

Disconnects Between Library Culture and Millennial Generation Values

Libraries must consider changes in both policy and technology to remain relevant to the next generation of students

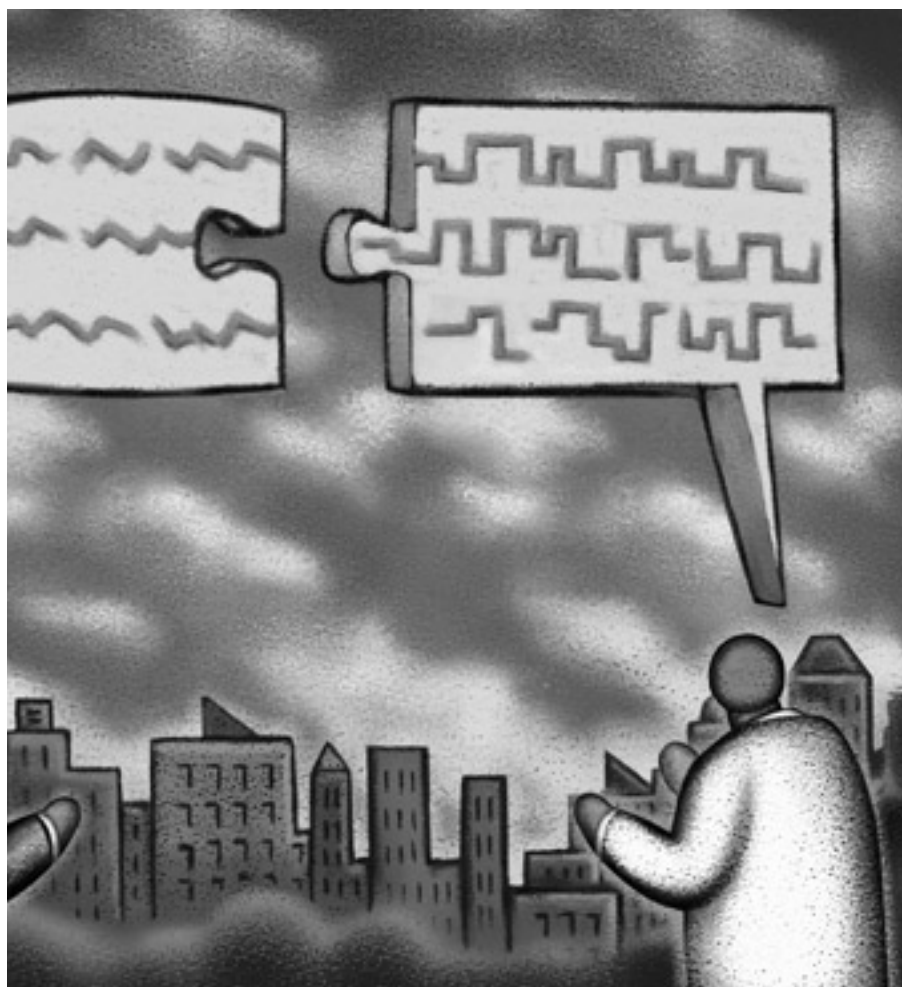
By **Robert H. McDonald** and **Chuck Thomas**

Research libraries were among the first to embrace and exploit the potential of the World Wide Web after its debut in the 1990s. They quickly began constructing virtual information landscapes, including policies, services, and collections that not only shaped but also defined the realms of possibility within such terrain. In their roles as both terra-formers and cartographers of these spaces, libraries generally modeled the virtual terrains as electronic counterparts of physical libraries.

In recent years, gaps have materialized in the virtual terrain, meaning the landscapes we constructed do not provide certain services, resources, or possibilities expected by emerging user populations like the millennial generation.¹ These rifts often represent fundamental disconnects between the values of today's library users and the historical, core values of libraries that shaped the first generation of online information landscapes. We classify those disconnects into three categories—technology, policy, and unexploited opportunities—and discuss ways academic libraries can create next-generation landscapes to address these gaps. If academic libraries want to retain and expand their usefulness for online users in the next decade of the Web, these core disconnects must be addressed today.

Library Culture

Research libraries have done little to embed themselves and their resources into the everyday tools, spaces, and activities important to today's learners.



Most library information systems and discovery tools are not easy to customize and remain substantially limited by an enduring library obsession with individual privacy and copyright. Our services and policies are equally limiting, seemingly guided more by fear of litigation than any other factor. Pri-

vacancy and intellectual property are more important than ever in a digital age, certainly, but libraries protect both to the point of eliminating many capabilities modern technologies otherwise make possible. Consequently, libraries miss out on many opportunities to participate in new modes of research, scholar-

ship, and creative expression. Emerging communities of research library users have demonstrated strong preferences for exactly the kinds of networked trust-building, collaboration, resource sharing, and creativity that library technologies and policies discourage.² When they encounter these systems and find themselves limited by library culture rather than by technology, how can they help but feel research libraries are not responsive to their needs?

Perhaps libraries need to revisit their cultural roots and adjust their systems and services from this perspective. Almost a century ago, S. R. Ranganathan articulated five laws:

- Books are for use
- Every reader has her book
- Every book has its reader
- Save the time of the reader
- A library is a growing organism³

These laws echoed the historical, core values of libraries, including openness, accessibility, and sharing. Today, Ranganathan's "books" are a metaphor for all information accessible through libraries. The library itself is part of a larger, growing, networked organism, yet individual research libraries still provide a print-centric approach to finding and using information. Our systems and policies reinforce the notion of only being able to access what any particular library owns. Additionally, the interfaces and capabilities of these tools are strikingly inferior for a generation accustomed to video games and sophisticated e-commerce services like Amazon or Google.

Despite a few encouraging exceptions, such as RLG's RedLightGreen Catalog interface and OCLC's Open WorldCat, most libraries have been reluctant to embrace or provide new capabilities for users. Features such as personalization and recombination of information resources are pervasive in the external software and systems world, but libraries generally have not demonstrated the desire or intent to adopt these capabilities for users.

Technology Disconnects

Some of the key technology disconnects between libraries and current online communities include:

- Libraries lack tools to support the creation of new-model digital scholarship and to enable the use of Web services frameworks to support information reformatting (for example, RSS) and point-of-need Web-based assistance (multimedia tutorials or instant messaging assistance).
- Dogmatic library protection of privacy inhibits library support for file-sharing, work-sharing, and online trust-based transactions that are increasingly common in online environments, thus limiting seamless integration of Web-based services.
- Ubiquitous handheld access is more prominent thanks to digital lifestyle devices such as smart phones and iPods, yet libraries still focus on digital content for typical desktop PCs.

These stereotypes obviously do not describe every situation. Nonetheless, they indicate the areas in many research libraries that typically need attention.

Policy Disconnects

Drawing a clear line between technology and policy can be difficult. For example, how many of the characteristics of current libraries (identified by the list below) are driven purely by technology or by policy? These traits include:

- Mainly electronic text-based collections with multimedia content noticeably absent
- Constructed for individual use but requires users to learn from experts how to access and use information and services
- Library presence usually "outside" the main online place for student activity (MySpace, iTunes, Facebook, the campus portal, or learning management system)

Not many of these issues could be resolved simply by introducing new technology. Conversely, policies used consistently to guide changes in these areas would likely yield substantial results. Similarly, a policy solution might be required to address the following types of disconnects between libraries and online users:

- Deliberately pushing library search tools into other environments such as learning management systems or

social network infrastructure and, conversely, integrating popular external search tools into library frameworks (such as Google Scholar and MS Academic Live Search or LibX.org)

- Libraries linking and pointing to larger sets of open-access data that add context to their local collections
- Restructuring access to reflect use instead of library organizational structure

Opportunity Disconnects

What are libraries doing now to enable flexibility for new learners? Too often library culture reflexively condemns the new or little understood creative opportunity offering more flexibility and technological enhancement, creating an obstacle for opportunities either in technology or policy advancements. As an example of this, for years libraries have been obsessed with a single management system theory that has rarely worked. Much like enterprise resource planning initiatives, one size rarely fits all, and while a select few have been saying for years that libraries should disconnect their acquisition management systems from their discovery tools, it is only within the past few years that large academic institutions have started seeing this as a viable option.

Thinking about the ideas discussed here, you might want to ask the following questions about your library. What is your library doing to:

- Support the user's affinity for self-paced, independent, trial-and-error methods of learning?
- Create opportunities to make library information look and behave like information that exists in online entertainment venues?
- Explore alternative options for delivering information literacy skills to users in online environments and alternate spaces?
- Apply the typical user's desire for instant gratification to the ways that libraries could be using technology for streamlined services?
- Redefine administrative, security, and policy restrictions to permit online

users an online library experience that rivals that of a library site visit?

- Preserve born-digital information?

Conclusion

Many of the most important disconnects between library priorities and millennial generation values are closely related to the way libraries conceive, create, and provide public computing infrastructure. The promise of seamlessness that stems from ubiquitous computing access and instantly available networked information is, unfortunately, stifled significantly within the libraries of today. Certainly, accommodating changing user preferences is not the only priority that drives library decisions. A basic philosophical issue for libraries is the extent to which we should move in the direction of the users and how much we should expect users to move in our direction.

In a recent article,⁴ Carr discussed two indicators for change in academic libraries in recent years: competition

and electronic information. Competition has driven libraries toward their users' needs at least in terms of library as place; thus the abundance of libraries that are remaking their physical space in the likeness of a typical third space (for example, a coffee shop). Unfortunately, support for user needs in terms of their virtual information space still rigidly adheres to old values that force online users to find other paths to information, often not even realizing what their own library has to offer. Finding the right way to achieve balance between traditional library values and the expectations and habits of coming generations will determine whether libraries remain relevant in the social, educational, and personal contexts of the Information Age. *e*

Acknowledgment

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of the Free Culture & the Digital Library Symposium, held at Emory University in October 2005. The article can be found online at <<http://dscholarship.lib.fsu.edu/general/4/>>.

Endnotes

1. N. Howe and W. Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).
2. Ibid.
3. S. R. Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science* (London: Blunt and Sons, 1957).
4. R. Carr, "What Users Want: An Academic 'Hybrid' Library Perspective," *Ariadne*, No. 46, February 2006, <<http://www.ariadne.ac.uk/issue46/carr>> (accessed August 16, 2006).

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