Lagniappe *

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The Library in 2022

In my first article in NCLA Online I looked at predictions made in the late 1980s and early 1990s by librarians and information specialists concerning their vision of the library of the future. In this article, I'm going full circle and making my own, hopefully reasonable, predictions of the library in ten years' time. I chose ten years rather than twenty because I believe the pace of change is accelerating and to predict too far into the future would be an educated guess.

Many of you are probably familiar with Moore's Law, which essentially states that the processing power of computers will double every two years. So a computer built two years from now could potentially be twice as fast as the computer you bought today. This has also been true of network speeds, storage capacity, and hardware pricing. Which brings me to my first prediction. Most libraries will be dependent on cloud-based systems for their ILS and many of their other technical needs within the next ten years, as cloud-based services become more prevalent. Currently, most libraries rely on their own servers to maintain their ILS. This is done for a number of reasons, the most important being control of their system and speed of access. With the increased capability and speed of cloud-based technology, libraries will still be able to satisfy their basic needs without compromising on control and speed. This will allow them to free up personnel and capital, which was once needed to maintain their servers and focus those resources on providing more value-added content and services.

Cloud-based systems will not be limited to the ILS. Today many libraries already use "the cloud" even if they are unaware of it. If you don't host your own electronic reserves or interlibrary loan services but rather pay an annual access fee to have these services hosted by a third party, or if you use the increasingly popular LibGuides service, then you're already using cloud based resources. I believe this will be the new "normal" in the future, and those hosting their own systems will be the exception.

My second prediction is there will be a greater divide between the "have" and "have not" libraries. This classification is based purely on financial resources and not a reflection of the quality of the library or its personnel. The "have" libraries, those whose budgets allow them to spend beyond their basic subsistence needs, will be able to retain the more traditional role of the library as knowledge warehouse. They will be able to purchase ownership of ebooks, journals, data sets, streaming media, and other resources. The "have nots," whose budgets only allow for the minimum resources required to meet their library's mission, will increasingly rely on subscription access to resources without ownership. They will have less depth and breadth of coverage than the "haves," and their collection's future will be unstable and at the whim of economic factors to a greater degree than that of the "haves." This could of course be offset if there is greater cooperation among libraries or if, over the next ten years, the open access movement gains greater traction and a larger segment of the knowledge market share is made freely available.

My third prediction is that what is commonly called the Big Deal will collapse and morph into a number of smaller more customizable deals. In the past three or four poor budget years, the real weakness of the Big Deal has become apparent. During the boom times it sounded like a great idea to purchase a publisher's entire or nearly entire collection for a fee above and beyond what you were paying for access to a handful of their titles and promising to keep a certain spending level. However, once budgets tightened, libraries were forced to evaluate their collections and determine the true value of the Big Deal. Some titles in a package may be essential journals with low cost per use, while the package as a whole has high cost per use. This created a dilemma for many libraries. In the all-or-nothing environment of the Big Deal, this has caused many libraries to drop the Big Deal and pick up individual titles from the Deal at costs only marginally lower than the deal itself, losing access to hundreds of titles. It has also caused some libraries to abandon the Big Deal all together and to provide access to titles through direct subscriptions or on an on-demand basis. I believe this trend will continue and libraries will be forced to drop Big Deal packages in favor of more traditional collection development and/or patron-driven acquisitions. Hopefully, publishers will develop better more flexible subscription models that will allow for some cooperation between library and publisher that will benefit both parties.

My final prediction is that publishers will shift from providing their own unique search platforms and begin to rely more on third party platform providers. Currently, most of the larger publisher have their own search platform, which are not cross searchable with other platforms. This has left the library in the position of providing a means of cross platform searching via federated searching and, more recently, discovery services. I predict that a flexible open platform or platforms will be developed that allow publishers to provide access and search functionality to their resources without losing control over those resources. The film, music, and other media industries have already embraced a model like this. This will benefit both libraries and publishers. Libraries will benefit from a uniform search platform and ease of ordering, while publishers can reduce spending on platform development and focus on content and customer service.

Only time will tell which, if any, of these predictions will come true in the next ten years. New technology, or a shift in outlook or accepted practices, could prevent any one of these from happening; but I believe all are equally plausible and are, for the most part, positive changes for libraries.