Guest Editorial

A Fold in Time

Thomas Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, tells the following story about the painting Juan de Pareja by Velasquez. In conducting his research prior to purchasing this masterpiece Hoving and his team were allowed to examine the painting in private. In the process they made an extraordinary discovery. The painting had been folded to fit the frame. Fortunately, the fold had not harmed the canvas. When the painting was finally displayed at the Met the proper size frame was provided.[1]

As librarians we build frames. Cataloging, classification, and library buildings are among our most notable of these. My colleague Fred Batt suggested that I include collection development policies. We fit the world into these frames. It is impossible of course for us to capture the world as it is. We can only approximate it. What do we miss? How important is what we miss?

Some of our frames may be called paradigms. Ownership and access are the most common. Others receive little attention. In fact, we have not done enough to discover new frames or to expand our awareness of the many types of existing frames in order to serve society and its people more effectively.

For over twenty years I have from time to time expressed opinions that run counter to the prevailing thinking in our profession. In *The Client-Centered Academic Library,* I expressed some of these views in a systematic way and proposed a prototype organization quite different than existing libraries in purpose and structure. [2] The potential far reaching impact of computers on libraries was one of the factors that in my mind would provide the supportive conditions for the design of a client centered library.

Shortly after the publication of *The Client-Centered Academic Library* I became aware of an important error in my thinking. I had proposed a new type of library structure based on the assumption that the most important changes necessary to accomplish this were organizational. In fact, they required an entirely new paradigm, a new way of thinking about the role and purpose of libraries themselves. This change was necessary before any organizational changes of the magnitude suggested could be undertaken. Essentially my view was that librarians dealt primarily with the structure of information (the frames analogy) and stopped short as professionals from dealing meaningfully with the content of information. Behavioral and attitudinal norms within the profession prohibited this degree of attention to content and were reinforced in theory by the paradigms in use and upheld in practice day to day.

I see the need for a paradigm in librarianship that recognizes and pays attention to the context of information as well as its content.

A few months ago I had an experience that led me to move beyond a paradigm formation based primarily on the content of information. As I walked past the University Archives I noticed a group of people sitting listening to a lecture about an important collection we had recently acquired. The archivist was providing her audience with a context for the contents of the collection. She was describing the background conditions existing at the time the resources in the collection were being produced and gathered together.

This context was equal to or greater in importance than the content.

As a result of this experience and my reflections based on it, I see the need for a paradigm in librarianship that recognizes and pays attention to the context of information as well as its content. For example, a context for information on the early growth of snow boarding as a sport might include the social and cultural attitudes of snowboarders toward skiers, their clothing, and status orientation.

The attitudes of skiers toward snowboarders would also be informative in a contextual sense.

As we near the end of the 20th century observers have begun to stress the importance of context. Without a suitable context the enormous amounts of information (content) available on most subjects cannot be adequately understood or structured in a meaningful and effective manner.

In *Avatars of the Word: From Papyrus to Cyberspace* James O'Donnell notes his willingness to pay for help to find and filter the ocean of data at his door. According to O'Donnell, librarians are already leading the way. "Can we imagine a time in our universities when librarians are the well-paid principals and teachers than mere acolytes? I do not think we can or should rule out that possibility."[3]

As we move to provide more content and a suitably encompassing context, we begin to reach users at higher levels - knowledge, wisdom, and the enhancement of life. By customizing our services to the greater needs of our clients we move beyond the banality of digits toward the more abstract but more rewarding realms of knowledge formation and the pursuit of wisdom. In this world if we primarily contribute more bytes or disjunctive smatterings of information we will be merely adding to the information overload in our society. We will also fail to reach beyond the obvious to the more fundamental challenges facing our society.

> No one else but we ourselves
> Handcuffed us, comfortably in the
>   face of our fear
> That's why we offer you our two
>   bound palms
> Instead of unfolded wings.
> Ivan Radoev[4]

Let us move beyond digital libraries to build whole earth libraries. Let us step back from reaching down for a handful of sand. Let us reach instead for the stars. Let us unfold our wings.

CHARLES MARTELL
(A former *C&RL* Editor)
California State University,
Sacramento

Notes
1. Thomas Hoving, *Making the Mummies Dance: Inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 259.
2. Charles Martell, *The Client-Centered Academic Library: An Organizational Model* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983).
3. James O'Donnell, *Avatars of the Word: From Papyrus to Cyberspace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 90.
4. Ivan Radoev, "Ballad for the Future," in *Clay and Star: Contemporary Bulgarian Poets*, trans. and ed. by Lisa Sapinkopf and Georgi Beleve (Minneapolis, Minn.: Milkweed, 1992), 58.