

Is My Library Going Down the YouTube? Reflections on the Information Landscape

Diane Kresh

The late Anne G. Lipow would have loved YouTube. Talk about "in your face reference." She would have loved its brashness, its rawness, cheered its role as an equal opportunity employer for the inane, the bizarre, and the just plain funny. Anne died too soon. She missed out on blogs and blackberries, MySpace and Facebook, podcasts and peer-to peer, wikis and widgets. She would have been all over all of it and she would have exhorted others to give these innovations a try. I can't claim to be one of Anne's closest friends or colleagues but I can claim to have been influenced by her more than anyone else in a career that has lasted more than 30 years. Without her prodding, I might never have ventured beyond the walls of the Library of Congress. I was affected more than she knew by her generosity of spirit, her indomitability, her willingness to poke at sacred cows. Anne was a passionate person ... passionate about her work, her family, her belief in social activism, her political convictions. She believed that librarians made a difference and set

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Technology in Libraries: Essays in Honor of Anne Grodzins Lipow, ed. Roy Tennant. Lulu.com, 2008.

out to prove, by example, how it was done. A rare combination of thinker and doer ... she had an uncanny knack for sniffing out what was in the wind and then being right there in the vanguard, ready to lead the pack in new directions. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I cannot remember a time when libraries were not a part of my life. I remember going with my mother to the Westover Branch of the Arlington County Virginia Public Library, housed in an apartment building, to get my first library card. The card was a square piece of cardstock-like material bearing a rectangular aluminum plate. I was 7 years old and able to write my own name, the legal requirement for obtaining a card. The year was 1961; the year Anne began her career at Berkeley's Library, the Iron Age before 8 track tapes, Pac-Man, the World Wide Web, the Patriot Act. The Freedom Rides to register African-Americans to vote in the South would begin that summer; Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream Speech" was two years off. That simple card with the odd metal plate became my key card to the world. Fast forward to my first library job, an entry level position at the Library of Congress ("a summer job" between my sophomore and junior year at a local university), followed by a succession of jobs at the Nation's Library that ultimately led me to "rethink reference," to Anne herself, and then, finally, to founding the Collaborative Digital Reference Service (CDRS), now QuestionPoint. But I'm getting head of myself, again.

It was 1997 and I was in search of an oracle. The world was changing. So, too was librarianship and, more specifically, the role of reference in the library. The explosion of information and the popularity of the Internet and commercial search engines surfaced new demands and expectations. Patrons could contact librarians from anywhere, (and they did) and librarians were asked to serve increasingly diverse communities with diverse language skills and special needs. Even being a library professional was different. Where once we would have talked to one another at conferences, sat on committees or task forces, now we engaged in "group gropes" on listservs, querying, discussing, flaming, debating everything from what new software product to use, to defining new rules of email etiquette. Was reference librarianship high tech or high touch or were we headed for high noon? We needed a Sherpa, and fast. Linda Arret, then my colleague at LC, put me in touch with Anne and her consultant company Library Solutions. The short version is that

through a series of workshops, open meetings and a symposium (*Reference in a Digital Age*, June 1998), an image of the future and a roadmap for how to get there began to come into view. And we discovered that we librarians had it all wrong. It wasn't the library users who were remote; rather, the library was remote from its users. In resolving to bridge the gap, we sought solutions that coalesced around three fundamental principles: to create services both to meet demand and revitalize the profession; to take the reference desk to cyberspace; and to satisfy patron requests at point of need. In 2000, with a lot of help from friends, CDRS was born.

To understand the impact of CDRS one must understand the context from which it sprang. It was the early days of technology adoption for information services. Google was not yet God but there were many other online services (remember Ask Jeeves?) vying for the attention of information consumers. Anyone with an online shingle and a clever slogan could become a self-styled expert. What was new and different about CDRS was that it combined techie innovations with the subject, standards-based, content organization and customer service strengths of information professionals and sought to operate on a global platform. After all, with Internet connectivity, any one in the world was now only a click away. Within a couple of years, it suddenly wasn't too hard to imagine a reference service where a patron in a public library in the United Kingdom could query an online system and get reference help from a librarian at a public library in southern California ... all within a matter of hours. But more on that in a minute. CDRS combined the power of local collections and staff strengths with the diversity, availability and openness of libraries and librarians around the world, 24/7. As envisioned, the service provided several benefits to users of libraries among them: reliable and authoritative navigation services available to anyone with an Internet connection; skilled staff available to search the collections of participant institutions; extended reference desk coverage achieved through coops like 24/7 Reference; and increased visibility and support for libraries.

CDRS began with a pilot of 16 libraries ... all responding to cold calls from me and many of them leads from Anne. From the beginning, libraries of all types — special, academic, public and national — were invited to help shape and define the service. The strength of the product came from the

diversity of the contributions. Each library brought its own special experience, knowledge of user behavior and needs, and subject expertise to bear on the project.

The project was built in real time, through trial and error, chunked into phases to test technical solutions and business rules defined by the participant libraries. Implementation consisted of a series of pilot tests and modifications to processes were based on results of the pilots. As we tested the solutions and added libraries, we simultaneously examined staff training needs, addressed governance by establishing a voluntary advisory board and created a funding structure to ensure the broadest participation among types of libraries and to ensure that no one library or group of libraries had to bear all of the costs of establishing and sustaining the enterprise.

The first "live" question was posed on June 29, 2000. The inquiry — regarding ancient Byzantine cuisine — was sent by EARL Ask-A-Librarian, a participating public library consortium in the UK. The request, received by the CDRS server at the Library of Congress in Washington, was matched based on subject matter, depth of detail, and time of day, and routed to the Santa Monica Public Library at 10:40 a.m. Several hours later, a list of five books was on its way to London. So the "test" worked and we were on our way. During its first month of "live" testing, the member institutions exchanged more than 300 questions, creating a virtual reference desk spanning three continents and 15 time zones.

Further pilots tested scaling, creating manual and automated back-up systems such as an "on call librarian," and built a "knowledge base" of fully searchable answered queries. As we expanded globally and added services in languages other than English, we considered cultural and political sensitivities and e-commerce and trade agreements that may affect pricing models. We performed a number of behind the scenes analyses to ensure economic sustainability, such as creating a marketing plan to attract new customers and determining the most cost-effective means of administering the network. And we continually examined the technical solutions to ensure that we had the right ones to meet our mission, and that the tools we created were easy for librarians to use.

The range of questions that caromed around the service in its early days reflected both the diversity of the users and the participant libraries.

Questions like what do astronauts listen to in space, when and where electricity was first brought to California, how many highways there are in the United States, the origin of the names of the seven continents, the costs of a loaf of bread, a gallon of gas, a house and a car in 1931, the history of popup books, and the definition of a “cheese head.” All of these questions were thoroughly researched by the receiving library and returned to patrons with full source citations.

Part social network, wiki, listserv, breeding ground for dissidents, CDRS helped to revitalize the profession through leveraging the expertise of information professionals. What made it most exciting and challenging for me as the originator was that CDRS was a true collaboration among the parties. Everything was on the table for discussion as we reinvented public services and built a sense of shared purpose. The rapid development of CDRS and the technical innovations tested were the result of teamwork and the resourcefulness and prescience of the early adopters. And we could see the results ... not after years of development in highly structured committees and task group but in real time ... real people getting real information needs met. It was also the first time that the Library of Congress, long a recognized world leader in standards development, cataloging and classification and the preservation of library materials stepped in front of the pack to serve the general public.

Looking back, I can see flaws in the design and recognize that much of what we envisioned, while technically possible, could not be easily accommodated in the risk-averse library culture. But it was an enormous learning opportunity for me both personally and professionally. It opened my eyes to the power a community of shared interests can bring to a task and how by sheer dint of belief in something, one can make a difference armed with little more than spit and baling wire. The short version of CDRS is that it was a project that made relevant information available faster and more effectively to meet ever more specialized demands. The longer version is that it ushered in an era of experimentation and cross-fertilization among the pre-existing silos of librarianship — tech services, IT, in-person services — unifying them around finding new ways to harness technology to serve the public good.

Anne's presence was integral to the successful development of CDRS. In addition to her role as project oracle, she was equal parts cheerleader, provocateur, and often the conscience of the enterprise, reminding us to consider the user first and always in planning service enhancements. CDRS sought to bring libraries throughout the country into strong local, online networks — redirecting patrons to their local libraries and local resources, as well as to specialized materials that would not ordinarily be available to them. Its legacy is the migration of the traditional skills of librarianship (reference interviews, controlled vocabularies and source citations, building networks and using both online and print resources) to the online environment; to meet patrons' needs, thinking globally while acting locally.

But Anne wasn't done with me yet.

In January 2006, I left the Library of Congress and a few months later became Director of the Arlington County Virginia Public Library. The card with the partial metal jacket that lined my pockets as a kid had morphed into a piece of plastic that dangled from my key ring. I knew two things when I joined Arlington Library. I knew that I wanted to remain in the public sector where I had spent my entire working life; and I knew I wanted to pursue work that made a difference. With the latter, I felt I was continuing Anne's legacy of social activism and purposeful engagement.

The first thing I did was challenge each staff member to think about what he or she wanted Arlington County libraries to be. We are drawn to the "library business" because we answer a call to serve others; so that the citizens of a community may enjoy an enriched quality of life. (Department of True Confessions: I showed an early predilection for the field when I alphabetized my childhood baseball card collection; I also memorized parts of the *World Almanac* but that's another story). Libraries provide a number of services: entertainment and education among them. So far so good. But public libraries, if not libraries in general, are at a crossroads. The change drivers that ultimately shape us — economic, geopolitical, cultural — are prompting us to consider new ways to reach our community, however that community is defined.

Google, Amazon, Yahoo! RSS Feeds, community-based websites like Digg, web based bookmarking tools like del.icio.us, and startups (upstarts?) like LibraryThing, provide services, tools and content that rival libraries in

the market place. Although the reports of Dewey's death have been greatly exaggerated (see Perry Branch Library in Gilbert, Az, the nation's first Dewey-less public library), new methods and means are being tried to make libraries less, well ... library-like. A 2005 OCLC study on the perceptions of libraries found that the public views search engines and librarians equally as "trusted advisors."⁶⁶ This is a change from just a few years ago. We all know that search engines will only get better, more reliable, more content rich. Can Google Storytime be that far off? The study also suggested librarians update the brand, lose the ssshhh, grab some street cred and get in touch with our inner hip (see NYT, July 8, 2007 "A Hipper Crowd of Shushers").

So if there is more content on the web (and I am using content to mean all formats), and it is getting easier and easier to find, what will be left for libraries to do and what will libraries do to survive? And I say, the same things we have always done: preserve materials for future generations, provide free and open access to local and global resources, support life-long learning, and serve the public good. It's not the mission or purpose of libraries that has changed, but the means of providing service. It is no longer enough to say we have stuff and lots of it; we have to push it to people at their point of need. Music to Anne's ears.

Arlington Libraries has provided me with a platform to launch and test some of my deeply held beliefs about the role of libraries in society: that they are hubs of their communities, "third places", catalysts for creativity, safe havens to test one's values and beliefs, comfort zones for the free exchange of ideas and opinions. That the library is one of the departments in Arlington County government is an added bonus, an opportunity to integrate library programs and build collections in support of the services local government provide both to sustain and renew community and to promote a high quality of life. And what better place to experiment with delivering services than a socially progressive, diverse, participative, highly educated, urban village, Smart Growth exemplar like the People's Republic of Arlington?

⁶⁶ Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership. Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., 2005.

In January 2007, the incoming Arlington County Board chair (the position changes with the calendar), launched Fresh AIRE, or Arlington Initiative to Reduce Emissions, a year-long green program. And the library's role? To help rally the citizens to do their part and to demonstrate that it is easy being green. With most events planned for April, when National Library Week and Earth Day fortuitously collide, we promoted an awareness of global warming and other critical environmental challenges through seed and tree plantings, website tips, film screenings, loans of kill-a-watt meters so citizens could measure their home energy drains, nature walks, a one-woman show on nature-writer Rachel Carson who started it all with *Silent Spring*, yoga classes, green lit book talks, and an inter-generational community art show featuring works of art crafted from recycled materials. In short, we got green.

The library took its role and its place in the community seriously and gave residents a range of information sources and vehicles to enhance their understanding of an important community priority. We maximized the community's investment by working essentially without walls – across departmental boundaries. The program was a success because we networked with other partners both inside and outside the government – we showed that we were better together than by ourselves. Such an initiative would have been dear to Anne who, in spite of my repeated attempts to dissuade her, backed the evergreen Ralph Nader in the 2000 Presidential Election. And that decision, too, was pure Anne. Ever true to her principles, voting her conscience, no matter the cost.

This summer the American Library Association met for its annual meeting in Washington, the first time since June of 1998, 20 years since the summer of love and the San Francisco Be-In, nine years since the LC-Library Solutions–sponsored "Reference in a Digital Age." ALA annual conference was when I set aside some time to visit with Anne and catch up. And this year, as I walked the exhibit hall, where, for the first time, I was hosting the Arlington Public Library booth, my thoughts inevitably turned to Anne. In years past, Anne could be found there in the hall, holding down the fort at the Library Solutions booth, wearing a "Rethinking Reference" t-shirt, exclaiming about the latest and greatest, her enthusiasm infectious.

I have been attending some part of an ALA conference since 1980, my first conference as a newly minted library professional. ALA annual was in New York that summer and I and a few dozen colleagues from the Library of Congress rode up on a Greyhound bus. To a novice, the conference was a little overwhelming ... hundreds of meetings, thousands of people, millions of products, billions of bags of stuff. Librarians really like stuff. Having no committee responsibilities gave me the freedom to pick and choose programs of interest ... so I soaked up the exhibits, stood on line for two hours to get Maurice Sendak's autograph on a poster of *Where the Wild Things Are*, and started following an issue that had been bubbling since 1975 when a group of school board members in the Island Trees District of Long Island, New York, removed several books from school libraries, claiming they were "anti-American, anti-Christian ... and just plain filthy." The books included Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*, Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*.

A lawsuit was filed in 1977 and in 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court (*Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico*) ruled in favor of the books (and the students, *Pico et. al.*) affirming that "students do not shed rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" and that the First Amendment right to express ideas must be supported by an implied right to receive information and ideas. In short, the Court declared that public school boards could not ban books from school libraries merely because they dislike the ideas expressed in them. I couldn't help but recall this case in view of the Supremes' recent ruling against a high school student and his 14-foot-long "Bong Hits 4 Jesus" banner, an apparent limit of student free speech.

For this ALA annual, I found myself in the roughly the same place I was in 1980, new-ish in my job . . . no committee assignments . . . nothing I really had to do except follow my bliss. And it led me to hear:

- Lois Lowry, author of the Young Adult classic, *The Giver*, poignantly illustrate how precious freedom of choice is;
- Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. vigorously warn us that the cheaters ARE prospering; and,

- Armistead Maupin (a late substitute for a campaigning Elizabeth Edwards who, in a sweet bit of irony, was in San Francisco speaking at Pride Week) warmly and touchingly lead us by example toward tolerance and acceptance.

So I went to my 27th ALA annual conference hoping to hear something new, to be dazzled by the razzle, to be wowed, to be awed. And I discovered, instead these many reminders of why I am still here . . . in this profession, still trying to understand and serve the needs of diverse communities, still trying to protect rights as necessary to a democracy as meat is to salt, and still hoping to make a difference in the lives of others.

On Tuesday afternoon, I raced to the Convention Center to hit Harper Collins before they packed to go home to claim my most prized ALA souvenir, a black and white poster announcing a forthcoming book of portraits by Richard Avedon of John and Jackie Kennedy. JFK also knew a little something about answering the call to public service.

But it was a quote shared in a LAMA-sponsored session on Leadership that pretty well summed up my ALA experience, my career to date and my memories of Anne:

Watch your thoughts; they become words
Watch your words; they become actions
Watch your actions; they become habits
Watch your habits; they become character
Watch your character; they become destiny.
— Anonymous