Making Technology Plans in Shifting Sands
by Stephen Abram

As I write this column in mid-July, I am floored at the amazing changes taking place in our technology ecology. I wrote in November that there was major shift in the force and it would continue and enlarge but what a year!

Most of us have participated in some form of SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) exercise in all those 5 year strategic planning exercises that our employers and associations indulge in. Well the changes wrought in the past few months, and the easily visible near-term changes on the horizon, make our planning exercises almost humorous. What's that old Yiddish expression? "God laughs at those who make plans."

Anyway, in traditional strategic planning we do an environmental assessment of the status, condition and expected changes in society, the economy, technology, demography, legal frameworks, etc. Sometimes forgotten in those traditional processes is that the environmental scan is an *ongoing* effort and that plans must be reviewed and adjusted for critical changes that happen in our world. As a long time sailor, the metaphor is that you stay on course by adjusting your sails for changes in the wind direction and velocity. And how those winds are buffeting libraryland now!

It might be partially resolved by the time this appears in print (I doubt it), but it likely isn't over yet either. In the past few weeks I've been fascinated by the soap opera that is playing out with those key companies that play a major role in the information ecology that frames much of the global technical environment of our organizations, governments, companies, educational institutions and our libraries and information operations. It's a wild ride and we can all acknowledge it's not over even as you read this.

Just think about all of the big players involved – Yahoo!, Microsoft, Google, AOL and more. And then follow along with the amazing personalities involved – Yang, Icahn, Ballmer, Murdoch, Schmidt, and more. And then think about the huge sums of money in play here – billions of dollars. We have owners – Jerry, Sergey, Larry, Rupert. We have hired help and CEO's. We have armies of commentators in traditional print, TV, every new media, and all those blogs. Hollywood couldn't make up a mini-series or blockbuster movie with half the cast of interesting characters in this story as it plays out. And make no mistake – the end of this story hasn't been written yet. We don't know how it ends, who 'wins' and what the public information ecology is going to look like – even next year.

- Will 90% of all 'search' in reside one company? We saw Congressional testimony that this could be the result of a Google/Yahoo partnership.
- Will only two harvests of the web of any importance remain by 2009? If Yahoo goes to Microsoft, will the only complete public harvests be MicroHoo and Google?
- Will one company control advertising and therefore most search result rankings? If you only count search based ads, then maybe.
- Microsoft abandoned its book digitization project (I think temporarily). Will that place too many digital copies in the hands of one company or will there be balance through the Open Content Alliance? Libraries are supporting both. Google has thrown an interesting volley with its new searchable copyright renewal file. Combined with the Creative Commons search and we can foresee some interesting scenarios.
- Will "The Cloud" deliver more ads in applications, messaging and e-mail? Some estimates are that 95% of the ad opportunity is in the cloud. Just privacy implications alone should be cause for public debate.
- What about the satellite companies? Yahoo has Delicious and Flickr in its orbit. AOL has Bebo. Murdoch has MySpace and Microsoft has an interest in Facebook. How will the new ecology play out? What 'standards' of interoperability will win?
- And what about that iPhone!? One million of the new G3 phones were sold globally in just three days and tens of millions of application downloads happened almost right away. What does this mobile leap mean for libraries and society in general?
- Will the government allow this consolidation? Are we entering another DOJ-style anti-trust investigation like happened with AT&T, IBM, or Microsoft? Every decade seems to have its fearful monopoly. Will progress be delayed by an endless congressional investigation? How would this work in an increasingly globalized world?

Make no mistake – ownership matters. Make no mistake – personal devices are a major shift in marketing and service. And in our world, the confluence of content, context and contact rule.

The Third Way

Librarians and libraries have played a role in exploiting the environments of the Internet, the web, the mobile web, the social web and the intranet. If the foundations of the publicly available ecology become the purview of only a very few companies, is this good for our users and us? I don't think so. I think we play a huge role in the creation of what I call the 'third way'. We can make sure that there is a source of information that does not rely almost completely on advertising for its business model. We can ensure that the information corpus being searched or used to support institutional needs is managed and collected to align with the objectives of our users to learn, discover, research and make

decisions. We can care deeply about competitive advantage through information exploitation. We can ascertain the needs and determine the end-user skills and train them to search and support their decisions with the best content in terms of authority, comprehensiveness, and quality. Our institutions can thrive because of our work.

As the consumer-driven web grows to meet the needs of their core customers – advertisers – we have a unique and wonderful opportunity to build the third way. Our way is one that truly meets the strategic, and indeed special, needs of our organizations and end-users. We have been gifted with the web tools, social networking and communication tools, all stress tested in the public environment and ready for use to exploit in the service of the special needs of our target audiences.

Unfettering Information

Sure lots of the Internet content and experiences are free of charge, sort of. But cost-free isn't the be all and end all. Certainly not! When information wants to be free, it really wants to be unfettered. Our role has always been to do this. Now that role is expanding really quickly. Our core skills of research, content evaluation, technological choice, training, metadata application, and personal service are growing in importance. We release the energy in content in context.

As we watch the changes happening in the ownership of the major web properties as well as the changes to search and the advertising-driven space, we can see opportunity or threat. Or both! The time to review our five-year plans is not on every fifth anniversary. We need to keep our eyes and ears open for opportunities and threats continuously to find those that build on our strengths and address our weaknesses. We can adjust the sails if we remain nimble and open to changes.

In these times of dynamic and transformational change, the future information and knowledge-based economy holds great fortune for special librarians and information professionals. We can inherit the future.

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