viewpoint

Forty years on

"I feel about art librarianship as I feel about ghosts". There is simply no other way to start once you've read Antony Croghan's viewpoint on the state of art librarianship published in the spring 1977 edition of the *Art Libraries Journal*.[1] But perhaps almost 40 years on I have a more positive outlook than Mr. Croghan as I do believe in both and I'm not afraid of either!

Mr. Croghan's definition of the ideal library service has, I think, become a reality with modern discovery catalogues built on complex algorithms which allow information to come together and which is no longer limited to that "well chosen stock". Large libraries are able to operate a 24 hour service, complete with self-service, and give remote access to a large selection of online resources. Surely users now have the information they need when they need it?

Then there is Google, the ultimate information tool... I am a Google user, as most art librarians are, and perhaps the scariest part, from a librarian's perspective, are those users who google and aren't aware of what can't be found via search engines. I specifically mean those users who believe that if it does not come up in Google search results, then it must not exist. It should be made clear to users that Google's ever changing artificial intelligence doesn't want users to find what they need but gently nudges them in the direction it wishes them to head; in a fraction of a second it will freely ignore your keywords, use alternates or altogether ~~*remove keywords*~~ (this based on the billions of searches which preceded your own). Essentially Google, the tool we all turn to, has become the librarian Croghan was afraid of in his *Viewpoint*; the one who limits users to what it knows.

Here I wish to comment on the value of the art librarian. As I belong to said species, I take pride in being able to answer most enquiries even when it has to do with terms and concepts that are completely new to me. This is mostly due to being able to use current technologies, but I also strongly believe that it is due to everything I've learned as a subject specialist which now allows me to send users to look at rare maps and drawings when needed or source material from specific suppliers. My art librarian search results include what can't be found on Google or what gets lost in the information overload of a discovery tool.

Are we really heading towards a future without specialist librarians? One full of general practitioners? Other subjects might have the luxury of doing away with a subject specialist librarian but it's a little more complicated for art and architecture libraries. Art library usage studies (of which we need more) tend to conclude that art library users remain "traditional" users, preferring print over digital books, that prioritize

1. http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=10199543&fulltextType=XX&fileId=S0307472200020150.

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recommendations from tutors and/or librarians, and often feel overwhelmed by discovery platform search results. Not that those users have much choice as art and architecture databases offer less full-text coverage than science subjects, for example, and specialist publishers aren't investing in the production of e-books.

I also strongly believe that art librarians play a crucial role in the 21st century with the increased value of cataloguing and the creation of pertinent access points. Even with Google-like searching OPACs, or rather fuzzy searching, I *do not believe* that cataloguing has become a menial task. On the contrary, the accuracy of the metadata must be impeccable when search engines attempt to retrieve as much as possible instead of as accurately as possible, even if most of us still catalogue using standards created before the internet, OPACs and discovery tools. Speaking of cataloguing standards, the future is now full of possibilities in the shape of BIBFRAME and RDA. Most libraries will not be able to justify the cost of implementing new cataloguing standards until these have a more direct impact on searching and the usability of OPACs, especially when a business case needs to be made to non-librarians. AACR2 has not been the friendliest to items catalogued by art libraries and I will admit to having used a bit of imagination at times. The flexibility of RDA is something I'm very much looking forward to.

Mr. Croghan made the point in his 1977 viewpoint that being an art librarian involves both art and librarianship, but favoured the librarianship aspect as we are the only ones who can attend to it. Mr. Croghan couldn't have imagined that in 2016 the biggest problem for users would be having too much information and that librarians would still be around to weed that information. If we think of Google, discovery tools and self-service as the zombie apocalypse of art librarianship, having that specialized knowledge is the equivalent of having a few extra bullets. In reality this apocalypse is more likely to remain fiction for some time. However someone may want to contradict me in another 40 years.

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