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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/563808qm>

Journal

Library Hi Tech News, 24(8)

ISSN

0741-9058

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Publication Date

2007-10-30

DOI

10.1108/07419050710835974

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ALA Annual Conference, Washington DC: LITA/IRSIG Program "The Ultimate Debate: Do Libraries Innovate?"

Mitchell Brown

The Library and Information Technology Association (LITA) Internet Resources and Services Interest Group (IRSIG) hosted a new series called The Ultimate Debate when three panelists discuss issues relevant to libraries and information professionals. More a discussion of topics than a debate, "The Ultimate Debate: Do Libraries Innovate" was held in the Mayflower Hotel, Washington, DC on Saturday, 23 June 2007 Moderated by LITA Vice-President Andrew Pace, the panel featured Joseph Janes (University of Washington), Stephen Abrams (SirsiDynix), and Karen G. Schneider (Florida State University) talking about libraries, innovation, and a great deal more. Podcasts and blog entries for the 2007 program are available (<http://litablog.org/2007/07/11/ala-annual-2007-the-ultimate-debate/>).

A series of questions was given to the panelist prior to the session. Panelist were asked to talk about the theme: "Libraries did not invent Google Book Search (<http://books.google.com/>), LibraryThing (www.librarything.com), Facebook (www.facebook.com/), or any other innovation critical to the new information era and knowledge economy. We make use of these inventions, but is that enough? What prevents us from being more creative?" Questions and answer session follows in summary.

Question 1: Is there any evidence that libraries are innovative institutions?

While each panelist phrased their answers differently, all agreed that individuals in libraries are innovating, but the institutional support is often lacking. Negative criticism inhibits new ideas before projects can be developed and their merits fully evaluated. An example of innovative library developments in the Maricopa County Library (Phoenix, Arizona) (www.libraryjournal.com/

article/CA6448055.html) experiment that shelves its books bookstore-style, rather than by Dewey. Schneider noted that, despite all of the uproar in the library community over this non-Dewey library, they have not had one single complaint from the public about the shelving system. The patrons seem to love it. All of the complaints have come from other librarians.

Question 2: What is your definition of an innovative library and what would be some of its qualities?

Abram described having a tough hide is necessary, that the innovation process should be shared so others can learn from it. Do not be afraid to be a follower of a new idea. Joseph Janes encouraged the audience "Don't be afraid to fail". An example of ideas that initially failed but lead to subsequent successes. He referred to Apple Computer's Lisa model (<http://oldcomputers.net/lisa.html>) that failed, but ultimately led to the Macintosh. "Development is more important than research". He noted, particularly in technology areas – "Get out there and experiment."

Schneider urged the attitude to be willing to re-evaluate the definition of success. She used the example of Flickr (www.flickr.com/) that started as a form of a gaming site, then shifted to posting photography when it became apparent that users wanted that aspect of their functionality above all others.

Question 3: What prevents libraries from innovating?

Karen wondered if age is one of the problems keeping librarians from innovating. An audience member noted that she was more of an innovator when she was younger, but she now finds herself defending the status quo more than she thought she would. Joseph and Stephen both disagreed. Joseph said that librarianship as a profession is inherently conservative, and for good reasons – so

much of what libraries do is about describing, storing, and preserving the past. However, when tradition becomes important for its own sake, then it becomes dangerous. Stephen noted that as he gets older he feels more free to say what he really thinks.

Question 4: Can libraries become more innovative, and if so, how?

Everyone on the panel agreed that innovation includes purchasing products developed outside the library world and implement it in a library, but they also agreed that it would be nice to see more research and development in libraries as well. But most libraries do not have the scale to handle R&D, and that development is more important than research: "basic research is a nice thing, but libraries probably can't do it". Development with a research focus, a panelist said, is probably a more realistic goal. Another panelist countered with the point that you have to do research before you can do development. "We are not a research-driven profession", was the reply. "That's probably why we're not innovative", was the response.

Question 5: What will happen if libraries do not become more innovative?

When the panel was asked if libraries are not innovating because library schools are not innovating, both Joseph Janes and Stephen Abrams pointed out that library schools are innovating. Joseph noted that trying to innovate in education can get you as much flak as the Maricopa library got for abandoning Dewey. When the University of Washington (www.ischool.washington.edu/) became an I-school (Information School), he said, some librarians thought it was the end of civilization. Joseph Janes mentioned that the San Jose's Second Life School (www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6449579.html?industryid=47132) might not work,

but at least they are "trying it". Library community beats up on those who try new things without waiting to see how it turns out. People thought distance education would not work until it was tried as well.

Question 6: Even if libraries become more innovative, can they hope to compete with the private sector for their user's attention?

Janes suggested the library profession should get over the idea of requiring an MLS degree to be useful in a library. Experts of all backgrounds have a role to play. Schneider followed with suggesting systems librarians should spend time on the reference desk? "Shouldn't their time be spent where they are most useful".

What about the role associations like ALA play in innovation? Abrams noted that ALA often serves as a sandbox where new ideas are experimented with, then rolled back into individual libraries. But Abrams commented that on a less encouraging perspective that recent discussions on the Ning Library 2.0 (www.ning.com/) site "beat any of ALA's 2.0 efforts". Janes recommended revitalizing ALA from within, rather than starting over from scratch. Libraries need

the advantages of scale that organizations like ALA and OCLC have. No libraries have that same critical mass to initiate a profession-wide change.

Question 7: What is your vision for the future of library innovation and what is your level of confidence in achieving it?

Throughout the debate, Karen Schneider and Stephen Abrams emphasized two overarching theories for why libraries have trouble innovating. For Karen, the problem is that libraries do not have the resources to be able to support failure, and if you can not accept the possibility of failure you can not innovate: "innovation is risky and uncertain". For Stephen, the problem is within the culture of librarianship, which he says is a "culture of victimization". Librarians share disaster stories and commiserate over low salaries and other challenges, and then they come to believe that these disaster stories are the reality of all of librarianship and do not even try to change it. Discussion among the panelist also repeatedly came back to the "culture of victimization" that permeates the profession. "Why do we focus so much on the disasters, instead of celebrating successes" Agreed, a few libraries had to

close due to budget cuts recently. But meanwhile, overall funding increased nationwide. The closings are what we give headlines to. Janes mentioned that maybe we ultimately feel dispensable and do not give ourselves enough credit. One of the panelists offered "Change happens from those who show up". The panel summarized that innovation is impossible without someone willing to try. "Libraries won't innovate themselves".

About the panelists:

- Andre Pace (<http://blogs.ala.org/pace.php>)
- Steven Abrams (<http://stephen-slighthouse.sirsidynix.com/index.html>)
- Joseph Janes (www.ischool.washington.edu/people/facdirector-y.aspx?id=3122&mode=pics)
- Karen Schneider (<http://freerangelibrarian.com/about/>)

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