

## In My Opinion

Four Questions for 2010

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By Terry Huwe

In 2004, Cindy Hill, then Library Director at Sun Microsystems, Inc., and good friend of mine, was approached by some consultants with a request for an interview. They had a client, a government agency library, which wanted them to interview a group of library directors on their views about what a state-of-the art, best-in-class technical research library would be like in five years. This struck me as a very familiar line of thinking, since most of the profession, including LAUC members and the University of California Libraries, expend a substantial percentage of our brainpower crafting variations on this theme. An expansive topic, to be sure, but perhaps worth the effort; and after decades of similar speculative thinking, we're much better at it than we used to be.

We're living in an era when many of us, even University Librarians and Associate University Librarians are comfortable stating that the research library of 2010 is an unknown quantity, and we need to help each other to get it right. Indeed, the Academic Senate's University Committee on Library spoke at length with the University Librarians on this very topic, when I visited them in February 2005.

Academic librarians at the University of California may know more than any other cohort about facing the future, head on. We live in an era of continuous change. Our professional lives are marked by numerous moments when a whole new technology is unveiled, tested, and ramped up — like SFX for interlibrary services, for example. In 2005, while speaking at [AusWeb '05](#), I heard a lot about speculative futures. The difference with Ausweb was that most of the program offerings were given by librarians and technologists in very close cooperation. I came home with a greater awareness of how effective our planning processes are — and how much potential lies before us.

So: on to the questions. The consultants posed ten questions to their interview candidates. Some of them are very specific to the corporate marketplace and don't really apply in academic libraries. But some of them were right-on. I list four of the questions below, and offer my opinion on what trends seem the most significant to me, and my user community (also in my opinion).

1. *What technologies do you see shaping the industry and/or library of the future?*

SOPAG and company have new technologies covered pretty well — but in thinking about the library of 2010, I see three distinct forces. These forces all have to do with the impact of technology on human interaction, and often lie beneath the process of introducing new hardware and software.

- o **Mobility.** WiFi is just one iteration of mobility. Porting full digital library access to — well, anywhere, is going to be a top priority. The most obvious destinations right now are cell phones and PDAs. Consumer behavior is driving design in the right direction: more data, more options, whenever, however. But another, less-studied element of mobility is visual display. I see a bright future for library services that depend on the new display technologies that are now emerging. For

example, [FogScreen](#) is a "water particle display" technology that creates a screen in mid-air, without a backdrop. Water particles capture and refract light, and the particles are so small that you can walk through the display and feel cool, but not wet. Another medium, "light emitting polymers," or LEP, will eventually lead to roll-up or spray-on screens with high resolution. The U.S. Army is experimenting with LEP on clothing for the infantry. In a similar fashion, freeing high resolution display from the computer lab will make library technology — and library space — much more social in the long run.

Why is mobility so important? Two reasons, both obvious but nonetheless challenging. We need to go to users and give them what they want. We also need to reinforce our own roles as expert searchers and collection managers. The best way to do that is to port our high-value resources to the end points where people want them. That might be a cell phone, and it might be an online tutorial, floating in the air, in public spaces — to gain attention and interest.

- **"Google-like" Searching.** Right now, the SOPAG Bibliographic Services Task Force is working on a major report, with recommendations that may alter the landscape of electronic library services. In brief, the argument goes like this: if we make library resources easier to use, more "Google-like," we will gain an enormous advantage. Library resources, notoriously hard to use due to the many interfaces of vendors (among other reasons) frustrate even skilled users.

I agree with the initial premise that we need to make library searching more like Google searching—but I have two additional caveats. First, if we emulate open-Web searching of our digital libraries, we need to accentuate the metadata and finding tools that are native to each discipline — via "Advanced Search" screens, with intuitive icons, and with "smart" service connections, like SFX's ability to link interlibrary borrowing with catalogue e-journal searching. Our knowledge of the richness of bibliography (both pre and post Internet) is one of our biggest value points, and this knowledge base all too often goes unused. Second, at all points throughout the user's search process, we need to "brand" our services like the UC E-Links service does, so that researchers can make the visual connection between the University of California Libraries and the things they find "on the Web."

- **Instruction and "Community."** In the future, technologies that foster instructional relationships will become central to our work. One particular e-learning tool that may revolutionize how libraries offer training and conduct teaching roles is "[Teleimmersion](#)." Immersive environments go hand in hand with metadata-rich, value-added digital libraries. Instruction — both classroom-based and library-based — could reach more people with greater effectiveness, and enable more informal learning to occur in the process.

Teleimmersion may seem far afield now, but it is converging with teaching and research. It will populate the library commons. Moreover, immersive teaching environments will add cache to the physical libraries, which are still heavily used for studying, hanging out, and WiFi laptop access. In fact on some days, the libraries seem busier than ever.

## 2. *How do you see user behaviors and needs changing and shifting?*

We've already heard a lot about how users prefer the open Web for searching, indeed, few know more about this than we do. Users like the immediate results given by Google — until they find themselves becoming expert in a narrower slice of the information universe. Then they may find they need tools that cut more closely to the chase, and don't deliver millions of hits.

I work primarily with doctoral students, and what I find is that a particular student might know a lot about, say, econometric theory, but the same student may not know much at all urban and regional planning, or sociology. As the curriculum becomes increasingly multi-disciplinary, users are more aware that they miss material that they need. At the same time, higher education is becoming multi-disciplinary, and pedagogy is growing more participatory. More students realize that cohorts of researchers can achieve better results by

working together. First and foremost, I foresee a growing tension between the classic "go it alone" approach of the doctoral student, versus a growing acceptance of the collaborative, group approach used by professional degree programs. The library of 2010 needs to serve both ends of the spectrum and everything in between. This will be a challenge, and success will depend upon collaborative relationships with the faculty.

### 3. *How do you see management or leadership needs changing or shifting?*

The University is populated with at least four distinct organizational cultures: the faculty world, the academic world of non-Senate folks like us, the staff, and students. Each of these cultures run by different rules, making life complex for all, but also creating many opportunities to be creative. Senior library administrators are trying to harness all of the brainpower at their disposal — witness SOPAG Chair Bernie Hurley's comments at the LAUC Fall Assembly: "We are at our best when we collaborate."

The leadership of the library of 2010 will recognize that a more egalitarian distribution of decision-making — with accountability throughout the process — will benefit the library. This will hold immediate opportunities for librarians, paraprofessionals and other staff in the library to be speak out — and be heard.

Working as I do outside of the direct reporting lines of the University Library here at Berkeley, I can assure you of a fact that may surprise some of you and cause others to disagree. In comparison to many "program units" within the University, the libraries are very well prepared to advance — even lead the way — in developing collaborative academic strategies. Yes, there are major variations from campus to campus, but does anyone disagree with Sarah Pritchard's statement, made at the LAUC Spring Assembly: "We need to work together to plan for the future."

Not all sectors of the University community have the long years of enforced collaboration that consortial buying, collection development and other university-wide activities have built in the library sphere. It's time for us to realize that the University Libraries, with all their human imperfections, are in fact leaders in defining "best practices" in a digital era. If everyone we talk to works in the library sphere of the University, it's all too easy to miss this advantage, or focus on less cheery issues in our day to day jobs.

### 4. *What skills must the library's staff embody?*

When Lincoln Cushing and I wrote an editorial about reference service for South Hall News, the bulletin of the School of Information Management and Systems (SIMS), we quoted Alice Youmans, from the Boalt Hall Law Library. She said, "In my experience, the media we use to help people find the answers they need are constantly changing, but the actual work of reference stays the same" (*South Hall News*, Fall 2002, p.1). In other words, the core skills of the library profession remain relevant, and perhaps even grow in import, as our jobs become increasingly digital. The skills we will need the most in the coming years are separate, yet related to core library practice. We'll continue to handle reference, face to face and online, and build collections, print plus digital. To succeed in those endeavors though, we'll need to get a lot better at three strategic skills.

- **Marketing.** From my perspective as a member of an Organized Research Unit, it's clear that the faculty members have a choice of venues for where to put their grants, students and time spent in fellowship. Life in academic departments also drives much of what happens in campus life. LAUC members need to go to the faculty and students in their own space, outside the library — and that's different than waiting for users to come us. A lot of us do this already, but a lot more of us need to be much more active.
- **Outreach.** Cultural critics have been quick to see how the Internet changes the art of "storytelling" — adding interactive features (like blogging) to the linear narrative of the book or short story. The same is true of library outreach strategies: we have more venues to reach into, and more tools at our disposal. However, success in outreach — a storytelling process, essentially — depends upon the ability to see the uniqueness of our stories. Very few academics are confronted with the sheer

diversity of intellectual activity that reference providers deal with. That's a powerful basis for telling the library's "story" to the faculty. At every level within the library, we need to think about the strategic value of our deep knowledge of research practices — and use that knowledge to build more robust, peer-level relationships with our faculty colleagues.

- **Collaboration.** As we market services and perform outreach, we need to spend more of our precious time interacting with faculty in activities that all can benefit from. For example, collaborating on grants, fieldwork and publications all raise our profile — and advance the academic profile of the profession. Once again, we need to step out of our own "organizational culture" and into the culture of our collaborators. That can be hard to do, and support may be lacking as we practice triage. That's a good reason to give up on it — but the moment when we may think we can give up is the moment to push the hardest.

### “Hearts and Minds.”

Continuous planning has, in recent years, improved our skills in each of the above areas. We need to learn more, and do more, to make sure we participate fully in the intellectual and organizational process of defining the 21st century library within the University. This is an intellectual struggle for the hearts and minds of our colleagues.

We work in an environment where roughly half the faculty are not terribly focused or interested in library-based information services — while the other half is either very receptive or highly engaged. Even if we have the attention of a large percentage of our faculty colleagues, we cannot afford to set aside the slow work of cultivating interest in the library. Often this is a one-to-one task. As such, it can take place at both the highest levels of the library administration (as it does), and on the front lines of our public service points. The recent attention given to the "crisis in scholarly communications" is a very good example of what can be achieved when outreach, marketing and collaboration combine. Like continuous planning, this work is never done.

To be effective, we need to tap into our passion and excitement. To do that, we need to step through cynicism, however justified those sentiments may be. This profession is far from dull; it is in a constant state of self-reinvention. That alone makes us more than capable of navigating the changing landscape of the University. We need to make sure our colleagues are aware of our skills in collaboration and imaginative, aggressive planning. If they can see these sides of us, we will continue to be sought out for our contribution, now and in 2010.

Send comments regarding this site to [Frank Lester](#), LAUC Web Manager. Last updated: 03/12/2013