A Steady Vision for Libraries

The following excerpt is based on an interview conducted by Gerry Bayne, EDUCAUSE multimedia producer, at the Coalition for Networked Information (CNI) 2007 Fall Task Force Meeting. To listen to the full podcast, go to <http://connect.educuse.edu/blog/gbayne/cnipodcastaninterviewwith/45868>.

Bayne: What sort of vision goes into managing twenty-five institutional libraries, especially during what some may see as a tumultuous time for library transitions in data-storage access and technology?

Neal: The research library community, particularly in North America and Western Europe, is going through a dramatic shift in role and responsibility. Our vision, though, remains pretty steady. We still have a core responsibility to identify, to capture, to organize, and to enable the scholarly record from across the world—through use and then preservation. Whether that information is captured in print or in various multimedia formats digitally, our responsibility doesn't change.

This does mean that we have to think very carefully about the infrastructures and the technologies that support our work, and it also means that we have to think very differently about the type of expertise, about the professional staffs, that we bring into our organizations and the way we structure our organizations. But the format of the information does not set aside those core responsibilities.

Technology, however, has opened up many new roles and responsibilities for libraries. Many of us have taken on significant publishing roles, and some of us have gotten much more involved in the educational enterprise of our institutions, both in classrooms and through the creative application of technologies to teaching and learning. Many of us have become engaged in major public policy questions at the local, national, and international levels. And I think we are seeing much more of an entrepreneurial spirit in libraries today. We hire people who are committed to rethinking traditional structures and traditional processes to enable us not only to use our resources much more effectively and efficiently but also to be at the front-end of some of these changes that we are experiencing.

We also need to think about how we push more of our services out into a 24x7, self-service type of environment. We can no longer assume that people will physically come to the library to get information, to get service, or to get assistance from our librarians. As Web 2.0 develops, we need to think about “Library 2.0” in terms of re-visioning what we are and how we interface with our user community, and we need to build that social relationship with our users in ways that the old tools didn't allow us to do.

Bayne: Many libraries, including yours, are taking a more active role in publishing and scholarly communication. Can you explain the rationale for this new role?

Neal: Libraries, particularly in academic settings and in some respects in public library community settings, have always had a strong partnership, a strong relationship, with the author community. Digital and network technologies that allow everyone to be an author open up a lot of opportunities but also create some very interesting challenges—ones for which libraries can provide a strong leadership and support role.

The digital library programs at many of our institutions are in fact publishing programs. We are taking historical materials in our collections, often rare or unique materials, and we are digitizing them, putting them up on the web, and building tools and content around them. In many ways, these represent new publications. Very often, these publications are produced as a partnership between the library and the scholarly community. There are many examples around the country of large digital libraries that are now serving global audiences.

In a more strictly business sense, libraries have also developed publishing enterprises, sometimes in partnership with their university presses and sometimes alone. These involve not the repurposing of historical information but the creation of new works. An example has been the Electronic Publishing Initiative at Columbia (EPIC). A partnership with the Columbia University Press, EPIC has created new web-based materials that are being licensed by libraries around the world. This is a business: it produces new content or new packaging of content that needs a thoughtful approach to business planning, to marketing, to subscription base, and so forth. Historically, libraries have not had experience in working in this type of business environment, which is why the university press partnership can be very valuable.

But we are also seeing another generation of involvement with scholarly communication. Libraries are becoming very involved in many of the policy issues
related to scholarly communication. In the past, libraries have been like a Greek chorus, standing on the side of the stage for a long time and saying, “We paid too much, and it takes too long, and we give too much away, and no one cares about this issue.” Finally, in the last ten years, the serials crisis and the libraries crisis have been embraced as a campus-wide scholarly crisis: we now recognize that the price of information, the ownership of information, is something that we need to be much more concerned about. So provosts, presidents, and scholarly societies are now, in many ways, sensitive to these issues and are helping us rethink the whole business of scholarly publishing.

Libraries are working much more systematically across the whole life-cycle of research and publishing. Digital libraries, publishing programs, and support for faculty scholarship are good examples.

Bayne: As we move more rapidly from the print realm to the digital realm, how have copyright laws, both in the United States and around the world, changed to reflect these changes?

Neal: Copyright laws, both in the United States and around the world, are challenged by the digital and network realities. The 1976 copyright law was an effort to update law in relationship to new technology, in recognition of the increasing ability of both users and libraries to make copies. But certainly, over the last twenty-five to thirty years, in the digital network environment in which universities and libraries and general society have developed, there is a consensus that copyright laws are not keeping up…. At Columbia, we have established the Copyright Advisory Office to educate and advocate across the university on copyright matters.

I am concerned about the erosion of fair use. I am concerned about the future of the copyright exceptions and limitations that support the work of education and research in the world’s libraries and archives. There are, within U.S. copyright law, two broad exemptions that have supported this work. The first—Section 107, on the doctrine of fair use—provides some degrees of freedom in reproduction for the purposes of education and research. This section really is based on an economic assessment that says as long as we in education and research do not interfere with the market for a particular work, there are certain activities that we can do. The second—Section 108, which was an extension of 107 in some ways—states that there are certain things libraries and archives should be able to do, such as facilitating interlibrary loan, preservation copies, and the use of photocopy equipment. But Section 108 needs to be rethought in the context of digital technologies. A study group of which I am a member has been working, over the last three years, with the U.S. Copyright Office to refresh Section 108. The Section 108 Study Group Report was released in March 2008.

One of the other limitations of copyright is that it’s not perpetual. Copyright protects an author’s work for a period of time or for a term. We have experienced an extension of those years of protection. And that is something we need to be concerned about as well. Just because an international treaty is signed or one country extends that term should not precipitate a domino effect around the world. The United States needs to be very cautious that its copyright laws reflect national traditions and national values and are not always subject to international agreements. Although there is a huge international context for copyright today, ultimately the United States should think about copyright within our own national context.

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