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A Response to *The Vancouver Public Library Vision and Plan 2015*
Part 2.
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(Short) Introduction to Part 2.

The Board of Vancouver Public Library commissioned a Vision and Plan 2015. The short form of the vision is "to connect people with a world of ideas". In Part 1 of this Response to that Vision and Plan I described my concern that the Vision is based, to a considerable extent, on pursuing the brand "books, but much more" and what my theoretical opposition to that brand is. Here in Part 2 I will illustrate some practical steps the library can start to take. But first, I want to expand on why I don't think Books is a brand that will be helpful to us going forward in our communities.

Why is this a big deal?

We are possibly living in the biggest change in the recording of information and the acquisition of knowledge since the development of the written alphabet. I don't really know if that's true, of course. No one really knows. Only a view back from the future would really tell us this. Nevertheless, whether it's the "biggest change", the "second biggest change" or whatever, we are the information professionals for our community and it is up to us to meet this challenge in order to ensure that citizens retain access to information and have access to our skills to turn that information into knowledge when and how they need it.

Twelve years ago, when I was building something we at that time called "web libraries", using the then-new idea of serving data-based information to web browsers, I hired brand new librarians and library technicians and told them, "you probably will have to throw out the rules you just learned in school to do what we need to do, but you have to keep all of the concepts because those will be what shows us how we should do what we need to do." Now, as public libraries find the foundations of our profession moving beneath our feet, I think that advice would have to be changed. It is certainly still true that many of the rules we've created to handle the properties and capabilities of the formats we used for decades are no longer of any use with new formats that are now in place in our communities but I believe just as certainly that some of the founding concepts are no longer useful either. Many of those concepts assumed a one-way trajectory of

information (from the author to the publisher to the library to the reader: which I described in Part 1) or they assumed that documents were fixed with a certain set of content at a certain time and place. Instead of readers of our collections become critics and commenters and publish straight to blogs (or post of facebook/twitter, etc) without any intermediaries. Even authors themselves can use blogs and social networks to publish straight to the reader without needing a publisher. And documents themselves are now being made up of sets of bits that are assembled in one way here but in another way over there.

Several years ago I wrote a paper for a council of Realtors. They had the responsibility of publishing a licensing handbook that provides realtors with a set of rules for working within in the Real Estate Act. Their problem was that the detailed interpretations of that act changed constantly and they knew, that as soon as they assembled and printed a new addition, it would go out of date. These were progressive, well-educated people who could see how the web worked and they were determined that some kind of guide assembled on the fly and published to realtors through their web site must be possible that still retained their responsibility to only deliver information that was accurate, reputable, and available at the right time in the correct order. I was hired to help figure out how that could be done. During the process of that research, I realized that our whole conception of the definition of information may have to be changed to truly understand the scope of the changes that digitized information was leading us to. Briefly, our definition of information since the development of the written alphabet has been that information is the recorded results of the extraction of experience. And, as you know, it's been devilishly difficult for us to define that concept in words. One of our huge problems right now is that that definition of information is that, once it is extracted from experience and recorded, it is static until it's "re-recorded" in some other document. I believe that the movable, formless nature of individual bits makes that definition not very useful to us in the world of digitization. (For reference, my original article is here: <http://philiphall.ca/docs/XML-study-final-no-appendices.pdf>)

You can imagine that if we are facing a world where the very definition of information could be changing, then certainly how we go about the business of keeping our communities informed may be changing to the point of being completely unrecognizable to us if we were able to look forward a decade or two. Unfortunately, we can not look forward. As someone who has often been challenged with the task of trying to find better ways of handling documents and the information they contain, I've learned to steer away from the precipice of looking for the future and, instead, to concentrate on the concept of "now": to study the tools and techniques we have now and to work to make the best use of them. Each new idea isn't necessarily a good one. Each experiment doesn't necessarily work. But I'm convinced the only way to get to the future we want is to start with what we have now. So following are some observations and suggestions to get us to where we might want to be in 2015 and beyond.

Three things we can do now:

1. Continue to Re-Envision the purpose of a library building:

We may need a more structured, theoretical basis for designing our library spaces to serve both a digital audience and a traditional patronage. One way to look at the problem is to conceive of physical spaces that follow a "pace layers" concept (<http://www.bisinfonet.ac.uk/infokits/learning-space-design/imagination/techniques/pace-layering>) : a quick layer up front, a slow layer in the back.

The Vision 2015 suggests the use of volunteers as greeters at the entrance to the library. These "greeters" should actually be information assistants with a "triage" role (described in more detail below under the "reference desk" section). They are the enablers for the patrons who need help finding their "route" though the quick layer into the slow layer so these "slow layer" patrons don't have to navigate the quick layer unassisted. The metaphor of "navigator" has been used before to describe library reference service and it is apt in this sense. A knowledge of semiotics at the level of Understanding Comics (<http://ipac2.vpl.ca/ipac20/ipac.jsp?session=1239HF2K76314.1628&profile=pac&uri=link=3100023~!6127601~!3100023~!3100002&aspect=subtab97&menu=search&ri=2&source=~!horizon&term=Understanding+comics+%3A+the+invisible+art+%2F&index=ALLTITL>) also helps to understand this concept.

By structuring our services with this concept of pace layers, we can retain the existing market of readers and "book people" who we certainly do not want to lose but to whom we can no longer concentrate our marketing and services. These are the people who think they know what they want to library to provide for them and, I expect, are willing to walk up to the desk and into the stacks to get it because that's the way they have used the library for many years. But the danger of relying on a "quick information" desk is two fold. The traditional market of readers may begin to find the the quick-layer of library services that they would have to walk through to get to the desk becomes, slowly by degrees, increasingly unfamiliar (and even unattractive) to them that they may no longer feel comfortable and welcome in the library and they will need to meet an information staff in a "triage" position to make sure they are comforted and steered in the right direction. The second problem with relying on the QIS-type desk is that the quick-layer patrons may well never stop at the desk to ask for anything. They may think that they know what they want and/or will be able to find what they are looking for without personal intermediation. In the first case, while they may know what they want, they probably don't know the range of resources that are available to them and the triage information staff can suggest to them something they might not have known existed . In the second case (the quick-layer patron who expects to find what they are looking for without help) the patron is almost always not as proficient at information search and

discovery as is the library staff and the triage information transaction is a way to (gently and politely) suggest to the patron that there is a wealth of hands-on assistance and expertise beyond what they expect. This triage approach to the quick-layer patrons would (in both cases described above) work in conjunction with revamped digital services suggested below.

2. Aggressively build our digital information services to reflect digital cultures as they have emerged so far and market to any and all digital devices and formats.

It has to be understood that the majority of our services to "quick-layer" patrons (as described above) will not be delivered to them while they are located in any of our bricks-and-mortar library spaces. Further, even when they are within our libraries, we have to assume that their patronage of our services is predominantly digital and our digital services within the building have to reflect this. I'll describe two different digital situations: from within our libraries, and from everywhere else.

First, from "everywhere else":

Digital culture as it has progressed so far shows that a truly community-oriented website *must* be a site built on two-way communication. In fact, the ideal site would be a Community commenting/community publishing site. The "publishing" part is very important. As described above: digital communication and information has led to the existence of important, vital locally-based commentators and critics who have never been "published" in the traditional library/book-world sense of submitting their work to a publishing company and allowing it to be published by that publisher (and those being reviewed in review journals and then collected by libraries and borrowed (and presumably read) by library patrons). Yet, the work of these local writers is in fact a critical part of understanding the meaning of a particular place. Especially a place like Vancouver which is on the edge of a culture and whose depictions in that dominant culture (whether it's centred in Toronto, New York, or London) is marginal and not nearly a reflection of the true experiences we share as we live here. I believe, more than anywhere else in society, it's the business of the library to ensure that that part of the local discourse is made available to everyone in the community. But, because of the nature of digital information (that it's bits-based, not physically-based) it doesn't just mean that our collection is a passive "pointer" to other sources of information. It also means that our activities, collections, and services, since they are an integral part of the local community-discourse, are a node of this discourse. This role in the discourse is clearly already reflected in our programs. Important local voices present their readings, films, and ideas in many dozens of programs per year. Almost every evening, somewhere in the library, a challenging, insightful voice is presenting to a public gathering in some library building. Our web-site must become the digital equivalent. It isn't enough to point to other blogs, sites, and discussions. Our site should also have the discussions and opinions (*our* opinions, among others)

that result from all this culturally vital information that is transmitted through the library programs, collection, and the digital-commentary about our community. That means the library website can not just be a passive "here is our collection, would you like to place a hold" kind of digital outpost. It must encourage two-way discussion of not just what goes on in our buildings but what goes on in our communities. Just as the library has traditionally been a hub for how to get informed about the world and our place in it, the site must be the digital version of that same hub for our community. But, as with so many digital things, the way to become that hub is completely different from what we are used to. Instead of collecting published works and hosting the presentations of authors/film-makers, and so on, the digital hub must be the very location of commentary and criticism about what goes on here (in our town) and here (in our library). It's a tall order and notoriously difficult for websites gain traction as vital digital hubs of thought and culture. Many many sites have tried and failed. We have one great advantage. We (as an institution and physical location) already are a hub of thought and culture in our communities. The job of the site is to migrate that hub to the digital realm of this same community. Many website builders would kill to have that kind of headstart.

For starters, here are three simple ways to build on that headstart:

- * Build our own collections of blogs and local opinion sites and place them directly into our catalogues and other locations that patrons use to find information
- * Provide places for commentary, opinion, and response at all points in the library site. Include the traditional points of the catalogue (search forms, results display, and item display templates). Ensure that those catalogue points include the collection of blogs and opinion we've already collected.
- * Build subject-based discussion points that are not tied to some other "collected" resource but that simply are blogs and discussions about what is happening in our communities. Because this discussion is "from" the library it will probably initially be based on a "library" perspective but that perspective will change as the library slowly becomes less identified as a "collection" and more as a hub for all information.

At the same time, we have to go beyond the "site". A digital environment is far more varied than just a site and a browser. (see the whole M-libraries movement for much more about this). We have to reach out to our community and be there for them in whatever digital format they use. The first months of AskAway's virtual reference service showed that the communities of many of the provinces public libraries were already out using the web as an information source (as if we didn't know that: finditnow had already found this out once already for VPL) and that they were quick to use us once we provided services where they were (on the web) and in a format that they found useful (IM

chat).

People are communicating with each other all over the place: for the last couple years it's been mostly mobile voice/text and instant messaging. This year, it's becoming "social network" sites (twitter, facebook, etc.). Next year it may be some other nifty trick that allows you to signify your "presence" while at the same time limiting who has access to that presence. Regardless of the particular technique, communication and information-gathering are never far apart. Sometimes communication comes first (phones and texting); sometimes information comes first (html & the web). The point for libraries is that we need to be available to our communities where ever they are communicating. We need to let them choose the initial communication format and then guide them to appropriate formats just as, at the same time, conducting the reference interview and guiding them to the appropriate sources. Virtual Reference services across the continent are already moving past web-based vr chat to be able to respond to mobile-text reference. The techniques may constantly change at this micro level but the basic concepts and skill of receiving reference requests and pointing to useful resources is constant and is something we should expect to be doing to decades to come.

There are some practical ways that we can also make sure that our digitally-based services also reach back into our traditional constituency of readers and authors and meet the Vision 2015 objectives of increasing the involvement of local authors: one quick and easy way is to run programs to teach authors how to publish digitally and use print-on-demand services for book productions. As usual, this is just one suggestion: there are doubtless other ways to do this. One of the surest ways of reaching the objective of increasing the library's presence in public places can be greatly achieved with VR and digital collections which allow library service to be moved out into many community locations without having to bring a physical library with you.

Digital services to patrons already from within our libraries is the second of the two-pronged approach to aggressively re-build our digital services. I'll sketch out my suggestions for that part later on my blog at philiphall.ca.

3. Get out from behind the reference desk: it's in our way.

Here's a library-navigation scenario to consider: First, imagine an "anti-greeter": a staff member at the library entrance who is, in fact, a trained information assistant who meets every patron entering the library and carries out a kind of "information triage". The patron can be directed very quickly to any one of a number of locations: to circulation or to some kind of "info access" services if the patron's need are about specific items (either physical or digital); to an information desk if it's not yet clear where in the library and from whom they would get the best help; to a specific floor if their stated need is clear enough to indicate exactly

from where they will get an answer.

Second, there is a library technician roaming through the ranks of computer users at the internet stations. This staff member responds immediately to requests for help about using the computers and their software and occasionally just calls out to see if anyone there needs help finding something they're looking for.

Third, on all the floors and through all corners of the library, there are reference staff wandering among the dozens of laptop-using connected patrons offering to help anyone who is having trouble finding what they are looking for.

Yes, this might be called roving reference. Although it is used in other libraries and carries a certain baggage, it may be, in fact, what we need to convince the patrons who are already in the library to realize that we have the skills they need to help them to do whatever they are there to do.

The first two parts of that scenario might sound familiar to anyone who's been to a hospital emergency ward: first triage, then admission, then medical care. In an emergency ward they know that nobody should come in without getting some attention from a trained practitioner. That's the way I think we should run our libraries.

I think that in the patron's mind, the reference desk is where we tell them about books. That's good for the patron who understand a "traditional" library but the problem is that we also have to reach the people coming through the gates who have never asked a question at the desk and who don't at the moment see why they would. Those people (the people coming in to use the "quick layer" (that I described above)) need to be approached individually or at the group tables.

At its foundation the physical reference desk is a hangover from the closed stacks. That's where its heritage is: with closed stacks patrons had to ask at the desk to request items. Once stacks were opened, reference desks were still used by patrons because our arrangements of material were based on the closed-stack expert-access systems (which we call cataloguing rules and classification systems) and patrons either knew or soon learned that they had to ask for help. Of course the reference staff at the desk are far more capable than these "quick layer" patrons realize, but they are being under-utilized. Getting out from behind the desk will help fix that.

Conclusion

This set of suggestions is not meant to be prescriptive at all, but they are more than just illustrations. They are meant to be strategies we can begin to put into place now. and we have to assume we'll never really be finished building our new library for a digital society. The development of book-based libraries took hundreds of years to get from

the printing press to the scientific revolution of the baroque era to the free public libraries at the end of the 19th century. I don't see any reason to believe we'll get to the end of library development in our lifetimes or in several generations but, whether that's true or not, only the future will tell us (and we can't read the future from here) so we just have to do whatever we can, now. The goal posts will continue to move. During the time this article was written the goal posts have already moved: Google booksearch overcame a legal hurdle and will be soon put into place for American web browsers; Indigo unveiled the shortcovers e-book store and the Seattle Post-Intelligencer published its last print edition. There's no time to waste.