Autumn 2007: A few weeks that shook our world
by Stephen Abram

Wheeee! Life is a roller coaster. In autumn 2006 I was traveling and managed to experience a 6.7 earthquake in Hawaii and a huge snowstorm in Buffalo. In autumn 2007, it was even more fun as I traveled for SLA as president-elect. There were two large earthquakes, scary and disastrous fires, Santa Ana winds, and all of this before returning home and the start of the Canadian winter, not exactly unknown for its epic dreariness! However, the weather reports weren’t the scariest part of the news for special librarians.

The economic story was headlining the news. US national debt was forecasted to increase by trillions of dollars due to 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 dollars against most world currencies. Tie this to oil heading to over $100 a barrel, oh you get the message. I am writing this column over Hallowe’en and the papers are scarier than the costumes on the street!

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 and interest rate sensitive private sector enterprises. 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 hope not. But we’ll see. 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 as well as my associations, that wasn’t what scared me and caused me to rethink my view of our prospects and the window of opportunity we have for success in the new world order. I was more concerned by two weeks worth of news that, I think and feel, may have changed the prospects of our mutual 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 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.

• 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. 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 very 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.

• 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. 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.

• 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 (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 has 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 SLA have lived through the various stages of the Internet. We saw the killer application – e-mail – drag our enterprises into the pre-web Internet when 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. 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 and the one on one interaction with clients. Are we ready for this shift?

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 customer relationships we so lovingly tend. It’s also our customers’ relationships with each other and the expertise market. The playing field has expanded and we need to decide: “Are we ready to more clearly de-cloak our expertise and participate – with radical trust and honestly, devoid of false modesty – in the world of need?”

Either way, the Canadian dollar has soared past the US dollar for the first time in decades. It’s time to shop on the road again so I just bought a new leather jacket (actually 2!). It’s an ill wind that doesn’t bring someone some happiness.
Strap yourself in because the rest of 2008 is going to be a fine ride. We are the stars in this new knowledge and relationship-based economy. Remember that and enjoy.

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