Has the Old Lady with Cakes Passed Us By?

The Library in "Novel Circumstances"

John Lubans Jr.

November 2009 found me in Zagreb, Croatia, talking to academic librarians. I stayed a week and absorbed the multiple wonders of this historic city and, with a hike into the Medvenica hills, the surrounding countryside. The cakes passing by in the title, taken from a Croatian proverb, fit my underlying questions about what is happening to the academic library here and abroad.[1] Will librarians be left forlorn and empty-handed? Have we missed out on the opportunities, the cakes? Initially, I thought the subtitle phrase of "novel circumstances"—contributed by the organizing committee—was limited to the global budget crunch as it affected libraries, but as I thought about it and communicated with the organizers, I realized we have been in our own novel circumstances ever since e-resources came through our doors many years before the financial fumbles of late 2008.

I can date our novel circumstances from the early 1990s. That's when we first felt the tremors of a tectonic shift in library user behavior—still ongoing. The precipitous downward curve of the number of reference desk questions pointed to what was happening. The flood of students who previously engulfed our reference desks has crested and is now a trickle. Whenever available in the early days, do-it-yourself e-resources were preferred by most users; even our OPACs. If it wasn't in the OPAC, most users ignored the retro card catalog of books awaiting recon. In some libraries—not all—when the Internet vaulted into its premiere role as the go-to venue for Information, not only were the reference lines gone, the stacks were empty of browsers. Each of us probably has an opinion to offer on the causes of our novel circumstances and we can probably identify several of the economic and technological forces relentlessly bearing down on us. Some of these forces are beyond our control (Wikipedia, Google); others were and may still be in our control (staffing and how we organize ourselves). My Zagreb talk touched on three areas of influence: the digital, the financial, and the organizational. All three have enriched and challenged our lives, and indeed have contributed to our novel circumstances.

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The Digital

The drop off in reference questions was, of course, the earliest library indicator of *disintermediation,* the driver for much of the user's behavior in libraries, in the newspaper and media industry, the travel business, and publishing. It wasn't just that the user *preferred* the DIY model, the user saved time, among other benefits. Independence, as long as it is *on their terms,* is still a magnet for library users, I used to think the "i" in front of electronic devices and services like iPad, iPhone, iLife stood for information or Internet. Well, no longer. The prefatory letter stands for "I," as in "me." The Google Books program is another example of how the Internet is about independence. The millions of digitized books already available directly to the consumer vastly diminishes the collection-building and intermediary role of libraries, bookstores, and, to some extent, publishers. We may carp about the quality of Google's digitization, just like we did about Infotrac and other early e-resources in the 1980s, but the success or failure of e-books depends less on librarians than it does on the use made by literate people.

Google is now the world's information desk—they have achieved this stated goal, albeit a few years later than planned. Of course, the quality of the answer you get from Google depends on how well you know the limits of the system. Your answer might pop up in the first three returns, or, with some questions, you may find yourself circling endlessly as if asking for directions in some nightmare subway station. Providentially, there is at least one library benefit from the Internet's popularity as an information source. Our most savvy users realize that not everything is digital, nor that if even digital, that the Internet will find it. This caveat about Internet use has improved and strengthened partnerships between librarians and faculty and other knowledgeable users. Likewise, the rapid transition between print and digital, the velocity and complexity of e-resources and Web 2.0 innovations have faculty and

administrators looking to us for help. This has led to some exciting and sustaining in-depth collaborations in the classroom, and between teaching departments and the library. And, therein lies hope for the academic library's future.

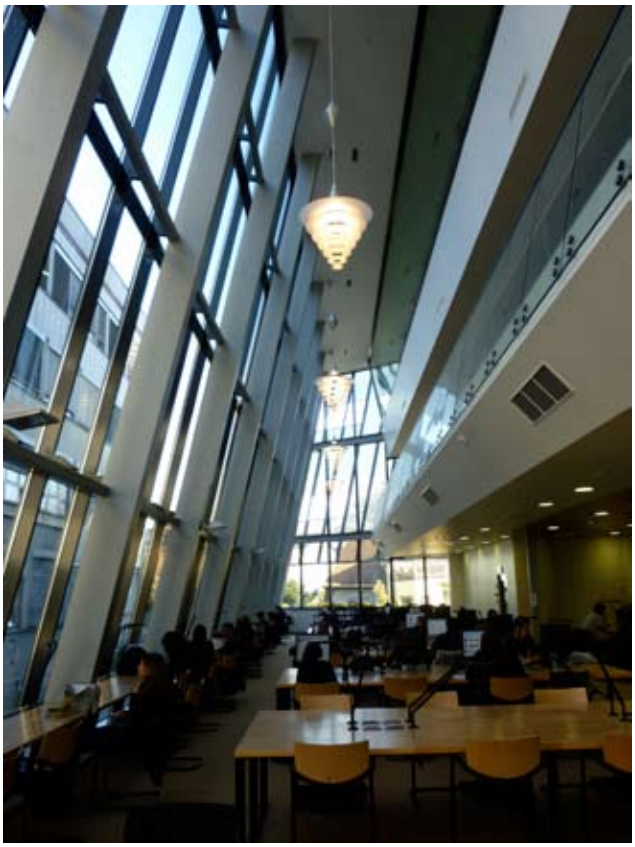
The Financial

Daniel Greenstein, an IT vice provost, recently offered up a gloomy prediction from budgetarily challenged California—where budgets are down appreciably more than 10 percent.[2] Worse, according to a survey article the Chronicle of Higher Education, the UC-Berkeley Library has already lost 18 percent of its budget along with 30 staff members, and there's more adversity to come in 2010.[3] For Greenstein, "The university library of the future will be sparsely staffed, highly decentralized, and have a physical plant consisting of little more than special collections and study areas." Why? Because "capital funding is scarce, space constraints are severe, especially on urban campuses—and, frankly. . . funding needs to flow into other aspects of the academic program."[4]

Greenstein's prediction alarmed the librarians at the discussion, and a flurry of denial ensued in the comments segment of the article reporting on the meeting following his presentation. I might argue with Greenstein's forecast over the short-term versus long-term effects, or his unclear, possibly ignorant, suggestions for outsourcing, but we likely will see much of what he predicts. While these proposals may be unpopular among our allies on campus, triggering a "No Change!" tantrum or two, a scarcity of dollars will force administrators into unsavory choices, regardless. Libraries that have strong community relationships can expect more support than a library that believes its being there is sufficient reason to keep funding it. And, even with good relationships, some of our assumptions about core roles will change. The overzealous, just-in-case book collection model probably never was a good idea—we still don't know what value all those unused books added—and it certainly has even less sustainability in an era of digital books and user preferences for the digital, and fewer library dollars.

These dire predictions jarred a bit with what I encountered in Zagreb. In 2009, the University of Zagreb opened a new library for the humanities and social sciences, consolidating more than twenty branch libraries in an architecturally striking building (pictured). Perhaps anticipating a "bare necessities only" future, this library has no coffee bars, no group studies, and no computer commons. It does have a large amount of attractive seating at tables and carrels, self service checkout, computer stations on every floor, lots of books on open shelves, and a service desk on *every* floor. The building was heavily used during the several daylight hours I spent in it.

Budgetary distress is not limited to California. On the East Coast, after Harvard lost nearly eleven billion dollars—or 27 percent of its endowment—Harvard Dean



The new library for the University of Zagreb's Humanities and Social Sciences departments. The mezzanine offers dozens of seats looking out across the first floor study space through the sloping windows.

Michael Smith says he "hopes to rebuild (the library) with a dramatically smaller base of resources." The Harvard College Library has already reduced its workforce by some one hundred staff.[5] As one would expect, not all academic units are equal when it comes to sharing the pain. An example of this relative "hardship": Thai food takeout replaced the seasonal catered banquet at a department head's home. No faculty salaries will be reduced, nor will professors teach extra classes, for now. If the severity of Harvard and Berkeley's library reductions are any example, libraries may be far more vulnerable than faculty salaries and the long list of protected privileges and perks enjoyed by academics at elite public and private schools.

The Organizational

Much of my Zagreb talk focused on the concept of organization. I stressed this because how we are organized influences staff empowerment and impedes or facilitates how we work through change. There are two kinds of change. There is change we initiate. We use existing or new resources in proactive and new ways. We operate from strength. We create urgency. And, there is change done to us. We are forced to change: we react, reduce, minimize,

and restructure. Urgency is imposed. We may operate from weakness and fear. Or, we can adapt. When disaster strikes, urgency is imposed, but all is not necessarily lost. In disasters, people often rise to the occasion. We do what it takes; we help each other, we work together, we use what resources remain, we don't worry about mistakes—after all, in a disaster how much worse can it get? Libraries have at least three strategies for dealing with change: autocratic, democratic, and, lastly, muddling through—our seemingly preferred model, in my experience.

We muddled along with our dwindling reference desk service. As long as funding remained the same, many of us disbelieved that the drop-off in questions was permanent and in need of any repair. Now, with less money, there is little choice but to stop staffing stagnant service points. Denial has a cost: missed opportunity. We delayed literally a decade in some libraries before getting out from *behind the desk*. With autocratic solutions, formal leaders make decisions with little or no input from staff. Some staff and some organizations prefer top-down leadership. Indeed some cultures are so indoctrinated they wait to be told what to do. Libraries—quasi-bureaucracies—are prone to this, and most library leaders have to work hard at resisting the draw of a bureaucratic style of decision-making. Even the most egalitarian libraries, with open discussion, often reserve the final decision-making for senior department heads and higher-ups. Personally, I prefer democratic change with broad involvement by all on key decisions. My conviction stems from the massive organizational research literature outside of libraries, from my studies on organizations like the conductor-less Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and Southwest Airlines, and from my real-world library experience with self-managing teams. Without fail, I got better—highly creative and more productive—results in collaborative efforts than I did with bureaucratic approaches.

Elinor Ostrom, the winner of the 2009 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics, bolsters my argument for more participation. The award committee said Ostrom's "research show(s) how common resources—forests, fisheries, or oil fields—can be managed successfully by the people who use them, rather than by governments or private companies."[6] Ostrom's work challenges the conventional wisdom that experts and governmental bureaus should be making these decisions for us. Still, the top-down tradition prevails on campus and off. An astonishing headline, "How unions and executives killed off Saturn's shared decision making," describes the demise of the Saturn car company.[7] The headline—purporting collusion between management and labor—suggests just how entrenched the hierarchy and its supporters can be, even to the point of self-destruction. Saturn might have survived had it remained in the collaborative tradition in which it was created and thrived for several years. At the start, back in 1985, the company issued a joint labor and management statement: "We believe that all people want to be involved in decisions that affect them, care about their jobs . . . and want to share

On my trek up three-thousand-foot Mt. Sljeme, in the Medvednica national park, the early going took me along a rolling golden carpet of beech tree leaves.

in the success of their efforts."[8] By 2003, the union and administrative forces that were opposed to participatory organization had won. The dreamed-about collaboration evaporated like an early morning fog, and Saturn became one of the casualties in the GM bankruptcy. Had the inclusive Saturn model been adopted throughout GM, I wonder if bankruptcy might have been avoided.

There is another complication in my call for greater participation by staff in decision-making. In the United States, I told my Croatian audience, many young librarians really do not want to be managers or leaders. And, those who do want to be boss naturally gravitate to hierarchical structures. I told them about a talk I had with a bright, young reference librarian about her leadership potential. She was interested in leading, but remarked that the supervisors at her large library in New York City are rarely happy. They are aggrieved in appearance: always in a hurry, preoccupied, some with shoulders slumped and scowling faces. Why, she sagely asked me, would she want to be so stressed? Her peer group of a dozen other young professionals confirmed that this is indeed what they see whenever groups of library supervisors meet. At the least, we should consider ways to alleviate the causes of managerial stress and to encourage front-line librarians to reconsider their disdain for leadership roles. I'm told that Seneca's essay, "On the Shortness of Life," is now required reading

for MBA students at some business schools. Perhaps slipping a copy of that essay under the supervisor's office door might brighten his or her outlook on life.[9] Or more to the point, hear what Southwest's former CEO Herb Kelleher, of Wild Turkey Bourbon fame, has to say: "I take my job seriously, I don't take *myself* seriously."

In the next day's followup discussion in Zagreb—"Coffee with John"—a senior librarian pretty much told me that I was tilting at windmills with my advocacy of teams and such. To paraphrase her comment: Library leaders are told what they can do by the organizational leadership. If the upper level bosses do not want teams—and they don't—there won't be teams! She was not going to play Sancho to my Don Quixote! Much of my organizational viewpoint comes from personal experience with teamwork and in working toward a "post-departmental" organization—at least on paper. While it is seemingly self-evident that a democratic organization is best, it does not always play out that way, regardless of the lip service paid to the idea by administrators and staff.

What Cakes Will Remain?

Picking up on the Croatian proverb, one of the librarians asked about the cakes; what cakes were in the oven? The S-shaped curve is a metaphor I use when contemplating our future. Think of the letter S, as large as a flip-chart, slightly tilted forward—that's the S-shaped curve. The tail on the left is the beginning of something, its birth. The end on the right is the conclusion of something, its death. The curve helps me consider where we are and how far we have to go before we need to start a new curve. When we are near the top, not past our prime, we have the time and resources to plan our next upward curve. Of course, at the top we tend to think we can only go up, just like the ill-fated housing market. It is at the top where leadership matters, where leaders can make decisions that prepare the organization for either the new curve or the downward tumble.

In Croatia, I asked the group to tell me where libraries were on the curve I drew for them on a flip chart. They suggested a mix of locations, mostly past the prime location. I see libraries as mature, in some instances an endangered species. If we are to start a new upward curve, what will we take with us? What stays? What do we stop doing? What do we start doing? This is a long overdue conversation we should have with our stakeholders, our users, our staffs, our funding agencies. With a collaborative and open effort I think we can continue in our central role of intelligent information seeking and provision.

The Graying Profession—Not!

When I speak to American librarians, those in the audience match my shade of gray. Of the 150 participants in Zagreb, 60 percent were young, 30 percent middle-aged, and the rest like me. I was probably the oldest person in the lecture hall. I got the impression that these youngish librarians are primed to envision how to move forward and what to move toward in the future library—what to jettison and what to invent. I sensed, from a half-dozen conversations with these "Young Turks," a groundswell for change, a penchant for proaction, even if the old guard is not ready. My take-away impression was that there is a pent-up demand among the young librarians to leave the old way, and to do things differently. This yearning of the young wanting to replace the old has always been with us—it is human—but perhaps this burgeoning of independence is augmented by the war with Yugoslavia in the early 90s, a war of independence. I saw and shared in that desire for independence in the dawn hours of my departure on November 18: There were candles flickering on the downtown sidewalks and in the airport lobby in memory of those killed in the Croatian town of Vukovar. Because of that city's persistent and against-the-odds resistance to invading forces, too little and too late international support, and its eventual devastation, Vukovar is a symbol for human independence and the sacrifice it demands.

In Zagreb's historic upper town, I spotted this whimsical place set amidst the dignified embassies and rows of refurbished ancient houses and newly restored apartments.

References and Notes

1. My title comes from a Croatian proverb, "The old lady with cakes has already passed by," meaning, "Now it is too late to act." In my keynote address at the Ninth Annual Conference of the Croatian University and Scientific Libraries I posed it as a question: "Je li prosla baba s kolacima?" The Academic Library in 'Novel Circumstances,'" University of Zagreb, Croatia, Nov. 13–14, 2009.
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3. Jennifer Howard, "Libraries Explore Big Ideas to Overcome Small Budgets: Tough Times Are Taking a Toll but Spurring Innovations in Handling Collections," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Nov. 22, 2009), http://chronicle.com/article/Libraries-Explore-Big-Ideas-to/49227 (accessed Dec. 6, 2009).
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6. Elinor Ostrom, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elinor_Ostrom (accessed Dec. 14, 2009).
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7. Ibid.
9. Seneca's essay "On the Shortness of Life" (an abbreviated translation) can be reflected upon here: www.philosophicalsociety.com/Archives/On%20The%20Shortness%20Of%20Life.htm (accessed Dec. 17, 2009)