Get to Know Your Gadget Guy or Gal

Tips from an Accidental Library Technologist on Staying Current

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Something happened last week to cause me to reflect on how I became technologically knowledgeable enough to edit a technology column. One of my graduate assistants asked me to explain (1) how a patron clicking on a link in an article index is taken to the full-text of the journal article from another vendor, and (2) what happened behind the scenes when the patron was off-campus to allow remote access. I found myself explaining open URLs, link resolvers, digital object identifier systems (DOIs), and proxy server authentication.[1] I realized that I learned a lot of technical stuff somewhere between graduating with my master's in LIS and now.

How did this happen? I never set out to be a technology guru. I didn't take any tech classes in library school (and I graduated in 1999, so a lot has changed). I don't feel like I am on the bleeding edge of anything. Any time I mention some new technology to my husband, he says "yes, I read about that a month ago." Yet I have a not-so-quiet pride in my ability to keep up and learn what is new. I am not a systems engineer, data security specialist, or programmer, but I can hold my own in meetings.

While explaining DOIs to my graduate assistant, I determined that I am probably a lot like many readers of *Reference and User Services Quarterly (RUSQ)*: we use technology daily in reference, collection development, and almost everything else that we do. At the same time, most of us are not the systems librarian or the go-to person for all things techie, and we occasionally wonder where we learned what we know and if it is enough. If you are like me, you might fear that you will someday have outdated technical knowledge—that you won't keep up. Or, you could be concerned that you aren't keeping up right now. (I have this recurring nightmare where I am in a meeting and I realize that I don't know what is going on . . .)

Today's column is about where you can go to stay current and a little bit about why you should care about emerging technologies. Future columns will highlight current—but major—technologies with a public services impact because, after all, service is what we are about. There will also be a "what to watch" section that will help you with what to keep your eye on and what might be on the way out.

LOOK BEYOND YOUR IMMEDIATE AREA

It is easy to become overfocused and to build expertise in one area to the exception of all else. Staying current requires lifting your chin up and looking around. Think about what is outside of your immediate sphere and even further—think

outside of librarianship. In the realm of technology, what is happening in your community, in higher education, in the rest of the world?

READ. JUST A LITTLE. EVERY DAY.

Reading something every day, in addition to looking for information when you need it, is a great way to stay current. It is also less overwhelming than trying to set aside a large block of time for professional development. There are a lot of places to find information on technology in print and online. Web sites, blogs, and mailing lists are some of the easiest ways to get a daily dose of library (and nonlibrary) technology information. Setting up Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds make it even easier, as the information is then aggregated into one place, perhaps even into your e-mail.

TechEssence
http://techessence.info

"Come here for accurate, understandable explanations of important information technologies for libraries. Go elsewhere for the hype." TechEssence lives up to its promise with a straightforward approach. The focus is not on the technology—although the technologies are well explained here—but on how libraries can use the technologies to provide services and content to patrons.

The content of TechEssence is written by a group of library technology experts, including Roy Tennant of the California Digital Library; Andrew Pace, technology columnist for *American Libraries*; Jerry Kuntz, creator of the KidsClick! Web portal; and other leaders in library technology.

The default page for TechEssence is the blog, which is regularly, but not obsessively, updated—about once a week. The Technologies section contains detailed information about technologies, with sections devoted to what it is, what can be done with it, and who should be using it. As with any site created by good librarians, it also contains directions on where to go for more information on a technology and links to examples.

If there is any downside to this site, it is that the emphasis is on technologies that are already proven as important to libraries, not on what is hot or emerging. Those librarians looking to be trendsetters will need to get information elsewhere.

Techsource blog
www.techsource.ala.org/blog

This is the blogging arm of the American Library Association's (ALA) *TechSource Online* publications. Posts to the blog are frequent—you can expect new content several times a week—and substantial. The content is a mix of news, factual information, and opinions on an amazing range of technology issues. The categorization and tagging of posts in the blog is extensive, enabling discovery of relevant content.

You can subscribe to the RSS feed or just look at the most recent posts.

Library Success Wiki
www.libsuccess.org

The Library Success Wiki was created by Meredith Farkas (also a contributor to TechEssence) in 2005 on the premise that "All over the world, librarians are developing successful programs and doing innovative things with technology that no one outside of their library knows about," as the site notes in its introduction. As with all wikis, this is a participatory sport, and librarians are invited to add to the content of the Library Success Wiki by writing about it in the wiki or posting a link to content posted elsewhere.

There is a big section of the Library Success Wiki devoted to technology, but other topics are covered as well, including readers' advisory, marketing, and management. You can search for a specific topic, browse by subject, or view just the most recent postings on the recent changes page or by subscribing to the wiki's RSS feed.

Library Link of the Day
www.tk421.net/librarylink

This Web site is not entirely about technology, but I recommend it as a way to stay broadly aware of the field of librarianship. To make sure that you get this daily, sign up for the mailing list or subscribe to the RSS feed. Links to online articles about libraries of all types and library issues of all manner, from technologies to censorship to preservation will be delivered to you once a day. The focus is on current issues, but sometimes the links are to articles that are years old but have contemporary relevance. The scope is global (but mainly in English) and occasionally there is even an article which might be suitable to pass on to your nonlibrarian friends or bring up at a party.

Tame the Web
http://tametheweb.com

Michael Stephens posts almost daily about libraries, technologies, and the ways in which libraries respond to technology. Occasionally amusing, frequently informative, and often eye-opening, Stephens brings his experience as a public librarian and his evident fascination with technology to his blog.

BE DISCERNING

Where do you want to be on the technology scale? First-adopter? Fast-follower? Cautiously curious? Last on the block? Not everyone (or every library) can be so far out in front that they are falling off of the edge. And even the edgy library is likely to pick where to be a leader and where to be a follower. Being "on the edge" on everything hurts.

So, make some decisions about where you want your library, or department, or yourself to be. Which areas are most ripe for technology change? Keep your eyes open to new technologies in case something really good comes along, but save more of your energy for those things that fit in areas where you are planning change. If you implemented a new catalog interface last year, maybe you will only give related technologies a scan and focus instead on new communications technologies.

GET TO KNOW YOUR GADGET GUY . . . OR GADGET GAL

I think you know what (or rather, who) I mean. Someone at your organization probably came immediately to mind. It is the person who was the first to own a PDA and cameraphone, the one who lists an Instant Messenger name on a business card. If this person does not already talk to you about fresh technologies, reach out. Let him know that you want to know what's new, what he and his friends are using.

For me, I have a host of gadget guys among my graduate assistants. I am blessed by their willingness to question how we currently do things and suggest technologies that may (or may not) be an improvement on our existing processes. A big part of this is being open to suggestions and the other person knowing that not everything mentioned will come to fruition.

POOL YOUR RESOURCES, *OR* MANY HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

There are also several librarians with whom I work or with whom I'm friends who are members of different organizations than me or who read different discussion lists and blogs. They send me e-mails asking "Have you seen this?" with links to new technology information. If I've seen it, I delete the message. If I haven't, I click and read. I know that they've pre-screened what they send to me and it will be worth a look, maybe even a full-blown exploration. Likewise, I send them information that I find. This is a way to spread out the effort. There is enough technology to spread around. If all of you are interested in gaming and you put your collective focus there, you might miss out on a lot of other developments. I suppose you could be organized and coordinate who belongs to which lists and RSS feeds or who follows what technologies, but the point is to reduce the effort; just be ad hoc.

CARE

This is the most important element to staying current, and if you don't already care, little I write here is going to make a difference. But I am a columnist, so I will try. What happens in information technology (IT) (especially the IT world outside of the library) will affect your patrons and will affect you, if not directly, then by extension. Let me rant a bit more, please. This goes not just for IT, but for technical services as well. There is a lot happening in cataloging right now, and I predict that the trickle-down effect on public services will be big. Staying aware of the coming attractions will make you a better reference librarian and more promotion-worthy. If you are feeling sluggish or in a professional rut, it could even renew you.

ATTEND SOMETHING OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE

I once turned down encouragement to attend the Digital Library Federation (DLF) conference because I deemed it outside of my area of expertise. Now I know that you learn the most when you attend conferences, conference programs, and courses that are a little outside of what you already know. Constant bombardment with the new can be overwhelming, and you want to also improve your current skills, but by being discerning, you can probably select two conference sessions at each Annual Conference, or one new conference a year, or a continuing education offering online or at your campus that will expand your areas of knowledge. I attended a great lecture on social taxonomies held at the electrical and computer engineering school on my campus.

There are online offerings as well, from a variety of places: RUSA, the Library Information Technology Association, Educause, the Association of College and Research Libraries, state library associations, and local library consortia. If there are enough interested people in your geographical area, it may be cost-effective to bring in a consultant. There might be an expert near you. Try the ASCLA/OLOS/RUSA Directory of Peer Consultants and Speakers at https://cs.ala.org/speakers or the Special Library Association's CONSULT Online at www.sla.org/consultonline. Again, your state association or local consortium may have a list of experts available to offer training.

EXPAND YOUR SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL CIRCLES

While most of us need another workday meeting like we need increased journal prices, meeting with colleagues who are not in attendance at the same meetings as you can really open your eyes. It took me traveling to Nigeria with a serials cataloger to make me aware of the looming developments of Research Description and Access (RDA), Faceted Application of Subject Terminology (FAST), and Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR).

Don't wait as long as I did! It is embarrassing. Be the first reference librarian on your block to know how FAST and RDA might affect the OPAC and your patrons. These changes will have technical ramifications. (If there are any ILS vendors reading this, I hope that you are getting ready.) Get in on the discussions early and be part of the change. Advocate for the patron; applaud developments as warranted or stand up and make suggestions for improvement.

A formal meeting of groups can be productive. My library just instituted a meeting between our general public services librarians and technical services librarians. Library IT and public service might be a good occasional meeting to have as well. Informal conversations over lunch, coffee, or in the hallway after another meeting can be beneficial and easier to schedule. I knew I was "in" with cataloging when one of the serials catalogers stopped by the reference desk to ask what I thought of the Calhoun report. Not only did he know I understood what he was talking about, he valued my input.

EMERGING (AND RETREATING) TECHNOLOGIES

There are many technology top-X (ten or otherwise) lists available.[2] Sometimes it would be nice to know what is *not* a top technology. This next section of the column will occur routinely and will address technologies on different places of the emergence spectrum.

Sprouting—Instant Messaging

Instant messaging (IM) is a growing mode of communication for reference services. It is already huge with our users, particularly for teenagers, who use it more than e-mail.[3] While not for every library, if you've not looked at IM (lately) then look again. There are new services out there such as MeeboMe and CuteChat, which, while new and perhaps cloyingly named, have potential for libraries. I am not yet ready to sound the death knell of traditional chat software, given the alpha state of MeeboMe and newness of CuteChat to the library market, which has heavy consortial demands. However, these should be raising the concern of some library chat vendors and the interest of more than a few librarians.

In Bloom—Millennials

If you haven't already smelled this flower (to overextend a metaphor) you should. But if you've already read the Edu-cause report or attended a good program on Millennials or the generation gap at a conference, then turn your attention elsewhere—maybe to another age group such as the Baby Boomers or Generation X-ers.[4] The issues may (or may not) be different, but Millennials are not the only people affected by technology.

Dormant—Voice over Internet Protocol and Online Videoconferencing

These just haven't seemed to catch on with the general population and certainly not as a library service. Maybe the technology is not good enough, or maybe it is not what people want to do online. I've not investigated. If I read that there are a lot of consumers using these technologies, I'll pick up my interest again. If you want to be a pioneering library in this area, please let me know how it goes.

References and Notes

1. If you aren't familiar with DOIs or other technologies mentioned, you are not alone among librarians.
2. The Library and Information Technology Association (LITA) presents a semiannual Top Technology Trends meeting at Midwinter Meeting and Annual Conference. Lists from past meetings are available at: www.ala.org/ala/lita/litaresources/toptechtrends/top technology.htm (accessed Sept. 1, 2006).
3. Pew Internet and American Life Project, "Teens and Technology: Youth are Leading the Transition to a Fully Wired and Mobile Nation," July 27, 2005, www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Teens _Tech_July2005web.pdf (accessed Sept. 1, 2006).
4. Diana Oblinger, "Boomers, Gen-Xers, and Millennials: Understanding the New Students," *Educause Review* 38, no. 4 (Jul./Aug. 2003): 37–47, www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/erm0342.pdf (accessed Sept. 1, 2006). For starters, *RUSQ* 45:2 and 39:2 each contained articles on the aging population of the United States and libraries' collections and services for this group.