

Thought leader interview: Stephen Abram

STEPHEN ABRAM

Vice President

SirsiDynix

The E-Resources Management Handbook – UKSG

The UKSG Editorial Board decided it might be interesting to invite some key thought leaders in the information industry to be interviewed for *The E-Resources Management Handbook*. A list of five questions was drawn up, ranging from the reasonably straightforward – “How long have you been in the industry and what is the most significant change you have seen?” – to questions for the professional seer – “Where do you see the industry going in the future?” A number of professionals from varying backgrounds – Stephen Abram, SirsiDynix; Martin Marlow, Ingram; Peter McCracken, Serials Solutions; Jim Mouw, University of Chicago; Alison Mudditt, SAGE – agreed to be interviewed. The resulting material makes fascinating reading, giving a range of very different perspectives on the information industry at this time of change and upheaval.

Why are you in this industry?

There are two reasons why I am in the information industry – the personal and the professional. Personally, I just like variety. I like to wake up every morning and not know what’s going to happen and get to do interesting things. If you really like people, research, information and ideas, this is one place where you don’t have to choose an industry or a sector.

On a professional level, I like to participate in the building of the knowledge and information-based economy. Working in large libraries and working in the vendor world you get to build services that change the way things work. For instance, there are examples of large conversions that started to build a different kind of information- and knowledge-based economy. When I was in library school I was the Beta tester for the first full-text newspaper databases – saw the potential there. Then we started converting all the law that had ever been heard in a court into a single database. Once you build a massive database like that in the UK, in Canada, in the US, you change the way law is practised. The same thing happened when we started building big full-text databases of journals, articles and newspapers at ProQuest and Micromedia. We included newspapers back to 1804, into the 1700s some of them, and that changed the way research was done. People started being able to do things that they couldn’t do before when they were using microfilm, which is a horrid experience when doing research. So it goes back to a few things that changed the way the world is for the better. That’s what most librarians do.

How long have you been in the industry and what is the most significant change you have seen?

I started at library school in 1978 and graduated in 1980. I ran two or three decent-sized national libraries from 1980 through 1991. Then in 1991 I moved over to working for vendors, so then I started working for Thomson, Micromedia and ProQuest, and now SirsiDynix.

I think the most significant change I have seen in the information industry is electronics and connectivity. When I started there was no e-mail, there was no web, and there was no IBM PC, and those things changed things. I guess the web is the most significant by far, but I’d say that the main thing is the connectivity – aspects of networking and connecting to information and other people.

What will replace Google?

I think Google will grow, mutate, and change. I don’t understand why the library world focuses so completely on Google. Libraries have fallen in love with a company whose entire success is based on

selling advertising. Why aren't we looking at websites that answer questions better? I think librarians have fallen into really lazy thinking.

I think there are two things that are going to change or replace it. One is The Cloud. Google gets 98% or something like that of its revenue from advertising and 95% of the overall advertising opportunity is in The Cloud. So if Google can't catch up with The Cloud activities of Yahoo and Microsoft and Zoho and others, its entire business model is at risk. What will replace it is a new version of the space that isn't search based. Search is not that important. Librarians have fallen in love with search as if (before we had Google or online searching) we said the most important thing when you come into the library is that you understand our catalogue and that we show you how to search in the library. They are overly focusing on search and not focusing enough on what it should be. That's just dangerous. So The Cloud is creating an experience environment that's about what people want to do, their communities, learning, hobbies, entertainment; the real stuff, not this super-search stuff that people have been focusing on for the last ten years.

Then the second thing that's going to fundamentally change Google – and Google's got experiments in this area – is social networking, social content creation and social spaces; Facebook and Wikipedia and the social aspects of creating content and providing access to it. Tagging and scrap-booking are all part of the mix. Either Google will be successful – and their KNOL project will compete with Wikipedia – or it won't. We are about to go through a huge drop in advertising as these massive companies fail or merge and that's going to challenge Google. They've got lots of money in the bank, but the New York Stock Exchange is going to want them to continue to deliver and that might change some of the dynamics of their 'do no evil' philosophy.

What has been your biggest disappointment (in a work context)?

I'm really positive about things and I think there's been an awful lot happening. But my disappointment is that many of the conversations about changes that are going on in the industry at the moment have been too conservative; too much criticism, and negative thinking instead of critical thinking. Many of our colleagues see the bad, but can't suggest what it would look like if it was good. Critical thinking demands that you actually look at something and say, "Oh, I don't like how that's going!", knowing why – rather than just fearing change – and then say, "This is what it could look like!"

I think there are challenges in the profession to get better at thinking about some of this. The debate has been polarised; librarians are good, vendors are bad, and there is no middle ground. That's beyond prejudice and ignorance, it's bigotry and that's not healthy. When I moved from being a regular librarian in a library to a librarian in a vendor, people would tell me, "I can't talk to you about that anymore because you're unethical now". It makes me angry because I think it's damaging the profession and it's not allowing the players in the profession – all the people who participate in the creation of an information economy – to have an effective discussion. That's a disappointment.

Where do you see the industry going in the future?

I think the information industry is going to move under the hood. I think there's an experience state that talks to what people really, really want to do and it's about the way you take opportunities like the web and electronic information and apply them.

When you have a life issue – where you want to invent something, discover something, be entertained or learn something – do you see those kinds of issues as information issues or do you see them as life issues? When you have a problem, where do you go? We've known for centuries that the first place people go for solutions to their problems is friends and colleagues. They don't see it as an information problem. Research shows that libraries and databases are very low on the scale of where people go. So what the industry needs to do is to move its content into where they do their life questions.

So how do you move them into a learning space? How do you get information at the lesson level within a university or a high school? How do you get medical information out of the library and into the space where doctors are making decisions on rounds and when they're talking to patients. Most people always have their mobile phones in their pockets so information could be at the point of need. Most people have a social networking site, like Facebook or Bebo or MySpace, and they're using it on a daily basis so information could be where they're talking about their problems.

That, I think, is where the information industry is going. Much time has been spent in libraries and in vendors converting data over to XML, trying to understand recommendation engines and how people recommend, put content choices in the right order.

We are already overwhelmed with information. When I started as a librarian it was hard to find three good articles on a specific topic, now you get millions. Over the next few years, not only will all articles be online and all websites online, but all books, all TV shows, all radio shows, all podcasts, and all videos will be online. The problem of having too much information is going to get worse. So the information industry has got to figure out – librarians and vendors have got to figure out – how to put the good content, or limited amounts of quality selected content, at the point of need. You don't sit there and say, "Teacher X or Student Y, here's 20 billion items, have fun, go for it!" You want to say, "Teacher X, teaching grade 4 history, here are the best articles to help your kids learn." That's what librarians have been doing for centuries, trying to select and build collections, but it's changing as we try and build print and electronic resources in balance.

So I think that's where the industry's going, it's a nice lifetime challenge! Over the next five to ten years we're going to see significant progress made in this area, but it's not going to be perfect. We're entering a period of massive ambiguity. The real challenge will be whether we're going to let advertising-based engines win or whether libraries can create the third way. Advertising-based engines are good if I want to find a pizza place that's near where I'm searching from. But if I want to make a decision on what prime minister I'm going to elect, do I want the advertising tools to select that? I think something like two thirds of the money McCain and Obama spent on their campaigns was spent on Google adverts. What percentage of people understand that Google and the big search engines' results are so heavily manipulated by special interest groups?

Libraries have to create that elusive third way. That's the challenge of our age.

Stephen Abram was interviewed for UKSG by Catherine Jamieson on 26 September 2008

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