

Guest Editorial

Between Two Ages



An intriguing problem for any profession or field of knowledge is its own development. When such development is between two ages—the print and the electronic—this problem becomes significant, centering on prospects for restructuring traditional organizations and other institutional arrangements. Unfortunately, the picture one gets of academic libraries is that of a profession, struck by the speed of technological change, putting a premium on the avoidance of organizational instability—even at the expense of organizational relevance. This editorial suggests the need for a new genre of case studies that would not only expand our knowledge of restructuring processes but also stimulate such processes in the profession at large.

Boundary Spanning

The essential problem we face is the lag of organizational development behind technological change. The key factor is the rising demand for network-to-desktop information resources, which require boundary-spanning library services. Organizational development would build on a series of new patterns of influence and interaction “out there” in the networked environment: a realignment of library-computing center relations, a redesign of academic programs to assimilate information technology, a regeneration of consortia through electronic resource sharing, and a revisioning of the library’s and university’s societal roles in the context of the Internet.

“Catching Our Breath”

What little is known empirically about the state of our organizational development comes from a 1995 survey by the Association of Research Libraries.¹

It found only rudimentary changes under way—in the main, that a third of its member institutions were reallocating staff from technical services to public services. The report, not finding much evidence of boundary spanning, noted “little involvement by members of the university community outside the library” and concluded that, “It is almost as though research libraries are catching their breath before they might proceed to realign their resources, organizational structure, and services.”

“We Haven’t the Courage”

A similar perspective was drawn by Jerry D. Campbell, who once advocated restructuring reference services. He later reflected that “technological assault” combines with “organizational rigidity” to produce an “unproductive anxiety” in our profession.² Campbell now recommends strategic planning and team-building programs for some years before any restructuring might be attempted: “Given the trauma associated with major changes in libraries, few librarians, including library administrators, have the necessary courage to risk it.”

Cognitive Maps versus Road Maps

During the print age, libraries were insular, nearly unique, and had hierarchical control over processes of change. A case study was like a “road map” of a particular institution’s structure, culture, plans, and biases. Of course, such studies were hardly generalizable. As the electronic age advances, however, insularity and hierarchy diminish. With this shift toward a common ground, case studies drawn as cognitive maps of the

networked environment may be applicable professionwide. A *cognitive map* consists of the concepts, relations, and strategies a participant uses to make sense of organizational situations.

Cognitive maps are realistic to the extent that they embrace the meaningfulness of certain complexities in the networked environment. In any boundary-spanning (restructuring) project, the primary factors—problems, solutions, decision makers, and choice opportunities—are in relatively independent streams. Problems across different spheres of influence become harder to diagnose. Solutions may exist “out there,” unattached to problems. Decision makers drift in and out of various problem arenas. Choice opportunities flow through organizations rather free of human intents. What gets accomplished—by joining problems, solutions, and decision makers to create choice opportunities—often depends on variables of timing and ecologies of attention.

Cognitive maps become relevant when they focus on the interpretation and organization of such ill-structured situations. Cognitive maps may be influential to the extent that they demonstrate plausibility, coherence, and instrumentality in the face of uncertainty. By outlining even a roughly perceptible environment, they can prompt needed actions along similar lines on the part of other libraries.

“One of Us Found a Map”

The classic case of a cognitive map with such sense-making, activist influence is a true story told by Nobel Laureate Albert Szent-Gyorti and preserved in a poem by Miroslav Holub:³

*The young lieutenant of a small Hungarian detachment in the Alps/sent a reconnaissance unit out onto the icy wasteland./It began to snow/immediately,/snowed for two days and the unit/did not return./The lieutenant suffered:/he had dispatched/his own people to death.
But the third day the unit came back./*

Where had they been? How had they made their way?/Yes, they said, we considered ourselves/lost and waited for the end. And then one of us/ found a map in his pocket. That calmed us down./We pitched camp, lasted out the snowstorm and then with the map/we discovered our bearings./And here we are.

The lieutenant borrowed this remarkable map/and had a good look at it. It was not a map of the Alps/ but of the Pyrenees.

Plausibility versus Accuracy

The moral is that having an accurate map (or a detailed plan) may be less important than having an imperfect map that overcomes inertia, instills confidence in people, and gets them moving in a general direction. Once under way, they can rely on cues to learn where they are and where they want to be. Although a formal strategic plan has great symbolism, it is bound to lag behind technological change; being perennially “under construction,” long-term planning should not deter us from taking suitable initiatives in the near term. After all, we are judged primarily by what we *do*, not by what we plan. In that spirit, academic libraries that have accomplished large restructuring programs might well consider publishing case studies as cognitive maps of their experiences.

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Notes

1. *Library Reorganization & Restructuring*, comps. Joanne D. Eustis and Donald J. Kenney, SPEC Kit 215 (Washington, D.C.: ARL, 1996).

2. Jerry D. Campbell, “Getting Comfortable with Change: A New Budget Model for Libraries in Transition,” *Library Trends* 42 (winter 1994): 451.

3. Miroslav Holub, “Brief Thoughts on Maps,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, Feb. 4, 1977, 118; reprinted in Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 1995), 54.