Clay Shirky on Newspapers and What It Can Teach Academic Libraries

By David W. Lewis

In March 2009 Clay Shirky posted the essay, "Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable," on his blog and in July 2011 he posted a second essay "Why We Need the New News Environment to be Chaotic." These two essays are concerned with the newspapers and the news, but taken together they provide useful insights for academic librarians. Newspapers and libraries are in many ways quite different, but they share a common heritage, both born out of the technology of the printing press and its 19th century industrialization. Similar technologies drove economic and organizational structures and the values of libraries and newspapers. Both face similar challenges as the Internet unwinds their economic and technical underpinnings and by doing so stresses organizations and the professional values that have sustained them.

Shirky is a keen and frank observer. One could simply do a global search and replace — "libraries" for "newspapers" — and get the general view of what will follow. I will, however, risk my own parsing of Shirky's views and what we as academic librarians can learn from them. I will do so by focusing on a few key passages.

Shirky (2009) states,

> With the old economics destroyed, organizational forms perfected for industrial production have to be replaced with structures optimized for digital data. It makes increasingly less sense even to talk about a publishing industry, because the core problem publishing solves — the incredible difficulty, complexity, and expense of making something available to the public — has stopped being a problem.

Like newspapers, libraries as we know them are the product of the 19th century industrialization of printing. Industrialized printing made books and journals more common, providing the means to distribute the increase in scholarship created by growing research oriented universities. Libraries were shaped by Melvil Dewey and his colleagues to manage the growth of publications that resulted. They designed libraries to manage large numbers of relatively scarce documents.

Beginning in the 1970s bibliographic structures were automated, but this did not change the fundamentals. People still had to come to libraries to use print materials. Over the past decade and a half more and more items have become digital. We are about to see most books cross into the digital realm. With this, our world flips. Local collections will no longer be the only, or the best, means for individuals to discover and acquire documents and information. These functions will move to web-scale services like Google, Google Scholar, Wikipedia, the HathiTrust, arXiv.org, and *PLoS ONE*. Communities and organizations may still need to pay for some information, though I believe increasingly scholarship will be open access and freely available. Libraries may still be the mechanism for making these purchases, but writing a few checks does not require the organizations that exist today.

Shirky puts it this way, "The moment we are living through, the moment our historical generation is living through, is the largest increase in expressive capacity in human history" (Shirky, 2009). Much in the way the printing press allowed literacy to move from a professional scribal activity to a mass amateur activity, the Internet makes it possible for anyone to become a publisher. This is on one hand liberating and democratizing and on the other frightening. This is especially true for the established institutions built to support the old order. Libraries are seeing many of

the institutions we had counted on to provide content —newspapers and university presses, for example — slowly passing away, and at the same time there is a whole new universe of content — individual web pages, blogs, Twitter feeds, and whatever comes next — that we have no idea how to manage. As Shirky says about the impact of the printing press, "The old institutions seemed exhausted while new ones seemed untrustworthy" (Shirky, 2009b).

Shirky (2009b) also goes on to say, "That is what real revolutions are like. The old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place." We know this is true. The reference desk broke ten years ago. Five years ago the Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC) broke. Scientific journals have been broken for several decades. The core strategy libraries have used for providing books, the local print collection, is breaking or about to break. As documents become digital, our ability to preserve archives, correspondence, and personal papers breaks. And we don't know what to do. E-mail, chat, and texting haven't fixed the reference desk. New discovery layers haven't really fixed the OPAC. The "big deal" didn't fix scientific journals, though open access might. Circulation continues to decline, and most libraries still pretend that we can manage e-books as if they are exactly the same as their print predecessors. We are beginning to figure out digital archiving, but much will be lost.

All of this is disconcerting. What Shirky tells us is, get use to it. This is just the way it has to be.

Shirky (2009b) states, "When we shift our attention from 'save newspapers' to 'save society', the imperative changes from 'preserve the current institutions' to 'do whatever works.' And what works today isn't the same as what used to work." As we look for what works, it is hard to look beyond preserving the current institution, but if we don't we will be unsuccessful. As I have argued elsewhere, as information becomes digital and moves to the network, libraries as we have known them could become less important. As I put it, we need to consider, "Whether libraries are

the only, or even the best, means of making information easily and conveniently available" (Lewis, 1998, p. 192). I am convinced that part of the answer is in free and openly available web-scale services. Some of these will engage amateur contributions, such as Wikipedia. Many others will be built around smaller groups of knowledgeable individuals. Take for example eBird, a project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, which provides tools for birders and uses the resulting data in research (eBird, n.d.) or the web site of the Polynesian Voyaging Society (Polynesian, n.d.), probably the single best source of information on the subject created by a combination of anthropologists, native islanders, and interested amateurs. Open access journals also fit this mold and I am prepared to predict this will be the dominant business model for scholarly journal publication within the next decade (Lewis, in press).

I believe individual libraries have a significant role to play in supporting the development of, access to, and preservation of such unique content and many libraries are beginning to engage in these activities. But most are not prepared to make this a major focus of their programs or to divert significant resources to it. This will not be adequate going forward. We need to develop the means to provide significant subsidy to a wide variety of web scale projects. We will have to resist the temptation to be free riders. My own view is that something like the United Way is required; an organization to which we can all contribute that will evaluate projects and make reasoned strategic investments in content and infrastructure.

Shirky (2011) says, "There are only three things I'm sure of: News has to be subsidized, and it has to be cheap, and it has to be free," this points to the fact that subsidy is important. As I have argued, libraries can be viewed as the means that communities and organizations use to provide an information subsidy to their members (Lewis, 1998). As Shirky (2011) frames it in the newspaper context, "Most people don't care about the news, and most of the people who do don't care enough to pay

for it, but we need the ones who care to have it, even if they care only a little bit, only some of the time. To create more of something than people will pay for requires subsidy." Librarians need to make the case for subsidy. Easy and cheap access to information is an important public good. We need to make sure this is not forgotten.

News and scholarly information need to be cheap because many of the people who need both can't afford the current costs. Both are more expensive than need be. Both newspapers and academic libraries, the traditional institutions for providing the news and scholarly information, are now expensive and difficult to use and thus unavailable to many who need them. Newspapers feel this in the market place as they lose advertising and readers. Libraries face a slower, but no less certain, decline if they cannot rein in their journal expenses and demonstrate the value of reference and instruction work done by librarians. If libraries are not cheap, or at least cheaper, they will inevitably face a downward spiral of undervalued services leading to less support leading to less capacity, etc. The hard reality is that the level of subsidy that communities and institutions are providing libraries is sufficient. We have enough money. The problem is that the subsidy is not efficiently or effectively applied. There are two causes. First, commercial journal publishers discovered that they could extract the subsidy from the system and channel it to their stockholders as corporate profits, and they have done so relentlessly for three decades. Second, librarians have been slow to reframe their professional roles in light of the disruptive changes that we confront. This is understandable, changing organizations and professional values is hard, but if we don't make these changes, we cannot make scholarly information cheap.

Shirky (2011) states, "News has to be free, because it has to spread. The few people who care about the news need to be able to share it with one another and, in times of crisis, to sound the alarm for the rest of us." Scholarship is similar. As Peter Suber puts it, explaining why we need open access, "Authors need OA [open access] to reach all the readers who could build on their work, apply it, extend it, cite it, or make use of it. Readers need OA to find and retrieve everything they need to read and to allow their software prosthetics to process everything they need to process. OA doesn't merely share knowledge. It accelerates research by helping authors and readers find one another" (Poynder, 2011). Scholarly information is of course not without cost, but given the technology of the network, it can in many, if not most, cases be free to the user. Making as much scholarship open access and free to users should be one of the primary goals driving academic libraries.

Shirky (2011), speaking on reporting says,

> Having one kind of institution do most of the reporting for most communities in the US seemed like a great idea right up until it seemed like a single point of failure. As that failure spreads, the news ecosystem isn't just getting more chaotic, we need it to be more chaotic, because we need multiple competing approaches. It isn't newspapers we should be worrying about, but news, and there are many more ways of getting and reporting the news that we haven't tried than that we have.

In the past, documents in local library collections were the primary mechanism that communities and organizations used to provide their members with the information they needed to be successful. With the growth of information on the web, this historic function of libraries is waning. What is not clear is what will replace it, but as with the news, it is in everyone's interest to explore all of the options.

Librarians are by their nature conservative and so are our libraries. As those trusted to make sure the artifacts of our culture are preserved for the long haul, this makes sense. But we are now in a period where our environment has fundamentally and radically shifted. We don't know what will work going forward so it is in our interest to try all sorts of things,

even if they seem crazy and fail. In disruptive environments no one knows what will work so recourse to experts or taskforce reports will be less effective than trying things. What is sometimes called "exploratory development" should be the norm. Expecting failure and having fiscal strategies based on that assumption will also be key.

What I take from Shirky is that we are in the midst of historic disruption. Academic libraries will not survive in their current form. The times we are living in require us to step back and consider how we serve the cause of scholarly information, how it can be subsidized and made cheap and free. And importantly, how is it preserved. To figure all of this out, we need to explore. Old strategies are unlikely to be successful and no one yet knows what will work, thus chaos is not only expected, but also useful. It will be interesting, challenging, and ultimately rewarding work.

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Bio

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