

What does “What’s Past is Prologue?” mean to libraries and vendors?

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Introduction

The common proverb “what’s past is prologue” can hold a lot of meaning in four words. When we begin to unpack that meaning, however, it can resonate in many different directions. Those directions can include the historical, where a single incident can lead to serious consequences later, whether for good or for ill. Genealogical research of our past can lead to revelations about our ancestry and the places where those people once lived. In both instances, past events can serve as a guide for present and future actions. In the twenty-first century, both libraries and vendors have reached a place where the statement “what’s past is prologue” holds significance. Now, both agencies are coming to terms with where we have been but also where we are going. However, we both have a role to play in the path we are on toward our futures.

Where We Were and Where We Are

Technology has been an undeniable fact in libraries for decades. Indeed, the transition of libraries from a print to an electronic environment has been marked on several fronts, from the replacement of checkout cards by barcodes and electronic books and journals superseding their print counterparts. Today, this transition continues as libraries begin to depart from the treasured MARC standard toward the emerging standard known as BIBFRAME (Qiang 2016). Indeed, the lessons from MARC can lead to BIBFRAME becoming a more robust model, as this transition can ensure that current library materials will remain accessible well into the twenty-first century, while allowing for the access of a variety of non-print materials — such as audio files and image files — to be directly available following a catalog search. As a prologue to the future of access for a variety of resources, vendors must be able to supply records that can take advantage of these new and emerging formats, creating them to be readable by BIBFRAME. Libraries can also prepare by familiarizing themselves with the means to catalog in BIBFRAME as well as adopting library systems that can move the library forward to embrace a new level of accessibility.

Publishing has also taken a turn away from the traditional definitions as the roles have shifted considerably. For many years, libraries were only customers to vendors, as they would receive, catalog, and shelve materials that had been sent to them by a society, small press, or publishing house. As institutional repositories emerged on college campuses, however, those learned skillsets can bring new results. Many libraries often found themselves in possession of these resources as they began to collect and store the research output of the campuses they served. These libraries discovered that they could take on the role of content providers themselves, allowing faculty authors to publish their works to the internet to expand the levels of research. Libraries would also bear the responsibility of being content providers themselves, facing the need to maintain accessibility for a potentially broad audience (Dawson 2016). Similarly, vendors can also assist libraries as they embrace this new role while serving as a platform for libraries who cannot provide this service for themselves. In that way, vendors have become hosts for content, with that term taking on new meaning as vendors assume the role of libraries themselves.

Partnerships are an important element of libraries, vendors, and the populations they serve. Libraries, particularly academic libraries, have patron groups that include students, faculty, and staff as their primary constituents. Libraries would provide the books and journals for their patrons, and the flow was

mostly in the direction of only dissemination. Vendors have been part of this supply chain as well, as they have been the source of the materials that make it into libraries. This was also a position of dissemination, where the content flowed away from warehouses, returning only when there was a problem or concern. When electronic resources became the next development in library materials, libraries and vendors became partners in a different manner as they took on new roles. As vendors became content providers, libraries had to work with them to manage these resources, especially when these resources became unavailable to their patrons at a critical moment (Powell 2014). Conversely, libraries must account for patron groups who are different from their traditional counterparts. Distance learners require the same level of access as those who are on campus, and a library must account for them as they negotiate licenses to guarantee that their access is in place.

Where We're Going

As we continue to move through the twenty-first century, both libraries and vendors are faced with questions regarding emerging technologies. These technologies can impact that can range from a minor change to a complete transformation in traditional services. Some of these, such as data mining, have already begun to affect scholarship as researchers want to have access to raw data and converting it into new information that could be incorporated into their own work (Altalhi 2017). The semantic web is another significant development for the internet as strides have been taken to standardize elements of the web into common streams of understanding (Guerrini 2013). It is into this new landscape that libraries and vendors now find themselves, but past endeavors have prepared both groups for what is to come. By working together, libraries and vendors have advanced their respective reaches, and worlds that were once viewed separately are intrinsically linked. They both retain individual identities, but they can collectively bring a wealth of experience and knowledge using their respective skills. The next development to revolutionize academia is always on the horizon, but using the information from past developments can serve as a reminder of how to prepare for it.

Conclusion

“What’s past is prologue” serves as an adage to revere, but for libraries and vendors it can serve as a plan of action. Building on their past relationships of technological transitions, shifting roles, and stabilizing partnerships, this can be a model for the unseen developments in services that patrons will request in the future. Rather than abandoning what worked altogether, preparing for them in advance could aid in a graceful adoption in the present ahead of a successful future.

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