New and Noteworthy

Running to Stand Still: The Challenge of Keeping Up with Library Trends

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How do you keep up with what's going on in your field? Library and information organization managers are expected to be aware of the latest trends and developments, but the sheer amount of information produced daily can be impossible to effectively handle. Not only is news and information itself always in a state of flux, but the methods by which that information is transmitted changes constantly as well. Librarians have traditionally offered current awareness services to our patrons, but how well do we do the same for ourselves?

As Dorothy Barr states in a 2006 paper,[1] librarians must not only stay up-to-date with key information, but must also keep on top on the technologies via which that information is transmitted, both for themselves and their patrons. She offers a brief history of the often time-consuming process of offering current awareness services to library patrons, from the publications of the Royal Society of London in the 17th century to ISI's *Current Contents* service in the late 1990s. Unlike earlier methods of delivery, however, today's current awareness services do not require significant librarian intervention. For example, patrons themselves can set up their own news alert services, tables of contents and citations alerts,[2] and other auto-alerts from a number of sources. Barr also mentions the growing popularity of the RSS feed,[3] which was apparently not widely used at the time of the article's publication.

Another study published at approximately the same time highlights the wide range of choices that library professionals have when monitoring professional news.[4] The study authors, both librarians at Georgia State University Library, surveyed over 700 academic librarians to discover how they managed to keep abreast of new information, and if new technologies were a help or barrier in that effort. At the time of the survey, most participants indicated that listservs were a preferred method, as well as networking with peers at conferences and reading professional journals. As was mentioned in Barr's 2006 paper, blogs and RSS feeds were not seen as being an integral tool for the information-gathering process. Only 28 percent of the responders reported using blogs as an information source, and 15 percent used RSS aggregators or XML readers. Frequently-mentioned reasons included the opinion that listservs were more useful than

blogs, and that the sheer number of blogs made determining the "best ones" difficult. Another comment, which certainly contributes to the problem of information overload, is that "the growth of the profession into areas such as classroom teaching, information systems and web technologies implies that librarians cannot limit themselves to gathering information and reading literature from strictly the "library" field. Instead, librarians must attempt to keep up with trends in education and information systems, for example, in addition to literature in disciplines in which they teach or collect materials" (196).

The importance of keeping up with "trends" in general is well explained in a 2011 title from ALA Editions, Elisabeth Doucett's *What They Don't Teach You in Library School.*[5] The book is divided into three logical career phases: before the first job, new to the job, and with some job experience. However, the suggestions here are useful to professionals regardless of the number of years spent in the field. Of particular interest to "keeping up" is Chapter 14, "Trend Tracking." As Doucett states, "if librarians are not aware of, or are behind the curve in understanding and taking advantage of, today's trends, then we all run the risk of becoming irrelevant and unimportant to our society" (110). To help ensure that doesn't happen, the chapter outlines eight straightforward steps to identify and process useful projects for your own library, from identifying potential sources of information to developing a viable project proposal from your list.

Recent print resources about current awareness in librarianship are few, but another title in addition to Doucett's chapter is from Steven M. Cohen, a law librarian who also blogs at www.librarystuff.net.[6] In *Keeping Current: Advanced Internet Strategies to Meet Librarian and Patron Needs,*[7] Cohen offers two key reasons for librarians to keep current: ". . . monitoring ongoing news and resources for their profession and locating useful resources for their patrons" (xi). In order to do this, however, librarians need a strategy, and this is Cohen's main focus. His "theory of currency" suggests that librarians should not have to "find" material; it should come to them via e-mail alerts or other services and shouldn't take all day to digest. Further, librarians should limit themselves to no more than two data-gathering tools (not including e-mail), stay away from tools that are installed on only one machine, and learn to skim (13-14). A discussion about search engines, web site monitoring software, weblogs, and RSS feeds rounds out the book, liberally supplemented with images and examples.

In a 2004 follow-up article,[8] Cohen also provides more common-sense tips for keeping the flood of information to a manageable stream, although (as in the book) many of the websites he mentions are now dated or defunct. His "eight steps for keeping current" include limiting your browsing, choosing your methods carefully, finding the right sources (and not forgetting to purge them when you don't need them anymore), and keeping your information flow fresh and relevant.

Of course, many of the online resources mentioned in Cohen's book and article, both published several years ago, are no longer active.[9] However, this is an issue not isolated to print material. Online resources frequently come and go as usage patterns and professional interests change. For example, the popular "The Kept-Up Academic Librarian" blog, which has highlighted topics in academic librarianship and higher education since 2003 (http://stevenbell.info/keepup/index.htm), is no longer actively maintained. As author Steven Bell states in his final post, dated August 31, 2012, "It has been a good run but the need for this blog is diminished ...Now with so many others sharing higher education news on social networks, along with other sources such as University Business' daily update, Academic Impressions and daily news items in the Chronicle and IHE, it's clear there is less need - and that is supported by the stagnant usage data." In a 2011 *Library Journal* blog column,[10] Bell emphasizes the need to monitor not only the key resources in particular fields (*The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, for academic librarians), but also multiple information streams; there is no "one size fits all" resource for keeping up.

To use a well-worn metaphor, having access to such a wealth of professional information can be like drinking from a fire hose. As Steven Cohen summarizes this issue in his book *Keeping Current*, "Staying on top of current developments is often difficult, overwhelming, and cumbersome, but there are ways in which librarians can keep abreast using the latest technologies without falling victim to information overload" (xi). What are some of the ways that YOU keep yourself current?

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References

[1] Barr, Dorothy. Staying Alert: The Wild New World of Current Awareness Services. *University of Massachusetts Medical School Library Publications and Presentations*, Paper 5 (2006). http://escholarship.umassmed.edu/lib_articles/5

[2] For a useful list of Tables of Contents (TOCs) in a variety of subjects, see the free current awareness service *Journal TOCs* at http://www.journaltocs.ac.uk. New journal issue alerts are also available via the *Academia.edu* news feed at http://journals.academia.edu.

[3] Articles, websites and books on RSS (Really Simple Syndication) number in the hundreds. For a short, basic introduction to RSS technology, see: "What is RSS?" (Software Garden, Inc., last updated 6 July 2004), http://rss.softwaregarden.com/aboutrss.html. Another introduction is *Blogging and RSS: A Librarian's Guide*, 2nd ed. (Medford, N.J., Information Today, 2010) by Michael P. Sauers, who is currently the Technology Innovation Librarian for the Nebraska Library Commission and who blogs at http://travelinlibrarian.info. This is a very elementary guide geared to those with little exposure to RSS, and it also touches on blog creation, feed aggregators, microblogging with Twitter, and other relevant topics. For a nicely-annotated list of recommended RSS feed readers and social bookmarking tools, see M. Kathleen Kern and & Cuiying Mu. The Impact of New Technologies on Current Awareness Tools in Academic Libraries. *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 51.2 (2011): 92-97.

[4] Hardesty, Skye and Tammy Sugarman. Academic Librarians, Professional Literature, and New Technologies: A Survey. *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 33.2 (2007): 196-205.

[5] Doucett, Elisabeth. *What They Don't Teach You in Library School* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2011), 109-119.

[6] *LibraryStuff.net*, "the library weblog dedicated to resources for keeping current and professional development," is sponsored by Information Today, Inc., and provides not only frequently-updated content, but also additional web tools and resources. Available at http://www.librarystuff.net.

[7] Cohen, Steven M. *Keeping Current: Advanced Internet Strategies to Meet Librarian and Patron Needs* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2003).

[8] Cohen, Steven. Eight Steps for Keeping Current. *Knowledge Quest* 33.1 (2004): 40-41.

[9] One notable exception is the popular current awareness service *Current Cites* (http://currentcites.org/), published continuously since August 1990 and edited by Roy Tennant.

[10] Bell, Steven. From the Bell Tower: Hey, New Academic Librarian: You Need To Keep Up, Too. *Library Journal* (June 16, 2011). Available at http://www.libraryjournal.com/lj/communityacademiclibraries/891021-419/hey_new_academic__librarian.html.csp