Editor's Desk

<p align="right">Eric C. Shoaf</p>

Game Changers

Name a field of endeavor, be it professional, leisure, or scholarly, and there will be some discovery, creation, or style at some point introduced as a "game changer." It's almost as though we are fixated on the newest and latest, as though we are more interested in trendsetting than substance:

- "Bright-Auto's latest Blingmobile will be a game changer in the market."
- "The discovery of this new species in the Amazon forest is a game changer for research."
- "Watson's latest app for the Miran electronic reader changes the game for the electronic book."

These are fictitious examples, but there have been true game changers over the years. No one will doubt that personal computers, Internet browsing, and cell phones changed the way we live our lives and have certainly been game changers. Similarly, a hundred years ago advances in residential electricity, telephone, aviation, and automobiles were changes that profoundly affected the way we live our lives. But this is all seen in hindsight. Generally, no one knows what will be the real game changer as opposed to the latest style or variation of product or service.

It is rather easy for pundits to append the "game changing" descriptor to the newest and latest. If they do it enough times, they will be right occasionally. What is the saying about the broken clock showing the correct time twice a day? That said, with information doubling every few years, and with rapidly changing technology, it is difficult not to see some applications of each that might change the game, even for librarians. Take, for example, the "Digital Rosetta Stone." A wireless memory chip sealed in silicon, it is said to store data for a thousand years. This is something I might be interested in, since I recently had a thumb drive fail after less than twelve months of use. The inventor says the device has uses for many types of fields, including data preservation.[1] For libraries, the device could offer many possible uses. Game changer? Sounds like it, but will we know before a thousand years passes? Closer to home, while Amazon's Kindle e-reader was a popular Christmas gift this year, the e-reader market continues to swell with new products, each attempting to outdo the others on features, price, or access to e-info (the latter may be where the real value lies). Sony already has three products available that are said to provide better resolution and more intuitive use than the well-received Kindle. News just before Christmas had Sony partnering with a number of public libraries to offer free book "check-outs" for its readers.[2]

Kindle has responded by playing up their first-to-market status with an endorsement from Oprah Winfrey, but what is not clear is how well the units are selling. It is difficult to know the precise impact of e-readers on the market when specific sales numbers have not been made available. It has been reported that selling the readers is not really where the money is to be made, but rather in selling the content.[3] Those pundits again? Market watchers, however, better understand the economics of technology, and it is now a well-established approach initially to sell a product inexpensively, perhaps at zero profit, then to offer the content at a real cost and to make money off the latter. Amazon pioneered this practice, but with free public library checkouts offered by a competitor, things are bound to get interesting. Game changer? Perhaps not, but at least briefly a market changer. There are a number of other e-readers lining up deals similar to Amazon's and Sony's.

In a way, the game is changing all around us. Many LLAMA members work in academic libraries, and higher education is being transformed by technology as rapidly as any endeavor rooted in information (kicking and screaming all the way, since the academy has always been a slow-to-change behemoth). A recent report documented radical new ways to educate the populace, many at odds with present practice.[4] The idea is that education can be free, with wiki universities, Facebook-style tutoring, open access online coursework, and more. If we accept the idea that distance learning is viable, and that taking a course online is already part of the landscape, then how big a step does it become to allow students to design their own curriculum: For example, enrolling in a class in algebra from MIT, one in design from UCLA, in ethics from Duke, and in engineering from the University of Texas at San Antonio could be possible. Students with access to electronic

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library holdings from across the country could engage in research not previously possible. The idea is viable, but a game changer? Maybe not (yet). The economics don't work because there is no established way to pay for the infrastructure involved in covering costs at different locations. Then there is the pesky matter of accreditation, and whether this approach to courses of study can be a viable alternative to established programs. These issues could probably be resolved with a real effort, but only at the cost of large-scale change in the current higher education business model. The idea of free education has been around for quite some time. Back in the 1960s, in any town or city with a large college, there was usually a sizable contingent of nonstudents who would attend classes for free.[5] Not for any sort of credit, since they weren't registered, but rather for the knowledge gained. If academia is not able to adjust to the changing market for education, perhaps entrepreneurs will step in and provide a means for accessing open-source online courses that can be tracked and developed into a virtual degree (now that would be a critical app!). Would this be acceptable to employers? In changing times, possibly. Would it be acceptable to the students? Yes, if it helped them get jobs? A game changer? Let's wait a while and revisit that question.

For those media-watchers, yes, the term "game changer" was on last year's list of banished words,[6] but previously so were "brainstorming," "webinar," and "synergy," plus other words in common use. Get over it. (Also on the list previously, but *apropos* here.)

References

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