

Multimedia and Internet @ Schools

Pipeline Column:

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Did You Hear that? The Internet Firmament is Shifting

Fall 2007: Two months that shook our world

by Stephen Abram

Wheee! (or Wii!) Life is a roller coaster. Halo wasn't the only game shaking the world last fall.

In autumn 2006 I was traveling a lot around the world and back and I managed to experience a 6.7 earthquake in Hawaii and a huge snowstorm in Buffalo. The Internet, however, looked much the same upon my return. However, this past autumn 2007, it was even more fun as I circumnavigated the globe again visiting all types of schools and libraries. There were two large earthquakes, scary and disastrous fires, Santa Ana winds, crazy sports fans in Australia, and all of this before returning home and the start of the Canadian winter, not exactly unknown for its epic dreariness! However, I digress, the weather reports weren't the scariest part of recent news for school librarians!

Also, the economic story was headlining the news. US national debt was forecasted to increase by trillions of dollars due to borrowing abroad to cover the high costs of war on many fronts (and this was affecting the entire global economy) along with the sub-prime mortgage meltdown causing the demise of several key financial leaders as well as contributing to the decline of the US dollar against most world currencies. Tie this to oil heading to over \$100 a barrel, oh you get the message.

For those of us who had tidily held our memories of the 80's recession in the recesses of our minds, the old fears have started to return. We remember what happened to our sector when fiscal crises at the national and international level trickled down into publicly financed institutions. It wasn't pretty. And we'd gotten quite used to a period of continuous economic expansion for decades – by some estimates one of the most peaceful and longest expansionist economies in modern history. Is this the end of that happy time that we are witnessing – war, pandemics, depression? – emerging not with a bang but a whimper? . I am writing this column just after Hallowe'en and the news is scarier than the costumes on the street! Now the world economy is scary but that's not the point of this column.

World economic drifts are not truly within our control. We can only control our own reaction to them. The world economy is not what really frightened me as the colours of the leaves turned. No, for me, as a librarian with a passion for

information, learning and community that wasn't what scared me and caused me to rethink my view of our prospects as educators and the window of opportunity we have for success in the new world order. I was more concerned by a few weeks worth of news that, I think and feel, may have changed our prospects for the future.

Consider this, aside from the earth and the western economy shaking in late October and early November 2007, we saw:

- Facebook getting a \$750,000,000.00 equity investment from Microsoft and two equity capital firms. Valuing this social network at over \$15 billion either indicates another Internet bubble or the migration of 'smart' money into a new tier. Facebook is rumoured to be using some of this case to acquire the major Facebook type competitor in China.
- Facebook introduced 'social ads' in addition to their F8 development platform that allows any developer to integrate their ideas and applications into this intriguing social network space.
- Facebook opened its networking platform to more than just groups but to enterprises as well. Schools, Libraries, businesses and more can now have a page and relate to virtual 'friends' and customers.
- Google headed past 10,000 licensed traditional publishers – yes 10K! How many of us can claim to have that many current suppliers to our collections? Following Google experiments with 99 cent book rentals a la the iTunes per-song pricing model hints at a monographic business model shift from the bookstore/library model that has been stable for centuries.
- Google continues to add new libraries all the time to Google BookSearch. We have already seen the transition of periodical collections in the library space to an article level economy through such firms as Gale, EBSCO and Electric Library. Can we expect to see books disaggregated too? Are we seeing the disintegration of the non-fiction book into a chapter and paragraph level economy – potentially integrated into the article results? I believe so.
- Google announced (or it was actually leaked) its new OpenSocial development platform. Blue ribbon partners such as MySpace, Bebo, Amazon, Engage.com, Friendster, hi5, Hyves, imeem, LinkedIn, Ning, Oracle, Orkut, Plaxo, Salesforce.com, Six Apart, Tianji, Viadeo, and XING have joined Google OpenSocial - their new "open" platform for development anywhere. This creates a proprietary / open hybrid that challenges the current architecture of the web.
- In addition, and in almost overlapping announcements, Google introduced the Open Handset Alliance, a group of mobile and technology companies committed to improving the mobile experience, and Google Android, the first truly open and comprehensive development platform for mobile devices. Wow, all phones developing to a common hybrid standard and already they have key phone manufacturers and carriers joining Android and starting development of applications.

- Apple dropped the prices of the iPhone a lot making them more attainable in the US.
- Amazon introduced its worst kept secret – Kindle – an eBook reader competitor to Sony's eReader that reads books and articles.
- Then, all in the same period and during an overall stock market drop, Google headed past \$700.00 a share. Someone thinks something is happening here. Internet rumours as I write this claim that Google will introduce its own Google Phone as well as acquire Sprint and / or Skype. I suspect these are just hot rumours but nothing is out of the range of possibility in the current shift.
- Some of these changes dwarfed the finalization of the Murdoch acquisition of Dow Jones and the Wall Street Journal. Combining Dow Jones with the largest social network, Murdoch's MySpace, certainly creates a new ecology for business information for the largest generation with disposable income, the Millennials. The world of finance heard a shot across its bow.
- IBM announced that they were working on a portable avatar that could move between games and avatar based worlds and applications. With their 400 developers working on Second Life alone, this could be a formidable development. IBM acquiring Cognos was just a side story! The Gartner Group forecast a while ago that the avatar-based world would dominate Internet experiences (such as search and e-commerce and not just games and virtual worlds) within a decade.
- Thomson continues work in late 2007 for their major acquisition of Reuters which creates a complete financial professional space combined with their properties aimed at law, accounting and medicine.
- Peter Kaufman predicted that with the next 13 years an iPod size device will hold 1 year's worth of video (8,760 hours) by 2012; all the commercial music ever created by 2015; and all the content ever created (in all media) by 2020. Gordon Moore, of Moore's Law fame predicts that his law will end at 2020 – not so much because of technology but because of need. This change will drive a new global phase of large informational hubs on the web and massive aggregations of content and services. What does this Internet and personal device hybrid world look like for information pros?
- And the first US Boomer to hit 65 years-old applied for their pension during this period!

Most of us in teaching and school libraries have lived through the various stages of the Internet. We saw the killer application – e-mail – drag us into the pre-web Internet and, arguably, communication improved as a result. We saw the next killer app – the web – where the content and e-commerce based experience fundamentally changed the way we do work again and how society and business shared. Now we are seeing the relationship-based, virtual social network emerge. And it's emerging in Facebook's F8, Google's Android and Open Social, and the other search folk's developer SDK's that will cause the web to evolve into an entirely different experience.

The technology is finally catching up with what we as information professionals value – the question, the user experience, learning, research collaboration and the one on one interaction with clients. Are we ready for this shift? As I have noted before in this column, we are morally obligated to prepare our learners with the skills and aptitudes that they will need for their futures – not our past.

We are about to see the biggest transformation of the web experience since people thought e-mail, or search or content were kings. Killer apps?! Apps no longer rule, if they ever did. Relationships do. This is an entirely new ecology. And not just the learner/teacher/librarian relationships we so lovingly tend. It's also our student's relationships with each other and the entire world out there. The playing field has expanded and we need to decide: "Are we ready to more clearly de-cloak our libraries and participate – with radical trust and honesty, devoid of false modesty – in the world of their needs?"

We must prepare them early to understand the principles of managing their own online and offline identities, we must help learners explore their world of questions as well as information, we must help them discover how to relate to friends in all senses of that word – classmates, relatives, friends, acquaintances, service workers, co-workers, strangers, FOAF, and more. We must address issues of privacy and sharing. We must teach face to face *and* online collaboration. We must teach content authenticity, authority, brand and so much more. Add this to our traditional role of teaching perspective, bias and voice and we can see that it nicely integrates into our traditional missions. All that changed was the playing field. It shifted, a lot, in 2007. Have we shifted with it?

Strap yourself in because the rest of 2008 is going to be a fine ride. Library folk are the stars in this new knowledge and relationship-based economy. Let's start building the tools and lessons that deliver the future. Remember that and enjoy.

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