traffic by acting more like Amazon. We're not threatened by Google (any more than everyone is). We have the potential to speak up for privacy and engage with a concern that these businesses have told us is irrelevant. (They lied.)

Bobbi Newman, who is collecting a treasure box of resources about library privacy, has written an inspiring blog post about why she thinks privacy in libraries and their systems matters. Librarians like her and Alison Macrina, with her Library Freedom Project, are showing how

libraries can be site of learning and affirmation for those concerned about the ways their personal data is being used, giving them tools to fight back.

LIBRARIES AND LEARNING

ARGUMENT, INQUIRY, AND LEARNING TO VALUE EVIDENCE

From *Library Babel Fish*, October 26, 2010

At the risk of e-mail overload, I still find it useful to belong to some old-fashioned email lists that engage different communities in discussion. Sometimes they set up intriguing resonances.

On one of my lists, one populated by writing instructors, discussion recently focused on whether teaching argument was all it was cracked up to be. Shouldn't we concentrate more on helping students master inquiry? Though being able to understand the academic meaning of the word "argument" and to gain skill in marshaling evidence effectively in writing is important, too often students early in

their career as apprentice writers have a hard time escaping the popular notion that argument means persuasion by any means. But then, inquiry is also often misconstrued as a matter of finding sources that will act as a ventriloquist for their preconceived prejudices rather than expecting evidence to lead them to conclusions. (Perhaps I'm overly sensitive to this winner-take-all attitude during a cantankerous election season.)

On another list, one for librarians involved in instruction programs, a parallel issue bubbled up when one member wondered whether librarians found it troubling that a popular database that provides a selection of sources on topics neatly arranged in "pro" and "con" binaries contains articles about global warming that she finds spurious and patently false.

This kind of question usually produces a few predictable responses among librarians.

- The principled stance: Students need to learn how to make up their own minds, so we need to provide sources that represent a variety of opinion. (This is a fairly fundamental library value: providing multiple perspectives, including unpopular ones, is an important way to support intellectual freedom. This has become less expensive with the Internet providing more perspectives than you can shake a stick at.)
- The appeasement strategy: Who are we to say what's true? Librarians must be neutral in all

things. Are you suggesting we become censors? (This is, to my mind, a garbled version of the principled stance. Often librarians are urged to avoid suggesting any opinion or belief is false or unsupportable. I find that attitude completely irresponsible in a higher education setting. That said, I will happily provide access to texts that I feel are demonstrably false if they have played a significant role in shaping social issues and public opinion; I happen to think *The Bell Curve* draws false conclusions based on shoddy evidence, but people should be able to examine it as an influential primary source.)

- The practical approach: Students have to write argument papers, particularly in their first year composition course. They don't have time to conduct extensive research, and most of what they might turn up in other databases is way over their heads. This database is exactly what they need.

I'm not sure what the answer to these dilemmas is. I don't think it's possible to teach students how to conduct responsible and nuanced inquiry about unfamiliar topics in their first year of college. We can get them started, but it takes a few years to gain enough contextual knowledge and enough familiarity with the ways in which evidence is gathered and presented in various formats to get on handle on it. It's not that undergraduates can't do it; they just can't learn how in one course or one semester.

I like to think these skills and inclination are a major accomplishment of a college education and the library is an important lab or workshop or studio where they can be developed. Yet however we work the arts of inquiry and argument into our courses, I suspect there are more responsible ways to give students practice in understanding and using evidence than resorting to spending our money on canned collections that make life easier for undergraduates but unfortunately end up reinforcing the all-too-popular notion that for every issue there are equal and opposite truths.

INFORMATION ETHICS, BLOGGING, AND THE NON-FICTION NOVEL

From *Library Babel Fish*, August 5, 2010

I just had to do some housecleaning among my RSS feeds. Some of my favorite blogs had moved from ScienceBlogs to Scientopia in the wake of PepsiGate. (If this -gate is unfamiliar, here it is in a nutshell: Bloggers who wrote for a respected science blog aggregation site were upset when the management offered paid blog space to corporate spokesfolks – in particular a Pepsi blog on nutrition – without distinguishing it from the other blogs, which many bloggers felt unethically blurred the line between science

commentary and advertising. Though ScienceBlogs relented, the damage was done.)

It made me revisit a rather savage description of the situation published in the *New York Times Magazine* last Sunday. Virginia Heffernan, who writes a kind of "tech/fashion" feature for the magazine, thought the bloggers who were making such a fuss unfairly used their status as scientists to engage in classist anti-Christian bigotry. "Hammering away at an ideology," she wrote, "substituting stridency for contemplation, pummeling its enemies in absentia: ScienceBlogs has become Fox News for the religion-baiting, peak-oil crowd . . . science blogging, apparently, is a form of redundant and effortfully incendiary rhetoric that draws bad-faith moral authority from the word 'science' and from occasional invocations of 'peer-reviewed' thises and thats."

In a comment to a blog post analyzing her unusually dyspeptic analysis, she explained that she has no training in science, but was surprised that scientists would engage in the kind of grudge matches that are so common on political blogs. She also issued a correction of sorts: among a handful of blogs she recommended in her article, she hadn't realized one of them was a vehicle for denying human culpability in global warming. As she put it, it was a well-written blog with lovely images and she "frankly didn't recognize the weatherspeak on the blog as 'denialist'; I didn't even know about denialism."

Yet she recommended it, and the purpose of her weekly feature is to point out what's new, what's cool, and what to

check out online. I think we have a trifecta, here: a tarnished teakettle complaining about a pot calling a kettle black.

All of which made me think about writing and reading and one too often neglected part of "information literacy" (a phrase I don't much like, but which seems to have become the dominant shorthand for being able find and use information critically in the pursuit of inquiry of all kinds), the part that has to do with ethics and epistemology. One goal of a liberal education is that our students embrace a disposition to interpret critically, value evidence, and not only let their minds be changed by it, but be willing to represent issues fairly when they make a claim. We don't want them to rush to judgment. We don't want them to cherry-pick evidence. We don't want them to ignore facts that are inconvenient, or engage in unfair oversimplification of issues in order to score a point. But those values are not unique to scholarly forms of expression, nor to traditional journalism. Bloggers should also be fair-minded and check their facts. As Bora Zivkovic, a saddened ScienceBlogs defector, explained, blogs are media, and as media they have responsibility. I would argue we *all* have a responsibility to do our best to triangulate the truth, or at least treat knowledge ethically, whether in writing or in any other form of discourse.

It's pretty obvious when I write up research for a peer reviewed journal that I am expected to adhere to scholarly standards. But I write a lot of other stuff, too, including occasional features (that are more like reporting than scholarship or opinion) and blog posts like these. In this medium, I will be opinionated, I will even be snarky, but I will not

knowingly misinform or write about something without checking it out first. The stylistics of the medium are strikingly different, but the underlying sense of responsibility is not.

Another kind of writing I do is genre fiction. And guess what – it may be by definition whoppers told in the service of entertainment, but there still is a need to get it right. I'm not talking about random bits of information of the kind that earn you fact-check emails pointing out that you put a building on the wrong corner, *you moron*, but the underlying representation of social issues and human behavior. It's not just that it's ineffective to use straw men as characters, it goes deeper than that.

A fair amount of interesting research has been done on how readers process fiction, and among the sobering findings is that readers do not cognitively shelve fiction separately from non-fiction. The less they know about a topic, the more likely they will fold what they encounter in fiction into their knowledge base. This is one reason why so many biblical scholars were offended by *The DaVinci Code*; too many gullible readers thought it was well-researched and based on fact. In fact, as I write this, I am amused to discover that Wikipedia describes it as a "mystery-detective non-fiction novel." I should probably edit that right now, but it's just too perfect as it is.

So I hope, as I write fiction, I'm not filing misinformation on the shelves of my reader's knowledge base. And when I work with students learning the ropes of research, I hope that what they learn about choosing good sources and writ-

ing responsibly is not something they only counts when completing assignments, but that making ethical choices about information is fundamental to being free and thoughtful human beings in a society where first impressions, hasty judgments, and a stubborn resistance to evidence are all too common.

So let's be careful out there, and use your snark responsibly.

UNDERGRADUATES IN THE LIBRARY, TRYING NOT TO DROWN

From *Library Babel Fish*, November 1, 2010

Project Information Literacy has a new report out based on surveys of over 8,000 undergraduate students at 25 campuses, as well as some follow-up interviews. The findings are both cheering and sobering.

The good news is that students do look critically at their sources and have evaluation criteria that they apply to choose which sources to cite or to use in everyday life. They don't take what they find online or in library databases at face value, and in addition to wanting a good grade, they place value on what they learn as they do research and on

searching "comprehensively" – though what that means to them is different than it is to an expert.

The bad news is that they think there's far too much information available and, as a result, narrow their options in rather mechanical ways. They limit what they look at to avoid being completely lost and overwhelmed. Very few students ask librarians "here's my topic; where should I look?" Instead, they typically do what has worked before, hoping to gather usable results in the most time-efficient manner. This seems reasonable enough, yet it's frustrating for librarians who would like students to choose wisely among the dozens of databases available rather than always using the same one simply because students know how it works and have gotten good sources from it in the past. They could turn to the most in-depth subject database . . . but risk getting completely out of their depth.

The study also confirmed something previous research has found: undergraduates have the greatest trouble at the start of their projects because they are often asked to write about topics they don't know much about. They can't form a clear focus until they've done a lot of scanning to figure out the landscape of the subject matter, and it's hard to formulate a query because they don't know what terms are relevant and may miss key words because they are phrases they've never heard.

For instructors, this may mean thinking hard about what the purpose of a research assignment is. Is it chiefly to expose students to disciplinary research traditions and tools, or is it to learn how to frame questions and seek evi-

dence in ways that are transferable to other realms of knowledge? Both are valuable, but they are not the same. Ultimately, what will students know, be able to do, and value as a result of the experience? How can those learning goals be conveyed to students who may believe that research is a formally layered puree of other people's words using the kitchen blender they learned how to use in high school?

For librarians, the implications are rather more stark. We tend to think more is always better, that helping students do research means exposing them to a huge banquet of options. The problem for undergraduates is not finding enough sources: it's finding the *right* ones. The methods undergraduates have developed to reduce the aperture, to focus their attention to a manageable set of options, is a survival strategy that we should consider as we design library collections and instruction for this group of novice navigators. How do we guide them to the best sources when most of our efforts in developing collections has been to simply make them bigger?

We tend to either want to make undergraduates mini-professionals, trying on the jargon and tools of the discipline and mimicing scholarly discourse, or mini-librarians, harvesting and winnowing information like a pro. In fact, undergraduates are what we all are when faced with making sense of unfamiliar information: grasping for some method of finding significance in an abundance of options.

This study is particularly interesting read against dana boyd's recent article in the *Educause Review*, "Streams of Content, Limited Attention." She points out that our infor-

mation landscape is changing radically and we haven't figured out how to help our way. "Content creators are not going to be able to dictate the cultural norms just because they can make their content available" is a phrase that seems particularly apt to the current library situation. We can't just provide content; we need to help novice researchers find the good stuff without resorting to rote routine or expecting them to simply search more databases more thoroughly. We need to question what life-long purpose learning to use academic content in academic libraries actually has. We need to ask ourselves what value academic inquiry has, period.

I have been thinking all day about a slightly sarcastic sign held up at Jon Stewart's slightly sarcastic rally to "restore sanity."

What do we want? Evidence-based change.

When do we want it? After peer review.

Maybe learning the value of evidence that has been formally tested – and is not just ingredients for a ritualized form of writing that only pertains to college – could be a step in the right direction.

IN THE TEETH OF THE EVIDENCE

From *Library Babel Fish*, February 22, 2011

One of the things we hope students will learn by seeking out information in the library and online is the value of using evidence in the formulation of ideas. We tend to focus on students' most immediate need: completing an assignment that is due in the next few weeks. But as we expose them to the tools of research and engage them in the work of evaluating and sifting their search results, we hope that they are gaining a respect for evidence as well as some familiarity with the various methods of making sense of the world that they encounter in different disciplines, from the close analytical reading they do in an English class to the examination of primary sources in history to conducting empirical research in the sciences. By doing all this, we hope that they have the tools and the inclination to make up their own minds based on the best evidence.

So I was intrigued to read a news story in the *Boston Globe* about research in political behavior. It turns out that people who have made up their minds are not receptive to information that doesn't support their beliefs. I tracked down some of the research mentioned in the article to see how the studies were conducted. (I'm nerdy that way.) Essentially, James Kuklinski and others found that people who held strong beliefs wouldn't let facts stand in their way. Those who were the least well informed were also the group that were the most confident in their mistaken beliefs. (I use "mistaken" here because they were factually wrong, and those misperceptions of fact conspired with their opinions about what policies should be taken.) Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler recently devised several experimental procedures to see how people respond to corrections in information. Not well, apparently. When people read false information and then a correction to it, they tend to dig in their heels and become even more convinced of the wrong information, a backfire effect that increases their insistence on misinformation being correct.

This is all very depressing. We have enough of a challenge giving students the know-how to locate good information. I am reminded of Peter Elbow's notion of the "believing game." Rather than teach students the art of taking a text apart and arguing with it, like a dog worrying a dead squirrel, he thought there was some value in entering into ideas and doing our best to understand them from the inside rather than take a defensive position and try to disprove them as a means of understanding. I am also

reminded of research done by Keith Oatley that suggests that those who read fiction engage in a kind of simulation of reality that leads them to become more empathetic – and more open to experiences that they haven't had.

Which is interesting. Kuklinski's research is about a different kind of story. We like facts packaged in compelling rhetorical frames because the stories comfortingly jibe with our world view and our political positions. They reaffirm our beliefs and defend us from confusion. These stories are so emotionally convincing that we tend to pay much more attention to them than to the facts they contain, and when the facts conflict with the stories, we choose the stories.

Maybe instead of teaching rigorous analysis that tests ideas to see if they break, we need to put a little more emphasis on understanding them better first. A little more empathy and lot more respect for evidence could go a long way.

A PS to this little paper chase of mine – this exercise of tracing sources mentioned in a news story convinces me we need to do a much better job of making research findings accessible in every sense of the word. When you are engaged in a debate online, the links that are easily found to support your position tend to come from in the form of opinion pieces and news stories. So much of our scholarly work is locked up behind paywalls that even finding research referred to in these opinion and news sources takes a lot of detective skill and patience, and when you find them you can't provide links that work. If we want our work to matter, if we want the evidence we gather to make a dif-

ference, we need to think about making it more accessible, not just in terms of readability, but findabilty. Kudos to the authors who have made their work open access, and kudos to those publishers and libraries who help.

WHY THE "RESEARCH PAPER" ISN'T WORKING

From *Library Babel Fish,* April 12, 2011

I recently returned from a brief encounter with some fascinating ideas at "4Cs" – the annual meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication. For years I have found people in the field of composition to be some of the sharpest minds around, and like librarians, they tend to be unusually attuned to the baffling glossolalia that students encounter when they reach academia and are introduced to the discourse norms of psychology at 9 in the morning, biology at 10:30, and history in the early afternoon of the very same day, each with its unique assumptions, language, values, and rules. Librarians want students to learn skills they can use after college, and those who introduce undergraduates to writing for college also want

students to learn how to write, full stop. And yet, like librarians, they tend to be seen as providing a "service" to other departments and feel they owe it to their students to help them survive college. That often means librarians help students look up information on topics about which the students know little and care less; composition instructors get to put first year students through the grueling paces of writing about sources they barely understand in a format that few will ever use again after college.

Though I'm not in the field of composition, I got invited to contribute to a panel after writing a bad-tempered blog post back in 2009, during the Great APA Catastrophe. Briefly, both MLA and APA published major updates to their citation rules within a short period of time; the APA added some frustratingly convoluted conventions, and then had to issue a multi-page set of corrections that we were supposed to add to the new edition by hand. We were not amused. But more than that, we questioned the emphasis on painstakingly citing sources correctly when it detracts from more important issues such as asking interesting and genuine questions, understanding evidence, and communicating persuasively.

On our panel I questioned the fetish of citation correctness, Doug Downs and ZuZu Feder examined the double standard that we impose on students (are we so careful of whether we need a colon or a comma in that part of a citation? Would we reject an article submitted to a peer-reviewed journal over trivial mistakes in citations? Is the whole point to get students to confess what they don't

know?) Nick Carbone made the refreshing suggestion that students first learn to write using sources the way people outside academia do—drawing them into the text as journalists and essayists do. The fussiness of citation rules can be left until students are writing something truly academic, in their junior or senior year.

I'm in love with this idea. I have long agreed with Richard Larson who wrote way back in 1982 that the research paper as taught in college is an artificial genre, one that works at cross-purposes to actually developing respect for evidence-based reasoning, a measured appreciation for negotiating ideas that are in conflict, or original thought. I'm honestly a bit amazed that anyone was surprised by the results of the Citation Project study, also presented at the conference, that found students "skimming the surface." This is a problem that existed long before the Internet, but has only grown more obvious as students are asked to do more documented expository writing than ever before. (This finding was published in a national study published in the CCCC's journal in 2008; subscription required.)

The first year "research paper" has always sent a mixed message. You're supposed to be original, but must quote someone else to back up every point you make – while in constant fear that you'll be accused of stealing from them. The obscure rules of citing sources only exacerbates the confusion and focuses attention on mechanics.

I hate it when students who have hit on a novel and interesting way of looking at an issue tell me they have to change their topic because they can't find sources that say

exactly what they plan to say. I try to persuade them otherwise, but they believe that original ideas are not allowed in "research." How messed up is that? The other and, sadly, more frequent reference desk wince-making moment involves a student needing help finding sources for a paper *he's already written*. Most commonly, students pull together a bunch of sources, many of which they barely understand on a topic they know little about, and do their best to mash the contents up into the required number of pages. No wonder the Citation Project leaders learned students "have nothing to say." I probably wouldn't, either.

Yet they have plenty to say when they are not writing "research" papers. Another presentation at the conference by Paul Rogers and Andrea Lunsford looked at extracurricular writing that students do and how differently they approach it. (There's lots more at the Stanford Study of Writing website.) Students writing for a real purpose (other than to prove they can adhere to a set of rules) are able to engage with ideas, understand their audience, use sources ethically and convincingly, and understand and care about the subject they are writing about.

This totally matches up with the recently-released study from Project Information Literacy on "everyday research." In that study, drawing on survey results from over 8,000 students at institutions across the country, students reported on their experience with finding and using sources for both academic and personal purposes. In interviews and focus groups, the researchers, Alison Head and Michael Eisenberg, probed what the survey results suggested and found

that the hardest part of academic research – finding a topic and narrowing it down – is not an issue for everyday life research. Findings sources is also not much of a challenge, and I was cheered to learn that students use library databases and books as well as web and personal connections in their personal research. Where they have trouble is evaluating the results – the part of the process that gets the shortest shrift when we try to help students learn the ropes. An hour in the library goes by fast, particularly when students are looking up scholarly sources they can't understand using search terms they have only just encountered for the first time and probably can't define.

All of this convinces me of something I've thought for years. We should abandon the traditional research paper.

If you want students to learn about a topic and be able to synthesize information effectively, fine – but don't call it research. Turn it into a presentation, an informational brochure, or a Wikipedia article. If you want students to make an argument, start from something they know and care about, something that matters to them and about which they can hold an informed opinion. If you want them to read and understand scholarly material, focus on close reading and have the class jointly prepare an annotated edition. If you want them to write academic prose, wait until they know enough about the discipline to know what they're talking about and how to ask a meaningful question about it.

But if you want first year college students to understand what sources are for and why they matter, if you want them

to develop curiosity and respect for evidence, your best bet is to start by tossing that generic research paper. As for those who will complain that students should have learned how to paraphrase and cite sources in their first semester – we've tried to do that for decades, and it hasn't worked yet. Isn't it time to try something else?

SECOND THOUGHTS: THE VALUE OF RESEARCH PAPERS

From *Library Babel Fish,* July 6, 2011

Back in April, I wrote a bit cantankerously about my doubts that research papers as a genre are a particularly useful vehicle for learning and argued for doing away with the traditional "research paper" – the kind that Richard Larson described as a "non-form of writing." This genre is primarily a vehicle for students to display knowledge by discussing a number of sources they have chosen on a topic using academic conventions for writing from sources. It's a very common high stakes assignment that often lives at the margins of a course, but plays a big role in a final grade, and it often

falls to whoever teaches writing to first year students to explain how it's done.

Larson objected that drawing an artificial distinction between "research papers" and other kinds of writing suggests other kind of writing needn't draw on evidence from sources and that the "research paper," which actually does not involve students in any research design, research method, or proposal of an original hypothesis, is a misrepresentation of research as an activity by defining it as reporting what other people have said. Essentially, he argues "the research paper" should not be taught in writing courses as if it's a genre unto itself, but that students should be encouraged to incorporate sources into their writing and to learn how to conduct research in the disciplines. Instead of asking English departments or writing programs to perform the service of teaching the "research paper," we should instead "insist that students recognize their continuing responsibility for looking attentively at their experiences; for seeking out, wherever it can be found, the information they need for the development of their ideas; and for putting such data at the service of every piece they write."

I still think that's excellent advice, and would argue that there are any number of contexts in which students could practice the art of drawing on well-chosen evidence to understand and communicate ideas as a key part of their education. I agree with Larson that by isolating reasoning from sources as a practice used only in a certain kind of writing that is peculiar to a school setting diminishes the intellectual necessity of arriving at conclusions by examin-

ing the evidence. I am cheered by Andrea Lunsford's findings that students can write compellingly using evidence when they have a reason to do so.

But I'm dismayed that in public discourse, few people seem to deal with information ethically. They either assume opinions are received as part of a belief system rather than shaped by observation, or seem to believe that facts are something one selects the way one chooses a weapon – for their edge, not as information that should influence what we believe. I worry that when we make research largely about citation formalities and a test of how well one can find and summarize other sources, we are putting a powerful kind of reasoning into a very small box, a small box that gets stuck in the attic and gathers dust along with other school memorabilia. That this kind of assignment will lead to reasoned critical thought in non-academic contexts is a leap of faith for which there is little evidence.

And yet . . . I keep thinking about a discussion I had with faculty a month ago, as we were wrapping up a three-day workshop on critical information literacy. Several faculty members argued passionately for the need to engage advanced undergraduates majoring in the humanities in deep and sustained writing about a topic that they explored thoroughly and made their own. The sheer discipline and complexity of reasoning involved in writing a fifty page thesis, they said, gives students an appreciation for building a sustained and evidence-based argument from the ground up that informs their understanding of the world around them and their place in it that has profound epistemological

and cognitive importance. These assignments give students a chance to engage in genuine research using methods that humanists use to coax meaning out of texts, works of art, or historical events.

This made me wonder if students new to academia might find those research papers I complained about necessary practice sprints for larger projects that truly engage students in research. Yet I think not. I think we could get a lot more mileage out of requiring well-chosen evidence in all kinds of writing and verbal discussion and learning how to extract the main point from sources and write about them clearly without those tasks being contained in a generic "write a 10-page paper" prompt. Aren't there other more exciting models out there, like a well-written essay in *The Atlantic* or a nimbly-argued opinion piece in *Salon*? These are forms of writing that don't take pains to erase the authorial voice and yet draw responsibly from sources.

In the end, I am intrigued by the claim made by faculty in our workshop that creating an extended academic argument is the most effective means they know of engaging students in ideas and exercising their minds in ways that carry enormous benefits. I have interviewed students who did exemplary work and their responses bear out this claim. They have a grasp of ideas and the people behind them that is mature, and they clearly see themselves as being intimately involved in creating meaning. I suspect that they've gained skills in interpretation and communication that will be useful in any number of contexts.

But I still wonder whether students who aren't as gifted

gain, by engaging in these extended writing assignments, the confidence in evidence and well-reason argument and the respect for ideas that our best students do.

SOURCES OF CONFUSION

From *Library Babel Fish,* August 17, 2011

I'm always interested in what Project Information Literacy is up to. This week they have posted an interview with Sandra Jamieson and Rebecca Moore Howard, the researchers behind the Citation Project, an effort to measure the extent to which first year college writers use various strategies for writing from sources (as previously reported at Inside Higher Ed).

Many readers of college student prose will not be surprised to learn that students don't summarize sources – that would require reading and understanding them well enough to sum them up in a sentence or two. In fact, when Jamieson and Howard examined the way sources were used in 174 papers, only 6% were summarized; all the rest were paraphrases or quotations of specific sentences. For the most part, students harvest chunks of information from

their sources and patch it together. Often they paraphrase too closely. (I suspect many students would define "paraphrase" as "change a few words so you aren't plagiarizing." This misunderstanding can get them in trouble.) Perhaps more troubling, but less frequently a source of mass anxiety than plagiarism, is the fact that students often don't understand the sources they are citing. In many cases, it's likely they haven't even read them. They've simply found some money quotes they can use.

This leads me to wonder (again) why we ask first year students to make their paper look sort of like a JSTOR article instead of sort of like a story in the *New York Times Magazine*. When we tell them "in order to write about ideas, you need to find good sources and cite them accurately," *finding* and *citing* becomes the task; ideas are contained in the sources cited and only make an appearance through those sources. By making it sound as if the point of the paper is to find and use sources, we're practically*begging* them to patchwrite.

Wouldn't it make more sense to say something like this:

> *For this assignment, you're going to write about ideas, but you aren't going to be doing original research – that would require a lot of time and training – so before you decide what to say about your topic, you'll need to find out what other people have learned about it. There's a lot of stuff out there, and deciding who to pay attention to is important. You'll want to focus on sources that do more than just tell you things about your topic, you want to find the people who are an impor-*

> *tant part of the story – researchers, public figures, government officials . . . people who really know their stuff or have been involved in the issue in some significant way. Since your reader will want to know who those people are, be sure to tell them where your information comes from, and make it clear why you believe this source is worth your reader's attention. Please don't include a bibliography. Everything the reader needs to know about your sources should be worked into your essay.*

That would, at least, make it somewhat clearer that when you say "use five sources" you mean "use five strategically selected sources." Presumably the student will have to do a lot of reading before they can figure out which sources are really important, but that reading needn't be documented. What falls into the category of "common knowledge" is often news to first year college students, yet we tend to frighten them into citing practically everything they've looked at to avoid being accused of plagiarism.

When you get right down to it, we assign the research paper to first year students for a variety of reasons:

- We want them to learn how to write clearly.
- We want them to grasp how to organize ideas in writing.
- We want them to value evidence as an important part of how we know what to believe.
- We want to help them succeed in college by giving

> them experience writing in an academic voice and documenting sources using academic rules.

The first three goals are not easy, but are absolutely key to the fourth. Yet the fourth goal almost always undermines the first three because as soon as a new college student is asked to write in an unfamiliar genre while mimicking an unfamiliar voice, clarity and organization become primarily a matter of patching sources together in a sensible order and smoothing out the places where they bump into each other, reserving enough time to pore over the rulebook and code the list of sources correctly. This is not research. I'm not even sure it's writing. It's more or less organized transcription. It's kind of like remix, kind of like mashup, only without being transformative.

What's to stop us from concentrating on the first three goals in the first year and leaving the fourth for later? Only tradition and the expectations of other faculty who want their students trained in a certain kind of college writing and – perhaps? – the fact that teaching students how to quote from and cite a source is a lot easier than teaching them how to draw on sources in their writing to make meaning.

BURKE'S PARLOR TRICKS

From *Library Babel Fish,* November 11, 2011

Today a colleague and I were feeling discouraged about the library sessions we'd been having with first year students. We typically have fifty minutes to introduce students to the library and help them get started on an assignment that will give them practice writing in an academic mode. In fifty minutes you don't get very far, particularly when the assignment asks them to find three or four quality articles on a topic. It's not hard to find articles, but what do you do when you find 3,000 of them? Quite often the answer students are given is "limit your search to peer reviewed articles." Great; that narrows it down to 2,340. And very few of those articles are written in such a way that a non-expert who isn't highly skilled at skimming complex texts can grasp the main point without a lot of work.That's daunting when you have 2,340 articles to sort out. Not surpris-

ingly, the choices students make are often not very good ones.

We've worked hard to make libraries inhospitable for beginners. It wasn't deliberate. Twenty years ago, before the age of abundance, we had a small number of the most basic and important journals in the disciplines we teach, and indexes that covered the basics. Now we have access to masses of journals and databases that include full text of thousands of journals, including many that we would never choose if they were a la carte. We librarians assumed the more, the merrier, but for the non-expert, it's a nightmare.

We know from Project Information Literacy's research that students actively try to reduce the number of choices they have to make in order to get their assignments done. We know from the Citation Project that first year students who use sources in their writing rarely write about them with much understanding. They don't summarize their sources, they harvest quotes, and nearly half the time the quotes they use are from the first page of the source. We know from research conducted by Andrea Lunsford and Karen J. Lunsford comparing thousands of undergraduate papers from 1986 and 2006 that first year students are asked to write longer papers and are much more likely to be asked to write using sources than in the past (see pages 792-3 of "Mistakes are a Fact of Life," CCC June 2008). Writing that involves students in research and argument has triumphed, yet what first year students do to cope with these assignments seems to defeat the purpose, which we assume is to learn to do independent research, make critical choices

among sources, and use them effectively in constructing a written argument. What students actually do, though, is go shopping for bits of stuff that they assemble according to instructions.

We realized that we both think conversation is a much more accurate and powerful way to think about academic writing, so we decided to work on a box of tricks to share with our first term seminar instructors – what we quickly started to call Burke's Parlor Tricks. Kenneth Burke described the way we talk about ideas as an unending conversation. When we enter a parlor and try to join a conversation in progress, we first have to listen and try to figure out what's going on. At some point, when we've picked up enough context, we can join in. And when we leave the parlor, we leave the conversation still in full flow. What we'd like to students to have is some sense of scholarship as conversation in progress and some tips on how to figure out who's talking and how to pick up the threads without getting completely lost. Because when we throw them into a database that contains the full text of thousands of journals, we're almost guaranteeing that they will be deafened by the cacophony. No wonder they're eager to get out as fast as possible.

I'm not sure what we'll ultimately put into this box of parlor tricks, or whether the conversation metaphor will work for students who are having to listen in to conversations that are so far from their previous experience, among people using words they don't know, dropping names they've never heard – and getting graded on it. But it's got

to be better than what we're doing now, taking them to databases stuffed with hundreds of thousands of articles and asking them to find three or four good texts to write from with little help to offer them other than "use scholarly sources."

Hat tip to Meredith Farkas, who wrote a good blog post about the "scholarly sources' conundrum.

THE LANGUAGE OF LIBRARIES

From *Library Babel Fish*, December 7, 2011

A discussion list I'm on has recently been kicking around a university's plan to put their faculty in cubicles rather than offices as several departments move into a renovated building. Obviously, this poses student confidentiality problems since faculty not only discuss academic work with their students but personal issues of all kinds. The plan calls for a few conference rooms that faculty can use, if they are free when the need arises. (I don't know if our students are more retiring than most – I doubt it – but in my experience students have to screw up their nerve speak to their teachers out of class. The more they need to talk about issues, the less likely they will take the initiative. Having to find their professor among a maze of cubicles and then go hunting for a free conference room would make the bravest of them come up with a Plan B.) Apart from practical issues,

what does a bank of cubicles for faculty say about the institution's values? Will it say to faculty "you are interchangeable workers; don't get too comfortable" and to students "your education is important to us; please hold until a conference room becomes available". Of course, the increasing number of adjuncts who don't get offices at all and what *that* says came up in this discussion, too.

Cubicles are among architectural markers of power relationships and the value we assign to people and their activities. It made me think about the messages library interiors convey to students about the nature of knowledge and their relationship to it. Last week, I found myself fascinated by Tim Sherrat's observation that interfaces are sites of power. Similarly, the architecture of a library says a lot to its users about the position they hold in the realm of knowledge, as visitors, consumers, or as members of a discipline or a tradition.

Though the conventional wisdom these days about library spaces is that students want to be social, that group work and collaboration are how kids learn today, and that digital texts and digital tools will get used but printed collections won't, students often disagree. I've heard more librarians talk about student demands for quiet and solitary spaces for study in the past year, perhaps because the information commons idea has become so standard it's no longer an innovation. Recently a small group of students at the University of New Brunswick protested because their spiffy new library was too noisy, too public, and the books were squirreled away at the periphery. It wasn't clear from the

article that students wanted to *read* the books, but they wanted a quiet, serious place to study, and books were part of their idea of such a place.

A recent Project Information Literacy study found that students minimize technology use and try to unplug from their overly distracting social networks when working on projects or studying for exams. Last month, a couple of student speakers at a symposium on the future of the academic library went even further. They yearned to be disconnected at times, and speculated that if a section of the library was purposefully taken off the grid, with no wifi and no computers, it would be the most popular site on campus for stressed students who needed to focus and get things done. I just noticed that the most recent issue of *American Libraries* has an essay proposing that libraries consider having gadget-free zones. Ironically, the print copy comes with a QR code you can use to retrieve the essay online.

You'd think books might have the same power to distract – what is behind that tooled leather binding up on the top shelf? Ooh, that title down there looks intriguing – but that's not their effect. Somehow, books signify a more intentional and contemplative relationship with knowledge. It's partly because nobody shoves a message about a pizza party or a note about a funny video between the pages as you are reading. And unless you are a skilled reader of endnotes and unusually impatient, it's less tempting than when online to interrupt your reading of one text to go looking for another in mid-sentence. Books just seem calmer, slower: slower to write, slower to read, more sustained in their narrative style

than what fits onto a computer screen. It could well be because they are not really in the business of advertising, as Google and Facebook are, and they don't fret about dominating the attention economy. They are more patient about discovery and don't count readers by the eyeball.

Students are attached to the symbolism of libraries, and books are a key piece of the iconography. When they go to libraries to study, it's not just quiet and solitude they seek; it's the feeling of seriousness of purpose that being in the stacks conveys. It's a sense that, as college students, they are participating in something bigger than themselves, that what they are doing is part of a long tradition.

When I've asked students to react to pictures of library interiors, they almost always warm to nostalgic décor that is low-tech and filled with books. They are not attracted to gilded baroque reading rooms – too formal, too off-limits for ordinary folks – but neither are they impressed by spaces full of computers or places that look like retail outlets. They are awed by the Trinity College Library in Dublin and charmed by the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum and Vassar's library. Modern information commons filled with technology are bustling places, and their value is demonstrated in their heavy use; but all the same, many students yearn for quieter, slower places where they can feel inspired – and get work done.

The identity that a library inspires in those who use it is important. Just as housing faculty in Dilbert boxes says something about the respect an institution feels for its faculty (and the students they teach), so do libraries speak to

their academic community about who they are. For students, the library can connect them to the idea of learning and enduring wisdom. For faculty . . . it's different. Faculty may not set foot in their library from year to year. They have classes to teach and committees to chair. Research may be something they do at larger institutions, supplemented by professional networks and personal collections.

But faculty do use a library, daily. It's the one that inspired them years ago, the one that taught them they belonged, that helped them define who they are. Our students deserve a library like that, too.

ROBO-RESEARCH, ROBO-WRITING

From *Library Babel Fish,* April 26, 2012

The other day, I was nonplussed to read a recap of a study that found human and robot graders fared equally well in assessing the work of student writers. The robo-graders, according to the study, do as good a job as humans at assessing clarity and sentence structure. While my initial reaction was "huh?" it's important to note that this study only compared processes for scoring standardized tests. It has nothing at all to do with what happens in the classroom when students are learning to write. In fact, it really has nothing to do with teaching or learning, only testing, and testing the wrong things at that.

Les Perelman, who directs the writing program at MIT, told a *New York Times* reporter he is not impressed by the robotic approach. He has tried out one of the robo-graders. It's worth noting that only one company was willing to let

him actually test the product – we're supposed to trust machines to examine our students' writing but we're not allowed to examine the machine. You can read one of his nonsensical but high-scoring essays linked from the *Times* story. Apparently making sense is not important, nor is building an argument with truthful information, so long as the sentence structure is correct; extra points for using a big word when a simple word would do. Since using words to express meaning is not on the test, writing instruction will go backwards, to being grammar drills and five-paragraph exercises in vapidity. Pearson, a textbook company that markets a robo-grader, disagrees, saying essentially that any student clever enough to game the system deserves to score well. Education is learning how to follow rules, to play the game. Truth and meaning are irrelevant and so don't count.

This depresses me so much I hardly know what to say.

Fortunately, Marc Bosquet said it for me in a thought-provoking essay at the *Chronicle*. He argues that too often we teach as if we are schooling robots to perform mechanically. Take the five-paragraph essay in which a student plucks lines of text from three sources as "evidence" to support an "argument" about which the writer cares not a jot. He writes, "the forces of standardization, bureaucratic control, and high-stakes assessment are steadily shrinking the zone in which free teaching and learning can take place."

Commenting on the troubling findings of the Citation Project, he argues that the way we teach undergraduates to use sources fails to engage them with scholarly ideas

because they encourage "quote farming." Students don't have to read or understand a source to use it for an argument. They simply have to mash up a random assortment of context-free material and document it. We are teaching students to argue the way lazy journalists do: "quote-farming, argument from authority, false binarism, fake objectivity."

So much of what academic libraries do is in support of that very practice. We train students to mine a database efficiently for five scholarly articles. We even have a database that provides sources that give "both sides" of popular if insipid paper topics. We help students perform the work they are asked to perform, even if we suspect the five scholarly sources that first semester student has earnestly gathered are beyond his comprehension. Comprehension isn't the point. Organizing an essay and documenting sources is.

For many academic librarians, the only classroom they ever get into to help students understand how to use the library and the wider world of information is the first year composition classroom, where what students are doing bears little resemblance to authentic inquiry. Yet it's where students develop habits that last the rest of their college careers. Copy, paste, cite. Done.

I realize that many gifted and hardworking teachers go to great lengths to start students off on a different foot. But too often even teachers who know the limits of the mechanical research paper feel compelled to help students write that way as a survival skill, because students will be getting those assignments in other classes.

Textbook companies are ready to jump in and help mechanize the process. Historiann reports that Pearson offered her some cool cash to gather up some student writing that they can use to refine their algorithms. How scummy is that, paying professors to assign writing that they will turn over to a textbook company *for cash?*

And it gets worse. I recently I saw on Mashable that Cengage has bought a clever software product that lets you harvest quotes from sources for which citations are automatically created, and dump it all into a screen where you rearrange and stitch them together without actually, you know, having to read those boring papers. Even better, it will add your quotations to a database from which other students can easily harvest material on popular paper topics! That sounds like a gizmo designed to violate of our campus honor code, but it's actually a clever mechanical reproduction of the kind of writing our students do routinely. Not long ago Cengage got into a wrangle with another company that helps students harvest notes from sources, including Cengage textbooks. Cengage claimed that taking notes from their textbooks was copyright infringement. If you take notes, they argued, you are creating a derivative work. A feature of Cengage's own notetaking machine is that it will draw students to juicy quotes found in Cengage databases, providing a kickback to the publisher of the quoted material.

So if you've reached a point in the semester when you have a stack of papers to grade, take comfort. Soon we will not only have robo-graders, we'll have robo-writers, with

students guided toward previously-digested quotes that earn companies extra cash.

If that makes you queasy, think about your assignments that ask students to find sources and write about them. What are you hoping students will learn? Are they learning it? Is there a way to make the process less mechanical? Think about what habits our assignments actually instill, the habits that machines can so easily emulate. Maybe there's another way.

THE ILLOGICAL COMPLEXITY OF THE WALLED-GARDEN LIBRARY

From *Library Babel Fish*, September 19, 2013

Yesterday I had two very different experiences that speak to two of Ranganathan's laws of library science: Every book, it's reader; every reader, his or her book. To put it in less format-centric terms, scholarship should have readers and readers should have scholarship.

The first thing on my calendar was an 8:00 am conference call with a group of people who are exploring the feasibility of a group of liberal arts college libraries starting an open access press. The research is just at the beginning stages, but whether or not we actually start a press, our find-

ings should be interesting and useful for others who are thinking about the future of scholarly publishing. One of the images that came up during our discussion stayed with me after the call ended. Someone likened publishing a scholarly monograph that has a tiny print run and is available in only a small handful of libraries to throwing years of work down a well. Yet when speaking with authors, the need to be published is often far more on their minds than what will happen after publication. When a writer's concerns are all focused on being published in an authorized manner, open access isn't a priority, and every book doesn't find its reader. Far from it.

A couple of hours later, I met with students in a political science methods class that has a weekly lab in the library. In our first meeting we talked about research as a conversation and how databases represent and offer entry points to those conversations. This week was hands-on practice tracking down sources. Groups of students had four citations: a mix of books, journal articles, essays in edited collections, and conference presentations. I knew this would be a challenge for some. I underestimated how much of a challenge, and it's not because these kids today don't work hard or know enough. It's *just plain hard.*

Is it a book? Use our catalog, look for the location and call number, figure out what floor it's on, and find it on the shelf. Several teams said this was the easiest of their four tasks. I was sort of pleased by that, since we've worked hard to make books easier to find, but also a little dismayed because if *that's* easy, everything else is much too hard.

If a book is not in our catalog, use Worldcat to request it through interlibrary loan. Worldcat isn't just books, though, so be sure when you click on the interlibrary loan link (which is mysteriously labeled "find it @ our library" even though you are clicking on that link precisely because it is *not* @ our library) make sure you are requesting the book, not a review of the book. Also, we have two different versions of Worldcat, because we librarians can't agree on which one is best, so it will look different depending on which link you click.

Is it an article? Type the name of the journal it was published in into our journal list, unless it's an article in a book. (Yes, that happens.) Our journal list will tell you which volumes of that journal are in any of our databases or in print at our library. Be sure to read the fine print about embargoes. Some of the journals we get electronically withhold articles until they are more than a year old. (It's a long story. I'll tell you later.) Once you choose a database with the content, find the place where you can click on the volume or year that you want and drill down to the article level. You could trying looking the article up in a database, but you might end up working your way through 80 databases before you discover it's not in any of them, so I don't recommend it. (Some libraries have discovery layers, a technology we aren't sold on and can't afford – but from what I hear it isn't very good at locating known items anyway, though it will search for books and articles using a single search box, like Google, only not.)

If we don't have the journal you need, or not the volume

of the journal you need, you can fill out an interlibrary loan form, but first you have to find the link to log into your library account. (That's part of our catalog, which you probably thought was for finding books! Ha ha!) Use the barcode on your ID card. Oh, you replaced your ID card a few months ago? We have to fix that in our system, since it's not automatically updated. Then you have two more clicks after you log in before you can get to the form. (Seriously, it's so well hidden I made a 10-second video for the course website showing where to click.)

The surprise was the conference papers. Often, a citation to a paper means you're out of luck unless you can get a copy from the author or find published proceedings somewhere in a library, but fortunately for these students, the American Political Science Association archives papers from its annual conference at SSRN. A simple Google search by title did the job, though one group got a little sidetracked by finding an abstract for a subsequent article published in a journal we don't have.

By the end of the hour I was depressed – not by the students, who did a great job and were wonderfully patient and curious and good-natured about it all, but by all of the work and money we put into systems that are supposed to help people find stuff but which, in spite of our best efforts, remain bizarrely complex. Every academic library has some staff FTE devoted to trying to make these systems work at the local level. We spend small fortunes not just on access to content but on content discovery systems that don't work very well. We're replicating this work over and over and it

still takes far too much time and effort to know which route to take and to click enough links to get from "where is this thing I need?" to "Here it is."

The complexity involved isn't just a function of digital versus print or book versus article. The most significant difference is between open access versus toll access. We throw years of work down wells, and librarians spend a lot of time and money helping readers find the well and learn how to rappel down its mossy sides to retrieve it.

Dale Askey has just written a persuasive argument that libraries are wasting too many resources trying to make library content discoverable, and I think he's absolutely right. But that's just part of the problem. It's also exacerbated by scholars and their peer evaluators who don't care if scholarship finds readers or if readers find scholarship, who see it only as a thing scholars do. Once it's on the CV, its work is done.

I have said elsewhere, and I still believe, that the greatest challenges student researchers face is not finding sources, it's framing good questions, scanning the landscape of the literature, interpreting the evidence, weighing other people's interpretations and coming up with their own conclusions. But it sure would be nice if finding wasn't so artificially convoluted. It sure would be nice if we actually were preparing students with skills and habits that served them after graduation rather than teaching them arcane processes before we usher them through the gates of our walled gardens, waving cheering before we lock the doors behind them.

TACIT KNOWLEDGE AND THE STUDENT RESEARCHER

From *Library Babel Fish*, June 25, 2013

I'm old enough that the annual Beloit Mindset List (created to help instructors avoid making what they think are contemporary cultural references that are actually historical to their students) is full of references to things that I never got around to knowing before they became passé.

I've started compiling a different list, one that identifies the tacit knowledge many of us have about information and how it works based on experiences that our students haven't had. Here's what I have so far.

Journals and magazines are published as ongoing series. For those of us who remember print, articles are bundled into issues, issues into volumes, and every year more articles are published in these bundles. If every article you ever read

was found online, the relationship of articles to a particular journal published in a particular year is not at all obvious.

News is different than opinion. I'm so ancient I grew up with newspapers printed on newsprint, delivered to your doorstep every morning and afternoon. (Hard to believe, but even small cities typically had two major newspapers dividing the day.) One thing that is immediately obvious from the layout of a printed newspaper is that news and opinion are different categories. One could argue that news is strongly influenced by reporters' opinions or the orientation of the publication, but when it comes to making choices about what information to use and how to use it, the distinction between reporting and opining matters. That distinctiveness is much harder to recognize online.

Books don't have to be read cover-to-cover to be useful. They even come with tools to help you search inside the book – tables of contents and indexes, an introduction and conclusion. It's not cheating if you read only one chapter of the book, or focus on only the pages that are most relevant.

Citations have the information you need to track down the source. That's what they're for. It has always been hard for students to trace cited works, partly because there are so many steps involved. First, you have to figure out what the thing cited is: a book, a chapter in a book, or an article in a journal – or something else. Then, you have to figure out where on the library's website you look up books or find out what journals are available and for which dates. Then you have to either get the book or print journal on the shelf, or find the full text link to the article or ebook (which may be

wrapped in pesky DRM) or request it from another library. What seems almost harder to grasp is the idea that citations are incredibly useful, just like links on a webpage, albeit slower.

Databases and catalogs (usually) don't search inside books and articles. If Google is your model for search, you are likely to search databases and catalogs using highly specific words and phrases. Those often don't work in many library tools, because these tools, like your friendly NSA, work with metadata. In library databases, that usually means it's trying to match your search to words in titles, abstracts, and subject headings or descriptors. One of the reasons students love JSTOR is that it doesn't use subject headings or descriptors; you can search for a match in the documents themselves, just like Google.

Catalogs are (usually) local; article databases (usually) aren't. Quite often, students new to the process are puzzled that so many library databases dangle before them articles that aren't available locally. Why even put them there? Are librarians sadistic? No. Unlike the catalog, local librarians didn't compile that database, they take the database that is on the market and then work hard to connect each database to content that the library has access to, sometimes in print but more often scattered across different databases.

Call numbers are a system. It's not always obvious, because the jumble of letters and numbers doesn't seem to mean anything, but it's a way of grouping books on the same subject together in a system that makes room for new ones. (It doesn't help that the system is old and the relation-

ships between categories sometimes seem bizarre. Photography is in technology, not art? Women are a subset of family? Yes, you have to rescue books from the old categories sometimes.)

Some things are organized alphabetically. In the past few years, I've noticed it's not at all obvious to many students that a multi-volume specialized encyclopedia has different content in each volume and, more likely than not, the articles are arranged alphabetically by topic. Think about it: if you've never used a printed encyclopedia or dictionary, organizing stuff by the order in which the letters come in the alphabet seems a little strange.

Not all sources stick to the facts. Some kinds of sources (textbooks and encyclopedias, for instance) summarize generally-accepted knowledge. Others are interpretations or reports of new research which may or may not find its way into the body of generally-accepted knowledge. Some sources are the raw material from which analysis and interpretation can be made. Some are fundamentally theoretical, explaining how to interpret and analyze things using a particular lens that can be trained on different subjects. (Hat tip to John Bean for these distinctions.) When looking for sources, students often think of these different kinds of texts (jumbled together in databases and catalogs) as if they are all the same, containing inert stuff to extract and transfer to the teacher. With practice they figure out the differences, but not likely in the first semester or two.

In addition, there are things we geezers often assume about "digital natives" that are mostly not true. They aren't

always adept at search (mostly because they don't know the specialized vocabulary of academic topics and don't know enough context to narrow or broaden a search or quickly sort through results). They don't generally welcome the chance to learn and use new technology in class. They don't know a lot about the software they use daily, such as how to set margins or hanging indents or how to insert page numbers – though they come up with workarounds. They don't all prefer screens to paper. They are three times more likely to read print books than ebooks. And – imagine! – they actually read books. A teenager is more likely to have read a print book in the past year than an adult is, according to a report released by Pew this week.

In large part, the challenge we face each year isn't so much that most of what happened in our lifetime is history to our students. It's being able to challenge our assumptions and make our tacit knowledge more transparent.

WHEN IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE JUSTICE

From *Library Babel Fish*, November 25, 2014

It was what I expected. All the signs were there. A state of emergency declared days in advance. An unusual grand jury process that was essentially a one-sided trial. Months of peaceful protest followed by a week of officials setting up barriers and laying fuses. A decision to wait until dark before making the official announcement – and that, after nearly ten minutes of rambling self-justification.

The prosecutor (in the Mike Brown shooting case in Ferguson, Missouri) has released documents to justify the lack of indictment, unusual in a grand jury proceeding. Included is testimony from the officer who could not be indicted describing the man he shot and killed: "It looked like a demon."

It.

It's impossible to grasp. Yet all of this is to be expected.

We know our society is deeply unequal. We know that in many communities the militarized police force serves and protects people of property, not the poor. We know that both racism and rape culture are real but invisible to a large percentage of the population. We live in a messed-up world. It's tempting to simply say "no words" because really, there are none that can explain any of this.

So I'm going to retreat into one little part of this messed-up world I inhabit to think about one little thing I try to do, though without any compelling proof that it works because, well, I'm old enough that I remember *Life* magazine photos of the snarling police dogs and the bombed church and the burning cities and I still can't understand how we are here, again. And again.

The little question I'm retreating to because the others are just too impossible to even frame sensibly right now is "what can academic librarians do to prepare the students we work with for this messed-up world?" We want to help our students think about information – how to interpret it, how to see it in context, how to create it, how to understand the social and cultural practices that influence it. This is not something librarians teach. It's something we (and the faculty in the disciplines) see as fundamental as breathing – trying to use our minds and hearts to makes sense of the senseless. To decide what to do.

This kind of learning asks a lot of our students. It takes a mind and heart open enough to pay attention to things that are hard and painful and a willingness to avoid the easy answers that put our minds at rest too soon. It takes using

our imaginations to see the world from an unfamiliar perspective, to have empathy, to let our assumptions be battered and sometimes discarded along the way.

It means learning history. These events cannot make sense without knowing what Ferguson was like before #Ferguson, without knowing what role race has played in all of American history.

It means understanding economics. The murder of Mike Brown happened in a place where fast food workers went on strike because our cheap hamburgers are subsidized by wages so low that corporations count on their employees receiving federal food assistance. It happened in a city that issued three warrants per household because fining citizens is how they make up their operating budget. Where a school could only afford to buy two graduation robes for all of its graduates to take turns wearing for photographs.

The channels through which information is reported are also influenced by economics. News organizations that fly in for big events aren't going to have the whole story but they have bills to pay and profits to make so they'll look for dramatic footage to gain and hold our attention between commercials. Facebook algorithms will create a hall of soothing mirrors to reflect your circles and your consuming self. Twitter will provide a stream of fragments, a pixilated picture that's partly observation (the coffee shop that was supposed to be safe just got tear-gassed; smoke is coming out of the HealSTL office) and partly emotion, often both at once.

It means knowing who and what to believe when trying to understand what's going on, having enough background

knowledge to understand it in context, and developing enough of a curious, critical, compassionate disposition to care.

There's a lot to do. I'm not sure what contribution I'm making when I explain what a scholarly journal article looks like to first year students who would rather be studying for the chemistry test tomorrow. I'm not sure what difference it makes when I explain to juniors how to find the books and articles cited in a literature review when that entire infrastructure will be unavailable to them once they graduate. But somehow, collaborating with the faculty who will do the most to help students learn how to interpret evidence and make critical judgments, I have to hope that these small steps, these tiny bits of procedural knowledge, give students tools that will begin to feel comfortable in their hands, so comfortable they don't have to think about them, they just use them. I have to hope that by using these tools and exercising their judgment they'll gain enough confidence in themselves to have hope of their own. Because I don't know what else to do.

Except maybe make a donation to the Ferguson Public Library (there's a Paypal icon in the upper right corner) or to HealSTL. And listen. And look for signs of hope.

KNOWLEDGE AS A PUBLIC GOOD

OPEN ACCESS AND THE LIBRARY'S MISSING MISSION

From *Library Babel Fish,* August 18, 2010

Dorothea Salo has an interesting post at the Book of Trogool. She wonders about the mission of academic libraries, and about one paradox in particular: Can libraries support the open access movement by reallocating funds from paying for content to providing support for open access publications, or does that somehow go against the library's mission to support its local clientele?

I should back up a moment and define some terms. Most academics are now familiar with the Open Access movement, an effort to make scholarship free to all rather than intellectual property owned by publishers and only available to those who can pay for it or are affiliated with institutions that will purchase temporary access to it on their

behalf. Many libraries have supported open access by providing the technical infrastructure and human support for archiving materials in institutional repositories. These local archives make various kinds of digital publications created by the institution's faculty, staff, and students available to the world. Salo, author of a famous article about why institutional repositories fail to thrive (with the memorable title, "Innkeeper at the Roach Motel"), has challenged libraries to be more strategic about repositories, rather than operate on the "build it, and they will come" philosophy. We know from experience *that* doesn't work.

She is frustrated when she hears librarians say that if they had to cancel a journal to put funds into open access, they would be betraying their clientele, because the library's mission is to serve *their* community, not the world. The political reality is probably more of a hurdle. Canceling a journal to support a new initiative will cost a library significant social capital, even if the journal is rarely consulted. But many journals are now bundled into Big Deals, so canceling a single journal isn't even an option. It's all or nothing, even if most of the journals in the big bundle are of no interest to anyone at a given institution.

These Big Deals are a huge headache. True story: we recently faced a $12,000 increase in cost for one journal database when its publisher decided in the middle of an academic year to discontinue a Not So Big Deal. We had to go with the Giant Economy Size Deal that cost close to $40 K or cancel our subscription entirely. We asked what it would cost to subscribe to just the handful of journals we really

needed. They came back with a quote of $90,000. I am not making this up. Since we really needed those journals, we ended up with the Giant Economy Size Deal, even though we really couldn't afford it.

The fact is, in the Big Deal era we aren't really using our resources to build a collection around what our local community needs. We're accommodating those expressed needs by subscribing to journals we don't want or we're buying one article at a time for users, with the library getting nothing out of the transaction but the bill. The most recent Ithaka survey of faculty confirms that libraries are increasingly being seen as the purchaser of information, but not a communal resource or a cultural institution. We are in danger of becoming no more than a purchasing office for disposable goods.

Salo questions the short-term wisdom of building an institutional repository, then starving it of staff and adding to it only things that are easy to acquire but which won't help solve the financial crisis caused by escalating journal prices. As she puts it, "we can keep feeding the same broken system in hopes it will become less broken. . . . Or we can place some longer-term bets, with the explicit understanding that some of them will turn up losers." Her conclusion: "I'd rather place the longer-term bets, myself."

I agree. It's hard to take any access away from our students and faculty. But hey, they're used to it. At my college, we've had to sit down with the departments three times in the last ten years to decide which journals to cut. That's

what happens when your budget doesn't keep up with increasing prices and you've already cut all the fat.

The fact is, we're no longer in control of our mission. We can't tailor our collections to the specific needs of our clientele; publishers won't let us. Rather than wait for the whole thing to come crashing down around us, we need to take a good look at where we're putting our resources. Right now a huge percentage of our library budgets go to renting temporary access to walled gardens planted by publishers who decide what grows there. This is not sustainable. It's not a responsible use of resources. We need to work with those who create knowledge to find a model that serves all of our needs and not just locally, but globally.

I'm looking at you, faculty. Are you ready to help us figure this out?

RETHINKING RESEARCH "PRODUCTIVITY"

From *Library Babel Fish*, July 27, 2010

A recent blog post at the University of Venus, "When Tenure Disappears," argues that PhD training is limited to training people to become future faculty members, emphasizing rigorous but narrow preparation for jobs that no longer exist.

This made me think about a frustration I share with many librarians, the feverish amassing of publications that may never be read, published in journals that libraries can't afford, churned out by unhappy and exhausted colleagues who feel they have no choice.

My frustration with graduate training is that from my (admittedly removed) perspective, scholars seem to be taught the ropes of building a career very thoroughly: which

journals count, how to finely slice research into multiple publications, how to build a competitive CV. I get the impression PhD candidates are rarely prompted to ask themselves "so what?" unless it's to build an argument in a grant proposal. When scientists are asked "but what does this actually mean?" they usually are able to connect the dots to an eventual cure for a disease, a longer-lasting battery, a more sustainable planet. They have to be able to do that; science is expensive, and funders want answers. So they connect the dots even if, in reality, they are doing basic science and have no idea what it will lead to.

For those who are not funded but need to demonstrate their expertise through publishing, the question – why is this research important? What difference will it make in the world? – is likely either be considered ludicrously romantic ("are you for real? this is how you play the game") or an attack on intellectualism ("what is it *for*? Only a philistine would ask a question like that; I'm contributing an entirely new way of looking at this exquisitely wrinkled pea, but you obviously know nothing of recent developments in heuristic legumology.")

My background is in literature, and I believe it matters as much as more obviously practical pursuits. I just don't like to see my friends expend so much blood, sweat, and tears writing books that will be purchased by three dozen libraries in the world, or articles that will be inaccessible in more ways than one: too specialized for a non-expert to understand, published in a journal that's available to a small handful of people. And it *really* bugs me because these are

incredibly smart, articulate people who can be utterly fascinating on a range of topics that matter.

Just as I worry that we spend too much time teaching students to be students rather than to be free and inquiring human beings, I think we expend too much energy training scholars to be scholars, full stop. We value esoteric expertise to the extent that we declare ourselves incompetent to judge our colleagues' work; instead, we outsource promotion and tenure to publishers, whose imprimatur is used to substitute for our judgment. Libraries are supposed to foot the bill, whether anyone wants to read this stuff or not. We could be doing something more productive, like enriching people's lives or setting people's imaginations on fire, but we've let ourselves define the word "productive" in very narrow and oversimplified quantifiable terms.

It makes me want to paraphrase T. S. Eliot: Where is the wisdom we've lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we've lost in productivity?

NO PROBLEM!

From *Library Babel Fish,* August 2, 2010

Late last week, hearings were held in Congress on whether federal agencies that pour billions of tax dollars into research should follow the National Institutes of Health's example and require that researchers provide a copy of the published research findings to the agencies within twelve months so it can be made publicly accessible.

In case you haven't noticed, library budgets are being gobbled up by the ever-rising cost of subscriptions to journals and databases, most of it temporary electronic access to research that gets turned off like the lights if we can no longer scrape together the rent. This increased budgeting for databases and journals means we have less money to buy things we actually own, like books, and university presses have to trim their lists because the market is shrinking, and good books without an obvious market have to go unpublished, and the next time we suddenly need to have thoughtful long-form analysis of things that nobody is

interested in – like, say, some fringe group called the Taliban in an obscure part of the world originally published by Yale in 2000 – we'll just have to hang on until somebody gets around to researching and writing that book that suddenly has a market.

But *don't worry about it!* According to Alan Adler of the Association of American Publishers, we have no problem! He said in his testimony, "unlike many other challenges our country faces and problems policy makers must solve, there is no crisis in the world of scholarly publishing, or in the dissemination of scientific materials."

Sure, taxpayers are entitled to federally funded research, but "peer-reviewed articles published in scholarly articles are *not* research." No, they are the intellectual property of publishers, because they're the ones who spend all kinds of money to make sure the science in them is accurate.

I'm not kidding. He actually said that. It's publishers who make sure the research is "accurate, new, and important." That peer review you do for free? They have to spend millions to make sure you do it right.

So we have no problem, and taxpayers have to right to this stuff because it's not research. And shut up about page charges. We don't want to confuse these poor legislators.

However, if we post this stuff online, we do have a problem, a really scary problem, because it could fall into the hands of foreigners. National security is at risk! I'm not quite sure how the current, problem-free environment, in which corporations (many of them foreign-owned) are happy to provide this not-research to anyone willing to pay,

keeps U.S. scientific research out of the hands of foreigners, or what problem sharing scientific information with people outside our borders creates. But apparently we're in big trouble if we stop selling it and let foreigners have it for free.

Somebody is going to have to do something about those damned physicists. On the day before these hearings were being held, they went and decided to let every public library in America have free access to their journals. And they're even talking about doing the same in other countries. Okay, maybe it's not rocket science – or wait, *maybe it is!*

All snark aside, I find these logic-defying arguments based on faulty reasoning, misrepresentation of how the process works, and appeals to anxiety about foreigners even more angering than the fact that in 2009 Elsevier made a billion dollars in profits with a tidy 35 percent profit margin. Wasn't that the very same year that saw enormous hardship in higher education, with layoffs, rising tuition, and libraries scrambling to manage huge budget cuts? What a weird coincidence.

But don't worry about it. There is no crisis. You whiners have plenty of access to information. All you have to do is buy it.

WOMEN AND WIKIPEDIA

From *Library Babel Fish*, February 3, 2011

I know gender inequality hasn't gone away, and that we are not living in a post-sexist society, but I can still be caught by surprise.

For example, women buy and read the majority of books, but get the mouse's share of book review coverage.

Women have opinions, but some 80% of published op/ed pieces have male names in the bylines.

And now the *New York Times* has called attention to a survey that suggests over 85 percent of contributors to Wikipedia are men.

Wikipedia, to its credit, wants to do something about it. Sue Gardner, executive director of the Wikipedia Foundation, sees it not as a problem of inequity, but rather a problem of quality. If a vast percentage of the world is not con-

tributing, if their perspectives, interests, and experiences are omitted, Wikipedia will be less than it could be.

The effect can be clearly demonstrated without departing from a Wikipedian "neutral point of view" strategy. The *New York Times* story points out several situations in which articles about notable women or popular culture issues of greater interest to women than men are covered in far less detail than other topics. A Wikipedia editor who goes by the moniker Headbomb analyzed articles on people included in a "science hall of fame" and found that articles on women scientists tended to be skimpier than those on men, and further found that the difference in biographical coverage was even more pronounced in areas where there was less of a gender gap. The more we're there, the more invisible we are. Kudos to the Wikimedia Foundation for identifying this issue and attempting to address it.

Since the *New York Times* covered the issue, I've heard more stories than I can count of women who gave up contributing because their material was edited out, almost always because it was deemed insufficiently significant. It's hard to imagine a more insulting rejection, considering the massive amounts of detail provided on gaming, television shows, and arcane bits of military history.

The responses to various commentaries on the topic propose different reasons for the gender imbalance. They tend to fall into these categories:

- Many women say they don't contribute because they are too busy.

- Many Wikipedians say anyone can contribute, so women are to blame if they don't contribute more.
- Some suggest that men are more geeky and obsessed with facts than women, so writing Wikipedia articles is simply more fun for them.
- Some suggest that women are not assertive enough and are too prone to undercut themselves. They need assertiveness training.
- Some find that women are more often uncomfortable with conflict than men and shy away from electronic forums where they might encounter it.
- Some suggest our brains are wired differently and men like staring at screens more than women.
- A very large number say any complaints about gender balance are coming from politically correct, whining, sexist liberals who are trying to impose censorship on the most perfect form of democracy. So shut up.

I'm not sure what the underlying causes are, but when an information source that is consulted by countless information-seekers daily has such demonstrable biases, we have a problem. And when so many people deny we have a problem . . . well, that's a problem, too.

DISPATCHES FROM THE FUTURE

From *Library Babel Fish*, June 13, 2011

You're traveling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind; a route that passes through the middle ground between light and shadow. Your next stop – the copyright Twilight Zone!

Imagine it's a year or two from now. You're preparing to teach an upper division course and want to assign a dozen groundbreaking journal articles published over the past century. Last time you taught the course, students wrestled with the primary research, but it gave them a much better sense of how the disciplines works than any available textbook would. The registrar has just sent out a reminder to get your reading list together early so students can see how much their texts will cost when they register for courses. You dutifully go to the Compliance Office's website and calculate how much students will need to pay to read the dozen

articles that you plan to upload to Moodle. Wow, that was more than you thought! They won't be too happy about paying $350 for articles they will have to print off themselves. You really don't want to get hammered in student evaluations again. Maybe you can just summarize the main points in lectures.But you make a note to avoid quoting too much from any of them, since you seem to remember that if you read more than 500 words out loud, you might be in trouble. Or is it 400 words? Better play it safe; you got your hand slapped last semester for playing a YouTube video that it turned out was infringing.

You push that problem away to prepare for class. A special issue of your society's journal published this week is devoted to the concept that you're covering this afternoon. What a goldmine! One of the articles has a chart that will really get the idea across, and another one has a table full of results that would be perfect for a discussion. You make a couple of screen shots and start to insert them in your slide deck before remembering that you're only allowed to use one illustration from any journal issue without first getting permission. You send quick e-mails to the authors, who you know from conferences. Both reply almost instantly. They're thrilled that you want to use their research in your teaching. Unfortunately, they don't own the copyright. You'll have to go through the publisher. That's okay, you know the publisher; it's your society after all. But since the organization outsourced their publishing operations, the copyright belongs to a for-profit corporation based in

Europe. You search for their permissions policy online, but run out of time. Would have been sweet . . .

After class you check your e-mail and find that an article you requested through interlibrary loan has arrived and is ready for pickup. You send a reply that the attachment seems to have been left off. The message you get back is so baffling you pick up the phone and call the library's interlibrary loan department. A student employee answers. "Yes, we have it printed out for you. You can pick it up whenever we're open. Oh, and we close at six today."

"Why six?"

"Some budget thing."

"But this article . . . why can't you just send me the PDF?"

"That's not allowed anymore. You have to come to the library to get it."

You're sure there's some mistake. "Can I talk to your supervisor?"

"Not until tomorrow. She only works half time now."

"Can you transfer me to the library director, then?"

It's not a mistake. The director confirms that yes, starting this term, articles obtained through interlibrary loan have to be printed out and physically picked up in the library.

"Says who? Wait, is it those compliance busybodies? I can't believe we're setting up whole new administrative offices at a time like this. Do you realize the provost won't authorize sabbatical replacements for our -"

"We lost four FTE. But it's not our administration. These are national rules."

"But . . . this makes no sense. To get an online article, I have to physically go to the library? We're going backwards."

"We did warn you. Those brown bag lunches we hosted last year?"

"Oh, yeah. They sounded really interesting. Wish I'd had time to go, but –"

"I wish you'd had time, too. Don't forget, we close at six." You put the phone down, wondering what pissed her off.

When you swing by the library to pick up the article, you're shocked at what a terrible copy it is. "That always happens," the student behind the desk explains. You know him; he's a senior, a good student. He seems to know what he's talking about. "See, the library that subscribes to the journal has to print it out and scan it," he explains. "Then we get the scan and have to print it out again. It really degrades the quality."

"That's nuts. It would be so much easier to just send the PDF. There's got to be a better way."

"Tell me about it. Last week I had to spend thirty bucks to buy an article." He shrugs. "My senior project involves chromatography. Black and white doesn't cut it. I have this friend . . ." He looks around, lowers his voice. "They get the journal I need at his library. He's sending articles to my Hotmail account."

"I won't tell," you say solemnly.

A few weeks later you get a flyer in your box. Good

news! Your students won't have to pay permissions after all because the library now has a contract that covers permissions for the whole campus. But when you go to the library's Website to find the articles you plan to assign, you're startled to find they're not there anymore. A librarian explains apologetically that they had to cancel the database that included those journals in order to pay the annual copyright license fee. You'll have to buy a copy from the publisher. You stifle a groan. And it turns out two of the items on your reading list are not covered by the license, so you will either have to track down the rights holder and figure out how to pay them yourself or choose a different reading.

It's been a frustrating day. You're about to leave for home when a man raps his knuckles on the door frame of your office. He isn't smiling. He introduces himself as the head of the Compliance Office. "You've been sending an unusual number of attachments this week." He goes on to say that in the past 24 hours alone you had sent out six PDFs, all the same size, 567 KB. "Want to tell me what's going on?"

You lose your temper, but he's patient and finally gets you to admit that you'd been responding to e-mails asking for a copy of your latest paper. Someone mentioned it on a blog. It's a good thing! The university should be happy about the publicity. The functionary sighs and reminds you that you don't own the copyright, and neither does the institution. His job to protect the university from liability, and the publishers are watching. "I'll let it go this time, but don't let it happen again."

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It sounds preposterous, right? This is what Kevin Smith has called a nightmare scenario,one that doubles down with new guidelines for interlibrary loan (which in his terms are opening "a second front" of attack on education).

But this is our future if publishers prevail. We may have to adhere to a strict and highly conservative interpretation of old guidelines drawn up by – you guessed it – publishers, who back in 1976 were troubled by that disruptive new technology, the Xerox machine. If they call the shots, we will have to create a bureaucracy to enforce copyright compliance or face litigation. We will have to reserve interlibrary loan for journal articles only for rare instances and in a manner controlled by "rightsholders" – which, by design, are publishers, not the authors. Where would we get the lines to staff compliance mechanisms? And the money to pay permissions for everything we use in teaching and research, every time we use it? Out of our existing budgets. The ones that keep getting smaller.

Librarians have been Cassandras for long enough. It's time for the rest of the academy to wake up before they have this nightmare and stop treating research as a commodity we naturally give away in exchange for personal advancement, assuming it will always be available, somehow. Otherwise, get ready for a future that will not be a hospitable place for that old-fashioned pursuit, the advancement of knowledge.

PREPARE TO REPEL RESEARCHERS!

From *Library Babel Fish,* June 29, 2011

An interesting question came up the other day on COLLIB-L, a discussion list for college librarians. A librarian reported that a student who was abroad discovered he couldn't access videos in a library database. An error message appeared saying access would constitute a "copyright violation." Though the library had licensed the material for its patrons, including that student, he was unable to view it because he happened to have traveled to another region. He wondered whether he might have the same problem with articles in databases.

I'd never run into students studying abroad being unable to access our databases (unless they didn't have their campus ID with them, with its barcode used to validate their identity as an authorized member of our community). But a librarian responding to the initial message said he ran into

problems when vendors cut off access pending investigation of strange activity in an odd location. His campus is on Guam. Apparently, many vendors don't know that's a US territory and act, thinking some foreigners have breached their security.

All this is part of publishers and vendors defending their products from those who haven't paid. As has been reported elsewhere, the American Chemical Society is taking measures to go after unauthorized use of passwords for their database, SciFinder Scholar. These passwords are not lightly shared. At my college, we have an arrangement with two other schools to put up tens of thousands of dollars annually so we can share *two seats*. That means that among *all* of the faculty and students at three institutions, two of them can conduct a search at the same time. They have to be patient, because often when they want to run a search the two seats are full. We have no other databases as expensive or as restricted as this one.

By the way, when you go through the difficult process of creating a password for this database (it's one of those picky systems that pretty much guarantees you will never be able to remember the complicated password you created) you have to swear that you will not use any of the information you access for anything other than personal use and study. If you actually do something with that information, you are supposed to pay more.

The American Chemical Society may be an extreme example, but they aren't alone in being stingy about library use. Now science, technology, and medical publishers want

to ensure that their articles have to clear customs before libraries can provide interlibrary loan across national borders. This proposed policy was apparently prompted by a statement from the Association of Research Libraries reiterating a long-standing conviction that loaning materials across international borders is A Good Thing. This isn't to say it's a free lunch. Libraries are restricted in how much they can borrow without having to pay copyright fees. The 5/5 rule states that only five articles from any one journal published within the most recent five years can be requested by a library without paying a fee set by the publisher. Libraries pay out many thousands of dollars to copyright holders. But that's not enough.

While I'm aware that it costs money to organize the flow of manuscripts through the peer review system, and that those online portals are costly to develop, I think it's worth noting that at the same time that federal funding for basic research is at risk and libraries are scrambling to cover yet another year of tight budgets, Elsevier had profits of over a billion, with a 36% profit margin. At those rates, we could afford an open access publishing system and everyone could access research findings.

For the past thirty years, this has been a library problem, one we've addressed by cutting everything that isn't among the expensive items we have to have (and in the case of chemistry, it truly is an offer you can't refuse: the society not only publishes the major database and journals in the field, it accredits programs, and to get accreditation students must have access to their journals and be able to search their data-

base). The impact on fields that are not profitable or big has not been pretty. Now that big deals are no longer affordable, we're eating our seed corn by buying one disposable article at a time – articles we're all forbidden to share or use for anything but personal study. This is not my idea of a library.

And it's a very strange way to advance knowledge. Until this ceases to be a library problem and is recognized as a hindrance to science, we're going to be chipping away at what libraries can do for their communities while chasing pirates.

BREAKING NEWS: ACADEMIC JOURNALS ARE REALLY EXPENSIVE!

From *Library Babel Fish*, July 19, 2011

. . . who knew?

As I write this, the Minnesota state capital has opened its doors after a nineteen-day state shutdown, and legislators (if they stick to their agreement) will likely pass a group of budget bills and end the longest legislative tantrum, er, state government shutdown in history. Though I was glad the state university systems were spared – they had enough cash reserves that they could continue teaching the courses students had enrolled in and paid tuition for – it was interesting to see just how surprised the public was when the state wasn't there.

No fishing licenses. No driver's licenses. No access to state parks. No AA meetings or family visits in state prisons. A racetrack appealed for an exception after a judge ruled the Minnesota Racing Commission is not an essential service. (She wasn't persuaded.) So many services were not essential, 22,000 state employees and an unspecified number of race horses were thrown out of work, the largest layoff ever in Minnesota. It may not be sheer coincidence that the wheels of the state began to creak and start moving again just as people faced the horrifying realization that beer would start disappearing from store shelves, bars, and restaurants; Miller Brewing had not renewed its brand label registration in time for the shutdown. And boy, it's hot here in Minnesota right now.

I shook my head at the ripples of outraged "hey, I *need* that" coming from people who think collecting taxes is a scam. I felt the same way reading comments on a new piece(subscription required) by Jennifer Howard at the *Chronicle* on libraries canceling "big deals" because they can no longer afford them. These comments tend to go like this:

- Whoa, dude! We don't get paid to write those articles. Why do they cost so much?
- If they stop printing and mailing journals, that should save a ton of money, right?
- All academic journals should be totally free. Why don't universities just put them on their own websites? It wouldn't cost a thing!

This is disheartening for librarians who have spent the past thirty years feeling like chicken little, only with actual chunks of sky falling on us regularly. "Hey, people! This stuff is unbelievably expensive. I mean, look at these numbers, look at this chart I made. Can you help us cancel some journals? Would you maybe take a look at those publishing agreements before you sign them, because it turns out . . . hello? Yo, this might interest you: have you noticed we're buying half of the number of books we bought last year, and we've been doing this math for a while? That's because . . . hello, can I get your attention for just a minute? Pretty please? I'll buy you coffee."

These are allegedly institutions of higher learning. Why is it so hard for faculty to learn what actually happens to their research? I know, I know. Everyone's so busy and societies need the money to survive and besides, those lazy public employees make loads of money and our taxes are way too . . . oh, wait. I must be watching the wrong channel. Hang on a minute . . . there, that's better.

Maybe wasting our time analyzing the issues and building thoughtful arguments was our mistake.

I was taken aback by those comments on Howard's article, but I might have been more likely to fall out of my chair in surprise if I hadn't already been on the floor after readingan interesting blog post, part of a lively blog series on problems with scientific publishing by Peter Murray-Rust who wrote that academic libraries "should have altered us earlier to problems instead of acquiescing to so much of the dystopia." That made me feel the way Wyle E. Coyote must

feel after having dispatched the Roadrunner once again, only to hear in the distance from a cloud of dust, *beep beep*.

But at last I think I know how to get the attention of academics and impress on them the extraordinary catastrophe we face. I've finally figured out how to make them care.

We need to take away their beer.

THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE SUBSCRIPTION-BASED

From *Library Babel Fish*, October 13, 2011

Another fascinating report has just come out from Project Information Literacy, a source of many fascinating reports. This one focuses on how students use technology during the busiest time of the semester. I love what these researchers are doing – actually talking to undergraduates about how they do research (what a concept!) rather than making assumptions. Often, when I read their reports I think to myself "yes, that sounds exactly like our students; no surprises here." But then I realize how much their findings challenge the latest library craze and am grateful to have real data to back up my impressions.

Take ebooks. Librarians currently seem to think we should be investing in massive numbers of ebooks, and the

rationale often given is "students live on the Internet. If it's not online, it doesn't exist to them. We need to meet them where they are." In a stronger form this is worded as "EVOLVE OR *DIE!!*" But if you point out that the students you talk to don't like to read anything on the screen, you'll probably hear "oh, we just need a better marketing campaign. They don't know what they're missing."

This is fresh in my mind because I just attended an interesting day-long virtual conference on ebooks in libraries. In fact, I was a panelist for a session on marketing ebooks to students in academic libraries. Sadly, what I had to say probably wasn't what the audience came for. Our students aren't interested in ebooks, so we aren't buying lots of them and thus have nothing to market. Frankly, I would much rather see libraries fund the production costs of open access monographs, the way the University of Michigan is doing with their Digital Culture imprint or what the National Academies Press has been doing for years, rather than become the open wallet used to fund another digital transition.

One indicator of how well this open-wallet-approach has worked so far is to see how much a single journal article will cost you. If you could buy journal articles the way we buy iTunes music, then we'd really have a digital revolution – but libraries would then stop spending tens of thousands of dollars for highly specialized publications that mostly go unread but are occasionally essential, and then where would we be? If the only future for scholarly monographs is for libraries to switch to electronic subscriptions and fund

access to $69.00 books in large numbers, we're funding a transition that preserves a pretty dysfunctional status quo.

There are compelling reasons to add a lot of ebooks to your library collection. You can instantly have a tens of thousands of ebooks available, but only pay for the ones your patrons actually use. That purchase isn't cheap; one of the presenters showed that from a potential pool of over 60,000 books, their library users only opened and read substantial portions from a little over 300, which the library then purchased. Each purchased book cost a bit more than $69.00; they averaged around $75.00 per digital file, er, ebook. The library also had funded "short term loans" of several thousand ebooks. A book rental (a use of a book that was something over 5 minutes, but no more than 24 hours) cost the library on average $13.60 per use. That's much cheaper than buying and shelving a book that might never be used, but this library spent $50,000 on access to digital books that people used for less than a day. Is this really the best we can do with our funding?

I keep thinking we're creating a new system where books will be as scarce as ever for those who can't pay while, for those who have money, there will be an all-you-can-eat banquet that can't be shared with the starving. After a transition like this, will we be any better off?

I don't know what students make of all this, but one thing that Project Information Literacy discovered in their latest study is that students are not as excited about gadgetry and electronic sources as we tend to assume. When project teams interviewed 560 undergraduates studying in

libraries at ten institutions, they found students were keeping it simple. Most of them had only one or two electronic devices with them: a phone and a laptop. Most of them were focused on getting an assignment done or were studying for a class. Most of them had only a couple of webpages open in a browser, and they weren't the same websites; they were browsing all over the place. Only a small percentage were on familiar sites like Facebook or Wikipedia. Few of the students interviewed (11%) had used a library databases in the previous hour and even fewer (9%) had used library books. Many of them were keeping an eye on text messages, email, and Facebook, but only when taking a break from their work. They weren't multitasking in that legendary fashion we expect of this generation, nor were they enamored of trendy new digital devices. Only seven of the 560 students was using an iPad or other tablet device. Only three had a Kindle or other e-reader.

I can't say that buying $69.00 books and putting them on shelves to gather dust is a good use of our limited money. I'm not convinced that spending $13.60 every time a student browses a book for more than five minutes is a better use of money. I'm not sure how we'll get there, but I'm pinning my hopes on open access. If we can find a way to fund publishing so that scholarship is available to all rather than rented to libraries at a high cost – sign me up. That's a library future that makes sense to me.

And I have feeling it will make a lot more sense to our students than what we're doing right now.

OCCUPY KNOWLEDGE: IT'S OURS, AFTER ALL

From *Library Babel Fish*, October 20, 2011

Among the recurring images from Occupy Wall Street demonstrations are the signs held by young people tallying their college debt. They've been jeered at for wanting their loans forgiven, but deep in debt and without a job is a terrible way to start your adult life. I didn't have to take out loans. I was able to pay my tuition bills, and I only had to work part time while taking classes; tuition was that cheap. Once we thought an educated populace was a good thing to have. But we no longer believe in education as a public good. Goods cannot be public these days. We're more likely to hear "it's an investment" – just like those houses that were supposed to keep going up in value.

What is it we are getting in exchange for all that accu-

mulated student debt? Well, we have more knowledge than ever, but that's a chimera, too. We academics don't actually *own* the knowledge we create, we only license it. Faculty are too busy producing new scholarship to think much about changing the system, because productivity is measured in publications. Publishers confer prestige, and scholars have to trade their work for bits of that prestige in order to stay in the game. Those who question the rules of the game are quickly reminded that they are lucky to have jobs, that a majority of academic laborers are not so fortunate. (This is not unlike what students hear: look at you, you own a *phone*! How dare you complain about your student loans!)

All that productivity does not necessarily extend knowledge, or rather it does – but only for those who can afford it. Libraries were once a monument to the wisdom that comes of sharing of knowledge, but now libraries only foot the bill for temporary access to information, and only for their campus community.

A fair amount of basic science is still funded with tax dollars, but that's because the private sector needs massive public investment into fundamental scientific knowledge. That stuff's expensive! But the results of that tax funded basic science are not available to just anyone. The reports of research become the property of publishing corporations, including corporations run by scholarly societies such as the American Psychological Association and the American Chemical Society. These societies benefit from being tax exempt, but they actively lobby against open access. An editor of one of the American Chemical Society's publications

once characterized the (so far unsuccessful) legislative attempts to require that recipients of federal funds make their publicly funded research results public as socialized science. (Funding the science is apparently a wise investment of tax dollars, but letting people read the results – socialism!)

Here's my version of an Occupy Wall Street cardboard sign. At my library, we've been seeing big price increases in two big journal packages that we really need. Again. This is what we're paying for American Chemical Society journals

- 2010 – $29,705
- 2011 – $34,337
- 2012 – $41,741

This is what we're paying for SAGE journals

- 2010 – $39,105
- 2011 – $41,442
- 2012 – $52,500

Look, don't get me wrong: these are great publications. I don't personally use the chemistry collection, but I know it's excellent stuff and that our students and faculty really need it. I do search SAGE quite often for my own research. Where else will I find such robust research on things like social inequality and gentrification? I'm not just being snarky; I know this kind of high-quality publishing costs money. Fine. I know that faculty are producing more research and presumably somebody's got to publish it. But

the only way I can afford to keep these journals (and I can't afford not to) is to cut other things. Smaller societies, university presses? Sorry – you'll be getting less of my money. I'll do this because I have to, but dammit – this is *so wrong*.

Our budget has been flat for a few years. I don't fault our administration for that. A lot of our acquisitions funding comes from endowment, and we lost a lot of ground in the financial crisis. The administration has had to scramble to make up the loss in endowment to keep our budget from shrinking. What are they supposed to do to fund these price hikes, raise tuition? Our students can't afford that. I don't want that.

I'm not upset that my budget isn't growing. I'm upset that scholarly publishers think these price hikes are okay, that they can keep adding new journals to their title lists with the expectation that I will pay for them. I'm upset that big scholarly publishing is being run like a protection racket, and that both I and the faculty I serve are pawns in this game.

Are you seeing price hikes like these? Tell the world. Tweet it, post it to Facebook, get the word out. Next week is Open Access Week. If you, too, think there's something wrong with this picture, it's time to raise some hell.

I'M NOT BUYING IT

From *Library Babel Fish,* February 1, 2012

We increasingly depend on companies whose business is collecting information about us – what we read, what we say, what we watch, what we buy, where we go, and who we know. It's scary how much the tools that we use every day capture and use personal information – and how little we care. But perhaps that will soon change. Both Facebook and Google will be revealing some of the astounding amount of information they've gathered about us, and it may make people uncomfortable enough to stir things up.

The soon to be non-optional Facebook Timeline is designed to show you your entire life as it unspools through wall postings and photos, giving others a chance to comment on your life history. After it's rolled out in the next few weeks, you will have a week to decide how much of it to hide or delete; the default setting is public. It's a curious move; so far as I know, nobody asked for it, and a lot of people actively dislike the idea. But it will at least be a chance

to get a glimpse of just how much Facebook knows about you. (Of course, it's not everything they know – it doesn't include which websites you've visited as the company follows you around the web, taking notes – but it still may seem a shocking amount of detail.) The company's assumption that we love sharing also informs a little project underway right now, "2012 Matters," a poll Facebook will conduct with results to be broadcast on a billboard in Times Square. Times Square! Wouldn't you want to be there? The invitation suggests we'll leap at the chance, even though we're bored with politics. A company official told the New York Times "Facts don't spread. Emotions do spread." Forget about carefully designed opinion polls. Let's go with aggregated gut feelings. But this isn't about politics or civic engagement. We're not going to occupy Times Square, after all. This is the "intersection of social media and branded event advertising." That's pretty depressing. But I don't have to be part of it.

I decided last fall that, while I quite enjoyed sharing links and photos and the brainstorm of the minute with my friends, I *really* disliked sharing those things with Facebook. Facebook's massive data mining and integration of their hooks into the rest of the web has just become too creepy for me, so I went through the process of deleting my account, which was about as easy as fasting for a month. But it can be done.

Google, however, is not in the "take it or leave it" category. Its research tools are too valuable for me to swear off Google completely. But I'm not happy that Google is

once again "improving the user experience," which means using my behavior online to fine-tune advertising. By merging information streams from their many applications, the search engine that has become ubiquitous will be turning into a weird sort of narcissistic peeping Tom. Your gmail messages will try to put things on your calendar; what you watch at YouTube will change the results of your next search. What you find when you search might be influenced by what your friends are talking about at Google+. The company has reassured Congress that it is simply making their policies clearer. They are not gathering more information on us. They're just using data from one service to influence our use of another.

When I search, I don't want what I wrote in an email or what I watched on YouTube to change what I find. Sure, there are places where my scholarly interests blur into my idle curiosity and into my social relationships. I also know that my choice of search terms and even the questions I decide to ask will be influenced by things I have read or conversations I've had. But somehow, I want search to be *pure*, not influenced by my own limitations and blind spots. I want to find what is out there, not what I've already expressed. I guess it boils down to my belief that the search for knowledge should be fundamentally different than shopping. Google is not treating it that way.

The ways libraries operate has been deeply influenced by trends in retailing. Barnes and Noble borrowed library décor to furnish their stores, and libraries then had to borrow it back after learning that our patrons' love of bookish

and comfortable reading spaces was not being nourished in libraries. We had an awesomely vast catalog of books in Worldcat, but it wasn't until our patrons showed up with Amazon printouts that we realized how shortsighted it was to confine all that information about books to a fairly clunky library-based subscription database. We had accrued a lot of cultural capital, but we didn't value it until corporations borrowed it and began to exploit it.

One bit of library capital that hasn't been borrowed by social media companies is our respect for privacy as a condition fundamental to intellectual freedom. We don't want to look over your shoulder when you read. We don't want to provide information about what you're reading to others. This runs against prevailing ideas about how social relationships work. Even JSTOR is trying out a way of trading limited free access to articles in exchange for data that publishers can use. In the absence of any access, this seems like a good deal, but it's not clear to me why we can't do better. I already click through a copyright statement every time I use JSTOR because I prefer not to tie what I read to a personal account. I suppose JSTOR might say establishing personal accounts will improve our user experience, but I'm not buying it.

Research is by its nature social. We build on one another's ideas and we share ours publicly to keep the conversation going. But it's not social the way Facebook is. Facebook is a data-gathering machine. It's a blank slate on which we write so that they can aggregate and monetize what we freely share. There are real problems with compa-

nies trailing you wherever your curiosity leads so that they can report to others where you've been. There are real problems with a database showing us what it thinks will make us happy rather than what might be out there. Privacy is one traditional library value that I wish these companies would borrow from us, but it would undermine their business model.

What happens if this mania for gathering private information passes and the business model proves unsustainable? What if it's all a bubble? We may have to find new ways to search and share. And maybe next time we'll avoid building it as a front for a massive surveillance system.

THE AUSTERE ACADEMY

From *Library Babel Fish,* July 26, 2012

Today, these things all seem somehow connected.

In a review of a slim (and apparently quite interesting) academic book, anthropologist Alex Golub began by asking why a book of under 200 pages based on a dissertation that has already been used as material for several articles should cost $34.95. Actually, it's not the cost of the book being questioned. (Of the preceding articles, one costs nearly as much for what is technically a rental; the other articles appeared in open access journals). Rather, he asks "where are we as an intellectual community where the impetus to publish pushes people to recycle the same material over and over in the name of 'productivity'? What sort of value are publishers adding to Chen's work that justifies their charging that much money?" Good questions.

In an analysis of the RCUK and EU's response to the

Finch Report (as policy makers put the United Kingdom on a fast track toward open access to publicly-funded research), Kevin Smith reports the director of a scholarly society has said it costs them from $2,500 to $3,000 to publish an article. (That doesn't, of course, include the costs involved in conducting the research, writing up the results, or reviewing by peers.) Smith asks whether it really needs to cost that much and urges funders to demand greater transparency about these expenses.

As I put together the annual report for the library, I spent a lot of time looking at numbers. One of them was the average cost of articles we provided to faculty published in journals we can't afford and which we couldn't get free through interlibrary loan. (In some cases, we had exhausted the fair use limit of five articles per year from a particular journal that we can't possibly afford to subscribe to. Others we had to buy because their publishers prohibit subscribing libraries from sharing PDFs. Instead, they have to print them out and scan them before sending them to another library, which deliberately renders them useless in cases where figures are critical.) The average cost we paid per article? $41.89.

These things, and an all-college budget meeting, have made me do some big picture reflection. Campuses everywhere (and their libraries) are facing cuts. Austerity is the stern religion sweeping the land – a curious successor to the previous bull-worshipping "greed is good" cult, which nevertheless leaves its traces in the part of the austerity catechism that states "wealth is good." On campuses, the deci-

sions about what gets cut seem to be increasingly made by the highest paid administrators whose mandate to make decisions is established by virtue of the fact that they are highly paid, not because they are uniquely informed or especially wise. (Recent events at the University of Virginia come to mind as a particularly disastrous application of the "we're the deciders" approach to academic leadership.) This approach also says, indirectly, "we're not in this together; be grateful if you aren't the one who gets cut." Thinking collectively about priorities and ways to cut costs could actually help us arrive at better, more informed decisions, but that seems heretical. The syncretic religion of austerity, with its embedded belief that individual desire drives human behavior, seems antithetical to what libraries are all about: establishing communal access to ideas through sharing. Never mind that pooling our resources is actually financially efficient; sharing runs counter to the way society is meant to work.

The articles we buy for faculty can't be shared. That's a legal constraint placed on the transaction: no sharing. When we purchase access to articles (because it's the least expensive way to get them and, therefore, the *only* way to get them) I feel as if our library's mission is being redefined as "to fund individual access to information" – because community access is unaffordable. Libraries don't build collections, corporations do – collections of intellectual property assets that only have value if they are not shared freely.

I know that publishing research findings, however we do it in future, will always cost something, but you don't have

to be a highly-paid administrator to know that we're paying too high price for the current state of affairs. We could be making the knowledge we produce more widely available if we rearranged our spending habits and if we decided as a culture to value the common good more than individual needs. If we truly want to contribute to knowledge, we need to design a system that is not driven by the need to prove individual productivity but by contributions to our common understanding, a system that enhances knowledge, not just reputations and bottom lines.

By the way, some of you may recognize the source of my title. *The Austere Academy* is the fifth volume in Lemony Snicket's *Series of Unfortunate Events.* It seemed appropriate.

ENLIGHTEN ME

From *Library Babel Fish*, November 8, 2012

I get a little testy when every attempt at developing a new way to share scholarship is required to pass a sustainability test. What we're doing now isn't sustainable. So why should new things have to prove they can do something our current system cannot provide? I'm all for thinking through the implications and having a some kind of plan. I'm not in favor of abandoning ideas because we can't figure out how to put them to a test that the status quo has already failed. Miserably.

Likewise, I get frustrated when people reject open access publications because they aren't "high quality" – not acknowledging that a large percentage of what is published traditionally is pretty rubbishy. The fact that we pay for it doesn't make it good; the fact that we don't pay to read it doesn't make it bad.

I feel grumpy when I see publishers that disdained open access suddenly embracing it, trying to make us think they

will take good care of it for us by charging huge author-side fees. No thank you. You already messed this up. We can't afford to keep up your profit margins.

I get irritated when I hear "we can't do anything until the tenure and promotion system changes." It's not going to change *unless we change it*. And why the hell don't we, if it's not working?

I become annoyed when we equate publications that few can access and even fewer read with "productivity." Why did we decide our worth could be measured in this clumsy way?

And don't get me started on the flawed but ubiquitous impact factor.

Ultimately what makes me fractious and ornery is that we are so caught up in spending our energies doing things traditionally, but with a crazy inflation rate (it takes a wheelbarrow of publications these days to buy a loaf of job security), that we fail to communicate the value of shared knowledge, of the benefits of ideas as inexhaustible public goods. We don't have confidence that our scholarship can be an agent of change. We only see it as a metric of personal industry, a smalltime currency used by members of our little disciplinary fiefdoms, of value only within our walled gardens.

The printing press was more than a disruptive technology or a new business model for copying stuff. True, the printing press was a great copy machine, but it had a more profound impact. It made it possible for us to discover our cultural past by making classical texts widely available in

uniform editions. It gave us more time to write new texts because we didn't have to painstakingly copy the old ones before they could be shared. The printing press enabled us to compare and share ideas and spread them further than ever before.

So why did we decide to go backward? Why do we deliver this stuff we do to a system that will lock it up with licenses and copyrights and firewalls to prevent unauthorized access? Why do we work so hard for a deliberately tiny audience? Why did we lose faith in the power of ideas as a force for good?

"Force for good." Yeah, I know, I'm a hopeless romantic given to highfalutin' statements that sound like they belong inside balloons in a comic strip. But Thomas Jefferson, who knew something about enlightenment, wrote,

> *if nature has made any one thing less susceptible than all others of exclusive property, it is the action of the thinking power called an idea, which an individual may exclusively possess as long as he keeps it to himself; but the moment it is divulged, it forces itself into the possession of every one, and the receiver cannot dispossess himself of it. Its peculiar character, too, is that no one possesses the less, because every other possesses the whole of it. He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.*

This world of ours needs more light.

AS IF LIVES DEPENDED ON IT

From *Library Babel Fish,* January 14, 2013

I was shocked and saddened to hear of Aaron Swartz's death. He was a bright, creative, and exuberantly principled young man who helped build tools I use every day. He helped start the Open Library, helped defeat ill-conceived legislation that would limit freedom on the Internet, and courageously set public information free.

When I say that last bit, I'm not talking about JSTOR articles, but rather the way he stuck his neck out to make PACER files available to all. PACER is a database of federal court filings. Though these are public documents, they are hard to obtain, because they are kept in an outdated system and the office that maintains it charges per-page fees to use it. When, as an experiment, these public domain documents were made available in 17 public libraries (all of 17 locations out of the over 16,000 public library buildings in the nation),

activists – including Aaron Swartz, who wrote the code – downloaded batches of it to put it online and make it available to all. It *should* be available to all. These are public documents made difficult to obtain by design. In response to what Swartz and others did, the government decided to remove access from the 17 public libraries and the FBI launched an investigation, but had to drop it because the feds couldn't charge anyone with a crime. It was perfectly legal. Though public library access was yanked, you can find some of these public domain documents using a Firefox plugin. It shouldn't be so hard to access public documents. And Swartz was a person who was willing to make information free, even at the risk of being investigated by the FBI.

(As an aside, I remember when the SEC put the Edgar database online. I was thrilled, because I had used cumbersome and expensive microfiche copies of these public records, and it was a pain. Making these public records . . . uh, public was a controversial move, because private corporations made a nice piece of change selling access to these public, but hard to access, documents. Now anyone can see them. It wasn't an easy fight, and I have the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Carl Malamud, the National Science Foundation, and Congressman Edward Markey to thank for making it happen. I should thank them for a lot of things. We forget how many people have had to fight so hard for information that we now take for granted.)

When Swartz was arrested for downloading a massive number of JSTOR articles, I hoped someday to learn more about why he did it. Because he was threatened with

decades in prison, we didn't get to hear much about it from his side. We did hear the prosecution's side: in the government's version, he was a thief and a dangerous hacker who would feel the full wrath of the federal government. It seemed a ridiculous and vindictive overreaction and a textbook example of what's wrong with intellectual property law enforcement in this country. Speculators who recklessly ruined the world's economy and harmed countless lives while enriching themselves are doing just fine, thank you. But a young man who opened an unlocked cupboard, violated terms of service, and perhaps made MIT's servers run slow for a period of time should serve more than the entire sum of his life in prison for that audacity.

Last week, as the prosecution was rejecting a plea offer from Swartz's lawyers, JSTOR (which had no interest in pursuing the case against Swartz and said so publicly early on) expanded a program that provided the general public some access to JSTOR content. It's not my ideal scenario, but JSTOR is negotiating with publishers and inching toward sharing research that was created to be shared.

A lot has happened in the past year. In 2012, scholars, particularly in the sciences, showed growing impatience with a system that could make knowledge free to all but doesn't – and hinders research in the process. A mass of citizens rose up in protest and roundly defeated laws that would have hobbled the Internet and made it illegal for the government to require research it funds to be shared within a year of publication. A number of new models for open

access publishing have been launched are are thriving. We're starting to get things right.

But what happened to Aaron Swartz is so, so wrong.

There have been many moving tributes from those who knew him and loved him (and in some cases found him brilliant, kind, and frustrating all at the same time). I didn't know him. I do know a lot of people who, like Swartz, suffer from depression or from other conditions that we still taint with shame, making awful illnesses that much worse. I know what it's like to lose someone to suicide. It leaves behind a wretched mix of sorrow, rage, guilt, and a forever unfillable void where understanding should be.

There have been calls for the resignation of the overzealous prosecutor. There has been an investigation launched at MIT to sort out what role the institution had in the prosecution. There has been a flurry of #pdftribute papers uploaded to the Internet by academics wanting to honor Swartz's short life and his commitment to information access. There has been a lot of confusion in the media about what exactly JSTOR is, and much misguided anger directed at a project that is one of the better efforts to make research widely available. There has, of course, been a backlash, with people (usually anonymously) insisting that thieves should all be pursued by modern Inspector Javerts and punished cruelly and publicly as an example to all intellectual property scofflaws. Because theft is theft.

I could try to argue here that it isn't, that copyright is not a guarantee of ownership but rather a limited monopoly granted by Congress to supposedly encourage creativity

and discovery, though for the most part it no longer does. I could quote Thomas Jefferson, or talk about the economics of scholarly publishing, or about the ways justice should be meted out with a sense of proportion.

But I'd rather honor a young idealistic man's memory by reflecting on what we can do, as scholars and as librarians and as people who have a special role in society to make new knowledge and share it. We've made some progress on open access in recent months. We need to make more. If we think our research is really not important, that only eggheads at universities with well-funded libraries have any interest in it, if what we do with our lives *actually doesn't matter*, then we can go on as we are. Or we can figure out how to take all the time and money we are already pouring into this stuff as if lives depend on it and set it free. It would make the world a better place.

THE AHA ASKS "WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?"

From *Library Babel Fish*, July 24, 2013

Today I found myself revisiting a blog post by Doug Armato of the University of Minnesota Press just as my Twitter stream was responding to the American Historical Association's new statement on why historians' dissertations must be protected from the public eye. Mark Sample remembered it and posted it to Twitter. Public streams of thought have these eddies and undercurrents that sweep back and bring up things from the past to bob along in the onward rush of ideas. Which is, itself, something of an example of what Doug Armato was describing as the way scholarship works today.

The posts are fascinating to read side-by-side because they take such different positions on what it is we are trying

to do when we make scholarship public. What's especially worth noting is that the *publisher* is more interested than the scholarly society is in how ideas flow in and out of various stages of development and how much more public this activity is today – and why that's a good thing. Armato sees the publisher's work as "pattern recognition" rather than gatekeeper or conveyor of disciplinary distinction: *arise, tenured historian. By the power vested in publishers, we have certified you as a historian worth keeping on the payroll.* That's not what he does. He enables thoughtful pauses in the fast flow of information so that ideas can take on depth and nuance and reach a kind of coherent complexity by being still for a bit before they flow back into the ongoing rush. We have, he writes, "a common need to create a better, more interoperable system of scholarly communication and publication and a steady flow from the serial development of scholarship into the material event of scholarly publication and out again."

The smart publisher today doesn't want to introduce books to the world so new, so pristine, so original that they have never been seen or discussed in any form. Rather,

> *the current place of the individual book in this emerging ecosystem is as an area of highly concentrated, unitary scholarship amid a flow of less concentrated expression, with a membrane (let's dub that membrane "peer review," though it is more than that) regulating the passage between those environments as a form of osmosis.*

He has no reservations about publishing a book that has been public, here and there serially in various forms, before. In fact, he sees that prior public activity as an opportunity to anticipate what book projects are likely to be worth taking on because he is able to see how readers are responding. The material itself is shaped usefully by that flow and will go on to join back into it. (As a matter of fact, as I read the blog post I opened a new tab to order a copy of the book he cites. That's how it works.)

He has a fundamentally different view of the book and its purpose than the AHA does. The AHA believes that opening access to dissertations puts young historians at risk. They should be allowed to keep their dissertations under wraps for a period of time matching the traditional tenure clock. Dissertations are the rough draft of first books, and since the worth of historians is measured in books, not dissertation downloads, their ideas must not be squandered on the open internet but reserved for proper recognition and career rewards.

The argument is based on a common belief (though no evidence is provided) that publishers don't want to publish books based on open access dissertations because libraries won't buy them. The best way to solve this problem, then, is to make it difficult for people to gain access to dissertations. Then publishers will turn them into proper books and libraries will buy them and young historians will get tenure.

Well, there are a lot of problems with this solution. Libraries have been buying fewer books no matter whether

they are based on dissertations or not; they won't buy more books because dissertations go offline. Academic publishers no longer earn enough from libraries to base their decisions on what libraries might do. Quality publishers never did (so far as I can tell) assume dissertations were all but ready to be put between boards and sold. Following the rules in the traditional way no longer leads to tenure. It seems odd that historians should seek obscurity by safely locking dissertations up for an almost biblical period of time, available only through interlibrary loan and UMI's services that make dissertations available on microfilm and through Amazon.com and . . . wait, Amazon?

Yes, the company that has preserved and sold copies of dissertations since 1938 now makes them available through modern bookselling channels unless the author opts out. (Edited to add: Proquest no longer distributes dissertations through third-party vendors.) Nowhere in the AHA's statement does it take UMI/ProQuest to task for selling their wares more efficiently, presumably because dissertations shouldn't be digital in the first place. Microform is newfangled enough, thank you.

Strangely enough, the statement stipulates that libraries ought to be required to store printed copies of embargoed dissertations on their shelves. If an embargo is a good idea, I'm not sure why libraries should have printed copies. (They do share, you know, rather efficiently.) Is the library consecrated ground where dissertations should be laid to rest to await resurrection day and the second coming? I suspect the authors of this statement feel a conflict: there should

be a tangible historical record of dissertations, but in order to preserve the primacy of the book and the value the first book conveys on scholars' reputations, it must be made inaccessible. I recommend keeping them under the department chair's bed, in that case, because inaccessibility isn't what libraries are for.

There's something weirdly helpless in this statement. Books are what matters to historians and that will never change. Publishers are an immutable force of nature, as are tenure and promotion committees. Librarians and program heads, however, can be told what to do. If they don't change their ways "young historians" will lose the "unfettered ability . . . to revise their dissertations and obtain a publishing contract from a press" because those pesky online dissertations are standing between a scholar and a fetter-free book contract.

Turn the clock back. Put those printed dissertations on the shelf where they can be safely obscure. Protect the children.

SUPERSTARS, SERFS, AND SCHOLARS

From *Library Babel Fish*, July 31, 2013

A friend asked me on Twitter if the recent debate about whether to embargo dissertations wasn't overblown, given it was prompted by a draft statement about giving students in some programs in one discipline a choice. Why all the fuss? I think the embargo debate, like the MOOC debate, has been about much more than dissertation licenses and the impact of MOOCs. These topics draw heat because they call on people's assumptions, aspirations, anger, and anxieties about the future of academia. Which is to say our *own* futures.

A lot of claims and counterclaims have been made in the battle of #AHAgate, leaving us with some complex questions. Is the dissertation the author's intellectual property, with all rights reserved, or does the university granting the degree have some claim on it? Or does ProQuest, or the

world at large? What is scholarship worth and who decides? What choice do we have? Who is to blame?

That's in addition to a lot of factual quibbles. Circle the right answer: Libraries do / do not avoid purchasing books based on open dissertations. Publishers do / do not reject book proposals based on open access dissertations. It's a good thing / a disaster that my dissertation is open access.

Some claims are uninformed: "Of course access to dissertations should be free. That work was paid for by the public, so belongs to the public." Um, no. If you got through your PhD without debt thanks to public funding, please don't rub it in. It doesn't work that way for historians.

And then there's "This is the 21st century!" No argument there, but so what? And "Dissertations are dreary, unreadable exercises in making mountains out of molehills and nobody wants to read them anyway." That's a silly, facile generalization.

The one that surprised me the most: "ProQuest (or the university) made me sign something, so I guess they own the copyright." I'm pretty sure you hold the copyright and granted ProQuest (and/or possibly your institution) a non-exclusive license to do whatever that license says they can do. Some argue that forcing copyright holders to put their work online essentially renders their copyright unexploitable and so is the same as taking the copyright. That's debatable, but it's a decision made by the program involved. Though libraries often have a role to play, they don't make the rules, and sometimes arrangements for electronic deposit with ProQuest, including the language of the

license, are made without the knowledge or input of the library.

What we saw with #AHAgate is the agitated flipping of a two-sided coin. We have the ability to share information globally at far less expense and much more quickly than ever before. As Clay Shirky famously said, the internet allows us to do "big things for love." As millions of people have pointed out since, that all depends on having an income that pays the rent and allows enough leisure time to go around loving big things. As the old revenue models for publishing have faltered and new sources of news and entertainment have absorbed audience attention, writing is looking a lot like internships: something that seems to open doors and provide meritocratic opportunity, but is more often unpaid labor that not everyone can afford. It could be labor donated for love, or as a kind of intellectual venture capital, an investment in branding. In any case, "free time" like love, has a bitter ring to it if you're piecing together several part-time jobs but still are at or below the poverty line, as so many faculty are these days.

Let's flip that coin some more. Today, we don't have to rely on gatekeepers. That means each scholar/author has to work hard at being noticed. Networks connect us and bring us together – or pit us against one another jousting for attention and its rewards. Education is a social good, education is a consumer good. Education can level the playing field. Or does it reproduce inequality and make it worse? We members of a discipline. We are on our own.

As John Warner pointed out, our culture is obsessed

with superstars. We've traded in the idea of solidarity, of common cause, for a chance to develop our personal brands as entrepreneurs in hopes of scoring big. (A recent example of this opportunity rhetoric is Thomas Friedman's claim that these days everyone can start a business, using as exhibit A a man who was unemployed and couldn't make the rent, so started renting out an air mattress, which turned into Airbnb – and *so can you!* The solution to unemployment and poverty? Start a business. Isn't life grand.) Warner linked to a though-provoking piece by Jonathan Rees, provocatively titled "To Be a Superstar is an Act of Aggression." Doling out rewards on the basis of individual competition is assumed to be the way of the world, even if it means there are a few winners and a lot of losers. Once research became primarily a job of promoting and protecting one's professional interests, we lost something really valuable.

Too often, scholarship is described as our property. We buy job security (or gamble on the chance we'll get job security one day) by exchanging it with publishers for prestige, or we give it away because it will build our brand and the metrics will be awesome. Or we don't actually own it because the taxpayers funded it, which makes it public property.

What gets overlooked is the possibility that knowledge isn't property, but is rather a common good. We work together to create something bigger than any of us. Culture, according to Jonathan Lethem (and his sources) is a mix of market and gift economy, with market on the ascendency. "The cardinal difference between gift and commodity

exchange," he writes, "is that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, whereas the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection." He argues that nothing is truly original, that we inevitably share and remix our words and ideas and can't claim them as ours alone. "Honoring the commons is not a matter of moral exhortation. It is a practical necessity."

We have a lot of practical necessities in our personal lives: a place to sleep, enough to eat, a sense that we will be safe tomorrow, that our children will be okay. When those are threatened, holding tight to our words and ideas, when they cost us so much, is natural. But it's also deeply unnatural. Why is it more valuable to turn 90,000 words that were built on other people's words into books that may sell 200 copies when those ideas could be available (though in rougher shape) to a much wider audience? It's not just that the old ways of sharing information are broken or backward, it's that the old ways of sharing education, of sharing our aspirations for a better world, have been dismantled, restructured, made leaner, more productive, more like a business. Students pay more, their teachers are paid less, and the "practical necessity" to invest our resources in making scholarship more widely available without lots of entrepreneurial hustling and bare-knuckled competition seems impossible.

But making that happen is kind of what libraries are for. They may seem like soulless vending machines – punch in your code, grab the article that slides out, and bang on it when it doesn't work – but the idea of a library, like the

idea of a university, is much more than that. It's a shared endeavor to understand and make things better that this damaged world needs badly.

OPEN ACCESS, TENURE, AND THE COMMON GOOD

From *Library Babel Fish*, October 22, 2013

I have been known to chide academic librarians who can't be bothered to make their work open access. It seems hypocritical for professionals in our field to advocate for open access without practicing it ourselves. It's also detrimental to our discipline. Most research in our field is undertaken in order to improve practice. Many academic librarians work in libraries that don't have access to many LIS journals because our collections are shaped around the curriculum, and we don't offer degrees in the field. It's hard to improve our practice without access to the discipline's research findings. Besides, if we go through the relatively simple steps to make our work open access, we'll have experiential knowledge about the process that will help us help

scholars in other fields who want to make their work available to all

This isn't the first time I've called on librarians to walk the walk. It probably won't be the last. Scholars in our field have an increasing number of options these days, with many new open access journals. Our flagship journal, *College & Research Libraries*, is now fully open. Preprints are made available on acceptance, the final copy is OA, and even the back issues have been digitized. In addition, most toll access LIS journals allow authors to publicly archive pre- or post-prints. The barriers to opening our scholarship are low.

I was a little surprised at some of the pushback I got via Twitter. Maybe I shouldn't have been. I've heard it before, pretty much every time open access is under discussion in other disciplines. It tends to fall into a pattern:

- It's not ethical to ask young scholars to put their future at risk.
- We ought to reform tenure and promotion criteria, but until that work is done, we shouldn't be so pushy about open access.
- Reform tenure? Yeah, right. Ain't gonna happen.

In addition to the usual objections, two other issues came up. One was usefully thought-provoking and the other was . . . well, a perennial debate among academic librarians.

One Twitter correspondent asked about books and book chapters. Does my finger-shaking include them? I replied that I thought they were a bit different. There are

fewer open access options available to authors who want to put together a book, books are often more lendable than journal articles through interlibrary loan without incurring copyright permission fees, and unlike the majority of scholarly journals, book publishers tend not to allow self-archiving or pre- or post-prints. At least they don't unless you ask, and getting an answer can take months.

I got called out on that – aha! isn't it hypocritical to say articles must be OA, but not books and book chapters? Um, yes, actually. So let's push the boundaries there, too. Why not? The more publishers are asked about self-archiving options, the more likely they will have an answer that doesn't take months of negotiation. Some book publishers, such as our own association's imprints, let authors keep their copyright and only ask that authors don't preempt their publication by putting material freely online before their release date. This does not appear to harm their ability to publish books. I myself won't publish scholarship I can't self-archive regardless of format, and I haven't for years. If enough of us take that position, we'll make it easier for everyone else.

The other issue deserved a more thoughtful reply than the rapid-fire and shortest-of-short-forms Twitter enables. As the "but we can't because TENURE!" debate was under way, a librarian who I respect immensely and who is an impressive scholar in her own right asked whether tenure is worth it – for both librarians and for the field. Many academic librarians are not on the tenure clock but are rather on an administrative, academic professional, or a quasi-faculty

appointment, and there is often debate about which status is more conducive to our work and our lives. Some librarians argue that being forced to do research takes time away from real work. Others argue that it promotes too much useless prose produced under pressure.

Here's what I think: tenure is always worth when it's handled responsibly. Tenure is a remarkable social contract between a scholar, who has to demonstrate her or his worth, and the greater society, which in return will benefit from having a group of highly-trained, highly responsible, highly ethical experts who are free to probe into unpopular areas and share controversial findings with their students and with the broader public without fear of losing their livelihood. It's an act of trust that depends upon high standards. In my experience, it asks librarians who are party to that contract to do valuable work by being systematically curious, sharing results beyond her or his immediate community, and improving local practice through the kind of testing and probing that good scholarship promotes but which may not happen if it's not valued and supported.

Too often, tenure hasn't been handled responsibly. Even in institutions where teaching matters tremendously, publications often carry more weight because it's more easily measured by outsiders, and that's so much more pleasant than having to make hard decisions amongst ourselves. The methods commonly used to decide which publications provide evidence of scholarly promise are about as valid as reading goat entrails when predicting whether a scholar will continue to support the mission of an institution for the

rest of his or her career. Oh, we assign numbers as we read the entrails: must have a book from a university press, or hey, let's make it two to show how rigorous we are; must have a certain number of articles in journal with an impact factor of X or higher.

We do this because we're not confident that we can actually assess a scholar's worth, or we don't trust each other to make a fair assessment, that by somehow attaching mumbo-jumbo to the process we're being even-handed even though we know perfectly well that impact factors are bogus, that university presses can't and shouldn't be asked to determine tenure decisions, that we're responding to an exploitative overuse of dreadfully-paid contingent scholars by raising the stakes for the few remaining positions.

When we hear "we can't make our research public because our tenure process requires that we hide it behind paywalls" (which is what "can't make it open access" means in reality), then the sensible response isn't "let's abolish tenure." Tenure may seem a brute and blind machine, but it's actually a human system that we created, and we can change it.

There is a connection between tenure and open access that we don't always notice. We should make our scholarship public because research is done for the greater good, not for our careers or for a tiny handful of people who are just like us. When we tolerate a system that requires us to work on lots and lots of things that we can't (or don't bother to) make public, perhaps neglecting our teaching and community service in the process because we've gotten the mes-

sage that it's less important, society has no reason to grant us the remarkable social contract that is tenure.

Tenure is both ideal and practical. We need to demonstrate we're worthy of protection and, in return, we need to enact what that protection provides – a chance to probe and explore and reveal *for the common good*. Generating piles of publications that very few people can afford to read is an insult to that ideal, and is impractical, besides.

THE STING

From *Library Babel Fish*, October 10, 2013

We often judge information by the company it keeps. A story in *The New York Times* is more likely to be taken seriously than a news story that was published in a small town paper. A university press's reputation is built by the strength of its list. It's the principle underlying the "impact factor," as flawed as that measure is for assessing the worth of any particular paper published in a "high IF" journal. An article in *Science* has a lot of clout because it's published in *Science*. That journal is near the top when it comes to prestige. But it's not perfect. It has come in for a lot of criticism for an article it published recently. Its author, John Bohannon, went to a great deal of trouble to establish that many journals today are accepting papers with little sign of peer review or with peer review so ineffectual that it fails to catch errors that should be obvious.

Bohannon has come in for quite a lot of criticism for his article, which was written while wearing his journalist hat,

though he has a PhD in molecular biology to go with extensive credentials as a journalist. (Both *Science* and *Nature* combine well-respected scientific research with news and opinion pieces in an effort to keep scientists abreast of significant new research and current reporting and commentary on the world in which scientists work.) A major criticism is that he focused on open access journals exclusively and drew conclusions about them without establishing a control group. The problem was compounded when a news release from *Science* exaggerated the study's meaning in a press release. Sal Robinson, at the Melville House book blog, adds a pointed critique that when Bohannon represented himself as a group of authors from an African country, running the text through Google Translate to make the English suitably substandard (part of Bohannon's methodology), makes it seem the problem is at least in part the fault of third world authors getting in over their heads and partly the fault of publishers who take advantage of ill-prepared would-be scientists with sketchy credentials. Gunther Eysenbach, an open access journal editor who refused to pass the article along to reviewers, but whose refusal didn't appear in the study's data, wonders if the author left out inconvenient data. Michael Eisen, who describes himself as "a strong proponent of open science," responded to the sting with a blog post about how the author of a badly-flawed paper fooled *Science,* which accepted it without detecting serious flaws. Eisen argues that the problem is with peer review itself, not with open access publishing. Blaming the problem on open access, he writes, "is like say-

ing that the problem with the international finance system is that it enables Nigerian wire transfer scams." Mike Taylor rounds up the critiques and adds some of his own at Sauropod Vertebra.

It is undeniably true that a lot of silly scam operations apparently are profiting from the way we measure value of researchers in units of publications. One could argue that the proliferation of niche journals with tiny potential readerships and very little impact on the advancement of science only exist because they rake in money for publishers as filler for the "big deals" that eat library budgets and soak up some of the excess supply of authors desperate to publish. It's not surprising, given the relative ease with which websites can be created with the unwitting assistance of witless and desperate authors, that scammers will find ways to make money from people foolish enough to fall for their nonsense. Even the obviously questionable offers from Mrs. Sese-Seko and her son Basher must find some gullible business partners, or why else would they continue to show up in my inbox?

This is hardly news to librarians. Wayne Bivens-Tatum wonders what all the fuss is about. Everyone knows there are junky journals out there. Many of the open access journals targeted by Bohannon's sting rejected the article. At Duke, Kevin Smith suggests we thank Bohannon for pointing out that simply labeling a journal "peer reviewed" accomplishes absolutely nothing and that perhaps the time has come to rethink peer review in an era when it could be open. The Library Loon speculates about ways the library profession and scholars could work on a solution to the

problem – including a plan submitted by a commenter (the Digital Drake, who adds to my suspicion that the smartest librarians have feathers) to create a responsive rating system and forum hosted by a respected organization that word operate a bit like Writer Beware, which is backed by a professional organization and maintained by some compulsively well-organized and strong editors. I totally want this to happen!

Publishing scams are certainly not a problem limited to open access or even to scientific and scholarly publishing. Maura Smale has a fascinating post at ACRLog about how confused a student was when checking the library catalog for a book he'd found on Amazon. The library didn't have it. It never would. It was one of a series of books put out by a "publisher" that simply assembles Wikipedia articles into trade paperbacks with attractive, if completely irrelevant, flowers on the covers. The only people hurt by this spoof are consumers who don't realize they could find the contents on Wikipedia for free – and, of course, anyone whose time is wasted sorting useful sources of information from the increasing amount of chaff. O brave new world!

Experimental tests of publishers at gatekeepers are nothing new. In 1982 in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* two researchers reported on how well papers previously accepted for publication fared when submitted again to the same journals, only this time with fictitious authors whose biographical information located them at non-prestigious institutions. In only three cases were the articles recognized as previously published. One article was accepted. The

remaining eight were rejected for lacking quality, proper methodology, or significance. The journal published dozens of responses from people in various fields, some taking issue with Peters and Ceci's research design or findings, others reporting similar problems with the peer review system. One of the most entertaining responses described how a man painstakingly retyped the manuscript of a novel that had won the National Book Award and submitted it to 14 publishers, all of whom rejected it. So did 13 literary agents. So did the novel's original publisher when he sent them a query and sample chapter. Nobody seemed to recognize the book. And then there is the famous Sokal hoax, in which a physicist, impatient with what he considered a nonsensical if fashionable approach to understanding the world favored by the postmodern set, got a paper riddled with elementary errors accepted by the journal *Social Text* (for a special issue on science; at the time the journal did not practice peer review, but subsequently adopted it).

This is why I always cringe when I hear instructors tell first year students "use peer reviewed sources" as if that single criterion is enough to sort the good from the bad (and as if non-experts will make good choices among the thousands of articles they'll turn up in a search, hardly any of which will be comprehensible). I cringe when I hear librarians say "internet sources can't be trusted, which is why you want to use library sources" – as if libraries and their licensed databases aren't full of rubbish in need of vetting. This is why I encourage students to go beyond checklists when they evaluate sources. It's not how information is dressed or the com-

pany it keeps, it's what it has to say that matters, and how it arrived at its conclusions, and whether the work was carried out ethically and with an open mind.

In an era when so much is published, when there are so many less-than-idealistic reasons to publish, when the way we share knowledge and ideas is in flux, we need to help our students and our colleagues think critically about what really matters and how to build those values into the way we comprehend and contribute to the record of knowledge.

LIBRARIES BEYOND BORDERS: RETHINKING COMMUNITY

From *Library Babel Fish,* January 14, 2015

Like many academic libraries, mine is small and highly focused on an educational mission. Our faculty are engaged in research, but they learn from the day they interview for a position that the library offers an undergraduate collection and excellent interlibrary loan services. Whenever we think about budgeting our time and money, we ask "what's in it for our students? How will this promote their learning?"

There was a time when we assumed most undergraduate research needs could be met by a carefully curated collection, supplemented now and then by interlibrary loan. Getting an article from another library took up to two weeks, so

only the most advanced students used the service. That's no longer the case. A first-year student writing a five-page essay can order articles and get them within 24 hours. For libraries with token-based article databases and patron-driven ebook options, students can push a button and get sources immediately, without ever knowing an invoice is triggered and money is changing hands. Our role as curators of a collection aligned with our curriculum theoretically drives decisions, but increasingly we see ourselves as the content-providing back end to Web of Science, Google Scholar, and every other discovery tool members of our communty might use. This has subtly changed what we mean when we say "we serve our community needs." Our job today seems to be to get members of our community the stuff they want, quickly and at the least cost.

When we say "community" we don't really mean it; we mean "serving the interests of individuals who are currently affiliated with our institution." When we pay for an article for one community member, only one person can use it. The rest of the community gets nothing. When we license bundles of content, we pay tens of thousands for one year of access. For the students who enroll next year – well, we'll have to figure that out later. It's a weird shift. Once we were talking about a group with shared interests, but now it's a narrowly-defined and temporary consumer demographic. Academic libraries have become shopping platforms that offer a kind of Library Prime membership – if you're a member, you can order whatever you like. If you're not, you're screwed.

Finding ways that libraries can use their skills and funds to organize new ways of sharing knowledge openly is the only way I can see out of this mess.

I'm thinking these uncomfortable thoughts after another meeting with colleagues about how to collectively support an open access press that serves the mission of liberal arts colleges – not unlike a nifty new monograph publishing program that the University of California just launched, but designed to carry out our liberal arts mission. It's going to be an uphill struggle, because librarians at each of our institutions will think "why should I put money into publishing something when I could use it for stuff my students need right now? Do I even have the right to spend money that will benefit people outside my community?" These days that seems weirdly unethical, as if we're stealing tuition dollars from students who have paid for the right to choose, whatever the long-term cost.

Our sense of community is members-only and wasteful. A huge proportion of what we subscribe to is of no use to our community members, but it comes bundled with the things we know we find useful, and if the publisher acquires more journals, they hand us the bill whether or not we want them. A giant database of ebook options seems like a great bargain – even if it's full of books on subjects we don't teach. Yet we feel this serves the community and funding open access, somehow, doesn't.

We need to think harder about what we mean when we invoke "community" with such fervor. How does it serve a community to spend $35 on an article only one person can

use? Why does a huge proportion of the community suddenly vanish upon graduation? Why does this concept of community trump putting some of our time and money into fixing this absurd and costly mess in a way that will genuinely benefit our students today and next year and beyond?

The fact is, funders of research are beginning to fix the problem at their end by mandating open access, and commercial publishers who have gobbled our budgets are developing ways to provide open access options while preserving their extraordinary profit margins. While access to these published research results will be open, paying to play will shut out valuable voices and our budgets will never be big enough.

If libraries want to live up to their values, it's time to think critically about what we are really saying when we talk about serving our communities. To truly serve them, we need to do more than buy access for individuals and passively wait to see what the big publishers will do next. We can't just sit back and hope someone else will fix it. We need to start allocating time, money, and imagination to serving our communities in a way that lives up to our missions. We will have to work collaboratively beyond our community boundaries and our fiscal year calendars so that the future of scholarship doesn't turn into just another profitable business model that provides a publishing platform for the privileged few.

This may seem like a huge change, but the reality is that libraries have already gone through a transformation. What we once chose on behalf of our communities we now

only rent. The choices we made that reflected our community's needs are now buried in costly one-size-fits-all packages supplemented by one-off payments for individual access. Who are we really serving?

THE NEW INTERLIBRARY LOAN

From *Library Babel Fish,* January 26, 2015

Quite a few years ago, a college president said to us, not entirely in jest, that he couldn't see why the library needed all that money when we had interlibrary loan. Why not just order whatever students and faculty needed from other libraries? We had to explain that there was a legal agreement in place that prevented us from sponging off other libraries. Sharing is great, and we couldn't possibly meet the needs of our students or faculty without it, but it only works so long as every participating library was willing to pitch in. We had to have a collection that we could share if we wanted to borrow. We all had to be prepared to do our part.

That has worked pretty well. How will we'll continue to share in the future? There are two roads ahead of us, one

well-traveled and familiar but studded with tolls, the other open but not paved yet and sometimes hard to see as we hack our way forward.

Right now, academic libraries all spend a large part of our budgets on ephemeral licensed materials which in many cases we cannot legally share among libraries. We can still get our students and faculty what they want, kind of like interlibrary loan, but we have to pay publishers by annual subscription or by the piece and for the most part we don't have any assets to show for the money we've spent. If we have a bad year, large chunks of the library can vanish.

Smaller bits are lost all the time. Images disappear from books because permissions weren't secured. Books and journals are taken off the virtual shelf that you subscribe to because a publisher pulled out of the deal. Of course, new things show up, too – things we don't particularly want, but which we have to pay for anyway. "Good news! We just acquired 300 new journals! Here's your recalculated bill. It's due Wednesday." This is a familiar road, but the tolls are steep and it's not taking us where want to go.

The road less traveled, the one we're still hacking out of the unknown, could put our collective funding toward a system that enables more sharing than we have ever had, but for it to work, we'll each need to contribute. "Just build it into the grant" won't work, because for many disciplines there are no grants. This is not going to be an easy sell. The idea that we might spend money on a project that might benefit others – even institutions that compete with us for students or star faculty or funding? That's crazy talk!

But we couldn't have had the interlibrary loan system that has served us for decades if libraries hadn't agreed to share the costs. A school like mine with a relatively small budget can't sit back and hope someone else will fund open access to scholarship any more than we can rely entirely on the kindness of interlibrary loan. We'll have to put our money into things like Knowledge Unlatched or the Open Access Network or the University of California Press's new Luminos project, or the Open Library of Humanities, or collaborative explorations like the Lever Initiative – or new ideas that haven't surfaced yet. Whatever it is, we have to do it together.

Somehow we're going to have to persuade those who hold the purse strings that the only way we'll all get adequate access to knowledge is if we put our institution's money into projects that benefit others through organized and equitable sharing – by all of us doing our part. Just like with interlibrary loan, only more so.

MACIEJ CEGLOWSKI'S INTERNET REPAIR KIT

From *Library Babel Fish*, June 17, 2015

Many conversations about privacy have been happening around various digital water coolers where I hang out, sparked by the work of the NISO Consensus Framework to Support Patron Privacy in Digital Library and Information Systems. (NISO stands for National Information Standards Association; this Mellon-funded project is an attempt to broker an agreement between librarians, publishers, and vendors about what we mean when we say "patron privacy" and how systems might be developed that don't violate it.) Privacy is something librarians have long felt strongly about because it's hard to explore ideas while worrying that what

you've read might be used as evidence against you. When this idea was first formulated in documents such as the ALA Code of Ethics (1939), librarians had no idea how massive the capacity for data gathering, storage, and analysis would be in 2015, but they knew it was important.

One of the links someone shared (I'm sorry I don't recall who) was a rediscovery of something that I read and liked last year. I had forgotten how great it is; it may have gotten even greater as the world caught up with it. It's "The Internet With a Human Face," a talk that developer Maciej Ceglowski gave at a conference in Düsseldorf last year. It's depressing, funny, smart, and thought-provoking, and offers some really good ideas about what's gone wrong with the internet and what might make it better.

We tend to think of the internet as a decentralized system, that its lack of a single center is its strength. But now a small handful of very large companies dominate our use of the web. Web innovation is currently funded through two tenuous things: the promise of targeted advertising that doesn't work very well and "investor storytime" – a dependence on a handful of very wealthy investors who can be persuaded that better advertising is coming with this new, exciting startup. (Ceglowski calls pitches like this "the world's most targeted ad"). I've often wondered what will happen if this data bubble bursts, if this edifice that depends on advertising will vanish into air, thin air, and all our revels will be over. Ceglowski also points out another possible dramatic ending. Our biggest tech companies have headquar-

ters located in seismic hot zones. Talk about technological disruption.

He has some ideas about what needs fixing, and I think it's good stuff, consistent with the recommendations made in Bruce Schneier's *Data and Goliath.*

- Limit the collection, storage, and sharing of data gathered by websites. He doesn't advocate for prohibiting data collection entirely – aggregated data can be used in delightful, creative ways. But don't allow the creation of huge enduring memory banks that the people whose data it includes cannot control.
- Limit sharing of data with third parties. A lot of data mischief comes from it being passed along and repackaged in various ways.
- Let people know what data is being collected about them and let them download it.
- Give people the right to delete their accounts and all the data associated with them.
- Give people the right to decide whether or not their data can be collected. People currently don't feel surrendering their personal information is a fair tradeoff (and it isn't). Having the choice to opt in may give companies an incentive to make people want to participate (assuming that data collection is handled responsibly).
- Encourage decentralization, which was one of the original design principles of the internet. It's not

> healthy that a small number of American companies commands the time and attention of the planet, especially when their business model is based on surveillance.

Obviously, none of this will be easy. But at least with public opinion turning against the surveillance-industrial complex and with savvy and ethical developers like Ceglowski spelling out what we *could* do, I have hope.

DETERMINING OUR TECH

From *Library Babel Fish*, June 25, 2015

I'm a sucker for optimism. That's one of the reasons I liked David Weinberger's recent essay in *The Atlantic* in which he first describes how the internet has been "paved over" by data-sucking giant corporate interests and then explores how we can still have an internet that reflects and embodies its original ideals – a place where people can share ideas, build their own stuff, and participate in open culture. You can use the paved-over internet or you can "feel the loam between your toes." A lot of people who didn't know where to start got online only when a paved road was presented to them along with a click-through agreement to surrender their content and privacy. But there are parts of the internet that aren't commercialized, that do allow people to tend their own gardens still.

The giants have the benefit of network effects – Google

and Facebook are so big their very size exerts a kind of gravitational pull, and where pull isn't enough they can simply buy their potential competitors to absorb or kill them. But our confidence in them has been shaken by the reverberations of the Snowden revelations. People who have felt helpless about their identities being exploited whenever they use a popular service are now feeling angry as well. That irritation can be fanned into fury as terms of service change with little warning and the platforms that have become our surrogate memories and social gathering places become high-handed about what we can see and whether we can have the stuff we contribute.

Of course, this metaphor of paving and gardening reminds me of libraries and how (with the collusion of the scholars we serve) we have entrusted our scholarly record to giant corporations which lobby for stricter rules about sharing and are busy buying up the smaller fry and are now even trying to invade our institutional repositories. In 2013, more than half of scholarly papers published were the intellectual property of five corporations. In the social sciences, that number is a whopping 70 percent. These companies make tidy profit margins – between 30 and 40 percent, largely riding on the demands made on libraries to provide All the Things and the desperation of academics to exchange their research findings for reputational crumbs.

We have choices, but they are not simple ones. Nobody forces you to be on Facebook. I'm not, but I have the luxury of connecting with my family by alternate means and enough money and a smidgen of tech skills to run my own

website – and no great need to attract attention to it because I have a job. Still, I miss seeing a lot of family news and family members have to go through extra steps to share news and pictures with a grumpy Facebook refusenik. Nobody forces you to publish with journals owned by the big five, unless you're seeking grants or a steady job and can't afford to go against the grain. Again, I have a job and nothing much to prove – so it's up to me to make it possible for those with less security to make their work accessible and open.

Recently Björn Brems suggested that librarians should simply cancel all subscriptions to fix this problem. On Twitter Mike Taylor predicted that things would sort themselves out within three months of the mass die-off of subscription journals. Of course, that ignores the likely fallout: librarians would be fired and possibly arraigned on charges of collusion, the budgets they had devoted to subscriptions would not be reallocated to supporting institutional repositories or any other way of sharing information, and the many scholars who email colleagues for the PDFs they no longer could access would find out their colleagues couldn't access them, either. Three months for the establishment of a new and better system seems a bit optimistic and based on some serious misconceptions, such as that the scholarly record Is safely preserved in LOCKSS and that somehow the copyrights publishers hold to that material will suddenly be irrelevant as publishers implode. Remember that the majority of books published in the 20th century live in copyright limbo? Yeah. Canceling subscriptions en masse won't fix the ownership problem.

All that said, we do have the potential to reclaim and rebuild the commons – both the internet that isn't wholly owned by the handful of mega-corporations and the scholarly commons that is largely controlled by five companies. It will take work, though. Librarians will have to say no more often (which shouldn't be too hard – think how much practice we've had over the past three decades!) and say yes to funding open access publishing that isn't dependent on those five companies (which is rather trickier in the current austere environment, but we're smart people, we'll get better at it). Scholars need to balance their understandable need for self-preservation with the moral obligation to make their scholarship accessible to those without wealthy institutional sponsorship – and senior scholars in particular need to protect those who take these risks. Their record isn't so great at the moment, as the contingent majority would attest. But it's our scholarship, and our system and we can fix it.

And those of us who are in favor of intellectual freedom have to do our part as citizens to fight for the right to have some part of the internet that isn't privately owned and paved over. Again and again. And yet again, because there will be many legislative battles to fight.

Let's celebrate our victories, educate one another, and keep trying. There's an awful lot at stake.

BOOKS, READING, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY

ANOTHER FINE MESS: PATTERSON, AMAZON, AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF READING

From *Barbara Fister's Place*, January 30, 2010

I've been mulling over how to respond to the amazing profile of James Patterson ™ in *The New York Times Magazine*, but the news that Amazon has instantly removed Macmillan's books over a dispute on e-book pricing adds an interesting wrinkle. "Removed" is an oversimplification; used copies are on sale, because Amazon and the seller make money on those, but Macmillan and their authors do not. There is no indication, of course, that new books exist and could be bought elsewhere. Amazon will sell you the book,

just not share profits with the publisher and, by default, the author.

Comments on news threads like this tend to fall into patterns:

- E-books are way too expensive.
- DRM sucks.
- My words as an author are MY PROPERTY and you will pry DRM from my cold, dead hands.
- Traditional publishers should die already.
- I'm a writer. How'm I supposed to make a living?
- Amazon is great.
- Amazon sucks.
- Why isn't everyone acting like Baen/O'Reilly/Cory?
- Self publishing is the future.
- Self-publishing sucks.
- Cut out the middleman. Sell direct.
- But what about indie bookstores?
- Indie bookstores suck. I get much better deals at Amazon.

Within days, Amazon blinked, grudgingly. But let's set all that aside for now. Here's what struck me about the Patterson profile.

Transformers – More than Meets the Eye

The subtitle of "James Patterson Inc." is "How a Genre Writer has Transformed Book Publishing." There are really

two stories here: one aggressively business-minded author has created a highly successful brand and sold millions of books; publishers drool over big hits, and he's hit his home run farther than anyone other than God when he wrote The Bible (but damn, forgot to inscribe "copyright shall last forever" as the eleventh commandment or he would be *rolling* by now. Think of all the derivatives! The children's versions! The movie rights! But I digress.)

The other story is about changes in the book industry that set the stage for Patterson, inc.

> *Like movie studios, publishing houses have long built their businesses on top of blockbusters. But never in the history of publishing has the blockbuster been so big. Thirty years ago, the industry defined a "hit" novel as a book that sold a couple of hundred thousand copies in hardcover. Today a book isn't considered a blockbuster unless it sells at least one million copies.*
>
> *The story of the blockbuster's explosion is, paradoxically, bound up with that of publishing's recent troubles. They each began with the wave of consolidation that swept through the industry in the 1980s. Unsatisfied with publishing's small margins, the new conglomerates that now owned the various publishing houses pressed for bigger best sellers and larger profits. Mass-market fiction had historically been a paperback business, but publishers now put more energy and resources into selling these same books as hardcovers, with their vastly more favorable profit margins. At the same time,*

large stores like Barnes & Noble and Borders were elbowing out independent booksellers. Their growing dominance of the market gave them the leverage to demand wholesale discounts and charge hefty sums for favorable store placement, forcing publishers to sell still more books. Big-box stores like Costco accelerated the trend by stocking large quantities of books by a small group of authors and offering steep discounts on them. Under pressure from both their parent companies and booksellers, publishers became less and less willing to gamble on undiscovered talent and more inclined to hoard their resources for their most bankable authors. The effect was self-fulfilling. The few books that publishers invested heavily in sold; most of the rest didn't. And the blockbuster became even bigger.

What did Patterson add to the mix? Television advertising. Swift and strategic development of new product lines for children and romance readers. Outsourcing the actual writing to hungry midlisters. Trusted product that has little swearing or challenges to family values (in one series the manly detective is a single parent of 12 adoptees – "'Cheaper by the Dozen' meets 'Die Hard,' as Patterson describes it"). But there's lots of violence, particularly against women – you may want to avert your eyes from this tidbit:

The thriller genre is generally not for the squeamish, but Patterson's tend to be especially graphic, and the violence often involves sociopathic sexual perversion and attractive young

> *women. For instance, the villain in his second Alex Cross novel, "Kiss the Girls," is a psychopath who kidnaps, rapes and tortures college girls in an underground bunker; at one point, he even feeds a live snake into the anus of one of his victims.*

I can't help but be reminded of a recent post by Peter Rozovsky on the most disturbing noir song ever, "He Hit Me, but it Felt Like a Kiss." But I digress.

The Ecosystem of Books and Reading

This is what I'm taking away from all of this.

Books produced this way are like meals at McDonald's. They are filling and they're fast. They provide a satisfying meal for people who have little time and can't afford to try things they may not like because they work two jobs and just want a little predictable escape for a few hours. These kinds of books are bad for you, not because the nutritional value is harmful so much as the ecological harm they do.

Think about McDonald's. We stopped growing people food to grow corn to feed cows to butcher and grind up in enormous, karma-destroying meat factories, shipping the resulting pink sludge in ozone-destroying trucks, subsidizing crops that are genetically engineered intellectual property owned by giant corporations that will sue your ass if you save seeds or if seeds accidentally end up growing in your fields without their permission; we import real food from Chile and elsewhere that lots of people can't afford

even if there was a grocery store in their neighborhood. And we wash that burger down with sugared beverages sweetened by subsidized corn in a production process that exhausts both water and land but makes big brands like Coke and Pepsi rich and exportable to the world.

You can't really blame people for eating at places like McDonald's if they're working hard and need fast, cheap, filling food that they can count on. But it's ruining our planet and our health.

Likewise, if we alter book production so that it's streamlined, predictable, easily accessed by people who can't afford to experiment by buying books they might not enjoy, then corporations will be able to churn it out. Okay, there's a power struggle of Godzilla proportions going on between the book equivalent of agribusiness and McDonald's, but in the end they'll settle their differences and readers will suffer.

Some people have already joined the equivalent of a "slow book" movement. Some people will save writers like saving seeds. There will be independent bookstores just as there are local farmers markets and food coops helping members savor flavors they wouldn't discover otherwise. Lots of people are growing their own stories. But none of that works for the person who works long hours, has little paycheck to show for it (or has a big paycheck but doesn't read except on airplanes), and can't spend a lot of time seeking new authors when they know a book with James Patterson on the cover will give them the escape they enjoy. Everything else is for elitists and snobs.

The analogy, thank goodness, doesn't really hold up.

First, the government doesn't provide subsidies to publishers to plant more James Pattersons. Avid readers constitute a significant share of the book buying market and they have adventurous pallets. We are likely to see a growing divide – with small publishers providing variety and the big six (now five) focused on fast food, or folding because the big bets they place on finding the next Patterson don't work out. But not all of our arable land will be planted with Patterson-engineered stories because the book business hasn't swung subsidy deals as agribusiness has.

Second, our ace in the hole: public libraries. They do a good job of helping people get their hands on the books they enjoy without passing judgment, and they are great advisors about what to read while you're on a waitlist for the latest James Patterson. Libraries grow readers, and readers love books. All is not lost. But we're in for some interesting times.

THE MYTH OF THE BOOKLESS LIBRARY

From *Library Babel Fish*, November 15, 2011.

Ten years ago, Abigail Sellen and Richard Harper published a nifty book about how and why people use paper in their workplaces. *The Myth of the Paperless Office* reported ethnographic observations of people struggling to do things with computers that they were used to doing on paper; sometimes there were good reasons why paper was so persistent. The title reminded us that the "paperless office" we were promised decades ago is a joke – on us. We use more paper than ever and manage to have disorderly desktops both literally and digitally. That's a funny kind of progress.

Now we have the bookless library. What is it about the concept of a library without books that is so sensational? Is it because it's so bold? So heretical? So man-bites-dog exotic?

The Cushing Academy got a lot of ink in 2009 when

the *Boston Globe* quoted its headmaster as saying "when I look at books, I see an outdated technology." He planned to replace them with Kindles. (This much-discussed article is now behind the Globe's new paywall; if you're curious, you can buy access to it for a little under five bucks.)

Here are some more recent examples:

Time magazine: Is a Bookless Library Still a Library? (on Drexel University's new Learning Terrace)

Gainsville Sun: Library Without Books is on UF 'Wish List' (on planned renovation of historic Newell Hall)

IHE: A Truly Bookless Library (UT San Antonio's Applied Engineering and Technology Library)

In the last case, Stanford's engineering library had to relinquish the title for booklessness. Though it made headlines for losing the books before UT San Antonio, it cheated and actually kept some. Rather than being literally true, being bookless is "a vision statement," according to a library official.

Every now and then, someone who doesn't do research and hasn't been following issues relating to intellectual property, digital rights management, or academic publishing (let alone scholar's preferences) argues that we need to do something radical to get over our fetish for outdated technology, suggesting that we burn books or ban them. These visionaries assume that everything that matters is digital and free, so why bother keeping paper copies? Silly librarians. These guys should read that *Globe* article. Of course, they'll have to pay.

In fact, going bookless is not particularly popular. Books

are strongly and positively identified with libraries, and libraries that ditch them get into trouble with the communities they serve, even when they have good reasons for reducing the number of books sitting on shelves. But there's no denying that academic libraries now spend far more of their budgets renting temporary access to knowledge controlled by a few big corporations than they do on buying and cataloging paper things. Renting is more convenient – just think how much effort you save by choosing one thing that costs $50,000 rather than choosing $50,000 worth of things that cost only $25.00 or $50.00 apiece. Renting requires less staff handling and those rented collections don't take up space. Of course, when you can't pay the rent, you have nothing to show for all that money you've been spending.Which is why you keep spending it.

University presses have gotten used to the idea of bookless libraries. They no longer publish with a library market in mind, now that the majority of the 500 or 800 copies of a new university press book are bought by individuals, with only 100 or 150 purchased by libraries.It seems to me a strange world when libraries are no longer a significant market for academic books.

Especially given that this is not a world in which books are fading away. In 2010, more books than ever in our history were published, over 3 million new books released in print format in the US alone, according to Bowker, the folks behind Books in Print. (This staggering number doesn't include e-only books or books published without ISBNs.) Of these new books, only 316,000 or so were from tradi-

tional publishers, but that's still a lot of new books, far more than were published ten years ago.

But academic libraries buy fewer and fewer books because the rent keeps going up. This rent, of course, is not for space – though that's expensive, too. I'm talking about all that electronic stuff, the stuff that the would-be book burners and banners assume is free. When you know that a subscription you've been spending tens of thousands of dollars on will vanish if you fail to pay the rent, you trim where you can, and for the past thirty years, that's been the book budget, which is more discretionary than those demanding subscriptions. No wonder university presses and other scholarly book publishers are banding together to license digital book collections by subscription. It seems the only way to guarantee your product will get into libraries is to charge a lot for something that disappears if you stop paying.

No matter how innovative the bookless library sounds, this isn't a situation we planned. If the academic library of the future is bookless, it won't be because of vision. It will be because of the lack of it.

GETTING RID OF BOOKS: A HERESY

From *Library Babel Fish*, December 2, 2010

Libraries are often in a tricky place when it comes to removing books from the collection. It makes some people think we we are so enamored of shiny new electronic toys that we have turned our backs on the traditional purpose of libraries, or that we want to devote space to trendy espresso bars and gaming rooms for adolescents who should be writing papers instead of goofing off. Sometimes we are so eager to demonstrate how hip we are, it makes some people think we hate books and the people who love them. And when we actually throw books away, those awful suspicions are confirmed.

The truth of the matter is that I love books. And I love getting rid of them.

Why do we weed the collection? First, we don't have much choice. We're running out of space and building a

wing onto the library to make room for more books just isn't in the cards. It would be an irresponsible use of funds.

But there's a more positive reason to weed the collection. Not all books age gracefully. Some weren't much good to begin with, and they haven't improved with age. Lots of them confidently state truths that are no longer true, if they ever were. Most of the books we remove are benignly bad – like advice books for executives on how to use computers to improve payroll management circa 1975; they aren't dangerous unless large numbers of them fall on your head. But others are recklessly bad, such as state-of-the art reviews of how to treat mental illness or how to deal with juvenile delinquency published in 1970. I'm not talking about classics, about books that shaped our thinking and continue to be cited. I'm talking about books that weren't all that great when they were published. And libraries are full of them.

Going into the stacks and taking the books off the shelf one at a time is instructive. Today, I pitched a handbook for secretaries published in the 1980s and career guides from the 1970s. I ditched a shelf of how-to books for budding executives published in the 70s and 80s. (Really, how many of these do we need?) I eighty-sixed software guides for dummies stupid enough to run software that's generations old. These books will not be missed. Even in their prime most of them were never checked out, not even once.

What's even better is that removing books can lead to adding them. When an entire subject area turns out to have no books with a publication date newer than 1975, and we are offering courses in that subject area – or it concerns a

region of the world or a topic that is not in the curriculum, but is in the news – it's time to track down book reviews and acquire some more current material.

Loving the process of weeding may make me sound like a philistine. I realize there is a need to preserve our past, to offer opportunities for the serendipitous discovery, to honor the odd and the offbeat. I realize that someone, somewhere, may be deeply interested in how payroll management was computerized or in how mental illness or juvenile delinquency was treated decades ago.

But not every library has to preserve all books, just in case. It's not feasible; we can't all build additions to store everything. And for libraries like mine, serving undergraduates, the likelihood that someone will conduct that historical study someday is outweighed by the fact that too often novice researchers use out-of-date sources in their research. If the library's shelves have 100 bad choices for every good one, students may never find the good ones. They may, indeed, conclude that libraries are where ideas go to die, that they are museums of mothballed information, jars of formaldehyde preserving curiosities.

There are many reasons to simply avoid the problem. Weeding takes time, and it's politically risky. Even when the library makes every effort to involve faculty and make the process as consultative as possible, it rubs some people the wrong way. *Big* time. Books are precious; they carry enormous symbolic weight; they are sacred. Disposing of books is tantamount to holding a book burning. It's unthinkable!

But it's necessary, and like weeding a garden, it's a way

to make sure that the plants you've nurtured, the books you've selected to represent knowledge in a particular area, can thrive. Today I loaded a book truck with tomes that have not been checked out in decades and will never be missed. And what's left is better for it.

But the true reason I love weeding is that for an hour or two I get to be in the stacks, holding books in my hands. Sadly, that's a rare treat for a librarian. Yes, some of those books will leave our library. But the ones that remain, they've been chosen all over again.

THE END OF THE TWILIGHT OF DOOM

From *Library Babel Fish*, August 2, 2012

Why do we love apocalyptic metaphors so much? Nobody reads. Libraries are doomed. Higher education must change radically or die; no, wait, it's *already* dead. R. David Lankes (author of *The Atlas of New Librarianship*) says it's time to close the crisis center when it comes to libraries, and I agree.

Yet there is something about heightened anxiety that is *so* tempting. How many books have a title that starts with "The End of . . . "? If you want to call attention to a cause, fanning fear helps. It's a nifty hook when you're trying to get people's attention. Stories that focus on threat can provide the drama and urgency that recruit people to a cause. The ways that anxiety has been used in the formation of social

issues has been well-described by both Philip Jenkins and Joel Best. And it has a long tradition. You think reading is in decline? Johnny couldn't read back in 1955.

When the National Endowment for the Arts wanted more people to read literature in 2004, they chose to echo a report that set the stage for education reform (of a sort) by calling us *A Nation at Risk*. It's interesting to look back at that 1983 report. So much of it sounds familiar, if you just substitute Japan for China as our economic nemesis. Students aren't spending enough time studying! Classes are too easy! We need more STEM preparation! The only thing that has been dropped from the litany of failure is teacher salaries, which in 1983 were called too low. Now the public perception is that teachers are earning too much.

The NEA titled their report *Reading at Risk* and predicted that, if trends weren't reversed, voluntary reading might disappear altogether. Since people who read also do good deeds, patronize the arts, go further in school, and exercise more, the report argued the loss could be much greater than merely the enjoyment of literature. Since the socially-beneficial pursuits enlisted in the argument are tied to income (as are the negative correlates of illiteracy – greater likelihood of poor health, low educational attainment, and serving time in prison) reading more literature is unlikely to be the fix.

I was skeptical about how doomed books and reading really are, now that more books are being published than ever before, people are madly cataloging their reading at Goodreads and LibraryThing, everyone I know is in at least

one book club, and that so much of what we do every day involves reading and composing texts. But don't take my hunch for it; check out *Reading Matters: What the Research Tells Us About Reading, Libraries, and Community.* You'll find there plenty of evidence that, yes, reading has beneficial effects – and that it's not really endangered, however perennially it is believed to be doomed. Still, whenever the future of libraries is under discussion, someone is sure to say "who cares? nobody reads anymore."

Lankes argues that constantly emphasizing risk and decline of libraries can lead to a perception that libraries are too far gone to be saved, that the doom we invoke for dramatic effect has already happened and is irreversible. Walt Crawford has also studied the narrative of library closures in the United States, finding it an exaggerated obituary. (Sadly, this seems not to be true in the UK, where public libraries are being closed and turned into volunteer operations in rather alarming numbers.)

Why is it that we don't want to present a happier view of books and reading, of libraries, or of what higher education today actually does accomplish? In part, it's the old newsroom slogan – "if it bleeds, it leads." Bad news is more likely to get attention, and librarians are more prone than anyone to spread it – either as an emotional appeal to recruit support for libraries or to sway other librarians to a position ("if we don't do as I say, we are *doooooooomed*!")

I also suspect there's an element of elitism involved in all of this talk of decline. We prefer to think we are among the elect who enjoy reading. We are among the rare, the spe-

cial people who care about libraries or education. We are the chosen, and when the Rapture comes, we won't be left behind.

But we really need a counter-narrative to the apocalyptic rhetoric. Every academic librarian has probably had the experience of having a high-level administrator ask in innocent puzzlement, "why do we even need to have a library these days?" These are people who don't use the library themselves (which is kind of scary, given that we would prefer powerful players in higher education to call on published research from time to time, but hey, they're busy and they probably get lots of information digested for them). No, they read it in the paper or saw it somewhere online: publishing is dead. Books are finished. Young people will have nothing to do with reading. Libraries are a thing of the past.

When I surveyed chief academic officers a couple of years ago, they had a far rosier view of libraries, though perhaps one not matched by their ability to provide better funding. We need to do more to spread the word about good things that are happening in libraries and as a result of the creativity and energy of librarians and library staff.

We need to tell our success story, even though doom and disaster make for a more exciting narrative.

STACKS AND AWE

From *Library Babel Fish*, November 15, 2012

There was a terrific post a little while ago on ACRLog (cross posted at Library Hat) by Bohyun Kim about what it is that appeals to us about being in the stacks of a library. She suspects that the reasons we give when we yearn for the stacks isn't actually the ability to serendipitously discover things through browsing. Any number of those who say they must browse for their research rarely set foot in their campus libraries, yet somehow manage to be productive scholars. Kim thinks that real value is ambience that is inspiring and conducive to promoting a sense of "flow" for researchers. Being in the stacks inspires awe because we sense the physicality of knowledge. She writes:

> *It is magical and magnificent. It is amazing and beautiful. This is where all those emotional adjectives originate. In the library stacks, we get to 'see' the knowledge that is much bigger than us, taller than us, and wider than us. (Think of 'the*

> *sublime' in Kantian aesthetics.) When our sensory organs are engaged this way, we do not experience the boredom and tediousness that we usually feel when we scroll up and down a very long list of databases and journals on a library web page. We pause, we admire, and we look up and down. We are engrossed by the physicality of the stacks and the books on them. And suddenly all our attention is present and focused on that physicality. So much so that we even forget that we were there to find a certain book or to work on a certain research topic.*

She goes on to discuss how library spaces should strive to foster the sense of wonder and space for contemplation as well as address the trickier challenge of enabling serendipity in electronic collections. What she envisions would be awesome: technological platforms that let us scan lot of texts and zoom in and out at will from the aerial landscape of the subject down to the level of the article, the photo, the page.

These experiences and emotions are very close to what I want our students to get out of their experience with an academic library: a sense of the sheer vastness and majesty of the universe of knowledge as well as reassurance that they can explore it safely, that it isn't just an inchoate and hostile terrain full of confusion but a place that, after a semester or two, feels like home.

There is no library website that can produce that feeling of being at home in the world, to combine the experience of awe while also feeling a sense of familiarity and comfort.

Our students, like undergraduates everywhere, would like to replace all those choices they find on our website with a simple search box that sorts through everything – but doesn't provide one of those tiresome lists of possibilities that has to be winnowed. They don't pine for that discovery layer that libraries are installing at great expense and endless amounts of tweaking that searches all the library's databases and catalog at once. No, they want a search box that sorts the options and retrieves just one item: the perfect source.

Instead, a list of results (perhaps the first twenty citations of the 1,084 articles found) is allegedly sorted by relevance, but looks fairly random. (To be blunt, Google has a much better relevance algorithm than any subscription database I've ever met.) It's also much easier for an experienced searcher to zero in on the titles that have some potential. We can quickly exclude the article that is too old, the one that's published in the *Journal of Incredibly Arcane Uselessness*, or the one with its title in Turkish. For the novice, each choice takes effort, and the clock is ticking. You can even see time passing down in the corner of the computer screen. Your paper is due in three days! Hurry, hurry, hurry!

Why is abundance so exhausting when it's on the screen, so inspiring when it's on the shelves? There's a sense of patience in the stacks, an impression that time slows down. With your call number in hand (or sent as a text message to your phone), it's tempting to check out what else is there. No time? No problem; the books will be there next time, exactly where you left them.

THROWING THE BOOKS AT EACH OTHER

From *Library Babel Fish*, June 17, 2013

Many residents of Urbana, Illinois are not too happy with their public library director at the moment. Tracy Nectoux of *Smile Politely*, an online local culture magazine, reported last Thursday that a large percentage of the library's non-fiction collection was being removed in a hasty and ill-considered project driven by an awkward glitch in planning. Some temporary workers had been hired to insert RFID tags into the books and it seemed foolish not to remove outdated books from the collection first, particularly since the RFID tags had yet to arrive. So to make use of the workers who were already on the clock, that removal project was suddenly shifted into high gear, and soon the

whole thing was smoking and the wheels fell off, but not before thousands of books were discarded.

Public libraries, more so than academic libraries, select books to be removed from the collection on a regular basis because they add them constantly and have only so much space. This process – oh, heck, let's call it by its common-or-garden-variety name: weeding – is generally done on the basis of a constellation of factors, but in this case apparently only one criterion was being used. Books more than ten years old were being purged en masse.

Since Nectoux's post, the library administration has responded. Mistakes were made. Communication failed. Voices were passive. The director took responsibility, though managed while doing so to leave most of the blame elsewhere. Better World Books, the company to which the weeded books were sent, responded quickly, trying to return as many books as they could. It's going to make a doozy of a case study for beginning library school students.

Though the failures here were numerous and catastrophic, all libraries face a certain amount of conflict over weeding. But weeding is just one aspect of a broader struggle over books.

The overlap of the cultural category "book" (which has all kinds of conflicting meanings) and the social institution "library" (almost equally full of variant definitions) is a place that's both full of friction and slippery. In that space, a lot of questions arise. What are libraries for? Who gets to decide? What does the future hold? Or (as that question is often reframed in a more pugnacious way) what's holding

libraries back? Oddly enough, books symbolize both what many people love and treasure about libraries and what many librarians feel is an outdated and limiting vision of libraries.

This conflict shows up in newspaper headlines that use the phrase "more than just books!" These articles almost always include in the lede the words "dusty" or "musty." Electronic resources and programs that are about things other than the promotion of reading are the man-bites-dog of the story. The conflict shows up at library conferences where librarians are urged to create maker spaces and celebrate local and unique materials rather than commercial products, or when attendees are urged to open up learning spaces by reclaiming the stacks, rather like the Dutch bravely reclaiming farmland from the sea in feats of engineering. It shows up wherever "books" and "warehouse" occur in the same sentence. It shows up on the slides of consultants who get paid to help libraries wrestle with the changing nature of library work and library collections. (A consultant recently led the Urbana Free Library staff through strategic planning discussions that some staff members perceived as hostile to books.)

The struggle is most visceral among librarians. Books are used to represent either the establishment that lets libraries wither and die while stifling all attempts at innovation, or a truculent counter-insurgency, trying to reverse progress and defend pointless work and useless piles of stuff in a misguided and self-serving rear-guard action.

The fact is a lot of people visit their public libraries

because they want to borrow books. There's no better place to do it, and a lot of people read more books than they can afford to buy. (I'm in that category.) They use libraries for other things, too, but if you asked the general public if libraries should make books a low priority, I'm guessing the response would likely be a swift and loud "no." Reports from the Pew Internet & American Life Project indicate a wide belief that libraries are valued in spite of being associated in the public mind with books and reading. (In fact, some librarians have criticized Pew for asking questions too focused on books and reading and the privileged class that those things represent.) The fact that lower income Americans particularly value libraries, which are more numerous than Starbucks and far more evenly distributed, tells me that we shouldn't be so hasty with assertions that libraries are teetering on the edge of irrelevance or that books are the deadweight that will tip us right over.

The fact is books are still useful in academic libraries. Students actually check them out, contrary to rumor, though they check out fewer than they did in the days when it was easier to find a book than article and the Internet was a weird short story by Jorge Luis Borges. That said, most academic libraries don't need so many of them on their shelves. The useful ones would be more likely discovered if they weren't so thoroughly outnumbered by ones that, for good reason, have not been opened since they were put on the shelf in 1954 or 1962 or 1948.

The fact is most scholars who insist they must browse to do their research don't actually do much browsing. That's

understandable, given that so many of them are at institutions that don't have research libraries like the ones they used when they earned their degrees and given the imprecision of the Library of Congress call number system, which scratches its head an sighs over novel and interdisciplinary research. It doesn't help that libraries have so drastically reduced their spending on books (because their budgets are eaten by ravenous journals and databases) meaning that browsing will largely miss the new stuff, no matter where you are. Our libraries are more piecemeal than ever, though we're pretty good at getting you what you need if you can tell us what that is. Interlibrary loan is much easier and faster than it was twenty years ago. It's no substitute for browsing, but then browsing today is no substitute for the browsing of the past, when libraries competed to have the most books and blithely built additions when space grew tight.

I just wish that we could talk about books as if they are for use, not as symbols of enduring knowledge that must be preserved against the ravages of digital barbarians or as emblems of obdurate and blinkered resistance to inevitable change.

I wish we'd take better care of our books. That includes thoughtful and constant weeding.

BREAKING TABOOS FOR ALL THE RIGHT REASONS

From *Library Babel Fish*, April 16, 2014

Not too long ago at a gathering of librarians (I can't recall which, exactly) I overheard a snatch of something that sank in like a splinter. I didn't hear it clearly so I can't quite get it out, but it's bothering me. It was an exasperated statement to the effect that ebooks are a huge headache and students often prefer print, but libraries are no longer supposed to give up valuable space to books, so what should we do?

I have two conflicting response to this. First, if students don't want ebooks, shouldn't we listen to them? Aren't we supposed to be student centered? (This is not a phrase I love, even though my undergraduate library is totally for students. I always feel as if it's an accusation of negligence that I don't quite grasp, or an agenda that is hidden from

me.) Of course, I've heard librarians say that their students at their institution love ebooks and I don't doubt them. But if students at a particular library have made their preferences clear, it seems it would be only sensible to take them seriously. Books are for use, after all, and a giant collection of ebooks that students prefer not to use may not be a terrific use of funds. But it's hard to tell. Some ebook packages tell you not just how often an ebook was consulted, you can find out exactly how many pages were turned (so to speak). Since we have no comparable numbers for printed books other than that somebody removed it from the shelf and didn't put it back, it's hard to compare.

There are many reasons people don't like the ebooks that come in academic packages. Sometimes they are difficult to use. DRM makes downloading tricky, and the platforms can be awkward. Sometimes students prefer reading from a page rather than a screen, partly because they spend so much time staring at screens and want a break, partly because they find it easier to concentrate. Sometimes ebooks have bits missing – images that can't be included because the rights were not secured. Most of the time, they can't be shared through interlibrary loan, and even if they legally can, there is likely no mechanism for doing so.

Often they come in big packages that cost a lot. The good news is that librarians don't have to spend any time on book selection, they take up no space, and you only have to write one big check annually instead of writing lots of fiddly little checks. The bad news is that you're probably paying for books your local library users aren't interested in and

you may not have any money left over for books that are interesting but aren't in the package.

Of course, there's a tactical way for a book lover to look at this: if libraries sink money into bookish Big Deals, they may have more books than they do when all the money goes to Big Deals full of journals and no money is left over for books. Then again, do we really want more Big Deals? Are we ready to let books join journals as the exclusive property of publishers, with nothing left for libraries to own or share or preserve? That's pretty much what we did with journals. Our libraries are becoming contingent libraries, only existing so long as we continue to pay the rent.

And there are some scary consequences. If a publisher is sued in Britain where libel laws favor plaintiffs, could all copies of a book be altered at the flick of a switch? Are we okay with that?

My other thought is that we've mostly done an absolutely terrible job of taking care of our printed book collections. Doing it right means getting rid of books that are no longer useful. That is a tricky judgment call, of course, but we used to make them all the time when adding books. We just didn't think we had time to go through the same evaluative process in order to remove them.

I imagine some readers are breaking out in hives just about now. Apart from the labor involved, deliberately removing books from library collections is taboo. Books are sacred. People get terribly upset if they catch you removing books and in some cases we can't find new homes for them. We're supposed to be no-kill shelters for orphaned books.

It's much easier to stop buying new books than to remove old ones, so our print collections get shabbier and less useful and after a while those neglected books really do seem to be a waste of space.

In my ideal world, we'd provide books in the formats our patrons prefer and would not sign licenses for ebooks that are not censorship-proof or which disable the kind of sharing we've done in the past. We'd select books carefully and knowledgeably and share them among libraries to make up for our inevitable gaps. We'd care enough about them to have an organized cooperative preservation scheme that would allow us to have a backup in cases where we remove a book that somebody might someday need. We'd even figure out better ways to browse absent books. And we'd be fearless about removing from our shelves books that aren't likely to be used or, or at least are ones we don't want our undergraduates to use – that collection of sermons published in 1934 used to support a point in a biblical interpretation, that tattered paperback in the Reference Shelf series on urban crime from 1972 used by a student writing about policing in 2014, that second edition of a book that has an eleventh edition sitting right next to it.

While it has become uncool to have growing print collections, we are still obsessed by having access to as many things as we possibly can. (I recently did a search of a university library's collection and found they had over 70,000 books and articles on neoliberalism. That seems like a symptom of neoliberalism to me.) But we also need to do the work

of improving our libraries by selecting books that should go, even if it means breaking taboos.

We don't have unlimited space. If there's not enough room for students, the library has a problem. But there's something seriously wrong with the idea that library space is too valuable to waste on new books. if you don't have room for new books, I have a modest proposal: put the same amount of labor and professional judgment into removing some of the old ones. Some taboos are worth breaking – judiciously.

READING BETWEEN THE LIONS

From *Library Babel Fish*, May 8, 2014

It's big news: the New York Public Library has decided not to make the controversial renovation that had humans of New York and elsewhere riled up. The part that had me concerned was that the renovation was being sold as a rejuvenation of a research library by turning it into a combined circulating and research library which would be funded largely by selling two other libraries, the Mid-Manhattan library and SIBL (which not too long ago was a cutting-edge science and business library but, as so often happens to cutting edges had gotten a bit dull).

There has been an enormous amount of commentary on the plan, but several things seemed to be flashpoints:

- The plan was rolled out without public discussion.

Input was solicited, but not systematically and only after plans were drawn up.

- A large percentage of books in the research library would be put into storage to create space for other uses (or "space for people, not books" as flatfooted defenders put it).
- The plan seemed to favor spending on a grand architectural gesture over spending on branch libraries serving a diverse population.
- The plan implied that the library would be improved if it was made into a popular destination rather than remaining a stuffy place for stuffy people to do elitist things.

This controversy is familiar to academic libraries everywhere that are considering renovation. So often, when plans go wrong, you hear very similar complaints:

- Nobody consulted me.
- Libraries are about books, including old and odd books that may come in handy someday, and browsing large collections of printed books is essential for research.
- Why are we spending so much on making the library look fancy?
- When you tell me space is needed for computers and social spaces but not for books, you're saying research is no longer valued by this institution.

There are a few lessons for academic libraries from the

NYPL drama (and the many smaller dramas unfolding in academic libraries everywhere).

- First, librarians know a lot about libraries and the needs of their communities, but the libraries they work in belong to the community. Not to the mayor, the university president, or the board of trustees, nor the librarians – the community that *uses* the library. The future of libraries can't be decided behind closed doors by top officials and donors. It's only common sense to build a library that reflects community values and needs. If the community doesn't buy into what you're doing, you have a problem. It's better to uncover and solve that problem before you spend boatloads of money on plans. The delicate and often secret work of courting donors and fitting together competing campus needs can't come at the expense of open community conversations.
- Second, we have to talk about books. Books are valuable, but libraries can't keep everything. Most of us would improve our collections enormously if we got rid of lots of books – the ones that are out of date, that weren't much good when they were published, are about things that we no longer teach, or are in languages we don't offer. Most academic libraries, in short, are not research collections, and it's harder for undergraduates to discover good books if they are surrounded by

ones that you wouldn't want to see cited in a paper. We all rely, to some extent, on research collections to be our collective memory, but we can't expect them to keep every book forever without putting some in storage and without a plan for sharing the burden. Faculty shouldn't feel threatened when libraries take responsible steps to keep their collections within a reasonable size. Librarians, in turn, need to respect the fact that books still matter to many people who will bristle if you act as if they're just in the way.

- Third, it's kind of tacky in an era of inequality for a library building to look like a luxury hotel lobby or an airport terminal in one of the emirates. Calling it a "library for the 21st century" doesn't help. Libraries should not be ashamed of having long memories and slightly battered furnishings.
- Finally, libraries have a valuable identity and purpose and librarians sometimes forget that. We are great at accommodating needs, finding synergy, and collaborating with anyone on our campuses who wants to help our students. But libraries are also *libraries*. Sure, students use our spaces to have meetings, take naps, hold a rave, have a stressed-out meltdown, and make things that involve asking if they can borrow tape and staplers and markers and scissors and glue. But if we decide that the collection is standing in the way of valuable things, like providing room for tutors and counselors and

> faculty developers and information technologists and food services and everything else that might play a role in student success and comfort, then we have forgotten that the library itself is pretty damned vital for students and their learning. It's not elitism to resist repurposing library space for other purposes if the library doesn't have space to spare. We don't have to be everything, but we do have to be a library.

If nothing else, the NYPL drama is a good reminder that libraries are for their communities. We need to talk before we act. We need to listen and we need to broker agreements among parties that may have different ideas about what matters. And while we're at it, let's celebrate that libraries matter so much to so many.

RESISTING AMAZONIFICATION

From *Library Babel Fish,* July 15, 2014

Joshua Kim raised a question yesterday that helped me build the bridge I was trying to construct between two stimulating blog posts that seemed connected, though I wasn't sure how. One, a Gigaom post by Laura Hazard Owen, describes the ways some writers are framing the Hachette-Amazon dispute in terms that echo Tea Party rhetoric: we're scrappy independents standing up for freedom against the elites and the snobs! That kind of framing appears in all sorts of tech-disruption rhetoric, which positions the individual entrepreneur as the vital change-agent fighting bravely against the power of established businesses – using the platform of an emerging megacorporation. The new (in this case, represented by one giant Internet business) and the old (represented by five giant publishing corporations) are pitted against one another in a death match, and only

the new offers freedom from tyranny. Either that, or its a rapacious, bullying destroyer of culture, depending on your point of view.

The other blog post that grabbed my attention was a really excellent provocation by Nick Montfort, The Facepalm at the End of the Mind, in which he assembles a set of bullet points in response to the ways people have reacted to the Facebook manipulation study published in *PNAS*. Each statement, starting with "do you want your money back?" leads to another, cumulatively indicting our own carelessness in allowing the Web to be privatized. The final bullet point is the clincher:

> *Why did people who communicate and learn together, people who had the world, leave it, en masse, for a shopping mall?*

I think the reason is partly that a whole lot of people didn't really have the Web in the first place. They might have used Prodigy for a while, or Compuserve, or AOL. They might have dabbled in USENET or Yahoo Groups. They might have set up a blog, once Blogger made it exceptionally easy to publish to the Web (before it got swallowed up by Google). They might have even used an RSS feed reader like Google Reader (before Google killed it). But it wasn't until Facebook combined simplicity with size that we had one platform to rule them all. (Remember MySpace and Friendster? Yeah.) This giant-sized network effect is the monopoly of the 21st century. Google and Amazon are also in that category. Nobody can compete with anything that attracts

nearly everyone, and that massive amount of attention gives them enormous power. It's so big people seem to feel they can't *not* be there. (Actually, there is life without Facebook, and it's fine.)

There is an alternative to this kind of corporate data-sucking dominance, and it scales, but it's not without barriers. Yochai Benkler calls it "commons-based peer production." To participate you need to have some skills, some free time, and some connection to the common project – because it won't be linked from everywhere as Facebook is and it's doubtful all of your relatives and friends and your ninth grade English teacher are already there urging you to connect. Instead of handing over personal information to fund the platform, you contribute time and some work, and you trust that the piece you work on will become integrated with the whole, which requires a stable and transparent governance system of some sort. Wikipedia is a great example of a massive peer production project, but its platform isn't as intuitive as it could be, its governance culture is unwelcoming to many, and its rules can be labyrinthine. OpenStreetMap is a collaborative peer project to share and build on map data; OpenLibrary aims to create a web page for every book ever published – but neither is as well-known as Google Maps or Amazon. Yet they do demonstrate that we don't have to surrender our lives and attention to mega-corporations to do cool and useful things together online.

Libraries are a local instance of this kind of peer production platform that sometimes has had trouble articulating its identity, even though libraries are massively popular.

Because they are local and only loosely linked, they can't have the network effect that Facebook or Google or Amazon have. Worldcat only became free to all after Amazon became the go-to source for book information, and discovery layers that are intended to make the search experience more like Google require lots of local work and money and have complicated padlocks to keep outsiders out. When it comes to being a social platform to rival Facebook, a shopping platform to rival Amazon, or a search platform to rival Google, libraries – local and little – can't complete, just as a community college offering a math course can't compete with a free Khan Academy video.

But that whole competition narrative is screwy. Some things aren't for profit. Some things need to be small and personalized. Some things are great even if they don't command a vast audience. As Kelly Jensen reminds us at Book Riot, libraries are not a Netflix for books. They are more than that. They have value even when they're closed. And we librarians could do more to help people understand the importance of public goods and of private lives. I guess the thing that connects my reading of those two blog posts is that we can choose a different narrative that isn't about which big thing is going to rule the world. We can connect and share without relying on private platforms with secrets to trade, that turn our lives into trade secrets. We might have to help each other out a little, and make sure the technical barriers are as low as possible, but it can be done.

Now I'm going to go off and read the autobiography of Zoia Horn, a librarian who I didn't know but wish I had.

She died this week after showing us the kind of courageous commitment to intellectual freedom we should all aspire to.

I could buy a used copy from Amazon for $68.87 and shipping and get it in a few days. I could borrow it from a library through interlibrary loan and get it in few days without paying anything. Or I could download it right now from the Internet Archive. Soemtimes Amazon, big as it is, just can't compete.

ONLINE READING COMMUNITIES

READING TOGETHER ONLINE: GETTING PERSONAL

From *Barbara Fister's Place*, August 1, 2015

I have been fascinated by the critical, interpersonal, and social dynamics of discussing reading experiences online for as long as I have participated in online reading groups. These are places to observe how these informal critical communities participate in the formation of cultural tastes around books. Since these groups date back to the early days of the internet, they reveal how changes in platforms and their affordances frustrate or promote group cohesion. I decided exploring these things would be the subject of a sabbatical project.

Though it's a relatively new topic of serious study, I've found books and articles by scholars in multiple disciplines who have analyzed reading communities, online and off,

from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. I've collected these references in a public Zotero group. I'm going to say a few words about how some scholars have approached this topic and then delve into my personal experience as a member of a variety of reading communities.

I suspect that literary critic and historian Janice Radway laid the foundation for inquiries into popular reading practices by exploring gender, the economics of book publishing, and collective reading experiences in her influential book, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984). In a sense, she gave us permission to turn critical attention away from texts to focus on readers and to their everyday reading experiences. Sociologist Elizabeth Long's study, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (2003) comes at it from another discipline. She examined book clubs as an increasingly popular if gendered social phenomenon. It's telling that her fellow sociologists found her subject matter too bourgeois and feminine (i.e. trivial) to be of scholarly interest.

Since then a variety of scholars in multiple disciplines, including Ted Striphas, who considers how Oprah's Book Club functions in *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control*. I've dipped a toe into the voluminous research on fan culture online and the ways that digital interaction is changing culture and our legal framework for understanding cultural materials as intellectual property. Henry Jenkins's book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (2006) does a good job of unpacking these ideas and includes an interesting chap-

ter on how young fans have appropriated and interacted with the *Harry Potter* series. DeNel Rehberg Sedo has studied both in-person and online reading groups, including Twitter as a book club discussion platform. With Danielle Fuller she has written *the* book on mass reading events in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. Lisa Nakamura sees in Goodreads a new way of exploring books; she argues that the digital traces of shared reading experiences is a more fruitful site for scholarship than the more common focus on contrasting digital and print textual formats. Nancy M. Foasberg has examined reading challenges posed by bloggers as a feature of contemporary reader engagement that can tell us something about how and why we read collectively.

Finally, two essay collections are particularly valuable: *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (2012) edited by Anouk Lang and *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace* (2011) edited by DeNel Rehberg Sedo. They are brimming with fascinating insights.

Back in 2005, I added my two cents' worth with a mixed-methods study of an online reading community that I participate in, arguing that these digital gathering places are valuable to librarians for their contributions to reader's advisory, for the insights such groups provide into the reading practices of avid readers, and as a demonstration of the social nature of reading. It was fun to mix my personal passions with my scholarly life.

As I write this, I am exploring autoethnography with a group of far-flung colleagues to see how and if this method-

ology might be a useful tool for practicing librarians. Though I am still in the beginning stages of learning what autoethnography is and how to do it, it has inspired me to think about online reading communities in the first person, by analyzing my own experience in a variety of communities that have formed around discussions of crime fiction.

Self-representation

I was first motivated to seek out these communities not because I am an avid crime fiction reader (though I am) but because I had a contract for my first novel and got the impression (I cannot recall from whom – an editor? My agent? Something I had read?) that I should start building an audience by connecting with readers online. The only place I knew of to do this was Dorothy-L, the legendary Listserv-based email list founded in 1991. I joined (according to its archives, available to members) in the fall of 2001. It was surprising to revisit my posts from that time. I clearly wasn't ready to out myself as an aspiring writer. My self-presentation was as a crime fiction fan and a librarian. My posts were mostly comments on books that I was reading and recommending or on my response to a book someone else had mentioned. I also commented with some frequency on what someone else had posted related to book culture (publishing, marketing, bookselling, whether reading was on the decline or not, and the like). At times, I tossed a question or challenge out to the group – what mysteries would you put on the reading list for a course on the geog-

raphy of mystery? What overlooked writers deserve to be on the bestseller list? Sometimes an online community can seem a series of posts related only by a common interest, but the back-and-forth conversations collectively sharing knowledge of and fondness for the genre was the list's greatest attraction for me.

Looking back, my posts seem both long-winded and a little goofy (intentionally). When I was responding to a topic that wasn't about reading mysteries, I generally ended with an explicit attempt to redirect the discussion to be "on topic" – to sharing experiences of reading mysteries. I was apparently not only unready to present myself as an author, I tried to influence the community's attention, directing it away from writing and publishing toward books and reading. I'm not sure, at this distance, whether I was responding to group cues or if that focus was my personal preference – or both. There seemed a tension on the list about its purpose. While authors were encouraged to let members know about new books, I sensed some uneasiness that the list was becoming dominated by authors talking to one another while competing for readers' attention.

One of the shortest messages I posted in 2002 was an invitation to a bookstore signing for my first crime novel. Clearly, I was not at all comfortable with the identity "writer" and hesitated to call attention to that part of my life, even though I had joined ostensibly to make that identity known. Other members who were writers were not shy about reminding members of their status. In fact, the subject of how writers should present themselves was often under

discussion. Members criticized "drive-by" authors who only posted when they had a new book to promote and praised those who participated as genuine people who were generous with their attention. Straddling the line between promotion and more authentic self-representation was often on my mind as I saw how members responded to negatively to promotional messages while warmly welcoming messages from favorite writer-members.

I posted fairly often throughout 2003 and into 2004. All this time, I was struggling to produce a second book in a three-book contract for an editor who didn't like anything I wrote. (My original editor had left the house long before the first was published and my relationship with the editor who inherited my orphaned books was unhappy.) A message from March 2004, responding to a post about an article in *Salon* describing an anonymous midlist author's misery, reveals something of my ambivalence.

> *I thought the article did one thing tellingly–reveal how personally everything about publishing can be taken if you're not careful. I thought [the author's] sense of frustration or jealousy that made it hard for her to enjoy reading or watching television because her own sense of failure was so in her face was something I've heard, though not so up front, from a lot of unhappy people.*
>
> *I think an industry that involves people's hearts and souls–and I think that goes for many editors and booksellers and readers, not just writers–is bound to get personal. You*

have to do it for the love of it and hope you can pay your bills. (Hey, if not, read some of those caper books and see if it gives you ideas!)

Meanwhile–why I'm posting from my desk at work–I'm reading this fascinating article in Behavioral and Brain Science–really!–about an experiment in which some researchers stripped names off published research and resubmitted them; a huge number were rejected. In the multiple responses to this article is one from a guy who did the same in trade publishing–submitted a Jerszy Kosinski novel that won an NBA to agents and publishers who said it was unpublishable trash. Which just goes to show you.... something. Maybe that we're all human and we'd better not take the process too seriously. Or too personally. Or that one man's trash is another man's award winner.

Here I am acknowledging my identification with the painful aspects of being a writer who is struggling in a difficult business without explicitly confessing my own emotional state. Instead, I throw in a list-appropriate joke and turn to my academic librarian identity, drawing on a scholarly article to both bolster my point and deflect it from my own experience.

In the following month, I suspended my subscription to the list. It had actually become a source of pain for me. My writing career was not going well and the list seemed to me to have be taken over by irritating self-promoters with a grim desperation for attention. Dorothy-L had started as

a forum for discussing mysteries, but from the start had allowed BSP – blatant self-promotion – because many members enjoyed forming relationships with writers in this informal space. When I first joined, I was pleased to see occasional posts by Ian Rankin, Harlan Coben, Laura Lippman, and Charlaine Harris before they were routinely on the *New York Times* bestseller list. In this sense, it was not unlike a fan convention, where fans and the objects of their enthusiasm mingle. But it also had become a place where authors sought attention and squabbled with each other over publishing issues. I didn't want to be exposed to so much anxiety and yearning for publishing success when I was experiencing too much of that emotional turmoil myself.

Moderation

Besides, by then I had found a different community that was a more comfortable fit. I somehow got chatting with a Dorothy-L member offlist who recommended that I join 4_Mystery_Addicts (colloquially known as 4MA), a Yahoo group founded in 1999 that held regular formal group book discussions and sternly warned authors applying for membership that they were to be present only as readers, not as writers. BSP was strictly banned, as were links to self-promoting blog posts or surreptitious log-rolling among authors promoting each other. If somehow a promotional message slipped past the moderators, group members were quick to call it out. Contentious issues – politics and reli-

gion specifically – were also unwelcome unless they were intrinsic to a book under discussion. For me, this was a safe space where I could talk about mysteries without getting depressed about the process of publishing them. It was a place free of the frantic self-promotion that seemed to be making all the writers I knew miserable. Members had meaty, in-depth discussions of actual books, which was fun for me as a reader and informative as a writer.

I joined in June of 2003, and in the first two or three days felt lost. It was an incredibly busy group at that time; in that month alone, 3,713 messages were posted by some 600 members. There were inside jokes and abbreviations I didn't understand. I was nonplussed when a dozen or more members personally welcomed me. I wasn't sure what the protocol for responding was, and had an momentary sense of panic: how can I fit in here? How will I manage this avalanche of messages? Why are we talking about spandex shorts? (I can't revisit that disorienting series of messages to confirm my memory. Unlike the Dorothy-L Listserv, Yahoo Groups had a storage limit at that time, and a moderator went through the archived messages and deleted any that didn't relate to monthly reading reports from members or book discussions to ensure we didn't go over the limit.) But I stuck with it and it didn't take long for me to get the hang of things.

There were regular prompts to share reading experiences and recommendations. There were three formal book discussions every month, and a process for nominating and voting for books to be discussed. There were lively discus-

sions about life as an avid reader, including whether an oven could be used for book storage and how to deal with people who ask silly questions like "have you read all those books?" There were hilarious accounts of adventures on the 62 bus in Glasgow posted by a Scottish member, Donna Moore. Members often attended fan conventions and, whenever possible, organized meetups. Frequently photos of those gatherings were shared at the group's site.

In February 2006, the moderators invited me to join them when one of the original moderators retired. It was an honor to be asked, but also a chance to see behind the curtain at all the work that went into keeping the group harmoniously humming along. All new members had to be approved. Members who were new or prone to posting problematic messages had to have their posts approved, one by one. If a conflict threatened to boil up, combative members were placed on moderation temporarily. Nominations for discussion books had to invited and collated, with a runoff poll created for the five top-ranking books. Discussion leaders (called Question Maestros) had to be recruited and polls created to collect readers' responses to a book, with results posted to a database of books discussed that dates back to the beginning of the group. January was "moderator's choice" month, so we had to decide which books to discuss and come up with discussion questions. Once a year, the moderators went through a byzantine process to select series reads that would offer members a variety of series to discuss. Each moderator has a distinct set of housekeeping duties and jointly discussed problems that come up

from time to time – should this person be put on moderation? is there some way to liven up moribund discussions? Is this off-topic conversation going on too long? From time to time the Yahoo platform went through changes, with a particularly extreme transition in 2014 to the "neo" platform, which was rolled out piecemeal and with major functions broken – all of which required moderator intervention.

Apart from the mostly hidden work performed by moderators, I've been fascinated by the ways group members interact to affirm one another, maintain long-running jokes, celebrate happy moments, and comfort one another when there's an illness or a loss.

Collective individualism

For a time, I belonged to a USENET group, rec.arts.mystery, established in the early 1990s. It was self-moderating in a fascinating way. USENET, which launched at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1980, embraced the free-wheeling free speech ethos of the early days of the internet and was decentralized by design. Though the focus of rec.arts.mystery was crime fiction, politics and religion were not off-limits. Political messages routinely led to flaming hot arguments, but somehow the community of regulars used humor and a common interest in genre fiction to surround the combatants and keep the flames from burning the place down. In a sense, the members who were most active in sustaining the community and its anarchic values played a moderator role without having

the technical levers most platforms provide. Unlike 4MA, there were no scheduled book discussions or prompts to share reading experiences. Rather, a core group of regulars kept up an ongoing loosely-joined conversation about books and everything else.

As USENET grew less easily available to the casual user, more devoted to sharing files than messages, members dropped off to seek another platform. Some carry on at Google Groups, a neglected corner of a very large company that has not been successful at developing social media platforms. Much of the diaspora settled on Facebook, where private or public groups can be created but the most powerful levers are trade secrets controlled by the ghost in the machine.

If these three online communities were likened to a fan convention, one might say Dorothy-L would be most like the interactions between authors and readers at the convention hotel bar, 4MA would be the fan-organized program, and rec.arts.mystery would be the free-wheeling conversations in the hallways among friends. In reality, these online communities intersect with the in-real-life fan communities at events such as Bouchercon, Left Coast Crime, Crimefest, and other volunteer-led crime fiction-focused gatherings. For members who couldn't attend Bouchercon, the largest of these annual fan events, members of Dorothy-L routinely held a virtual party for those left behind.

Linked together

Another online reading community has formed around crime-fiction-focused book blogs. While many blogs belong to writers or groups of writers, readers also share their reading experiences through individual or group blogs. Comment threads often gather together readers who visit multiple blogs and form a loose-knit community. One of the most active weavers of these threads was Maxine Clarke, an editor for *Nature* who reviewed mysteries on her own blog and made a point of encouraging other bloggers by visiting and commenting prolifically. She invited me to a new platform for online communities, FriendFeed, where she had set up a crime and mystery fiction room.

FriendFeed was a social RSS feed reader. Individuals could synchronize multiple feeds and follow those curated by others, sharing and commenting on links of common interest, with the most recent material rising to the top of the page. In addition to allowing backchannel DMs (direct messages), members could set up rooms where groups could pool feeds and hold conversations. Once I got the hang of the platform, I visited daily or more often to see what was new. This community, unlike the others I belonged to, was not dominated by American members. The most active members were from the U.K. and Australia and my knowledge of the genre expanded as a result. Because of its immediacy, this room on FriendFeed gave me a sense of being always on top of the latest news about the genre as well as up-to-speed on the blogs that I formerly had followed

more intermittently. Though the most extensive comments remained on individual blogs, the Crime and Mystery Fiction FriendFeed Room promoted a warm sense of comradery.

That community spirit was tested when (to my complete shock and dismay) a member posted the news that Maxine had died after a long illness. While she was generous with her time and attention, she wasn't one to make personal things public. I had no idea she was in the last stages of cancer. I remember reading that brief message and trying to understand it. How could that be? I had already started planning to research online reading communities for my sabbatical and assumed Maxine would be there to share her instinctive and thorough knowledge of how these communities worked. Apart from that, I felt she was a true and close friend, and it was not only a heartfelt loss, but a reminder that there was so much that I didn't know about people who I felt so close to. It's perhaps a measure of the community that Maxine pulled together and nurtured that a remembrance blog was put together to commemorate her passion for the genre and an annual prize was established in her name. This prize, for the best Scandinavian work of crime fiction of the year, has a sterling line-up of judges (who meet, fittingly, at an annual fan convention to deliberate) and has gained so much respect from publishers that winners note the award proudly on their dust jackets.

Dénouement

Dorothy-L trundles along even as new social platforms draw attention away from pre-web community platforms. My impression, on rejoining the list in 2015, is that readers have continued to chat about mysteries while the most self-absorbed writers have gone elsewhere to promote their books. It could be, of course, that I'm simply less sensitive to writers and their discontents, having greater distance myself from my first unhappy publishing experience. (I have published three mysteries altogether, the last coming out five years ago from the smallest of the Big Five publishers. I still feel uncomfortable identifying myself as a writer, but I don't feel a pressing need to perform that role.)

4MA has grown in membership but activity has declined. The draw of other platforms has probably had an effect, but the disastrous rollout of the new "neo" platform is my prime suspect; participation in Yahoo groups, which number in the tens of thousands, appears to have tumbled across the board in recent months. The moderators decided to drop the mid-month series read this year due to lack of interest, and though the group still holds two formal discussions monthly, fewer members participate. A member survey suggested that people still value the list, so we'll muddle along, but it's not the dizzyingly busy list it once was.

I haven't remained as well connected to my favorite bloggers since FriendFeed was shut down. I had grown dependent on having a single point of contact and haven't restored a habit of visiting blogs routinely. Though the

group reestablished itself on Facebook (which bought FriendFeed years ago and apparently remembered just long enough to shut it down), I haven't kept up with it because I object to Facebook's business model. For the same reason, I have never been a regular member of Goodreads (owned by Amazon, now, and built on the big-data-collection model that Facebook uses to sustain itself). Yahoo is a similar offender, gathering far too much personal information from its members, but it appears to be so much less competent at it that I'm lulled into acceptance. Of the two non-profit platforms I have used for sharing reading experiences, USENET has ceased to be a place where people gather to talk things over and is no longer supported by many internet service providers; the Listserv platform used by Dorothy-L continues to be widely used in academia, though that may be changing. The academic librarian lists I have belonged to for years are slowing down now that there are so many other ways to share news and discuss ideas.

Where will readers gather in future to discuss their experiences with books? I have no idea, but I'm convinced having spent a decade and a half chatting online about crime fiction on a daily basis, that they will, one way or another.

"READING AS A CONTACT SPORT": ONLINE BOOK GROUPS AND THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF READING

From *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, 44.4 (Summer 2005): 303-309, reprinted with permission.

Though reading is often perceived as a sedate and solitary activity, the popularity of reading groups suggests reading is very much a social experience. Readers – women readers, in particular—have been coming together for generations to share their responses to books as an occasion for

social engagement. That engagement can have a profound if sometimes unappreciated effect on our culture: for example, the majority of public libraries in the United States were founded by women who found through their cultural associations an opportunity to effect positive social change.

More recently, reading groups gained a high profile during the heady days of Oprah's Book Club, when for a few years a relatively obscure novel anointed by the popular talk show host would become an instant bestseller. Some members of the literary establishment took exception to a television celebrity being so strongly identified with book culture. When Jonathan Franzen expressed reservations that his novel *The Corrections* would be labeled with the Oprah logo – and therefore risked being shunned by highbrow and male readers, if embraced by middle-class women – the high-stakes juggernaut came to a sudden halt. But DeNel Sedo has pointed out that there is "life after Oprah," that the success of the talk show book club was a merely a well-publicized version of an unquenchable thirst for talking about books.[1]

The power of a television celebrity to influence reading practices has made some critics worry that book groups, often supported by chain bookstores and big publishers, are commodifying reading, that we are witnessing a corporate takeover of literary practices that engages readers in formulaic, shallow analysis of texts.[2] Others see the burgeoning

1. DeNel Rehberg Sedo, "Predications of Life After Oprah: A Glimpse at the Power of Book Club Readers," *Publishing Research Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (2004): 11-22.

of reading groups as a grassroots appreciation of books that can teach us much about the relationship of readers and texts. R. Mark Hall has noted that "the classroom study of literature sometimes dims the joy of reading"[3] and popular literacy practices encouraged by Oprah offered attractions that academics should take seriously. Ted Striphas found in Oprah's invitation to relate books to everyday lives a feminist reclamation of reading as an act of transformation.[4]

Janice Radway[5] and Elizabeth Long[6] have both explored the ways reading and talking about books enriches women's lives in a manner that academic approaches to literary analysis often disparage. According to Long, a sociologist whose curiosity about women's reading groups was considered a peculiarly trivial research subject by many of her colleagues, "literature requires a broad base of readers to flourish" and, thanks to new channels available for forming book groups, "books are still closely tied to moments of experiential insight and still show a stunning ability to make people, in

2. Dennis Barron, "I Teach English—and I Hate Reader's Guides," Chronicle of Higher Education 49, no. 6 (2002): B5. William McGinley and Katanna Conley, "Literary Retailing and the (Re)Making of Popular Reading," *Journal of Popular Culture* 35, no. 2 (2001): 207-221.
3. R. Mark Hall, "The 'Oprafication' of Literacy: Reading 'Oprah's Book Club'," *College English* 65, no. 6 (2003): 665.
4. Ted Striphas, "A Dialectic with the Everyday: Communication and Cultural Politics on Oprah Winfrey's Book Club," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20, no. 3 (2003): 295-316.
5. Radway, Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984).
6. Elizabeth Long, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

discussion, feel part of a significant book-related community."[7]

Paralleling the burgeoning numbers of face to face book clubs, the Internet has become home to thousands of book discussion groups. Critics of online communication, including Robert Putnam[8] and Clifford Stoll[9] suggest time spent in online communities leads to isolation and social disengagement. An examination of one online book discussion group contests that claim. This analysis draws on the discussion practices of one online group and off-list interviews with members to explore the experience of reading together in a virtual community. An active online discussion among committed readers can reveal much about how readers choose and respond to books, what role reading for pleasure plays in their lives, and how sharing responses to books can enrich the reading experience – and indeed, our lives.

Books at the Center

An unusually successful reading list, 4_Mystery_Addicts (4MA) was founded in late 1999 by a dedicated group of mystery fans who wanted to create an online forum for readers to share their reading experiences through organized book discussions. It is not the oldest or largest of online mys-

7. Ibid., 217-18.
8. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
9. Clifford Stoll, *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

tery discussion groups. That distinction most likely belongs to Dorothy-L, a discussion group founded by librarians at a 1991 Association of Research Libraries meeting that currently has over 3,000 members. But 4MA is surely one of the most active, with over 600 members who (at the time of this writing) post from 1,500 to 3,000 messages a month. Though many of these messages are marked "OT" for "off topic" and long-running inside jokes and personal observations pepper the daily diet of lively conversation, the focus is kept on books through three well-organized monthly book discussions and regularly scheduled opportunities to share reading experiences.

When a new member joins, the focus on books is clearly announced: they are asked to introduce themselves to the group by telling who their favorite mystery authors are and what they've enjoyed reading lately. As new members join, they are welcomed by the group, with members responding specifically to their reading tastes but also describing the nature of the group as a social entity. One member does a particularly good job of capturing the character of the community, as in this welcome post.

> *Stick around long enough and somebody will have danced with a ladder, left their unmentionables someplace, gotten locked in a bathroom, gotten stuck in a stair railing, fainted, fell, ate something, rode something, broke something, that will have you falling out of your chairs with hysterical laughter. (We assume no liability for the damage done to keyboards and mice if you insist on reading 4MA posts while you are*

> *eating or drinking). You'll hear about stalking authors, nicknaming authors, plans for book heists, hijacking the 4MA website, wild get togethers in NYC, conventions and somewhere in the midst of all that, you will occasionally hear about books and authors that you won't usually find on the bestsellers lists but should be. And if you hang in there long enough you will find that we just like to laugh, have fun, read and eat chocolate, not necessarily in that order.*

Though this post emphasizes the fun aspects of the list, her statement that you'll "occasionally hear about books and authors" is intentionally ironic. In fact, one of the groups prime functions is to help avid mystery readers decide what to read next. In the middle of each month members are prompted to report on what they're reading and at the end of the month they post reviews of the books they've read. Members value these tips. As one member put it, "I have my reading list made to order." Another said, "I tend to be a bit 'traditional' and stick to authors I know I like. If I'm looking at unfamiliar authors, I skim through the summary and if it doesn't sound interesting, I generally don't try it. I've found a number of authors I probably would not have found if they hadn't been suggested by a 4MA member. I also find I now keep a list of books/authors suggested by other readers that I know like many of the same authors that I particularly like." In fact, many members have "reading twins" whose tastes are so similar they take special note of each others' recommendations.

Catherine Sheldrick Ross has pointed out the process of

choosing what to read is not a trivial matter, particularly for beginners. "Each book read contributes to the bulk of reading experience that enhances the reader's ability to choose another satisfying book. Conversely, each unsuccessful choice decreases the beginning reader's desire to read, which in turn reduces the likelihood of further learning based on interaction with books."[10] Sharing information about what to read next – or what to avoid – is a key function of 4MA. As members pool their vast knowledge of the genre, they constitute an ongoing reader's advisory service of great depth.

As self-described "addicts," running out of books to read is a shared concern. One member joked about her need for a mountainous TBR – common shorthand for books "to be read":

> *That's why most of us are here I think – none of my co-workers read much and they think I'm bats and the family is constantly wondering aloud if the third signature for committal proceedings is overdue. I just don't seem to be able to explain to any of them that a Mt TBR of less than 50 books is a source of mild panic.*

The solidarity of a group of like-minded avid readers is also a source of comfort (and amusement) for this online group.

> *Most people have stopped asking me why I need so many*

10. Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "Making Choices: What Readers Say about Choosing Books to Read for Pleasure," *Acquisitions Librarian* no. 25 (2001): 9.

> *books (because I've taken to peering at them and asking in a very loud voice "you mean you don't!!!!!!!") but they still sigh and pointedly move stacks of books around so they can "sit comfortably" . . . I've often contemplated banning anyone from the house who doesn't have an emergency book in the glove box of their car when they arrive.*

Filling the Spaces Around Books

All of the members who I interviewed off list commented on the warmth and friendliness of the community and several had stories about times when the group provided emotional support. One member said:

> *I came aboard after coming out of hospital and in the first throes of dealing with an incurable disease that prevents me from doing lots of things I could before . . . few of my friends share my love for mysteries or books, at least to the degree I do. So finding 4MA was a double bonus for me. I found kindred spirits, I could finally discuss the books I loved to read, and I found a whole parallel community from all over the world (or close enough) who have supported me personally all through the last years.*

"4MA has soul," another member said. "We are friends who read books—some of us are best friends even though we have never met each other; there is even a sub-group which emotionally supports a fellow member in times of sadness or illness," referring to the "sunshine club," an off-list group

of volunteers who see to it that members who are going through a difficult time get letters, small gifts, phone calls, and other forms of support. Even members who don't post messages to the list appreciate reading the messages of more active members. One "lurker" wrote off list to assure me 4MA was an important part of the lives of even those who are invisible participants.

"It's a weird thing that you can end up having a sense of community with people you are never ever likely to meet," one member who lives in a rural area commented, which she finds an advantage. "I'm not really a face to face people person, to be honest." One felt the community was "there for her" after her husband suffered a heart attack, providing support that was "social and intellectual at the same time." Another said "I joined 4MA shortly after losing my dad, whose death left a big hole in my life. I was looking for some way to fill the time I had spent with him without falling into depression and joining 4MA did just that. As well as helping to fill a void in my life, I have met some truly wonderful people on the list . . . I look forward to reading each day's posts to see who has done what, as well as who has read what." Members often contact each other off list, make efforts to visit each other in person or meet as a group at mystery conventions such as Left Coast Crime and the Harrogate Festival.

Though all of the members enjoy mysteries, there is enormous diversity in the membership of 4MA, which is considered a strength. "Online book groups take you beyond color, race, religion and sex—you all love books"

one member said. Indeed, the 4MA membership offers great variety in terms of physical disabilities, educational attainment, income, age, gender, and sexual orientation. Though the majority are from the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and Australia, the membership is drawn from six continents, and for several active posters English is not their primary language.

This diversity makes for lively book discussion. One member contrasted the narrower range available in her face to face group: "we know each other so well (we studied together for the same career 40 years ago) that the discussions follow a familiar pattern. In 4MA there is always a fresh view of things." She added, "we get to like other members because we like their minds, not because they are good looking or have lovely manners or move in the best circles." Another member described 4MA as "very non-judgmental and supportive . . . Worldwide perspective and lots of mutual respect." Though political discussions are discouraged as potentially divisive, the sensitivity to international perspectives allows for cross-cultural analysis of criminal justice systems and social issues brought out in mysteries. One member said some discussion lists have "a very American-centric view which I find decidedly rankling, very closed and insular and very off-putting," though she added, demonstrating a "communication work" gambit typical of the list, "That could just be me, of course."

One of the moderators put it especially well. "People respect each other's opinions but go way beyond that and support each other. True friendships have bloomed. Lots of small and not so small gestures have happened—books

sent to members who don't have the resources to buy some books for example . . . Over the years, this list has grown into a full blown community where the books are still the center but the people and their lives fill all the space around them."

Making and Maintaining a Community

As S. Elizabeth Bird has commented, creating successful online communities take work and "being subscribed to a list doesn't result in community, any more than just living in a neighborhood makes that a community."[11] Though some online book discussion lists are beset by discord – one even has a list of "forbidden topics" posted on its Web site – 4MA members only rarely need a gentle reminder that some issues have the potential to upset other members. "Let's remember we're at a party and that politics and religion and causes are subjects that should always be avoided to ensure a peaceful, successful party," one of the moderators recently posted when members wandered into an area that invited discord. Another member used the party metaphor, but described a somewhat rambunctious event:

> *This is like a cocktail party where we schmooze the room and maybe make some friends and have heated conversations when we disagree. If you use your imagination you can see this group or that hanging around in clumps, never stopping*

11. S. Elizabeth Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 57.

> *the focus of why we're gathered in the first place. A room with mystery book lovers of all types getting along just fine, maybe checking this dress or that suit out or the dressing gowns or jeans . . . we are all here for our love of mysteries and good writing. The point being is I like to schmooze my way through what's out there to read and thereby add to my daily being something different now and then.*

Though controversial issues often surface in the discussion of a book, since social conflict and troubling ethical issues are so commonly the subject matter of crime fiction, members generally are careful to focus their comments on interpreting the texts to minimize any potential to cause offense.

Symptomatic of the group's self-reflective humor, along with gently-worded rules sent to new members and posted in the group's files, there is a spoof of list rules that include the following.

- No member shall submit more than 62 posts per day.
- If you are wittier than the list leaders, you will be appointed as the CEO of something or other and given a very nasty job to do.
- If you insist on sending BSP [authors indulging in "blatant self-promotion"], we will send the BS back to you and dispel the P.
- If any of these rules are not adhered to, we will infect your computer with one of those nasty worm viruses who will eat all of your "t"s. -ry -

> yping a pos- wi-hou- using -he le–er -. No- easy, is i-?

Several moderators divide up the maintenance tasks designed to keep the monthly discussions going, such as organizing nominations for group reads and recruiting discussion leaders, but the task of enforcing polite behavior is not onerous. The focus and tone of the list was carefully shaped by its founders when it was launched, and members work to retain its cordial and informal nature. One moderator told me, "we very, very seldom have to intervene. This list is incredible for its self-policing." Though some online discussions are closely identified with a single moderator, the sharing of list "ownership" among moderators from several countries has added to the welcoming diversity of the group and avoids the group being too dependent on one person's tastes and list management style.

Though off-topic posts are welcome, the list never wanders far from the subject of mysteries. In addition to sharing personal reading experiences, three books are chosen for group discussion each month. These books are selected through a voting process that involves members making nominations, an "ISO" period during which readers comment "in support of" nominated books they would like to read, followed by a voting process from which the two top scoring books are chosen for group discussion. For variety, there is a "moderator's choice" month, one devoted to "other cultures" and a "classics month" in which nominated books must have been published at least forty years ago. The

middle of the month is reserved for "serial readers," a group discussion of the first three books in a mystery series, spread across three months.

Reading Practices

The discussions themselves are led by volunteer Question Maestros who develop a set of five to ten questions to be posted to the list over the course of ten days, giving readers time to compose their own responses and comment on each other's posts. Often, general questions are included so those where weren't able to obtain the discussion book, or didn't have time to read it, can participate. "Spoilers" – information about the endings of books or twists in the plot – are allowed. The discussion questions for each group read are archived so novice discussion leaders have models for their questions, as are responses for those who came late to the conversation and want to revisit the discussions about particular books.

Some Question Maestros go to special lengths to enrich discussion by pointing out Web sites for background information, finding apt lyrics of songs to preface questions, or even contacting and interviewing the authors of books under discussion. From time to time a brave author will join the group for discussion, though that does not prevent readers responding frankly and forthrightly about aspects of the book they disliked. Though some books generate less participation than others, the careful planning, routine maintenance, and sensitive communication work done by

moderators and members alike keep the discussions focused and lively. The depth of analysis is no doubt influenced by the fact the membership is unusually well-read in the genre, with members pointing out plot holes, clichés, and factual errors that evade most professional reviewers and many editors. Members feel comfortable stating radically different opinions because it's understood that reactions to books vary widely and that different responses are to be expected and even enjoyed. At the same time, having someone respond the same way can be reaffirming. Quite often, after a dissenting opinion is posted, a member will say "I'm so glad you said that; I thought I was the only one who felt that way."

Becoming more adept at reading critically is a member benefit. "I have never been part of any book discussion group," a member told me. "Except for high school and college literature courses, I have never had the opportunity to discuss a book in depth with many people . . . I am viewing many of the books I read more critically and therefore I often have a greater appreciation of many of them. I find that many times I really think about what I reading and not just escaping into another world." Unlike in a classroom, the development of critical skills is not tied to grades. As another member put it, "The book discussions are wonderful. I am forced to consider why I enjoy or reject a book. I am grateful for the opportunity to voice my opinions, even if I consider them half-baked or incomplete. 4MA is invariably kind – no opinion is too stupid. Reading the opinions of others makes me think of the book in new ways."

The importance of these opportunities to tackle books with other readers is often underestimated by outsiders. "I was talking to a co-worker today" one member told me, "and mentioned this and he was amazed that we actually discuss three books a month. I think he thought it was a group of people who chatted about silly things." Yet the group can also parody the high purpose of some book discussion groups. A new member was welcomed with this message:

> *We are just a nice quiet bunch of sedate readers . . . we're very strict about the rules and never get off topic, we're quite a serious bunch . . . If this sounds like you—*
>
> *You are on the wrong list! LOL! We're a rowdy, crazy bunch of readers who spend our waking hours, reading books, trying to keep up with all the posts on this list . . . justifying that last book purchase, entering book giveaways, drooling over the latest book from our favorite author and trying to figure out if we can get by without using the oven, so we can use it for book storage.*

Though deepening one's understanding of books and of the genre is a function of the discussions, members don't forget to have fun while they're doing it.

Resisting Cultural Categories

DeNel Sedo points out that cultural studies scholars haven't studied reading groups because they aren't considered

"oppositional" enough to be interesting, but rather are perceived as groups of middle and upper class readers, chiefly women with sufficient leisure to form such groups, who are susceptible to commercial and cultural messages about books.[12] Though certainly chain bookstores and publishers have paid more attention to book clubs than scholars have, the assumption book group members are by nature complacent and gullible is not borne out by the evidence.

In the case of 4MA, members challenge dominant notions of the worth of books in two significant ways. First, there is a strong resistance to marketing messages. One highly touted but poorly written debut thriller led to the creation of the "Buzzhoff Award," given to amateurishly written books with big marketing budgets. Nominees are proposed from time to time with snippets of particularly bad prose. Though mysteries and thrillers dominate the fiction bestseller lists, 4MA members tend to pay relatively little attention to big-name authors. Discovering and supporting good midlist authors is a shared and clearly articulated value among list members.

Second, the focus is on genre fiction, and the membership frequently offers spirited defenses of fiction not considered "literary." Unlike the romance readers in Janice Radway's study of reading for pleasure as a form of concealed resistance,[13] 4MA members make no apologies for their taste and don't see reading crime fiction as a guilty

12. DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Badges of Wisdom, Spaces for being: A Study of Contemporary Women's Book Clubs*. PhD Dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2004.
13. Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance*.

pleasure but as a worthwhile activity. Indeed, they frequently argue that the issues tackled in mysteries and the overall quality of writing in the genre makes it superior to most literary fiction. Reviewers who describe books as "transcending the genre" come in for a regular drubbing.

Though all members love mysteries, they like different ones and are savvy about the differences. Several files at the group's Web site offer humorous definitions and examples of different types of mysteries. A 4MA quiz helps readers determine their reading tastes based on five descriptions of sub-genres. They range from "mysteries with a quilt making heroine and a quilt pattern and recipe for something wholesome every three pages," to "All the good guys have packed up their smiles and left town . . . The good guy usually wins, but becomes a little less good in the process." Adding up the score identifies the reader as Classy (a cozy lover), Splasher (sometimes cozy, sometimes hard-boiled) or Badass (hard-boiled). Though the taxonomies of sub-genres are well understood, the membership is broad-minded; of the nearly 200 members who have taken the poll, Splashers are in the majority.

When asked what they get out of reading mysteries, entertainment and escape were often mentioned by 4MA members, but so was learning new things. "I like the way I can get lost in a good mystery and I feel like I learn something from the best of them, be it about a geographical area, or some aspect of science or technology, or just about people of different cultures or backgrounds," one member told me. Another said, "Reading has always been my saving

grace. As the eldest of nine children escaping to a corner with a book was my way of coping with life in general. Even though I have always read many different types of book, from historical to romances to non-fiction history and biography, mysteries have long been my favorite genre . . . Maybe it's the psychology involved in trying to understand the villain or maybe it's escaping my problems by reading about someone else's."

One member began by pointing out she enjoys the puzzle, but added "What's kept me interested in mysteries is the constant spotlight on the human condition. Even the more gory, extreme books that I've managed to finish have provided an insight into humanity and its frailties that I just don't get with mainstream literature anymore." Another agreed, saying "the genre tends to be more grounded in the traditions of social realism and permits a greater interplay between characters and the social surround than do other genres." Though this may mean reading about uncomfortable subjects at times, that encounter can be informative. "If it makes people stop and think about issues then it's a positive thing," one member said. "I keep remembering the discussion we had on Rebecca Pawel's *Death of Nationalist* and the issues it raised about war, human nature and how nothing is black and white. I think that's probably the most interesting book discussion I've ever participated in."

One discussion thread concerned "parents as readers." For some members, reading was not modeled at home. One member noted both her mother and grandmother read in secret because it was considered self-indulgent when there

was work to be done. In other cases, reading was encouraged by parents. One member from Argentina told of her widowed grandmother emigrating from Spain with two children and a trunk full of books. "One of the first things I remember is my Father and my Grandmother discussing the battles of WW II with their newspapers open. And my Grandmother reading or telling me some tales from her books. I was a voracious reader since before I could read. Loved the printed word even before it took a meaning." Encouraging adolescents to continue reading is a common concern, often prompting book suggestions for particular interests, and getting a reluctant reader or a family member with learning disabilities hooked on books is grounds for communal celebration.

Above all, reading is not seen as a passive activity. One member called the encounter between reader and writer a "contact sport."

> *Reading is an *active* process for me, not something I passively do – brain engaged, heart open, willing to be stomped on or thrilled or hurt or helped, or all of the above. It perhaps explains my anger when an author disappoints or, even worse, deliberately "trifles with my emotions", promising but not delivering, manipulating for sensation only, "playing with my affections". <grin> . . . And oh, the wonder, the joy, the almost physical satisfaction when an author unexpectedly delights you, charms you, pulls you away from the mundane and "the usual". Brings you into their world, truly*

> *welcomes you there, makes you feel a part of it, *invested* in it, as if it truly matters for you what happens to those people, that place, this occasion. THAT's writing!*

Not only is it an interaction, the relationship between book and reader can be an emotionally intense and personal one:

> *Reading a good book is a lot like a love affair, admittedly short-term, but nonetheless intense for all that. Some lovers become boring very quickly, others can be endlessly fascinating, with new sparkles coming to light at surprising moments, shining in the sun when you least expect it. But it always takes two, and even the ultimately sad ones "grow" you in some way, as long as they touch you where it matters.*

Given that members of this group are activist readers, they are comfortable articulating their responses to books even when they disagree, making for lively and impassioned discussions. In fact, the books that meet with the greatest divergence of opinion are often the best choices for conversation. It's not surprising that each year, as members submit their "tops and bottoms" – the ten books they liked most and least – that the same title will often be found in both categories.

"Book Heaven"

One member commented that, though the librarians she encountered as a child fit the stereotype of spinsters with

tight buns found in the film *It's a Wonderful Life*, they provided something important to her: "several of them were the warmest and nicest people I'd ever met, and they turned part of my difficult childhood into a beautiful imaginary world, gave me gifts I didn't understand until many years later, helped me realize that the life I – or they – had wasn't all there might be." She added, with tongue firmly in cheek, "But obviously I'm a disturbed personality – I consider 'librarian' to be a noble title! And I have a tweed suit . . ."

Though most members of 4MA have extensive personal book collections, and those who can afford to buy books make a point of supporting their favorite authors, many rely heavily on their public libraries. As one measure of the need for extensive library service, a member lives in a city in which the branch libraries limit the number of books that can be checked out at one time. She managed to overcome that liability by obtaining seven library cards in various family members' names from different branches!

Recently, when a member reported moving from a rural location without a strong public library system to a community with a good library collection, helpful librarians, and virtually no waiting lists for books, she added, "I won't tell you where I live, or you all will want to move here. And there will go my 'no wait list' for books I want to read." The response was immediate: "Where is this book heaven that you've moved too?! We want to know, right now!" Members began planning a retirement community for 4MA, describing the restaurants, pubs, teashops and bookstores they

wanted located nearby. For this group, a dream community starts with a good library.

The needs and practices of the common reader, largely ignored by scholars of cultural studies and literary criticism, are also neglected in library science literature. For the most part, provision of information (whatever that might mean) is valorized, while pleasure reading is seen as a popular but far less culturally significant function. Information literacy, a cause that academic librarians in particular find urgent, is framed around a process that begins with identifying and satisfying information needs; lifelong learning – the ultimate aim of information literacy efforts – is presumed to depend on continuing patterns of information seeking established in the school or college years. The ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education makes no mention of reading without a specific purpose in mind, even though readers report learning a great deal through pleasure reading that isn't driven by an information need. Catherine Sheldrick Ross makes a strong case for librarians taking more seriously the role of encountering information in popular fiction and the significant impact reading has on people's lives.[14] She points out that understanding readers and their needs not only leads to better collection development, but better reference and reader's advisory service – not to mention a broader understanding

14. Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "Finding without Seeking: What Readers Say about the Role of Pleasure Reading as a Source of Information," *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services* 13, no. 2 (2000): 72-80.

of the uses of libraries, including those considered merely "recreational."

Though 4MA is a virtual group, with its members scattered across the globe, it has succeeded in becoming a true community for serious mystery readers who never take themselves too seriously. As a knowledgeable group of dedicated and critically acute readers, 4MA members provide an extraordinary reader's advisory service for one another through regularly scheduled and impromptu sharing of reading lists and ad hoc reviews, forming a worldwide network of friends in the process. As a resource for avid readers, online discussion groups can enhance reader's horizons and provide a sense of community with books at the center. For librarians, virtual book discussion groups offer extraordinary insights into the social nature of reading and its importance in the everyday lives of readers.

Note

The author wishes to thank the moderators and members of 4MA who agreed to be interviewed and have their posts quoted for this project. She is also grateful for assistance from Catherine Sheldrick Ross and DeNel Rehberg Sedo who pointed her in the right direction.

CULTURE SHOCK: WHEN GOODREADS AND LIBRARYTHING COLLIDE

From *Barbara Fister's Place*, March 30, 2013

It has been fascinating to see people respond to the acquisition of the largest book-focused social network, GoodReads, by Amazon, the largest book-focused *anything*. (In fact, it's so large, books are just one of the many, many products the company sells, but bookselling was its first focus; the company has had a huge impact on both book culture and book commerce. This acquisition is one of many that have consolidated Amazon's influence in the publishing world.)

If you are deciding which site to use, Book Riot published a thorough and smart comparison of the two sites

(in two parts). I have been a LibraryThing member since about 2007 and started using it primarily to replace a kludgy homemade website where I had been posting book reviews. I tried out Goodreads soon after it launched, but didn't want to maintain catalogs on two sites, and preferred the familiar layout and the business model of LibraryThing. Rather than rely on targeted advertising and magic venture capital dust, it charges a small lifetime membership fee of $25.00 and repackages reviews and tags as an enhancement for library catalogs. The terms of service is actually very similar to Goodreads', but I don't think Tim Spalding would sell his company to Amazon, and I trust him not to turn my reading tastes into marketing opportunities.

For many Goodreads members, the acquisition came as a rude surprise and many who are concerned about the growing power of Amazon began to explore competitors. The response is very like the way people reacted when Google announced it was mothballing its RSS feed reader: betrayal, outrage, anxiety about the size and power of a single corporation, and a crowdsourced scramble to find alternatives. Once people have invested their own creative labor into a site, have woven it into their daily routine, and have established social relationships there, it's a rude shock to realize that it's not actually theirs at all.

This scramble to test alternatives has also exposed many of the things people want in a platform built around sharing a love of books – and what happens when groups and their established cultures collide. Tim Spalding, LibraryThing's founder and owner of a majority share, started a discussion

about what the acquisition means for LibraryThing. Along the way, many feathers were ruffled and some were soothed. Spalding wrote "I find Goodreads too pushy on the social side, too cavalier about user data and – on average – not as intellectual as LibraryThing can be." Not surprisingly, some Goodreads members who were checking out the site took offense. In the ensuing discussion, some LibraryThing loyalists dug the hole deeper, while others tried to repair the damage. I've seen similar behavior in an online book discussion group in which members sometimes disparage another group in order to express what they like about the group they are in. Since these groups include overlapping memberships, feelings get hurt and members feel torn between the social codes of one group and those of another.

Both Goodreads and LibraryThing are a wonderful antidote to the claim that nobody reads and the book is dead. Both sites attract avid readers – millions of them – and offer opportunities to create personal book collections and share reviews. Both sites have extensive social features and ongoing conversations around books. Both involve members in volunteer work that improves the site.

But they have significantly different flavors. LibraryThing is more focused on individual members' catalogs, drawing on book metadata from many sources, making it useful for those who collect pre-ISBN books or non-US, non-English titles. (There are over 700 bibliographic databases from which to draw data, including national libraries across the globe.) Goodreads is much more social and con-

temporary and is designed to enable Facebook-like group formation and socializing around books.

Within each site, communities coalesce and thrive, but the threaded discussion at LibraryThing takes a back seat visually to the cataloging of books. LibraryThing is more like a library, with a major focus on cataloging, less on finding the next book to read (or purchase), though it has a sturdy recommendation engine. The company also shares with libraries a healthy respect for privacy, a fairly knee-jerk attitude to freedom of speech, and a culture of transparency (up to a point, given it is a privately-held company with no interest in making its code open source). Goodreads is more like Facebook – originally funded by venture capital, very large, and reliant on the data its users provide to serve up targeted advertising and to gather a spectacularly large and detailed set of book-related data to monetize.

One other distinction that seems to have cropped up as these cultures collide is where authors and publishers fit in. Goodreads tolerates a lot of marketing and is much more attractive to publishers, authors, and . . . well, Amazon. LibraryThing has a welcome mat for authors and publishers, but there are distinct social boundaries that the community has set beyond which marketing and promotion is unwelcome. The terms of service states clearly, “”Do not use LibraryThing as an advertising medium. Egregious commercial solicitation is forbidden. No matter how great your novel, this does apply to authors.”

The discussions at LibraryThing about what the Goodreads sale means have been eye-opening, both because

I've learned a lot about what other members get out of the site and what features it offers that I've never stumbled across, but also because of what readers say about their sense of community and what they want from a social reading experience. Some of these desires are technical (a mobile version, for example) and some are functional (preferring one type of social interaction over another) or aesthetic (with "dead salmon color" coming up a lot, but also graphics versus text and other design preferences).

But some of the differences are tribal, and those are the ones that are the most interesting to me.

FINDING THE RIGHT BOOK

From *Library Babel Fish*, July 9, 2015

Joshua Kim honored me by paying attention when I was one of those annoying people tugging his elbow to say "hey, you *have* to read this book!" (The book in question is *Data and Goliath* by Bruce Schneier. By the way you, too, have to read this book.)

The question he raises about how we discover what to read is interesting and points out how books aren't quite like other consumer goods. I don't generally go around telling people "you *have* to wear these shoes" even if I am happy with a pair I bought. But when I really, really like a book, I am likely to mention it to people who I think will like it, too. Why is that? There are so many books out there, and it's hard to know what to read next unless you have trusted sources. So far, it has been hard for algorithms to replicate the wisdom of a small in-real-life crowd or even for the wis-

dom of large crowds to be numerically calculated without tears. Let's take Amazon as an example.

Amazon started selling books because they are fairly easy to source and ship, there's a lot of them, there's a substantial installed consumer base, they were able to partner with the book distributor Ingram to start with a lot of data about books, and the book industry uses an international system of unique identifying numbers that make inventory control easier than for, say, shoes. But Amazon always meant to be a major retailer of goods of all kinds. Their "review" system can be a signifier of how a lot of readers feel about a book or how divergent opinions might be, but it also can say "it arrived a week late and the package was damp. I'll never buy from this seller again," which is a review of a service, not a book.

Apart from the mixed messages, there have been lots of problems with the rating and reviewing of books on Amazon. Ten years ago, a glitch caused reviewers' real names to appear on the Canadian site, revealing authors who praised their own books and made mean-spirited remarks about other writers' books. Authors have complained of being bullied by mean reviewers and readers have complained of being bullied by demanding authors. Authors have had public meltdowns and stalked their critics online and off. Most recently, Amazon has incensed some reviewers by removing their comments, saying they are friends with the author. How they know this relationship exists is a trade secret, and both the lack of transparency and the appearance of surveillance has caused consternation. Goodreads,

a book social network owned by Amazon, has gone through similar drama, and their sheer scale – Goodreads currently has over 40 million members who have listed 1.1 billion books and written 43 million reviews – mean that a change can affect a lot of people, all of whom feel some sense of connection to the platform.

There are at least a couple of issues entangled in this state of affairs. One is that it's very hard to design a system that can't be gamed somehow, particularly when the system is designed around gaining attention. This is one of the reasons Google keeps switching up its search algorithm. People whose job is SEO (search engine optimization) figure out a method to bump a site toward the top of search results and Google designs a work around. The second is that people who devote hours to creating content using proprietary platforms feel a sense of investment and ownership, so feel betrayed when the platform changes and their content is gone.

A recent opinion piece in *The New York Times* on the Reddit protests – volunteer moderators of popular threads were unhappy when an employee they liked was abruptly fired – prompted a lot of puzzled comments. Why should they have any input into a company's personnel matters? And isn't it just stupid to spend hours of time contributing content to a website without getting paid?

I think these responses miss the strange nature of the social web. Some things people do for love, not money. A platform needs active members. Members who are active are going to resist decisions they disagree with. And the plat-

form itself promotes a sense of belonging that can morph into a community of resistance.

All of which is a way of saying that finding the next book to read is complicated. You can sign on with BookVibe (which harvests books mentioned by the people you follow on Twitter and tells you which books are trending). You can join Goodreads groups that discuss your favorite genres. You can try out LibraryThing, which offers automated recommendations based on subject headings and tags, member suggestions based on those with similar reading taste, and even "unsuggestions" – books that are most unlike the ones in your collection. You can check out the incredible number of book lists out there – Book Riot, for example, will keep you busy with lists about various topics or different genres and even a top ten list of top 100 lists – how meta. Or you can hang out, in person or online, with people who read the kind of book you like and compare notes.

At root, the best book recommendation algorithms are based on information provided by people who take the time to tug your elbow to say "you've *got* to read this book" online or in person. Sometimes they're right. Or, of course, you could see if your local public librarians or favorite booksellers, who won't sell your data to a third party, have ideas for you. They usually do.

GOODBYE, FRIENDFEED

From *Barbara Fister's Place,* March 13, 2013

It has been a long time coming. Still, I'm gutted. Friendfeed is pulling the plug on a platform that has been a big part of my online social life.

Chances are you've never heard of FriendFeed. It was a bit under the radar, but those who used it were avid. It had a simple, uncluttered, and intuitive interface where you could form groups, have RSS feeds stream to the group, and have discussions – with any active discussion popped to the top of the page. It allowed anonymity (which can be extraordinarily useful) and private messages, which is where surprise parties were planned. Facebook aquired FriendFeed in 2009, but somehow it kept going. Every time it went down for a few hours there were panicked backup plans made, but it always bobbed back up – until the final official announcement was made.

Maxine Clarke, who I've written about before, introduced me to FriendFeed by inviting me to join the Crime and Mystery Fiction group. Knowing that Maxine was not only a trustworthy guide to crime fiction but also extremely informed about technology (helping make *Nature* one of the most lively interactive and trend-setting web presences for science), I dipped my toe in. I found a lot of bloggers who I'd already discovered and met far more. It was easy to go to one place and get a stream of new reviews, interesting links, and companionship. Though the room functioned primarily as a place where we could share RSS feeds and occasionally comment, real friendships bloomed. I intend to stay in touch with those who I met there, but it won't be as easy. A Facebook group has been set up where refugees can go, but I'm not a friend of Facebook, so will have to update my Feedly links and try to make the rounds of blogs to keep up the interaction there, which is where a lot of the more extended conversations happened, anyway. I sensed a kind of unspoken preference for taking comments to the original blog whenever possible so as not to dilute their impact.

It will be trickier to replicate the community found among librarians in the LSW FriendFeed group. After getting to know my way around the Crime and Mystery Fiction group, I poked around and stumbled across what has been my go-to professional (and just-for-fun) group ever since. FriendFeed has been the Library Society of the World's most active hangout for some time. Previously Meebo was an LSW space. It was acquired by Google and killed in 2012

in hopes we'd all flock to Google+. These ceremonial sacrifices don't always pan out, do they?

Rather than use the platform as a shared RSS feed, it was a conversational space. It wasn't unusual for the threads to run to dozens of comments. Members would raise problems (is this database acting weird for you, too? can someone check this reference for me?), professional issues (open access, privacy, the behavior of publishers or funding agencies, how to do cool things for our communities), and a lot of giddy fun and companionship. Because there are a number of technically adept members, we'll probably have another meeting place of some kind rigged up by the time the plug is pulled. We'll pass the hat to pay the costs. There isn't really a commercial substitue for what we have ensjoyed until now, and I don't know what I'd do without it.

It's hard to know what makes a social media platform work for a group of people who come together in a community. It's clearly not the infratructure itelf. The two FriendFeed rooms I participated in regularly used the affordances of the platform very differently. It really is the people and the way they develop a common identity through individual practices (choosing what to post and how to respond), a means of welcoming new members and celebrating membership, and the indirect development of group norms. How those norms evolved in this space is truly mysterious.to me. There were no posted rules. There was some kind of administrative status some members took on, steering with a very light hand on the rudder – mostly refreshing feeds if they stopped working. Every now and then there would be

drama in either of these groups, but even at its most heated it never seemed to fundamentally alter the nature of the community. Perhaps the relative obscurity of FriendFeed made it unattractive to trolls and spammers. In any case, these were remarkably civil, balanced, and inviting spaces.

One other thing true of both groups: they may be tight, but they are diverse. FriendfFeed earned users around the globe. I was intrigued when the news broke to see Tweets about it in Turkish, French, Spanish, and (above all) Italian. In fact, some Italian programmers have knocked out a replacement. For the LSW, the mix was in library types (academic, public, and special) and geography (U.S., Canadian and British librarians as well as a Singaporean member and others). The Crime and Mystery Fiction group was smaller in membership but more widely distributed geographically, with members from the UK, Australia, Canada, the US, Spain, Denmark, and probably other places I'm forgetting at the moment. These international reading communities create an interesting situation – the buzz around books doesn't respect the regional boundaries around rights. Books are released at different times (or not at all) in different regions with different covers and, often, titles. It will be interesting to see whether online commerce and these international reading communities might break down some of those borders or whether the separate sale of rights by region will continue to feature in the publishing world or perhaps even be artificially reinforced, with DVDs splitting the world into regions and the streaming of videos restricted by location – the sort of control of audiences that seems so self-defeating.

Finally, one thing that is lost as the plug is pulled – the record of those conversations. FriendFeed had an excellent search feature which I often used to find a link or retrace a debate that I needed for one reason or another. That won't be possible. As we entrust more and more of our lives to companies that come and go, the words we wrote, the things we think of as ours, are not under our control. As we lose our community gathering places, we also lose our histories. Something to think about as we live with our heads in the cloud.

WHAT BOOK BLOGGERS HAVE TO SAY

From *Barbara Fister's Place,* September 22, 2014

In August, 2014, I concocted a small survey for crime fiction book bloggers. This survey relied on a convenience sample drawn from my Twitter connections, the Crime and Mystery Fiction room at Friendfeed, and bloggers who I follow and contacted personally, inviting them to participate, so it is not a comprehensive analysis by any means. I should note that book bloggers are numerous, with 1,458 book review blogs listed on the Blog Nation directory. There's even a book for authors who want to court them – *The Author's Guide to Working With Book Bloggers* by Barb Drozdowich – which mentions querying bloggers as if they are literary agents. Most of the bloggers who I follow regularly and who took this survey are serious about their reviews,

but are largely indifferent to page views and influence. They love to read mysteries and they enjoy sharing their thoughts about them. Some focus on writing reviews; others engage in contests, book giveaways, and guest posts from authors as well as sharing their reading experiences. Though I doubt they would consider themselves cultural gatekeepers, bloggers play an increasing role in the marketing and discovery of new books as the space for book reviews shrinks in traditional print publications.

By the numbers

First, the demographics: of the twenty respondents, twelve were women, eight were men. The largest number (11) were from Europe, followed by North America and Australia/New Zealand. As for their ages, none were younger than 25. Six were between 25 and 45, 11 were between 46 and 65, and three were over 65.

Nearly all had blogs focused primarily on crime fiction, with half mixing book reviews with other mystery-related materials and seven who focused on book reviews. All of the bloggers enabled comments, and just slightly over half moderated them. (Of those who didn't, at least one mentioned removing comments that were obviously spam.) They all found blogging a positive experience, with half selecting "mostly positive" and half choosing "extremely positive." (I suppose that's hardly surprising, since if they didn't enjoy it, they'd stop!)

I asked bloggers to choose the top three ways they

obtained books. Getting review copies from publishers and purchasing books were the most commonly chosen options. The third most common source of books was the library, with review copies from authors following close behind. Though these were the bloggers' most common sources, they weren't necessarily equally distributed. One blogger added in a comment "I buy nearly all of my books (95%+)." While two in comments mentioned that getting free books from publishers was a plus, another pointed out that it could be a mixed blessing: "once your address is sent to one company, lots of other people seem to have access to it," resulting in lots of unsolicited books.

I asked about venues in which bloggers frequently discuss crime fiction with other readers. Other blogs topped the list with 18 respondents checking that option, followed by friends, family, or coworkers (14) then (in descending order) online discussion forums or email lists focused on crime fiction (14), Twitter (12), Facebook (11), crime-fiction-focused face-to-face events (10), Friendfeed (9), a face-to-face book group (8), and Goodreads (7). All of the respondents reported participating in at least three of these venues.

Exploring their motivation

I asked bloggers why they maintain a book blog. Several themes emerged from their answers. The two most-often cited reasons were that they found it helpful to track what they read and it provided a sense of community. As one blogger put it, "It started out as a place to keep track of

what I was reading myself in a way that was a little more accountable than personal notes. But it's turned into a way of being connected to other people with a similar interest. I only know a couple of people in my real world who share my reading interests and none of them want to talk about the books in any in-depth way." Related to community was a sense of reciprocity. Bloggers were able to promote books and authors who they thought deserved greater notice; in turn, they discovered books that other bloggers recommended. Bloggers also mentioned that it coincided with a professional interest in books (as writers, booksellers, or librarians) and that writing about the books they'd read helped them gain a deeper understanding of them. Finally, many respondents said it was fun: "it brings me joy to discuss books and introduce readers to books and authors they might not have discovered."

I asked bloggers whether they encouraged interaction with their blogs. One out of four respondents were not particularly interested one way or another in whether their posts were getting responses. Others invited involvement through issuing challenges or posing questions to readers, and many posted links to new blog posts on other social media. One respondent suggested that comment strings were preferable to Twitter interactions, with its 140 character limit leading to less in-depth discussion; another found that readers preferred to take conversation to email or to the blog's Facebook page. Bloggers often were pleased with interactions they had. One reported that after a conversation online, a reader wrote, "Thank you! This is very,

very helpful. I always feel like I can ask you questions. I normally feel like I should know the answer and don't ask, but you are so understanding and interested in sharing what you know I don't hesitate."

"Sharing a Passion"

Many respondents reported that making connections with other passionate readers, being able to influence other readers and being able to discover new authors to try were positive aspects of being a book blogger. There is a curatorial pleasure in finding and writing about what one blogger characterized as "hidden gems." Bloggers often discovered affinities with other readers who could help them discover worthwhile books. As one wrote, "I've found a group of other bloggers and crime fiction fans who comment whose recommendations I can rely on. That's invaluable." An Australian blogger was happy to "promote Australian crime fiction to the wider world – I'm proud of our local authors and it's great to see them being reviewed/discussed elsewhere." For another, "supreme satisfaction lies in receiving emails from readers who ecstatically tell me that they liked one of my reviews, got the book, read the book, fell in love, and immediately went out to purchase all that author's books." As another put it, satisfaction comes from the "chance to turn on a reader to a great book they might have missed and to introduce them to an author they haven't read." One mentioned "the contact it gives me with contemporary writers" was particularly satisfying, and another wrote "because

of the blog, I've been able to set up several face-to-face interviews with authors who I would otherwise never have met. I use things like Bouchercon to set some of these up to meet several in person at one event. I also will interview via email questions, also interesting." That said, fellow crime fiction readers seemed the dominant audience bloggers had in mind and community-building was primarily around sharing reading interests.

Occasional Aggravations

I asked if anything was aggravating, if anything, about blogging. Some bloggers reported no particular aggravations. Others mentioned that it was a significant time commitment, including meeting self-imposed expectations of frequency. One regretted that all available time went into writing posts, leaving too little to interact with other bloggers "which makes me feel a bit of an ingrate." Commenting created some stresses. Getting few comments or posting comments on others' blogs that met with no response was a disappointment to some respondents. Interestingly, one blogger who also reviews books professionally, found that there was much less negative commenting on her personal blog than on other media websites.

This points to an interesting tension between developing community through blogging and maintaining a certain amount of critical distance. Several respondents noted that some book blogs provide overenthusiastic promotion of new books rather than thoughtful, honest, informed criti-

cism, noting a proliferation of blogs whose authors substituted enthusiasm for knowledge about the genre or even strong writing and analytical skills. That said, only one respondent mentioned facing a quandary about whether to review a book that wasn't enjoyable or was simply not very good. There seemed to be an ethos of being scrupulously civil yet honest among the bloggers. A couple of respondents mentioned that authors who take issue with a review, expecting nothing but a five-star rave, and self-published authors pleading for reviews could be tiresome.

I thought I'd close this round-up of responses with a few quotes volunteered by participants:

- I never went into blogging to make money or build an audience to enormous numbers. I continue to enjoy it because it gives me an opportunity to talk about books.
- I just do it for fun and hope anyone who reads it enjoys and finds it interesting.
- I do occasionally feel overwhelmed by the amount available to read.
- Maxine Clarke's early comments on my blog an invitation to FriendFeed played a crucial role in my blogging: she introduced me to lots of bloggers and lots of books I hadn't read.

This last comment and a related one ("book blogging can be a sad experience") resonated with me. As many people in the crime fiction community know, Maxine Clarke was

both an expert at emerging social media platforms (something that benefitted the innovative online presence of the premier science journal, *Nature*, where she was a renowned editor) and a fine and prolific reviewer of crime fiction for Euro Crime and at her own blog, Petrona. She did a great deal to promote high quality book conversations online and almost single-handedly knitted together a vast network of crime fiction readers, so we felt her loss terribly. She is still missed, but the Petrona, a Scandinavian crime fiction prize, is awarded in her name annually and many bloggers have contributed to Petrona Remembered to carry on her work discovering and sharing good mysteries.

I want to thank the participants in this survey and mention those who gave me permission to acknowledge them here.

- Auntie M. Writes
- Buried Under Books
- Clothes in Books
- Col's Criminal Library
- Crime Book Club
- Crime Scraps Review
- Crimepieces
- Euro Crime
- The Game's Afoot
- Kittling: Books
- Lesa's Book Critiques
- The Locked Room
- Ms. Wordopolis Reads

- Mysteries in Paradise
- Past Offenses
- Reactions to Reading

DOROTHY-L: AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANE KOVACS

From *Barbara Fister's Place*, May 16, 2015

Readers have used pretty much every internet-enabled pathway to talk about mysteries since the early days of the internet. Some of those paths have closed or migrated from platforms that are no longer available to new ones, but some of the most durable conversations are hosted on a server but delivered to subscribers via email. One of those platforms is the LISTSERV software, developed in 1986 by an engineering student in Paris. It quickly became a commonly used discussion platform for email lists maintained at universities. Dorothy-L was born on that platform in 1991 and continues to host its conversations among over 2,500 members from its host server at Kent State University.

I reached out to Diane Kovacs, a fellow academic librar-

ian who, with other Kent State University librarians, created an incredibly useful subject directory of discussion lists back in the day, as well as more than one library-related discussion lists. Currently she is (in her own words) a "Librarian at Large and Web Teacher" who teaches library science courses, has a book forthcoming on online teaching from ALA Editions, and is the recipient of a prestigious Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services for the Design 4 Learning project. (Full disclosure, she also co-edited a book that I was involved with.)

But most mystery lovers know her as the founder of Dorothy-L. She kindly answered some questions about the origins of the mystery-focused mailing list that holds the record for longevity and membership. It has been a significant site for online conversation for readers and writers for a quarter of a century.

I know the idea for the list came up at an Association of Research Libraries conference. LISTSERV was still pretty new. (Say, weren't you one of the people who maintained a subject directory of lists? Flashback moment! That was huge.) Why mysteries? Why not some other genre or fiction more generally? Did you have any idea how popular it would become?

Yes, in fact the *Directory of Scholarly Electronic Journals and Academic Discussion Lists* 2000 edition is under my monitor keeping it at a good height. It is three inches thick. I loved working on that.

The reason that we have Dorothy-L is because of Ann Okerson's ideas. She was one of my early mentors and I

wanted to do something for her in turn. She proposed creating a discussion list on golden age mystery literature – specifically Dorothy L. Sayers – OR on chocolate. Because Dorothy L was euphonious, I chose that topic. Back then you had to put an L at the end. I'm not sure if that was required by the software or just a convention. Besides, I also had to justify to Kent State University that this was a scholarly topic. My English Faculty were thrilled at the idea and I had two full professor faculty sponsors (long since retired).

What was the list like in the early days? How did people find out about it and join it?

In the early days it was all word of mouth and email. While my English faculty felt the project was scholarly enough, my boss in the Library wasn't so convinced. I started Libref-L [an active discussion list for reference librarians] and it is still going strong after all these years also.

How has Dorothy-L changed over the years?

We were very much a group of academic types in the first five years. The Internet didn't go public until 1994 and initially I think almost everyone was either a librarian or an English professor. Kara – aka Dangermouse – kept everything going.

What do you think made it a thriving community? What were the challenges?

Moderation and rules. We didn't let anyone intimidate us into letting them post politics, hate speech, or flames in the name of "freedom of speech". At one point we had some assistance from the University Counsel. He was thrilled to be in on the issues of early technology. But he verified we

were on firm legal ground to create a "defined public forum" online. We could define and maintain the topic – our topic – because people who didn't like our topic could go start their own listserv discussions and so they did.

I believe we have created a safe space where people can post their reviews and ideas and market their books a bit without being attacked and belittled and shouted down. I've watched other forums crumble under the domination of the bullies. I've put up with a lot of personal flaming over the years. Simply informing one particular person that he could not post about his politics or political actions caused him to go off and start his own forum. It is long gone. Another person accused Kara of interfering with his right to free speech when she stopped him from posting semi-pornographic attacks on some authors. We also lost some of my very favorite people because of the flame wars that erupted over self-publishing and formulaic writing, which is why those topics were banned – or rather why we let them go a bit and then rein them in when they start to get personal.

There are so many other social platforms like Goodreads and LibraryThing devoted to books, plus Twitter and Facebook and other opportunities to share reading experiences. Do you have any thoughts about how social media are changing the way we form communities?

Goodreads has turned into a nasty flamewar and they do not give authors any protection. It is almost as bad as Amazon. I'm avoiding it. LibraryThing doesn't seem very community-like to me. I've not had the patience to sit and input my reading. It just seems a chore. I'd like to see

Dorothy-L move more into Facebook and even Google Plus because I like the Facebook format and communications possibilities. I incorporate them into my courses as well. Email is increasingly difficult to keep free of spam. I suspect that many of our continuing subscribers are folks who are just very comfortable in email communications and not really interested in changing.

I've expected the Dorothy-L listserv to wither away for the past five years. But it keeps trundling along. I'm glad I started it. Most of the really awesome things that we did were initiated by the subscribers and not by us moderators.

PLATFORMS AND THE SHAPE OF READER PARTICIPATION

From the *Digital Reading Network* blog (a UK-based project "exploring the impact of digitisation on readers and reading), June 26, 2014

Last week, I discovered yet another way to share reading experiences online: Call Me Ishmael. It's a somewhat self-consciously retro website launched in the US in early June that invites readers to call Ishmael and leave a voice message about "a book you love and a story you've lived." Selected stories are published on the site's main page, along with links to find the book in a library or buy it from a bookstore and a synopsis. The site says nothing about who created it, and its domain has a proxy registration so is equally myste-

rious. It is, at least, transparent about sales supporting the site, though the prominent inclusion of a library search link suggests it's not primarily commercial in nature. For each story selected, a video is introduced with a key phrase:

- *Maybe I didn't have a place I could call home anymore . . .*
- *Shortly after getting an autism diagnosis, I was so focused on trying to fix the situation, and on how to get my son back, that I was missing the point entirely.*
- *I know it's about love & 'blah' but ...*
- *(I'm on a plane and) all of a sudden I hit a stretch of narrative that just totally wrecks me, and I start sobbing, and I mean like complete, shameless, snot-flowing-down-my-face kind of sobbing.*

Each audio recording is accompanied by a transcription that appears as if from a manual typewriter using a battered Courier typeface. A video introducing the project includes the image of the phrase "sometimes books give meaning to our lives." The letters then rearrange themselves: "Sometimes our lives give meaning to books."

Unlike many social sites devoted to sharing reading experiences, this one invites the performance of reading experiences, but is unusually anonymous. We don't know who Ishmael is. We don't know who the people leaving messages are; they share intimate stories with the world from the safety of anonymity. In the past week, a new part of the

site has launched where visitors can listen to galley calls, referring to galleys as pre-publication copies of books and as the part of a ship where food is prepared. They then can vote for whether the message should be transcribed or not, with ratings chosen from a list and confidential. There is also a call for volunteers to help transcribe messages for the site.

This site bears less similarity to book-focused social platforms such as Goodreads or LibraryThing than to PostSecret, an "ongoing community art project" which invites anonymous contributors to submit artwork on a postcard. These have been collected into books and exhibited in museums by its founder, Frank Warren. Like the PostSecret site, Call Me Ishmael offers a curious mix of archness, cultural aspiration with a populist flavor, emotional connection, and anonymous exhibitionism. Its premise deliberately shifts the act of reading from the kind of literary analysis learned in the classroom into personal self-actualization. Books are a therapeutic mirror; after we gaze into them, the stories they tell us are turned into stories about us that we can share.

This is the kind of reading that Oprah and Richard and Judy encouraged. When books are hard work, it's because they contain secrets about our lives that have to be coaxed out and interpreted. Some literary scholars think this affective and personal response to reading can tell us valuable things about the reading experience (as Janice Radway famously explored with romance readers) or because it might be a useful bridge for students toward more nuanced

critical reading. Rita Felski argues that enchantment as a quality of the reading experience is distrusted by her fellow literary scholars because it is associated with women readers and their supposed tendency to succumb to escapist fare while also being a crass kind of manipulation performed by profit-driven mass media concerns. She writes,

> *While much modern thought regulates such hyper-saturations of mood and feeling to the realm of the child-like or the primitive, the accelerating interest in affective states promises a less prejudicial and predetermined perspective. The experience of enchantment is richer and more multi-faceted than literary theory has allowed; it does not have to be tied to a haze of romantic nostalgia or an incipient fascism. Indeed, enchantment may turn out to be an exceptionally fruitful idiom for rethinking the tenets of literary theory. (76)*

What interests me at the moment is not just what the act of sharing reading experiences tells us about readers and the role that books play in their lives, but how the technical platforms we use to share these experiences are mediated by both the commercial and cultural contexts of reading in the 21st century and by the choices designers of technical platforms make. LibraryThing has both a different business model and ethos from Goodreads, and the way these platforms have been designed shape the ways readers use them to interact with one another and with the public. These underlying design features matter.

Trevor Owens has studied twenty years-worth of manuals to explore the ways coders' and community managers' changing assumptions about how and why people interact in online communities has influenced their platforms which, in turn, has influenced users. He points out that "online communities are governed by a logic of ownership, control, and limited permission (161) and he urges researchers to bear that in mind when using the record of these communities in research.

> *It's important to ask whose voice is heard here? How do I know this is what it purports to be? What parts of this set of records are missing? Who constituted this collection of records, and for what purpose? Lastly, where might I look in this data for perspectives and points of view that differ from those who had the power to decide what is and isn't kept? (169)*

If we fail to consider the ways the platform shapes participation and expression, we are likely to read into people's reading a kind of agency and freedom of expression that is constrained by the platform's architecture and design.

As Lisa Nakamura puts it in a study of Goodreads,

> *Now more than ever, literary scholars must bring their skills to bear on digitally networked reading. Researchers who are versed in reading's many cultures, economies, and conditions of reception know that it is never possible for a reading platform to be a "passive conduit." For reading has always been*

social, and reading's economies, cultures of sharing, and circuits of travel have never been passive.

READERS RESPOND TO ONLINE READING COMMUNITIES

Because I wanted to get the perspective of crime fiction readers who use a variety of social media, from email-based groups to newer platforms, I posted an anonymous survey to Twitter, the 4_Mystery_Addicts Yahoo group, Dorothy-L, and to crime-fiction-oriented forums on LibraryThing, Goodreads, and Wattpad. (Since I invited people to pass it along, it may have also traveled elsewhere.) The survey was open between April and the end of July, 2015 and collected 197 responses. It's not at all scientific – purely a convenience sample that skews toward communities in which I've participated the most. While these aren't results from which gen-

eralizations can be drawn, they provide some insight into the experiences of a self-selecting group of individuals.

Those who responded were largely avid readers of the genre, with well over half reporting that they read fifty or more books in the past year. Over three quarters reported that half or more of those books were in the crime fiction genre. This isn't surprising since the only site where I posted the link that wasn't focused on crime fiction was Twitter. The vast majority of respondents read books in print (93%), with a majority also reading ebooks (69%). As quarter also reported reading audio books. The vast majority of respondents (83%) live in North America, with additional responses from Europe, Australia or New Zealand, and Africa. Seventy-five percent of respondents were women; half were aged between 46 and 65, a third over 65, and the remainder younger than 45 or abstained from answering the question. This does not necessarily reflect who talks about books online; the Wattpad community, which is particularly popular with teens, has over 40 million members worldwide. I suspect that i was more likely to get the attention of members of two lists that have been in existence since the 1990s and have some very loyal long-term members; I am quite new to Wattpad, and as one of the survey respondents points out, it takes time to get the acceptance and attention of a community.

Discovering books

I asked respondents how they discover the crime fiction

they read, asking them to choose the top three methods from a number of choices. Discussion lists were the most common choice, with 57 percent including them in their top three. (Since many respondents encountered the survey on one of two large and long-running lists, this is both unsurprising and no doubt skewed.) Around 35 percent of respondents chose reading online reviews at website or blogs, participating on book-focused social media sites such as Goodreads or LibraryThing, or getting recommendations from friends or coworkers as among their top three discovery methods. Thirty percent of respondents included reading book reviews in newspapers and magazines as one of their top three, and browsing in bookstores or in libraries were among the choices of around 22 percent of respondents. Least often chosen were all-purpose social media such as Facebook or Twitter and "other."

Discussing books

Most survey respondents discuss books both online and off. A majority (79 percent) say they talk about crime fiction with friends or co-workers. Though half discuss books on discussion lists, only 20 percent do so in face-to-face reading groups. Another 29 percent discuss books at Goodreads, with 22 percent writing or commenting on blogs. LibraryThing was a site for crime fiction readers for 17 percent of respondents. That said, about a third of respondents read discussion threads in online reading communities but rarely

or never post. A bit over a third contribute sometimes. Only 20 percent say they contribute frequently.

Since this is not a representative sample of these groups' members, these percentages are not particularly meaningful except to say that a significant number of people who are in online reading groups find them worth joining even if they don't feel like adding to the conversation themselves.

Tell me more

I asked four open questions. The first one was pure nosiness on my part. I'm always curious about why people read crime fiction. I coded the responses, looking for patterns, and found that these were the things respondents said were most satisfying about reading crime fiction, with many responses including more than one factor:

- The puzzle (or plot, or solving the mystery) was mentioned by 91 respondents.
- Characters (55); another 15 said they particularly enjoy series because they are able to see characters develop from one story to the next.
- Justice is served, the good guys win, or restoring order (37); another 14 mentioned that they like the fact mysteries *have* endings, that the ending itself offers satisfaction. Others noted that justice is not so easily come by in real life. As one respondent put it "I know the world is not like this, but I want it to be."
- Pace or engagement in a gripping story (27)

- Setting or sense of place and/or historical period (24)
- Entertainment, relaxation, or escape (24) As one respondent put it, "sometimes I just let myself float along, and enjoy the ride like any one else benignly looking over the shoulder of someone's very worst day."
- The capacity of mysteries to explore psychological aspects of crime or human nature generally (21)
- Learning new things (10)
- Enjoying good writing (9) Some respondents noted that they prefer crime fiction to literary fiction because of its focus on telling a story. As one respondent put it, "[I] enjoy the absence of the self-conscious 'writerly' elements that detract from some lit-fic. Crime fiction writers (most of them) seem to concentrate on the story and the characters rather than on themselves."

One respondent offered a detailed analysis of the pleasures of the genre:

> *Although it's true of all fiction, there's a special quality of distillation to the atmosphere and characters in crime fiction, likely because there is so much that has to be woven into a very logical trail offering puzzle and resolution, regardless of the narrative voice. I enjoy that quality of focus, assuming it's done with an understanding of real human nature. That all holds true no matter how far from actual reality or serious-*

> *ness the tale may be placed. If it's consistent within itself, it works for me. And, oh yes, the challenge and the resolution. Not just of working out what went down, for its own sake, but I also feel an enjoyable 'contest' with the author. Which is very likely part of how favorites develop. Someone can be a 'good' writer, but if I don't feel that interaction, I don't go back. Must be something about 'being on the same page,' so to speak.*

I also asked what respondents liked most about an online community and what they found most frustrating. Coding the responses, these were the benefits of being in an online community. The number of responses are in parentheses.

- Learning about new books and authors (95); many respondents mentioned the value of finding people with similar "reading DNA" whose recommendations were reliably a good match for their tastes.
- Reading a variety of opinions about a book (55); many respondents found that encountering different responses was particularly worthwhile.
- The social relationships that develop in a community (23)
- Holding book discussions (13)
- Being among fellow crime fiction fans (12)
- Sharing their own reading experiences and recommending books to others (11)

Frustrations included

- Competitiveness, aggressiveness, hostility, or elitism (24)
- Messages that were primarily book or blog marketing (16)
- Off-topic digressions (13)
- Lack of participation or lack of response to postings (12)
- Not enough time to keep up (10)
- People who post too often or at great length – "list hogs" (8)
- Lack of sophisticated commentary on books (8)
- Feeling that online communication lacks the richness of face-to-face relationships (3)
- Finding that the group has different tastes than one's own (3)
- People who give spoilers in their posts (3)
- Learning about tempting books that are inaccessible to them (2)
- Sense of being rejected by a clique (2)

Note that 23 people said *nothing* frustrated them, with several mentioning that it was easy to skip over messages that didn't interest them.

Finally, I invited respondents to add further thoughts about sharing their reading experiences online. Some comments related to what makes a group work – or not.

- *To really feel a member, it seems you have to participate a lot.*
- *Having a platform where you can comment without being bullied or ridiculed for your views is paramount.*
- *I don't share my experiences often because I am shy online . . . I did have an early experience with a group that doesn't exist anymore in which someone was very rude to me for no reason other than that she didn't like the author that I did.*
- *SO funny – when it's great, it's fascinating and revealing and enlightening and reassuring. When it's terrible – it's like high school. The cool kids stick together and the new kids are sneered at.*

Others spoke about what they see as personal benefits of being in an online reading community.

- *I think it's a great avenue to share information and thoughts with a diverse, though anonymous, group.*
- *Since joining LibraryThing 8 years ago, my 'to read' is ridiculously amazing . . . I just love having a place where like-minded readers frequent, I visit it nearly every day and the social side is just as much fun as the book information.*
- *I particularly enjoy it when authors participate in the discussion and update us on new work.*
- *The discipline of posting comments regularly has*

sharpened my reading and writing skills. Reading the comments of other expands my awareness and guides me to other works of possible interest.

- *I find that sharing and reading about reading experiences online is a time-consuming, enjoyable meta-activity. I'm embarrassed to admit that I read more 'about' books than I read books themselves. Perhaps it's a way to stay connected with the genre during periods when I lack the serenity to enter fictional worlds.*
- *I love it. There isn't always a real-life chance to get into the weeds with your personal criticism and experiences when talking with your friends or spouse . . . [at Goodreads] I've got a thorough database of my reading and can see not just the memories, but have discovered some unsuspected personal patterns!*
- *I appreciate that the group I belong to is international so that the participants bring various backgrounds and culture to the table.*
- *I have met so many friends through the mystery community and some that I have met IRL [in real life] that upon meeting you feel you already know them. Have also had the opportunity to travel to mystery conventions that I would probably have done w/o the enthusiasm expressed online.*

In general, regardless of the platform, readers who responded to the survey seem to enjoy learning about books from one another and seeing a variety of responses to books as well as the social interaction among fellow crime fiction enthusiasts. The positives, at least in this self-selecting group, appear to outweigh the negatives. I am grateful to all who took the time to respond to my survey and provided such intriguing insights.

AUTHORS INTERACTING WITH READERS ONLINE

Authors are often pressured to connect online to develop a reader base and promote their work. This puts them in the dicey situation of relating to people socially while also marketing their books. I was curious about how writers manage that balance and what they find rewarding or frustrating about interacting with readers online.

I created a short unscientific survey for crime fiction authors and distributed the link through a number of social sites where crime fiction authors participate: Dorothy-L, the Sisters in Crime Yahoo group, Twitter, and the crime fiction communities on Goodreads and Wattpad. Of the 33 writers who chose to participate, two were under 25 and eleven were over 65, with the largest number of respondents (16) between ages 45 and 65. One respondent preferred not to specify

demographic details. Most respondents were women (27), with only five men participating. All but two or three of the respondents live in North America. (Two live in Europe; one chose not to specify a location.) Fourteen of the respondents are traditionally published, 12 are both traditionally and self-published, four are self-published, and two chose "not yet published; I am evaluating options."

Platforms of choice

I asked participants to tell me which social media they use from a list I provided. Of social media platforms, Facebook was the most commonly used, with 30 respondents saying they use it. This is not surprising. A recent Pew Internet report found that Facebook is far and away the most commonly used social media platform, though its membership growth is plateauing, while the less-popular sites Pinterest and Instagram have doubled their membership since 2012.

Blogs (including either writing posts or commenting on them) remain a major social tool for these writers, with 24 respondents involved in blogging, closely followed by Twitter (22). Email discussion lists focused on crime fiction were the next most popular medium, with 20 respondents participating in such groups. Slightly over half (17) used Goodreads, with far fewer using LibraryThing (3), not surprising given that Goodreads has a much larger membership and encourages authors to promote their work, whereas LibraryThing explicitly focuses on readers and their books. (There is an LT Author badge and regular author chats and

book giveaways at LibraryThing, but the overall culture of Goodreads is more commercially oriented.) The four who used Wattpad were 45 or younger, including two respondents under 25. Only one respondent (over 65) reported using none of the social media options in the survey. There did not appear to be any particular patterns of use by age among these respondents except in the case of Wattpad.

When asked what makes particular platforms useful to respondents as writers, the most common response across the board was interaction or relationship-building. This was mentioned by eleven respondents as a plus for Facebook. Four praised email lists for this quality, and three felt blogs were useful for relationship-building. Some sites were valued as places where authors could express themselves, with Wattpad and blogs each having this quality mentioned by three respondents. Another reason respondents preferred various media was reach, where again Facebook (the largest of social platforms) was most frequently mentioned, with Twitter an also-ran. The sheer size of membership can be a factor. As one respondent put it, "I've found Facebook and Goodreads to be the most useful. They provide opportunity for a writer to get to know and interact with a large number of people from around the world, people who – once they get to know you – may purchase your books or at least recommend them to their own circles." But several respondents mentioned that they found it hard to keep up with all the options and weren't sure whether they were useful to their writing careers. As one respondent put it,

Despite the worldwide spread of the Internet, I feel I only reach a very few people through my social media efforts. Only a handful of people like or comments on my Facebook/blog posts. There's so many blogs and so much "noise" on the Internet that it's impossible to rise above the clutter.

Positives and negatives

I asked what authors liked most about interacting online with readers. When coding the results, the two most commonly-mentioned positives were socializing or meeting people (11) and getting affirmation (11). As one respondent put it, "this is a profession rife with rejection. I get validation from the interactions." Two interrelated benefits were learning about writing and the publishing industry and finding out what readers like, both in one's own writing and in crime fiction generally, with 12 respondents responding in one of these ways. Other qualities mentioned by at least two respondents were appreciating candor within a community, having fun, the immediacy of interacting online, low cost, and being able to belong to an affinity group.

My next question had to do with the downside: what is most frustrating about interacting with readers online? The two most-commonly mentioned problems were the time it took away from writing (7 mentions) and dealing with hostility or argumentative people (9). As one respondent put it, "The Internet can be a mean forum." Most of the problems arose from disagreements over personal beliefs or political issues, but some irritation was caused by people criticizing a

writer's work or disparaging it because it included elements such as "bad" language or sexuality that they disapproved of. Five were bothered by the shallowness of many interactions. Five were troubled by lack of response to their comments or posts. Three mentioned that they were frustrated by not having any way to connect the time spent on social media with sales. As one put it,

> *there's no measurable way of assessing impact/results . . . The lack of metrics dismays me because my time is not unlimited and my main job is writing."*

While social media platforms often include metrics (and even promote them), traditional publishers don't provide up-to-date sales information, and even if self-published authors have current information, it's difficult to correlate with time-consuming social interactions online. Another respondent wrote "I don't blog anymore. It's one of the best decisions I've made for my career. 3000 words per month to a blog – 3000 words not directed to my next book."

Additional Thoughts

I closed the short survey with an open question: Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences participating in social media? The conflict between the time spent on social media and writing the next book was felt by many respondents. As one put it,

> *Too much new technology to learn. Writing blogs can be time*

> *consuming for little results. Social media was leaving me too tired and with too little time left to actually WRITE! I put my energy now on my stories instead of social media.*

Another said, "I spend far too much time on it. If you're not careful, you can waste a good part of your day."

The focus on getting attention promoted in many social media platforms was also a concern. As one respondent put it, "I'd rather be writing books than participating in online fashion shows." But another respondent had mixed feelings.

> *Sometimes I feel like I'm simply adding to the social noise when I post anything, and maybe it would be better if we all unplugged. OTOH, I live in a rural area with few opportunities for reader contact, and I do think the contact makes me a better writer.*

For some, it was important to maintain a careful balance between being authentic and coming across as a heavy-handed marketer. (My previous reader survey bears this out – readers enjoy genuine interactions with writers, but are quickly turned off when they feel that the interaction is geared primarily toward sales). One offered advice about how to pull this balancing act off.

> *Don't force it. Be cool. Don't be a jerk screaming "buy my book," every eight seconds. Give content, answer questions, be funny (not forced), pleasant and available.*

Though one respondent reported seeing a spike in sales whenever she had a blog tour, another wrote, "It's actually pretty hard to find readers on social media. Most of the folks I'm finding are authors trying to find readers."

While a majority of respondents in these open comments reflected on how much writing time could be wasted on social media, some respondents said that once they overcame a learning curve and established a routine, they could fold communicating with readers online into their workflow. Learning best practices from one another also helped. As one respondent explained it,

> *I started early and have kept up. I'm glad I did. It was a bit overwhelming at first, but because I got in early I found a few really great people from whom to watch and learn. And it cost me nothing but time.*

Of course, the lack of time was a major issue among respondents.

While authors are frequently pushed to engage with readers online to promote their books, these writers were thoughtful about the nature and value of their use of social media. Like readers, they value authentic interactions (and sometimes the affirmation readers provided), and seemed largely realistic about the limitations such interactions have for boosting their careers. Some have deliberately reduced the time they spend online to focus on writing the next book. Others enjoy social media interactions but still ques-

tion whether they have the value that publishers often put on them.

A quick search online will turn up thousands of articles explaining how authors should (or shouldn't) use social media, often in the form of listicles: five essential sites, ten rules for engagement, 100 tips . . . Just reading through search results can be exhausting. The lack of metrics that tie sales to interactions online, the amount of time it can take away from writing in a genre where a book a year is a minimum expectation, and the sheer volume of writers seeking attention can be daunting. This is particularly true given that building a presence in an online community takes time and overt marketing is met with (often fierce) resistance. But there are benefits apart from the sales aspect, particularly in learning readers' perspectives on books and gaining a sense of connection and affirmation.

Thanks to the authors who took the time to share their thoughts and experiences. For writers who feel they've been pressed to do too much connecting, there's a satirical piece by Heather Havrilesky in the *New Yorker*, "How to Contact the Author," that illustrates the fraught aspects of being expected to develop close relationships with readers when carried too far.

SHARING READING IN 140 CHARACTERS

Twitter is kind of hard to explain to those who don't use it regularly. Originally described as a "micro-blogging platform," it's often dismissed as a trivial pursuit. How can you possibly say anything meaningful in 140 characters? Why do I care what somebody ate for breakfast? How does this thing even work? What a useless time-suck!

In fact, the criticisms of Twitter are very similar to those made of blogging when it was new and, later, of Facebook in the days before it became as ubiquitous as it now is. In the most recent social media update published by the Pew Internet project, 71 percent of American adults who go online use Facebook; nearly 60 percent of *all* American adults use Facebook. Twitter has an outsized media profile because of its immediacy, but a much smaller user base, with only 23 percent of adult Americans who use the internet signing

up. For more than three-quarters of the population, Twitter remains either irrelevant or a puzzle – or both.

Though I created a Twitter account in 2008, I didn't really get it. I learned how and why to use the platform while at a digital humanities THATCamp unconference in 2011. Attendees were encouraged to tweet about the concurrent sessions, and I quickly learned how to set up an application to watch several twitterstreams at once, including one from a university press conference happening at the same time. It was distracting and fast-paced, but amazingly fun and useful. Since then, most of the professional conferences I've attended have had a lively Twitter backchannel. At conferences, Twitter becomes my form of note-taking (at least if the wifi is able to handle the load; often it can't.) At one conference I attended, a handful of us began to plan an unconference to address issues we wanted to explore further using Twitter, and that unconference actually happened as a result.

For me, Twitter is primarily as a serendipity engine, like browsing bookshelves or scanning an RSS feed. I follow around 500 people and organizations who share information that I find useful, often in the form of links. A majority of those I follow are librarians and academics, with a handful of journalists who cover things that interest me, as well as a smattering of people and groups who share my interest in crime fiction. Though I don't even try to keep up with the flow, I check in daily and generally end up reading and saving links to news stories, scholarly papers, blog posts, or other resources that I may use later in research or teaching.

Sometimes I engage in informal conversations, kicking an idea around with others. Sometimes I join scheduled chats about a topic of interest.

Twitter as a Reading Community Platform

Twitter is a site where online reading communities form. It has hosted book clubs, as described by Anatoliy Gruzd and DeNel Rehberg Sedo in their article, "#1b1t: Investigating Reading Practices at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century." Early Word (a site that informs public librarians about forthcoming books) hosts a monthly "galley chat" where librarians share their responses to advanced reader copies of forthcoming books that they've read and recommend. A popular hashtag is #fridayreads, used to share what the Twitter members are reading. This practice was kicked off by Bethanne Patrick, whose Twitter handle is @TheBookMaven. Another popular hashtag appended to book-related tweets is #amreading.

BookVibe is a service that mines and analyzes books mentioned in the tweets of people you follow and sends a weekly update of their recommendations. In part, this seems an exercise by an entrepreneurial group of computer scientists to develop ways of extracting information from tweets, but it's interesting that the tech company decided to focus on books. In their "about" page, the challenge of sorting books from chaff is described this way:

> *. . . out of around 500 million tweets a day, traditional text*

> *matching search techniques would return around 10 million tweets a day that could be book titles, but the actual number of tweets about books is around 300,000 per day. Our technology handles these distinctions with very high precision.*

The recommendations I get are a mixed bag, given the various interests of the people I follow, but they do tend to accurately identify books from the millions of short messages flowing constantly.

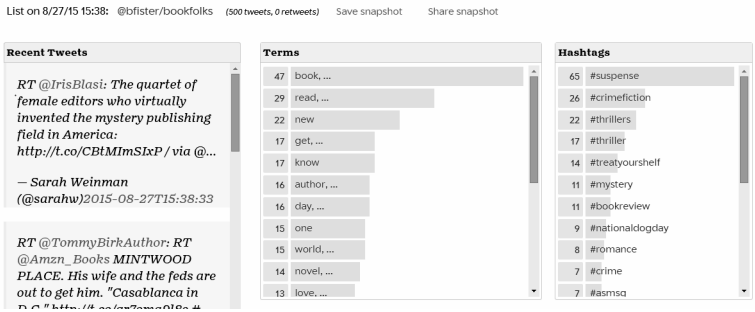
What does Twitter do for readers?

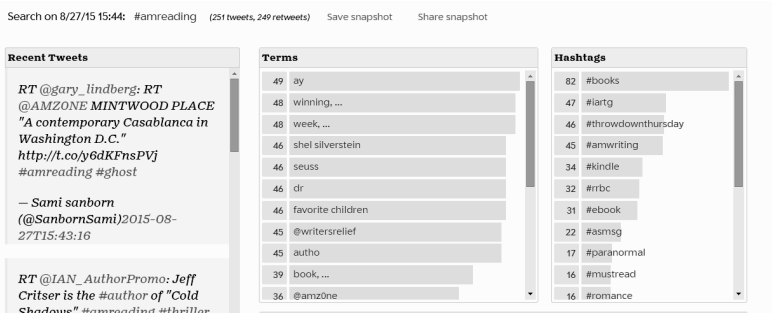
One of the things you can do on Twitter is create lists of Twitter accounts that you may not want to subscribe to, but will provide a site for serendipity when you want to see what a group is talking about right now. My Twitter account, for example, has been put on a number of lists other people have created, mostly library-related. I created a "bookfolks" list of fifty Twitter accounts that focus primarily on books and/or crime fiction. These range from tweets sent by Book Riot (a book-focused community website) and Shelf Awareness (a news service of sorts for independent booksellers and readers) to individual book bloggers or fans. Just to get a sense of whether my typical use of Twitter as a serendipity engine holds true for book-related tweets, I randomly chose a day to see what these fifty Twitter accounts send out within a twelve-hour period. It's not scientific – I will leave such technicalities to computer scientists and digital wonks such as those at BookVibe.

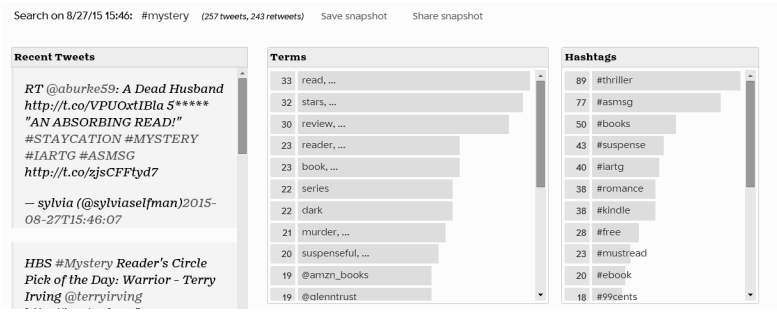
Scanning through the tweets of fifty accounts for a 12-hour span on August 26th, I found that the largest number of tweets were links that led to book-related news or entertainment. The next largest category were promotional tweets – one account in particular was primarily devoted to promoting self-published thrillers, linking to Amazon pages; another, less active account pointed out items on the market for book collectors. There were also quite a few unrelated tweets – ones focused on current events or politics rather than on books. Twitter users typically have more than one interest and their Twitter streams reflect that, just as other online book discussions include a certain amount of "OT" (off topic) chatter. A smaller number linked to blog posts or to book reviews, with a smattering of tweets about book-related events, humorous quips about books and reading, inspirational quotations, or information about crime film or television dramas. While this breakdown is unlikely to be entirely typical, it mirrors my personal experience with Twitter. It is, above all, a site for sharing links to items of interest to one's followers, with an admixture of links or comments on unfolding events. (In this time span, a particularly grisly crime was dominating cable news and leaking into this Twitter stream.) Some of the tweets had attracted comments and started conversations. John Scalzi, a science fiction author who is also an active blogger and Tweeter, had half a dozen comments on one of his tweets. But most of the tweets in this small sample were either posts without comments or retweets of other people's tweets.

I also experimented with twXplorer, a tool developed by

Knight Lab at Northwestern University, a non-profit organization that helps journalists use technology for reporting news stories. Using this tool, I was able to look at terms and hashtags used by accounts on my list and more broadly on Twitter, with terms and hashtags sorted for up to the most recent 500 tweets. twXplorer also finds links that turn up repeatedly, but my searches didn't produce any common links. This is likely a more useful feature for journalists following breaking news stories. The three analyses I ran were of the list, the hashtag #amreading, and the hashtag #mysteries.







#COMMUNITY

Twitter is a platform that encourages a new kind of online community, one based on affinity and interlocking interests (and, admittedly, for marketing), with a tendency to lead participants away from the platform to follow links to other sites. At times, it generates conversations that can involve multiple people and dozens of tweets, but following conversations can be tricky. It's often used to host scheduled chats, with rapid-fire short messages posted to respond to prompts or simply conversing on a common topic for a designated hour. It is used by authors as a promotional platform, though (as in other media) the authors who engage in authentic communication with readers are far more likely to gain a following than tweets that simply lead to an Amazon sales page. There are also informal but regular sharing of reading experiences using tags such as #fridayreads or #amreading. Readers, writers, libraries, bookstores, and publishers use Twitter for engagement.

The Ferguson (Missouri) Public Library, which gained an international audience of followers in the wake of Michael Brown's death and the #BlackLivesMatter protests

that followed, does a particularly fine job of engaging readers with prompts like "What is the best basketball book ever?" and "what fictional character is most like you? In what way?" All of the responses are retweeted, widening the circle of participants and creating a sense of community that expands well beyond the library's service area. Scotty Bonner, the director of this small public library, is unusually proficient at using technology in innovative ways and gained an unusually large following in part because of being in the national eye, even participating in a Reddit "Ask Me Anything," a signal achievement for tech-oriented people. This one small library provides an example of how individuals and book-related enterprises use Twitter in ways that create community around books, even within the platform's 140-character limit.

GOODREADS AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF THE READING SELF

Goodreads is the Google of online reading communities, so huge it exerts a kind of gravity. It operates on the same business model of "free" – offering a service in exchange for user-generated and third-party content and massive amounts of monetizeable data. That data is also described as a member benefit. As of this writing, the site's "about" page states "our recommendation engine analyzes 20 billion data points to give suggestions tailored to your literary tastes." Wow, all that, just for me?

Well, no.

Currently Goodreads has over 40 million members who

have attached over a billion books to their online identities. At least I think so; it's hard to know what exactly "1.1 billion books added" means when writers, readers, and publishers are all involved. One of the founders, Otis Chandler, has described how metrics can help publishers identify which books are going to be blockbusters through the influence of trusted readers and the viral nature of word-of-mouth recommendations on a massive scale. Recently, he unpacked how *The Girl on the Train* took off using Goodreads metrics, which in turn encouraged the publisher to spend even more money on promotion.

Colin Robinson has suggested that, as these vernacular sites for book reviews replace professional book reviewers as taste-makers, midlist authors will lose out. The decline of the midlist is a long-running concern, with the Author's Guild commissioning a report on the crisis back in 2001 (no longer available online, unfortunately). Since then, Chris Anderson's influential theory of the Long Tail providing new business opportunities has been challenged by Anita Elberse, whose research suggests blockbusters are bigger than ever, with smart companies spending more to promote fewer works. A site like Goodreads mixes the Long Tail of books – more published today than ever in history – with the blockbuster effect, bolstered by big data metrics providing insight into readers' behaviors that has never before been available to publishers.

Goodreads is not the first online book-oriented site designed for sharing reading experiences. LibraryThing, its geekier older cousin, launched in 2005; Goodreads went

online in 2007. (I've compared the cultures of the two sites elsewhere.) Goodreads has a commercially appealing presence, a panoply of social features, a strong mobile app (which currently accounts for half of the traffic to the platform) and is welcoming to authors and publishers who use the site for both engagement and marketing. It has been so successful at attracting members who spend hours "shelving" books, writing reviews, sharing quotes, discussing books, and participating in contests, people's-choice awards, and discussion groups that it threatened to eclipse Amazon customer reviews as a socially-mediated place to discover what to read next. A year after a 2012 dust-up with Amazon over restrictions on its API (with Goodreads member "librarians" scrambling to manually restore links to information that was getting lost in the transition), Amazon bought Goodreads. It had previously acquired a competitor, Shelfari, and acquired a minority interest in LibraryThing when it bought Abebooks and its holdings. That said, LibraryThing provides no information about members to third parties, including Amazon; Goodreads does and integrates members' Amazon activity into members' Goodread accounts as an opt-in feature. Though Goodreads lost some members when it was acquired by Amazon, it has gained far more, going from 16 million to 40 million members in the past two years.

Bullies and collective drama

Amazon has gone through public dramas over book

reviews, from inadvertently exposing anonymous reviewers on their Canadian site, revealing authors praising their books and trashing other writers' works, to deleting reviews by people who Amazon determines, though obscure and slightly creepy means, to be acquainted with the books' authors. Goodreads reviews are widely perceived as being more trustworthy, but that hasn't stopped drama erupting, sometimes with Vesuvian energy. A group of authors who felt they were being unfairly criticized banded together to fight "bullies," with the author Anne Rice playing a high-profile role. In turn, readers have decried authors who they feel overreact to negative reviews, sometimes resorting to stalking and harassing readers who don't give their books high marks.

At times, interventions made by Goodreads staff have created further strife, as when reviews and lists of books curated by members were abruptly deleted to conform to a new policy banning *ad hominem* attacks on authors. As often happens on commercial social platforms, anger among users was partially due to the fact that they feel the content they created is theirs, when actually control over the content of the site remains with the corporation. Given that this site is in many ways a marketing platform for writers, including many self-published authors with few outlets for publicity, conflicts are inevitable if, at times, a bit ludicrous. Both readers and authors who I surveyed were sometimes wary about the potential for prickly author/reader interactions on the site, yet the site is unarguably successful for many readers who want to socialize with other book lovers.

Exploring Goodreads

Though I personally prefer LibraryThing because of its privacy policies and its reader-centered focus, I spent some time exploring Goodreads' features, including joining a reading community devoted to mysteries, crime, and thrillers. (There are a lot of discussion groups formed on Goodreads. A group for moderators has nearly 1,500 members.) This group, apparently formed around 2009, has four busy moderators and over 12,700 members, with an increase of about a thousand in less than a year. Members propose and vote on two monthly discussion books and volunteer to lead discussions, rather like the practice of the 4_mystery_addicts group that I've previously described. Members also post items of interest, share reading challenges, discuss and recommend books to one another, and organize "buddy reads." Author self-promotion is confined to a small part of the group and is otherwise strongly discouraged.

Scanning through discussion threads, one sees the kind of relationship-building and affirmation that keeps an online community humming along peacefully. The group rules begin with "be kind and courteous to everyone and refrain from personal attacks." They go on to ask members to hide spoilers with a Goodreads technical feature, stay on topic, and provide links to books and authors mentioned without relying on cover art, which may not be easily viewed on a mobile device. Several restrictions also apply to nominating books for discussion, including making sure

the book is available to an international audience and that authors and their publicists may not nominate their own works or interfere with the voting process.

Goodreads offers groups functions for sharing photos, creating polls, and inviting friends to join. Members' profiles are available, including information about whether a member is currently visiting the site and what book they are reading at the moment. It's fascinating to see so many of the same practices used at this site as on the older Yahoo Groups formed for book discussions, but Goodreads is growing fast while traffic to Yahoo sites devoted to books seems to be falling precipitously.

The Double-sided bookshelf

Lisa Nakamura, a literary scholar and professor of American culture and film at the University of Michigan, has published a lot about race and gender in social media. Her insightful article about Goodreads published in *PMLA* in 2013, "Words With Friends: Socially Networked Reading on *Goodreads*," suggests that scholars should stop focusing so much on the differences between print and digital texts and instead examine discourse about reading books taking place online. Such sites use "bookshelves" to express identity in a public way, producing a public "reading self" just as displaying books on a living room bookcase does. She ties the identification of self with consumption to the history of the bookcase in American homes, drawing on Ted Striphas's fascinating research that uncovered the marketing strategy

that led Americans to use books as a marker of social status and taste in the early 20th century. (Both Striphas and Nakamura are compelling writers and critics, well worth reading.)

Nakamura points out how this consumptive display means that we, ourselves, are being collected.

> *Goodreads is an amazing tool, a utopia for readers. But by availing ourselves of its networked virtual bookshelves to collect and display our readerliness in a postprint age, we have become objects to be collected, by Goodreads and its myriad commercial partners. . . . Goodreads efficiently captures the value of our recommendations, social ties, affective networks, and collections of friends and books. Goodreads bookshelves are unlike real bookshelves not because the books are not real but because they are not really ours.*

She goes on to contrast the joyful and seemingly democratic nature of these shared (but corporately-owed) bookshelves.

> *Goodreads uses algorithms to rank and evaluate books and organize them into egocentric networks. Seen in this light, it's a folksonomic, vernacular platform for literary criticism and conversation—that most esteemed of discursive modes — that is open to all, solving the problem of locked- down content that pay-to-read academic publishing reproduces. On the other hand, open access to a for-profit site like Goodreads has always exacted a price—loss of privacy, friction-free broadcasting of our personal information, the*

> *placing of user content in the service of commerce, and the operationalization and commodification of reading as an algocratic practice.*

She urges literary scholars to pay attention to sites of social reading like this and the ways that commodification and vernacular criticism intersect. "Let us hope," she concludes, "that reading's digital future will include the kind of critique and unmasking of the technoimaginary's hidden ideologies that readers and writers deserve."

I couldn't agree more.

READING AND WRITING TOGETHER ONLINE: EXPLORING WATTPAD

The internet has long offered opportunities to form communities around reading and writing, particularly in the form of fanfiction, which predates the internet but has flourished online. In the 1980s, Usenet groups and email lists were created that focused on fanfiction based on *Star Trek* and other popular entertainments. FanFiction.net was launched in 1998 and remains popular, with sections for different fandoms such as Harry Potter (the most populated fandom as of August 2015), Dr. Who, and many anime and manga works. It retains something of the look and feel of early web forums.

Wattpad looks very different. It was founded in 2006, a year before Amazon released its Kindle platform, reading device, and store – and the popularity of ebooks surged. From its start, Wattpad has been designed to be a social platform for composing, reading, and sharing responses to stories, all of which are available for free, on the web of through an app. The platform was very much designed with mobile in mind, even though mobile wasn't as ubiquitous in 2006 as it is today. Though it took a few years to take off, it began to catch the attention of the press in 2012 and now has an astonishing 40 million members worldwide. No wonder it describes itself as "the world's largest community of readers and writers."

Based in Canada, it has members across the globe who read and publish stories in more than fifty languages. It's particularly popular in the Philippines, where the mobile version is reportedly the top-ranked mobile app. At this point it is a privately held corporation supported mainly by venture capital, though some relatively new brand sponsorships (in which Wattpadders are commissioned to write stories about new films, music, or products) may also be part of its business model. The product's assets, like most social media platforms, is its membership and information about their interests and the popularity of the content they share. Unlike Facebook, though, it doesn't have a "real names" policy and does not seem to be tying those metrics to other data sources, though it encourages sharing stories through social media and has recently developed a function for turning quotations from stories into graphics to share on Twit-

ter. It's hard to say how exactly it will make money, since the sauce is secret and the company is in that peculiar phase that new tech platforms go through that some people call "pre-revenue audience building." Another term might be "magical thinking," but who's going to argue with the site's impressive metrics?

According to venture capital researcher Mary Meeker's latest Internet Trends report, as of May 2015 (see slide 63 of her presentation), Wattpad had 40 million unique visitors monthly, twice as many as last year, with 11 billion minutes spent on it per month (up 83 percent over last year), ninety percent of this busy activity via mobile phones. In each minute that passes, another 24 hours-worth of text to read is posted. But not all of the members are writers; a company official told *Digital Book World* last year that 90 percent of the members are readers, not authors.

Dubbed "a YouTube for stories" and likened to Instagram, it's a youthful site in style and tone, but one of its most prominent promoters is Margaret Atwood, who sees it as a democratizing of literacy (The fact that it's a Canadian company may also be a plus for her. Canadians tend to support Canadian culture.) In a 2012 *Guardian* article, she wrote,

> *No one need know how old you are, what your social background is, or where you live. Your readers can be anywhere. And if you're worried about adverse reactions from your teachers, your grandmother, or others who might not like you*

> *writing about slavering zombies or your relatives, you can use a pseudonym.*

She does not see this kind of story-sharing as competition for traditional publishers, but rather a bridge to them. More importantly, she sees Wattpad as a path to literacy in an unequal world. You can't always buy ebooks if you don't have enough money – or, like many Wattpadders, aren't old enough to have a credit card. Nor do all aspiring writers around the globe have access to writing tools and models to emulate.

> *Our generation in the west was lucky: we had readymade gateways. We had books, paper, teachers, schools and libraries. But many in the world lack these luxuries. How do you practice without such tryout venues? Without a piano, how do you learn to play the piano? How can you write without paper and read without books? . . . Wattpad opens the doors and enlarges the view in places where the doors are closed and the view is restricted. And somewhere out there in Wattpadland, a new generation is testing its wings.*

Adventures in Convergence Culture

I joined Wattpad nine months ago and began to poke around. After exploring the social features and reading a few stories, I dusted off an old floppy disk with a young adult time-travel story I'd written in the early 1990s and posted it serially, as most Wattpad stories appear, one chapter at a

time over the course of several weeks, to get to know both the platform and the nature of its interactions better. (I had to make a few changes, including a new opening from which the story could become a flashback. I have a feeling a huge proportion of Wattpad members weren't born when I wrote that thing and wouldn't recognize a floppy disk. Also, yes, it is deeply weird to read something you wrote so long ago envisioning a future with limited surveillance capabilities – hah, I wish! – but I digress.) I can't say my experiment yielded much in terms of insight into the social life of Wattpad for writers. There is a lot of competition for attention and, as many members advise in various "how to do Wattpad" guidebooks, writers need to spend a lot of time engaging with others before they will be discovered, and I didn't. But even with this limited engagement, I can make some observations.

First, the platform is great for writing. On a desktop, it's a clean and intuitive interface that gives writers a distraction-free writing space. No, it doesn't have all the features of Word, but most writers rarely need those fiddly bits. I found the clean, simple interface refreshing. The phone app can also be used as a writing space (if your thumbs are up to it), which is likely the most common writing method among younger members of the site who may not have access to a laptop or simply are used to composing on a phone. For me, the app enabled easy editing when I spotted a typo or missing word. The default setting for copyright is "all rights reserved" (which someone who uploaded Shake-

speare plays carelessly left in place) but the platform also offers a variety of Creative Commons licenses.

Though the writing space is stripped-down simple, Wattpad offers ways to visually enhance a story. Writers can create and upload covers created DIY, by using a Wattpad app, or through a kind of barter system that I don't thoroughly understand. Apparently some graphic arts-inclined members create covers for others and their work is acknowledged in dedications, which are frequently appended to chapters of stories to recognize other members. Writers can also add pictures or videos as chapter headers, and frequently do. Chapters are sometimes introduced or closed with a comment from the author encouraging suggestions, promising a timeline for the next installment, or begging readers to be patient because exams are looming and they won't have time to post another chapter anytime soon.

The distance between readers and writers and between the story and the person who wrote it are deliberately blurred in this environment. There is a sense that works are in progress and readers and writers experience the unfolding of a story together. Writers also get a sense of affirmation when readers comment on their work or ask for more. Generally the comments are not the incisive analysis that writers would get from an editor or from comrades in a writing workshop. They tend to be short expressions of pleasure, responses to what's happening in the story ("Whoa!!" "Noooooo!"), or gestures of identification. ("That happened to me." "That's my birthday, too!" "My brother acts exactly like this guy.") This seriality and intimate form of

sharing owes much to fanfiction culture that is so well depicted in Rainbow Rowell's young adult novel, *Fangirl.*

There are metrics on every chapter and on your profile, constant reminders of how many people follow you, how many have looked at your stories, and how many comments and votes you've received. All of these pings of attention are meant to be positive. As one of the founders, Allen Lau, explained to *Publisher's Weekly,* novice writers crave affirmation and so all of the cues give positive reinforcement. There are no downvotes here. Scanning through stories that I added to my library, I found virtually no negative comments. Instead, these notes are generally short, flippant, and supportive. Comments that don't conform to community standards can be flagged by anyone for deletion.

Though it's an amazingly cheerful and positive place, it is also part of the attention economy. Those visible metrics are a display of status, which creates a certain undercurrent of anxiety about getting reads. Comments to community boards are sometimes desperate pleas for readers or requests for advice about how to get more followers and reads. Popular writers, whose status is reinforced by being featured on the discovery page, get tens of thousands of views, or in some cases millions, or even as many as a billion views, as Anna Todd did with a series that riffed on the boy band One Direction, the kind of fanfiction celebrity that led to the insanely popular and ultimately profitable *50 Shades* trilogy, a fanfiction based on *Twilight*. (As an aside, all three blockbusters seem to revolve around abusive relationships. I wonder what that's about?) Whether Todd's book contract

or film deal will pay off is unknown, the kind of blockbuster bet that big entertainment likes to place. These days, both self-publishing and sites like Wattpad have become crowd-sourced slushpiles for traditional publishers. As for Anna Todd, who kept her (pre-edited) books freely available on Wattpad, the affirmation that she gets from the social features of the platform are a necessary part of writing. As she told a reporter for *The New York Times,* "the only way I know how to write is socially and getting immediate feedback on my phone."

Some member/writers have been chosen to be "ambassadors" – moderators with specific duties that keep the community harmonious, but who are presumably paid only in the feels. There are also community sections of the site. Clubs are where members can talk about improving their writing, graphic design, the publishing industry, genres, or anything at all in "The Café." There are also areas for awards, contests, #justwriteit (a place where members can commit to writing and get inspiration, rather like National Novel Writing Month), and a recently-launched section for writers on how to use the site and get writing tips. There is also a page of information on a new program, "Wattpad Stars." It's not clear how writers become stars, but this program pairs Wattpadders with brands, mostly entertainment industry heavy-hitters, but including Unilever, which promoted a facial cleanser to teens in the Philippines by commissioning a story in Tagalog by a Wattpadder. Though paid product placement is rare in traditional publishing, this venture is an interesting way to blend fanfiction's love of

engaging with commercial culture and the use of Wattpad by its members as a bridge from free sharing to more commercial pursuits.

My second major impression from using the site is that it's a great place for readers, particularly young readers who enjoy fanfiction, romance stories, or young adult fiction. There are loads of other genres, too, but these seem most popular. You can discover books the hard way, by browsing genre categories or searching the tags authors assign their works, or you can click on the books covers that appear whenever you open the app – some new, some popular, some selected by Wattpad staff, some that appear, after you've chosen some stories, to be algorithmically chosen to match your previous choices. Each time you choose a book, you also get "you may also like" choices. All of these books are free, and they stay on your phone even when you're offline. They are also often quite compelling to read and composed with narrative sophistication. Of course, there are stories that are full of clichés and rehashing of tired tropes, but that's true in all kinds of publishing. What astonished me was how polished so many of the stories are.

Like users of the Kindle (which came into the world after Wattpad but, with Amazon's enormous reach, ramped up much more quickly), Wattpad readers can experience instant gratification, the reassurance that they have something to read with them all the time, and a seemingly bottomless pool of books to choose from. Unlike Kindle, these books are free, and the social apparatus in which they are nestled is youthful, supportive, and ubiquitous. Amazon,

generally a nimble company, tried late in the game to get a foot in the fanfiction door with Kindle Worlds, a place where writers can create and sell fanfiction – but only for certain willing brands, and only if they follow stringent guidelines and are willing to license some uses to the product they are riffing on *and* if they give Amazon world publication rights for the duration of copyright (meaning until long after you're dead). It does not seem to have taken off in a big way. I suspect there are two kinds of "free" missing, here – free to readers and free for writers to do what they like.

What's interesting at Wattpad is that it's infused with the free-wheeling remixing and community-building spirit of fanfiction while also including mild warnings about copyright. Wattpad has had to remove copyrighted material, and cautions writers not to use copyrighted works in the images or videos they choose for chapter headings, but that warning is blithely ignored by many Wattpadders who remix and repurpose as if they were born to it – as, in fact, many of them were.

From the perspective of examining online reading communities, Wattpad is fascinating. Some of the socializing is unabashedly promotional. Writers engage in hopes that readers will engage with them. But a lot of it is the kind of informal chatter and friendship-building that revolves around shared reading experiences. I didn't see any in-depth criticism or analysis, but that isn't the point.

The point is sharing emotional responses to the work and the act of reading it: *Love love love. Intense! Actual tears.*

Whaaa... did that just happen? Update pls. Having those reactions serially, immediately, and in the company of others within a web of social relationships is a very contemporary version of the decades-old practice of talking about books online.