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UBC LIBRARY AND THE DIGITAL FUTURE

By Glenn Drexhage

Allan Bell still shudders at the memory.

Bell, the new Director of Digital Initiatives at UBC Library, recalls a recent technology conference that he attended. The speaker was a renowned academic from a prestigious business school. He was relaying his experience, in excruciating detail, about an online search using his library's website.

Following numerous failed attempts, he finally opted to use Google Scholar—and the item he sought instantly appeared.

After the talk, Bell approached the speaker and asked him if he had told the resident librarians about this experience.

"He gave me what he called the cold-hearted answer," Bell recalls. "He couldn't be bothered."

It's a tale that serves as a stark warning to all academic libraries in this brave new binary world—adapt and excel, or face possible consignment to the dusty stacks of yesteryear.

UBC Reports spoke with Bell—who previously worked at the University of Waterloo, Stanford University Libraries, Ovid Techologies Inc., the University of Texas and McGill University for his thoughts on the role of libraries in the digital age.

On his position, which is a new role at UBC Library:

"The thing that really drew me to this job was that the digital agenda is a key part of the Library's strategic plan (http://strategicplan.library.ubc.ca). That and the fact that if there is a future for libraries this is where that future will be made—in the digital realm."

"The challenges are a lot more difficult now, because of the commercial ventures that are doing work that we arguably should or could have been doing. The Google Books project, Google Scholar, all those kinds of things are competing with us for our core audience in a way that we've never really had before."

"I believe we can rise to the challenges. But I think the challenges could be fairly dire, especially if we don't change our organizations and evolve to meet them."

"Google has done some amazing things using libraries. They partnered with libraries and then digitized scads of material, and made those available. We (the library community) could have done that."

On libraries' way forward:

"We need to be more nimble, but it's difficult to be nimble when your goal is to preserve things for a long, long time. So we've done pretty well by waiting to see what happens with new formats. But things are happening so quickly now that that waiting period doesn't really exist anymore. So we really need to move a lot more quickly."

"I think we need to provide the intellectual context that maybe isn't provided by commercial entities. As information explodes, which it clearly is doing, the need for someone to wayfind for people, or guide them to the right place, becomes even more important."

"Also, it's important that libraries now seem to rent collections. We have a long history of building physical collections, but now we end up renting electronic content on a subscription basis. The fact that we are making material available from our own collections through digitization is an important step to building digital

UBC Reports | Vol. 56 | No. 12 | Dec. 3, 2010

Allan Bell says it is hard for libraries to be nimble when their goal is to preserve. Photo: Martin Dee

The problem of preservation

Digital preservation is a major issue facing research libraries. While the centuries-old format of paper remains a hardy medium for storing information—such as text and graphics—the ever-changing guises of digital technology (remember floppy disks?) present big challenges. Aged storage media and formats become obsolete, while newer ones may not be compatible with their older counterparts. If left untended, websites, blogs and other digital information might simply disappear into cyberspace.

Given the implications, the problem of preservation has become a worthy area of study and research. For example, the InterPARES project, based at UBC's School of Library, Archival and Information Studies and headed by Professor Luciana Duranti, focuses on the long-term preservation of digital records. You can find out more at www.interpares.org

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collections from the rich offerings at UBC."

"In addition, we have to start looking at the things that are born digital and start integrating those into the Library and into our finding aids to become indispensible to teaching, learning and research at UBC."

What is a key emerging trend in terms of libraries and technology?

"Digital preservation is something that we need to figure out sooner rather than later. It's a complicated issue that will require a multi-pronged approach. If we're doing digitization projects, that's great, and it's great that we have good backups for disaster recovery. But we really need to make sure that these inherently fragile digital objects are going to be authentic and available in 20, 30 years."

"It's not one of those issues where you do it once and forget it. Digital preservation is going to be something that we're going to have to loop around and look at again and again and again to make sure that we're doing it right for the future."

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