Editorial: No More Silver Bullets, Please Marc Truitt

A recent *Library Journal* (*LJ*) story referred to "the palpable hunger public librarians have for change . . . and, perhaps, a silver bullet to ensure their future" in the context of a presentation at the Public Library Association's 2010 Annual Conference by staff members of the Rangeview (Colo.) Library District. Now, lest there be any doubt on this point, allow me to state clearly from the outset that none of the following ramblings are in any way intended as a specific critique of the measures undertaken by Rangeview. Far be it from me to second-guess the Rangeview staff's judgment as to how best to serve the community there.[1]

Rather, what got my attention was *LJ*'s reference to a "palpable hunger"for magic ammunition, from whose presumed existence we in libraries seem to draw comfort. In the last quarter century, it seems as though we've heard about and tried enough silver bullets to keep our collective six-shooters endlessly blazing away. Here are just a few examples that I can recall off the top of my head, and in no particular order:

- Library cafes and coffee shops.
- Libraries arranged along the lines of chain bookstores.
- General-use computers in libraries (including information/knowledge commons and what-have-you)
- Computer gaming in libraries.
- Lending laptops, digital cameras, mp3 players and iPods, e-book readers, and now iPads.
- Mobile technology (e.g., sites and services aimed at and optimized for iPhones, Blackberries, etc.)
- E-books and e-serials.
- Chat and instant-message reference.
- Libraries and social networking (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, etc.).
- "Breaking down silos," and "freeing"/exposing our bibliographic data to the Web, and reuse by others outside of the library milieu.
- Ditching our old and "outmoded" systems, whether the object of our scorn is AACR2, LCSH, LCC, Dewey, MARC, the ILS, etc.
- Library websites generally. Remember how everyone—including us—simply *had* to have a website in the 1990s? And ever since then, it's been an endless treadmill race to find the perfect, user-centric library Web presence? If Sisyphus were to be incarnated today, I have little doubt that he would appear as a library Web manager and his boulder would be a library website.
- Oh, and as long as we're at it, "user-centricity" generally. The implication, of course, is that before the term came into vogue, libraries and librarians were *not* focused on users.
- "Next-gen" catalogs.

I'm sure I'm forgetting a whole lot more. Anyway, you get the picture.

Each of these has, at one time or another, been positioned by some advocate as *the* necessary change—the "silver bullet"—that would save libraries from "irrelevance" (or worse!), if we would but adopt it *now*, or better yet, yesterday. Well, to judge from the generally dismal state of libraries as depicted by some opinion-makers in our profession—or perhaps simply from our collective lack of self-esteem—we either have been misled about the potency of our ammunition, or else we've been very poor markspersons. Notwithstanding the fact that we seem to have been indiscriminately blasting away with shotguns rather than six-shooters, our shooting has neither reversed the trends of shrinking budgets and declining morale nor staunched the ceaseless dire warnings of some about "irrelevance" resulting from ebbing library use. To stretch the analogy a bit further still, one might even argue that all this shooting has done damage of its own, peppering our most valuable services with countless pellet-sized holes.

At the same time, we have in recent years shown ourselves to be remarkably susceptible to the marketing-focused hyperbole of those in and out of librarianship about technological change. Each new technology is labeled a "game-changer"; change in general is either—to use the now slightly-dated, oh-so-nineties term—a "paradigm shift" or, more recently, "transformational." When did we surrender our skepticism and awareness of a longer view? What's wrong with this picture?[2]

I'd like to suggest another way of viewing this. A couple of years ago, Alan Weisman published *The World Without Us*, a book that should be required reading for all who are interested in sustainability, our own hubris, and humankind's place in the world. The book begins with our total, overnight disappearance, and asks (1) What would the earth be like without us? and (2) What evidence of our works would remain, and for how long? The bottom line answers for Weisman are (1) In the long run, probably much better off, and (2) Not much and not for very long, really.

So, applying Weisman's first question to our own, much more modest domain, what might the world be like if tomorrow librarians all disappeared or went on to work doing something else—became consultants, perhaps?—and our physical and virtual collections were padlocked?

Would everything be okay, because as some believe,

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it's all out there on the Web anyway, and Google will make it findable? Absent a few starry-eyed bibliophiles and newly out-of-work librarians—those who didn't make the grade as consultants—would anyone mourn our disappearance? Would anyone notice? If a tree falls in the woods . . .

In short, would it *matter*? And if so, why and how much?

The answer to the preceding two questions, I think, can help to point the way to an approach for understanding and evaluating services and change in libraries that is both more realistic and less draining than our obsessive quest for the "silver bullet." What exactly is our "value-add"? What do we provide that is unique and valuable? We can't hope to compete with Barnes and Noble, Starbucks, or the Googleplex; seeking to do so simply diverts resources and energy from providing services and resources that are uniquely ours.

Instead, new and changed services and approaches should be evaluated in terms of our value-add: If they contribute positively and are within our abilities to do them, great. If they do not contribute positively, then trying to do them is wasteful, a distraction, and ultimately disillusioning to those who place their hopes in such panaceas.

Some of the "bullets" I listed above may well qualify as contributing to our value-add, and that's fine. My point isn't to judge whether they are "bad" or "good." My argument is about process and how we decide what we should do and not do. Understanding what we contribute that is uniquely ours should be the reference standard by which proposed changes are evaluated, not some pie-in-the-sky expectation that pursuit of this or that vogue will magically solve our funding woes, contribute to higher (real or virtual) gate counts, make us more "relevant" to a particular user group, or even raise our flagging self-esteem. In other words, our value-add must stand on its own, regardless of whether it actually solves temporal problems. It is the "why" in "why are we here?"

If, at the end of the day, we cannot articulate that which makes us uniquely valuable—or if society as a whole finds that contribution not worth the cost—then I think we need to be prepared to turn off the lights, lock the doors, and go elsewhere, because I hope that what we're doing is about more than just our own job security.

And if the far-fetched should actually happen, and we all disappear? I predict that at some future point, someone will reinvent libraries and librarians, just as others have reinvented cataloguing in the guise of metadata.

Notes and references

1. Norman Oder, "PLA 2010 Conference: The Anythink Revolution is Ripe," *Library Journal*, Mar. 26, 2010, http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6724258.html (accessed Mar. 30, 2010). There, I said it! A fairly innocuous disclaimer added to one of my columns last year seemed to garner more attention (http://freerangelibrarian.com/2009/06/13/marc-truitts-surprising-ital-editorial/) than did the content of the column itself. Will the present disclaimer be the subject of similar speculation?

2. One of my favorite antidotes to such bloated, short-term language is embodied in Michael Gorman's "Human Values in a Technological Age," *ITAL* 20, no. 1 (Mar. 2000): 4–11, http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/lita/ital/2001gorman.cfm (accessed Apr 12, 2010)—highly recommended. The following is but one of many calming and eminently sensible observations Gorman makes:

> The key to understanding the past is the knowledge that people then did not live in the past—they lived in the present, just a different present from ours. The present we are living in will be the past sooner than we wish. What we perceive as its uniqueness will come to be seen as just a part of the past as viewed from the point of a future present that will, in turn, see itself as unique. People in history did not wear quaintly old-fashioned clothes—they wore modern clothes. They did not see themselves as comparing unfavorably with the people of the future, they compared themselves and their lives favorably with the people of their past. In the context of our area of interest, it is particularly interesting to note that people in history did not see themselves as technologically primitive. On the contrary, they saw themselves as they were—at the leading edge of technology in a time of unprecedented change.