Taking Community to the World

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Taking Community to the World

Jamie LaRue (jlarue@jlarue.com)

Collaborative Librarianship is honored to have Jamie LaRue write the “Guest Editorial” for this issue. Jamie has appeared on NPR, been cited in the Wall Street Journal, Forbes and the Denver Post, was a newspaper columnist for over 20 years, and authored, The New Inquisition: Understanding and Managing Intellectual Freedom Challenges (Libraries Unlimited, 2007). From 1990 to 2014, he was director of the Douglas County (Colorado) Libraries, widely known as one of the most successful and innovative public libraries in the U.S.A. He has received numerous honors and recognitions for his contributions to libraries and communities spanning several decades.

Today, Jamie LaRue writes, speaks and consults about the future of libraries. He is a candidate for the presidency of the American Library Association, the election to be held early in 2015.

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When I first started as a library director, I was clear about my responsibility: It was my job to secure the resources to make a great library. After a bit of seasoning (competing against police and fire for municipal resources, against roads for county resources, and against virtually every other bit of civic infrastructure as an independent library district), I had an epiphany.

Before then, I really did think that it was the responsibility of the community to support us. But after you sit at enough city council meetings, county commissioner town meetings, and the deliberations and planning efforts of a host of other public entities, you begin to realize that it may not all be about YOU, or in this case, the library. There are many causes in our communities. Most of them, if not their particular plan of the day (and that caveat includes libraries), are worthy.

The library is a vital community asset, far more positive and powerful than is readily grasped by civic leaders and the electorate. It still makes sense for library leaders to make our case, to demonstrate our value. And truly, it isn't that hard. We have a great story.

But ultimately, it is not the job of the community to make a great library. It is the job of the library to make a great community. The library does best that engages and supports local government, local businesses, local arts groups, local civic groups, local education efforts, local non-profit groups, and even local faith-based organizations. We can do something to lift every one of them. (But we also have to let them know we're doing that.) When one rises, we all rise—at least, if we are committed to tie our destinies together. And we are, whether we realize it or not.

I made pretty much the same arc of discovery when it came to our collections. Since the founding of public libraries, we have brought the world—selections of national bestsellers, important newspapers, award-winning films, classic music—to our community's backyard.

Before the World Wide Web, it took lots of tedious work and pooled local resources to gather, organize, and present the intellectual content of our culture. Our team of local experts—acquisition staff, catalogers, and reference librarians—kept one lively eye on the world of publishing, and another on the evolving tastes and interest of current or potential users. I am proud of, I have always been impressed by, the quality and consistency of our work.

But WITH the rise of the World Wide Web, this traffic greatly expanded. I remember my son, at the tender age of 13, hooking up with a kid in England with a similar interest in claymation. They made videos, in the moment, collaboratively, across an international network. They lied about their age to do it, but hey, what is empowerment if not "breaking the rules"?
Now, with a PC, then a netbook, then a smartphone, then a tablet, almost anyone could have at their fingertips intellectual wealth undreamt of by 20th century librarians. Bringing the world to the community was a worthwhile goal. But as telecommunications networks closed the last mile, it looked like this centuries-long role of libraries had been supplanted by the 'net.

And yet.

Everything is not digital, and not everyone has access to high speed networks. Much of our work continues unchanged.

Nevertheless, a new emphasis is emerging. What does the community have that the Internet does not?

Answer: our physical presence, our knowledge of our own stories, and increasingly, the possibility that those stories constitute something unique. No community is quite like the one I live in (or the one you live in), because no community has quite that admixture of quirky talent, civic experiments, and history.

So for now, librarians still are needed build the information and experiential platforms to deliver up what's interesting in the world. But we're also realizing that we can build our own servers with the writings of our homegrown bards, with the music of our neighborhood minstrels, with the visual arts of our local visionaries.

Once we've gathered it, once we've organized it, once we've presented it to those who made it, we realize that it's just possible that other communities might be interested, too.

In short, it was once the job of the library to bring the world to the community. Now, our job is to take the community to the world.1

Endnote

1 I wish I had said this first. I haven't tracked it down for sure, but it may well have come from Ann Arbor's Eli Neiberger. It wouldn't surprise me at all if he was first. But he is certainly right.