

Outgoing Editor's Column: Parting Thoughts

Marc Truitt

More from the Far Side of the K-T Boundary

In my September column, I offered some old-school suggestions for how we as a profession might cope with our confused and unbalanced times. Since then, several more have crossed my mind, and I thought I'd offer them, for what they may be worth:

- *We can outsource everything but responsibility.* Whether it's "the Cloud," vendor acquisition profiles, or shelf-ready cataloguing, outsourcing has become a popular way of dealing with budgetary and staffing stresses during the past few years. Generally speaking, I have serious reservations about outsourcing our services, but I do recognize the imperatives that have caused us to resort to them. That said, in farming out critical library services, we do not at the same time gain license to farm out *responsibility* for their efficient operation. Oversight and quality control are still up to us, and it simply will not wash with patrons today, next year, or a century from now to be told that a collection or service is unacceptably substandard because we outsourced it. A vendor's failure is our failure, too. It's *still* "our stuff," and so are the services.
- *We're here to make decisions, not avoid them.* Document delivery, patron-driven acquisitions, usability studies, and evidence-based methodologies should help to *inform and serve as validity checks for our decisions, not be replacements for them.* As with outsourcing and our over-reliance on technology-driven solutions, I fear that these services and methodologies are in real danger of becoming crutches, enabling us to avoid making decisions that may be difficult, unpopular, tedious, or simply too much work. But if decisions regarding collections and services can be reduced to simple questions of demand or the outcome of a survey, *then who needs us?* It's our *job* to make these decisions; demand- or survey-driven techniques are simply there to assist us in doing so.
- *Relevance is relative.* We talk about "relevance" in much the same breathlessly reverential voice as we speak of the "user" . . . as if there were but one, uniquely "relevant" service model for that single, all-encompassing "user." One of the perils of our infatuation with "relevance" is the illusion that by adopting this or that technology or targeted service,

we are somehow remaining relevant to "the user." *Which user?* Just as not all patrons come to us seeking potboiler romances, so too not all users demand that all services and collections be made available electronically, over mobile platforms. Since we do recognize that our resources are finite, rather than pandering to some groups at the expense of others with trendy temporal come-ons, why not instead focus on long-term services and collections that reflect our *values*? The patrons who really should matter most to us will respect us for this demonstration of our integrity.

- *Libraries are ecosystems.* As with the rest of the world around us, libraries comprise arrays of interlocking, interdependent, and often poorly understood/ documented entities, services, and systems. They've developed that way over centuries. And just as so often happens in the larger world, any and every change we make can cause a cascade of countless other changes, many of which we might not anticipate before making that seemingly simple initial change. We are stewards of the libraries in which we work: our obligation, as librarians, is to respect what was bequeathed to us, to care for and use it wisely, and to pass it on to those who follow in at least the condition in which we received it—preferably better. Environments, including libraries, change and evolve of course, but critics of the supposedly slow pace of change in libraries fail to grasp that our role is just as much that of the conservationist as it is the advocate of development and change. Our mission is not change for change's sake; rather, it is incremental, considered change that will benefit not only today's patrons and librarians, but respect those of the past and serve those of the future as well. Perhaps librarians need an analogue to the medical profession's Hippocratic Oath: *Primum non nocere*, "First, do no harm."

Innocents Abroad

Probably few *ITAL* readers will be aware (I certainly wasn't!) that Mark Twain's bestselling book during his lifetime was not *Tom Sawyer* or *Huckleberry Finn*—or any of a host of others of his now better-remembered works—but rather his 1869 travelogue *Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrims' Progress*. The book, which I've been savoring in my spare leisure reading time over the past several months, records in journal form Twain's involvement in a voyage in 1867 by a group of American tourists to various locales in Mediterranean Europe, Northern Africa, and the Near East. In the book, Twain gleefully skewers

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tour-goers, those they encounter, and of course himself; as with Twain generally, it is at turns witty, outlandish, biting, and—by today’s lights—completely lacking in political correctness. In short, it’s vintage Mark Twain: delicious!

I mention *Innocents Abroad* not simply because I’m currently enjoying it (and hoping that by saying so, I might pique some other *ITAL* reader’s interest in giving it a test drive) but also because it—as with other books, songs, stories, etc., about journeys-taken—is a metaphor for life. We are all “innocents” in some sense as we traverse the days and years of growth in self-awareness, relationships, work, and all the other facets that make up life. It’s a comforting way of viewing the world, I think.

I’ve served with *ITAL* in various capacities for more than eleven years. That’s a very long time in terms of one particular ALA/LITA committee. It’s now time for my journey and *ITAL*’s to part ways. This is my final column as editor of this journal. This “innocent” is debarking the *ITAL* ship and moving on.

ITAL is the product of the dedicated labor of many people of whom I am but one. For some of them, it is a labor of love. As with the credits at the end of a film, it is customary for an editor in her or his final column to recognize and thank the people who made it all possible. I’d like to do so now. Polite audience members know to remain until “The End” rolls by. I hope you’ll help me honor these people by doing so, too:

- Mary Taylor, Valerie Edmonds, and Melissa Prentice in the LITA office. Over the years, they’ve been unfailingly helpful to me, to say nothing of being nearly as unfailingly tolerant of my clueless and occasionally obstreperous, passive-aggressive ignorance of the Byzantine ways of the ALA bureaucracy.
- ALA Production Services. Production Services folk are the professionals who, among innumerable other skills, copyedit and typeset manuscripts, perform miracles with figures and tables, and generally make *ITAL* into the quality product you receive (whether it is cellulose- or electron-based). Regardless of *ITAL*’s future publishing format and directions, count yourself fortunate as long as the good people in Production Services continue to play a role. I’d especially like to single out Tim Clifford, *ITAL*’s production editor, who over the past several years has brought skill, grace, stability, and a healthy dose of humor to this critical post.
- The members—past and present—of the *ITAL* editorial board. The editorial board is a LITA committee; the members of this committee serve as the editor’s primary group of reviewer-referees of manuscripts submitted for publication consideration. As

committee assignments go, I think it fair to say that this is probably one of the more thankless. Board members must be expert in all areas of technology, and as important, willing and able to do a credible job of pretending to be so in those areas where they are not expert! They must be able to recognize and create good prose and to offer authors practical, constructive insights and guidance in the sometimes black art of turning promising manuscripts into great articles. As I think many *ITAL* authors will attest, they do a superb job at this. They also write some of the most interesting and perceptive editorial columns you’ll see in *ITAL*!

- Judith Carter. It’s really impossible to overstate the contributions made by Judith to *ITAL*. Other than a brief four-year interlude during which I served in the role, Judith has been managing editor for much of the past decade and more. She taught me the job when she relinquished it in early 2004, and then graciously offered to take it back again when I was named editor four years later. More than any other single person, she is responsible for the *ITAL* you hold in your hands, and she does it with skill and tireless dedication. She also has been my coach, my confidante, and—as only a true friend can be—even my butt-kicker when I was late in observing a deadline, which has not infrequently been the case. Thank you for everything, Judith.
- Dan and John. The late Dan Marmion brought me on board at *ITAL* as a board member in 2000; he later asked me to serve as his managing editor. He also encouraged me to succeed John Webb as editor in 2007. From both Dan and John I learned much about the role of an editor and especially about what *ITAL* could and should be. I am endlessly appreciative for their mentoring and hope that I have been reasonably successful in maintaining the high standards that they set for the journal.
- The authors. Without interesting, well-researched, and timely content, there would be no *ITAL*. I have been blessed with a rich and nearly constant supply of superb manuscript submissions that the folks who make up the *ITAL* “publication machine” have then turned into a highly stimulating and readable journal. I hope you agree.
- The readers. And finally, I thank all of you, gentle readers. You are the reason that *ITAL* exists. I have been grateful for your support, your patience, and your always-constructive suggestions.

Beginning with the March 2012 issue, *ITAL* will be edited by Bob Gerrity of Boston College. I’ve been acquainted with Bob for a number of years, and I can’t think of a better person to guide this journal through the

changes that will be coming over the next few years. I wish him the very best and hope that he has as much fun in the job—and on the journey—as have I.

“Happy Trails,” and “T-t-t-t-that’s all, folks!”

“The End.”

From the Managing Editor

I’d like to take this opportunity to give Marc Truitt my heartfelt thanks and best wishes as he leaves his long-term relationship with *Information Technology and Libraries (ITAL)*. I appreciate how he ably stepped into the role of managing editor (ME) when I needed to resign to focus on my full-time job. A few years later he became the new editor and I accepted his request to be his ME. I think we’ve had a good partnership. I’ve nudged Marc about the production schedule while he has managed manuscripts, the peer review process, and eloquently represented the journal when needed. Marc held and communicated a clear and scholarly view of the journal to the editorial board and to LITA.

I have fond memories of many cups of tea drunk in various ALA conference venues while we discussed *ITAL*, *LITA*, and shared news of mutual friends. We endured the loss of our friend and mentor Dan Marmion together

a year ago September when Marc wrote a letter which I read at the memorial service.

This too may be my final issue of *ITAL*. It is unknown at time of printing. I support the online future of *ITAL* and have offered my services to Robert Gerrity until a paper version is no longer supported and we successfully transition my duties into an online environment/to a new ME. I know he will take the journal into its new iteration with skill and grace.

I have served *LITA* and *ITAL* for over 13 years and am proud of the quality peer reviewed journal Dan Marmion, John Webb, Marc Truitt, the Editorial Board members and I have shared with the members of *LITA*. It has also been my honor to communicate with each of the authors and to facilitate their scholarly communication to our profession. Without the authors, where would we be?

Thank you all, Judith Carter.