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Navigators Needed: Information Now and Tomorrow

Remarks at University of Louisville
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It is wonderful to be in Louisville. I arrived only yesterday, but I haven't let any bluegrass grow under my feet. Yesterday, I was at the University of Kentucky, and this morning I toured the Ekstrom Library. You have some fine facilities--and some very fine information professionals in them, including Dean Hannelore Rader. Thank you again, Dean Rader, for allowing me to join you here today.

How many of you here today work as information professionals? Please raise your hands. How about students? Faculty?

I want to ask another question--and this time there is no need to raise your hands. This is confidential.

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information available to you?

Of course you have. We are all both blessed and cursed by the proliferation of information in our world today. We complain that people don't read, yet R.R. Bowker says that 277,000 new book titles were published in 2007. After many years of decline, the number of magazines published in the U.S. has actually increased slightly each of the past three years.

Netcraft counted more than 181-million Web sites in September . . . an increase of 4.5 million sites only the month before. And then there is user-generated content--blogs, wikis, social networking sites. It might be tempting to ignore them, but we do so at the risk of censoring valid data.

Once, the hard covers that sat in your stacks created a firm boundary between amateur and professional thinkers. There was an unwritten assumption that if it was worth knowing, a respected publisher would print it . . . and a mistaken assumption that if it appeared in a book, it must be true.

Now, even the Britannica is blogging.

Except for the occasional transcript, or the collected speeches of famous people usually published long after their deaths, the spoken word once evaded research--but no more. Now everyone is getting into searching for the spoken word. Podcast searching has been around for a while, but now MIT students have developed a search engine that helps them find and listen to particular segments from their professors' lectures. And just in time for the election, Google Labs is offering audio indexing on YouTube's political channel.

In fact, one day in the not-too-distant future, spoken-word communication will likely replace the keyboard.

In the 21st Century, we have more than information; we have the technology to find it, manipulate it, massage it and manage it with unprecedented speed and accuracy. With all that information to back them up, you would think that we would see businesses, governments, and other institutions making brilliant decisions, right?

Wrong. Take your pick: the mortgage mess, the Wall Street roller coaster, the gas shortages that have affected many areas . . . It is very clear that good data is not driving nearly as many decisions as it should.

Navigating through this sea of information . . . determining which information is reliable and which isn't . . . is a daunting challenge for the trained information professional. For the untrained, it can be downright catastrophic.

Case in point: the current financial mess, which is affecting almost every aspect of our economy. As governments and institutions around the world frantically try to address the crisis, one question looms. Why did they not see this coming???

L. Gordon Crovitz, onetime publisher of the Wall Street Journal and its current "Information Age" columnist, has a theory. He writes, and I quote: "One explanation is the absence of warnings from the professionals whose job it is to identify risks at companies such as financial-services firms: the much-maligned research analysts."

Crovitz goes on to say that there are only about half as many analysts today as there were in 2000. "For decades," he writes, "the large Wall Street brokerages had armies of analysts who, when they did their jobs right, asked the hard

questions and issued tough reports that often alerted both company executives and public investors to market-moving issues."

I don't know about you, but I find that pretty frightening. We have never had so much information. But Wall Street, it seems, lacks the human capacity to transform that information into knowledge.

Information is not enough. As Mark Twain may--or may not--have written , "If you don't read the newspaper, you are uninformed; if you do read the newspaper, you are misinformed."

I like to say that information is power--and it can be. But information must be intelligently assembled, properly vetted, and thoughtfully analyzed before it becomes knowledge. The environment must be scanned for additional data to compare and contrast before knowledge can be reached. And without knowledge, there is no basis for intelligent decision making.

But the gulf between information and knowledge is often deep and wide. To get through the currents requires a navigator. . . in other words, an info pro.

- Knowledge will be essential in building the "next economy"--the new economic model that will replace the one that just broke down.
- Knowledge will be essential to saving our planet from global warming . . . and to finding ways to meet the needs of today's populations without destroying the future of tomorrow's.
- Knowledge will be essential to addressing all of the challenges of our troubled times . . . and information professions will be essential to getting that knowledge. But as they face these hard economic times, will governments and institutions understand that?

If you are an information professional . . . or you are studying library science . . . or even thinking about a career in the information profession, the need for your services will only grow. But will the demand grow at the same pace?

Let's face it. Every economic unit, from our families, to corporations, to governments at all levels is looking for something to cut. The decisions ahead will be hard ones, and they must be based on knowledge.

That means that libraries and information centers need to be prepared to lead their leaders--to demonstrate their value in navigating the way to wise decisions . . . and to show that they are attuned to their organization's priorities and people.

Organizational success has become a team sport . . . with every player contributing his or her own special skills and knowledge to get to goal. Members of a winning team have a thorough understanding of the strengths and

weaknesses of every other player. Members of a winning team are committed to the team's success.

One of Louisville's greatest--in fact, he calls himself The Greatest--once said this: "At home I am a nice guy: but I don't want the world to know. Humble people, I've found, don't get very far." I'm talking, of course, about Muhammad Ali.

How to get beyond humble? Start by asking yourself,

- Do the people who make decisions about your future have the right information about you and your library or collection?
- Do they know what you offer and who needs it to do their job?
- Most important, can they see the outcomes within your organization that were only possible because you linked people with the right information?

The next question is this: How well are you tracking the changing needs and priorities in your organization?

A recent survey done for SLA by Outsell showed that no matter where they work, what executives most want from their organization's library is information delivered to their desktop.

But managing the physical library and print collection--which librarians tend to consider their most important role? That ranked much lower on the list, especially with corporate executives.

Your answers to questions about how your job is viewed, and what you have done to correct that view . . . those answers will determine whether your work is deemed "mission critical" or simply "nice to have." Needless to say, in times of economic uncertainty, "nice to have" is not necessarily nice enough to keep.

University libraries can play an important role by thinking beyond the needs of their academic customers to find ways to support the school's administrative departments--where decisions about funding are ultimately made.

You may be able to provide unique insight into steps your school took in past economic downturns--and how well they worked.

You can provide competitive intelligence about the actions other colleges and universities are taking to cut costs or raise revenues. You can set up customized news tracking on issues of greatest concern for administrators.

The admissions and financial aid functions come to mind--two data-heavy businesses that are already challenged to respond to the implications of tight credit and other factors.

Do they know what you can do to help them cope? To be truly effective in a stormy economic environment, libraries must be certain that they are constantly tracking the ever-changing information needs of their institution and its departments.

The information professional's role is advancing . . . from simply organizing information to discovering it . . . from categorizing to extracting . . . from filling requests to anticipating needs. And, importantly, the information professional is becoming a collaborator.

Do not make the mistake of assuming that the information products you may already be creating will continue to fit the needs of the people you serve. Ask and observe: What once was a monthly briefing may need to become a daily alert. Information that sits passively on your Web site today may need to be pushed out to mobile devices tomorrow. And next month? Who knows?

Assume absolutely nothing--except that everything will change. The cutting-edge technology you are mastering today will one day be as useful to you as a box of 8-track tapes. But be assured . . . whatever replaces it will make beautiful music!

At the same time, do not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. The people you work with expect--and demand--information almost instantly. You may not have time to frost the cake.

It may seem daunting to stay up to date on technology trends that affect your work and the emerging information needs of the people who rely on you. But it doesn't have to be that way. Once again, the human connection works.

Technology writer Clay Shirky says that, "every URL is a latent community." He describes the Internet as a "many-to-many" medium that supports group action.

We are seeing this trend unfold already. One person posts a blog . . . another person comments on it . . . a third person corrects one aspect of it with a link to a different site. People instinctively come together to build knowledge. And technology is making it easier and more effective than ever before.

One implication of this: There are always others out there finding ways to tackle the same challenges you are facing. And information professionals know just where to find them, actually and virtually.

Take every opportunity to fortify your connections with others in your profession. A strong network is vital to stay on top of trends, tap trusted people for advice and position yourself for continuous learning.

SLA can help. Pushing hard on our 100th birthday, we now have about 11,000 members in some 75 countries around the globe. At our annual conference,

information professionals exchange experiences, ideas and solutions that would not emerge in any other forum.

But community doesn't end when our conference closes. SLA has a robust Web presence with a wealth of information and professional development opportunities, including our online Click University. Our members continue to learn and exchange ideas on our blogs and wikis. By the way, the Kentucky Chapter of SLA has its own blog.

If members don't know how to use Web 2.0 tools, they can visit the online SLA Innovations Laboratory. It offers self paced, bite-size lessons on everything you should know about Web 2.0.

I am asked all the time whether books will survive in a digital world. I believe they will--even if we need robots to retrieve them, like the Ekstrom Library!

But all of us must redefine the word Library--and get beyond buildings and stacks, as the University of Louisville is doing.

We must stop thinking of information as something that sits on a shelf like a can of green beans, just waiting for us to open it. Instead, let us recognize information as the life-force it truly is--good stuff fresh from the fields that we can combine to nourish, to build knowledge that we actively distribute.

Now is the time for information professionals to speak up, to make the case for knowledge. No "quiet, please" allowed! Now is the time to show your organization that you--and the knowledge you can gather--are indispensable ingredients in a smart, lean energetic enterprise.

Thank you.