

How Many Canaries are there in Your Mine?

by Stephen Abram

My grandfather escaped (his words) the turn of the century coal miner's life in Yorkshire England where all of his brothers were miners. If you've ever seen the pictures of old style, pre-mechanization coal mining, naked men removing rock with pick-axes, you know this was a hard life. He avoided this life by immigrating to Canada in the 1920's with my grandmother and young aunt. My grandparents accomplished this by starting a fish and chips shop to save enough money to buy three tickets on a ship and a final train ride to Toronto where my mother was born. It worked for them. Grandpa once told me this story of the canaries and how they saved his brother's lives. Here's my paraphrasing:

For centuries, miners have been taking canaries down into the mines to warn them of potential danger from poisonous gases. Canaries sing lovely songs almost constantly. Grandpa told me that too many people think that the birds sing out when there's danger. That's not it. It's when the birds stop singing that you're supposed to get worried. If they're dead, get out of there quick. (As another aside, remember the old expression, "The rabbit died"? Apparently before OTC diagnostic pregnancy tests, the rabbit always died, not just if you were pregnant.) Apparently one day his brothers noticed that the canaries weren't singing and beatled out of there like a canary out of hell. It saved their lives and those of their co-workers to notice what wasn't there. They lived to have a future.

So, what canaries aren't singing now? In the coal mines of library land, what aren't you hearing or seeing? It's always easier to see what is there in popular culture. How do we train our minds to notice what we're not seeing?

Here are a few things I am seeing in other parts of the world and not in special libraries yet. Sometimes special librarians are on the bleeding edge and sometimes we lag. I haven't found a pattern yet. Maybe there isn't one.

Ning

Ning (<http://www.ning.com>) is the latest thing in private social networking tools. I belong to and participate in at least one – Library 2.0 (<http://library20.ning.com/>). It is very 2.0 sophisticated itself with streaming videos, a tag cloud and sorted blog-like entries. It was started by Bill Drew and in less than 6 weeks had over 1,000 members discussing and sharing ideas about every aspect of Library 2.0. It grew so fast and became so popular that it was featured on the top pages of the site. I've noticed Classroom 2.0, School 2.0, School Library 2.0 sites as well

and some focused on particular academic disciplines. There are even some for LIS students such as <http://lisstudents.ning.com/>. There are Ning Library 2.0 sites in other languages such as German, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian, French and Chinese. I haven't seen any yet specifically on special library issues. This doesn't mean they don't exist, it just means that I'm not hearing about any or my searches are inadequate. My antennae tell me that Ning type services are going to be huge. As an association of information professionals we are obligated to review anything that we see that connects people over specialized topics, grows alliances and collaborations quickly and creates social networks based on common needs around information and discussion. Why aren't I hearing a larger discussion? Perhaps we'll have a Hot Topic about this at SLA in Denver?

[Note to John Adams – you can get a screen capture of Ning here:

<http://www.ning.com/>

And a screen capture of Ning's Library 2.0 here:

<http://library20.ning.com/>]

Twitter

Lordy, Twitter is getting a lot of Buzz (<http://twitter.com>). It's even been featured in the New York Times. This is interesting as a presence tool. The next generation of the Internet is all about 'presence'. Twitter is in its hype phase right now with some of the hyperbole saying it could replace IM and e-mail. In my opinion it has a few specialized information centric uses. First, there the service use: "Where are you when I need you?" "I need you now!" Are we ready to be omnipresent for our core users? This e-interruption tool allows you to be in constant contact, although subtly so, with all of your core users. Second, there's the team use. For instance, say you're part of a team. This could be a project team, acquisition or merger planning team, management group, task force or anything that require close teamwork. Is anyone in the specialized information space trying it yet? I'd like to hear more. Is this just another e-annoyance or does it have some applicability for success in our environment? I think it would be amazing at a conference and it was recently tried at Computers in Libraries conference by a group of attendees to much excitement.

[Note to John Adams – you can get a screen capture of Twitter here:

<http://twitter.com/>]

Second Life

I've written about Second Life in previous columns. I am adding it here because I just returned from speaking at the DigitalNow Conference for association executives. There I saw some amazing things from other associations and charities that were quite leading edge. The manager of futuring and innovation (and I thought my title was cool!) at the American Cancer Society showed some of their Second Life attempts at building something that meets that Society's

needs. The association has guided the building of their SL island but it was built totally with volunteers. It's an amazing place where events have raised 10's of thousands of dollars, just in the early experiments. I met the head of the March of Dimes digital initiatives who showed an amazing plan for using Second Life to help parents of premature babies in the NICU understand their environment and connect with the bee there/done that crowd for advice and support. They're even doing a charity 'run' for peoples' avatars in Second Life. You get sponsors and they're making money from donations. I heard targets for fundraising at ACS and the March of Dimes exceeding \$75,000! Something is working here and SLA can learn from these guys. Another professional association that is doing amazing things is the Massachusetts Association of CPA's. These people blew me away. Their demo alone was amazing – all built with volunteer members and their kids (meeting two needs at once – professional and parental). You just had to meet this association's young professionals, seasoned leaders and the kids to know that something exciting was going on here. If CPA's and Librarians don't have a connection –around the image problem alone – then I don't know who does. Lastly, Jenny Levine, the Shifted Librarian and ALA digital goddess, presented some of ALA's proposed initiatives. I've been watching these carefully. ALA is doing some very interesting experiments and taking on the innovation challenge, head on.

Is SLA ready for this? Can we experiment more in these environments. Maybe we're ready for a new kind of partnership to build virtual worlds with ALA, MLA, AALL and SLA? I think we're ready and I hear murmurings. It's time.

Other stuff

So what's new out there (or even old) that we're not hearing enough about?

I saw a presentation in the UK recently that demonstrated the use of Google Scholar in a corporate intranet setting (GlaxoSmithKline) as a research tool and as a way to drive traffic to quality licensed databases. Are we hearing enough about Google as a traffic generator using federated search and OpenURL behind our firewalls?

I don't hear enough about devices in special libraries. How does our intranet presence work on our clients Treos, Blackberries and phones? Do they know it can work there? I love the work done in medical librarianship to improve healthcare and reduce hospital death rates using PDA's. When the Apple iPhones and Google Phone arrive this summer, will be ready? Will we have adapted to the new standards.

I am sure you can think of a lot of other things you haven't heard lately. Are we listening intently enough? Are we in the places where we'd be likely to hear? Are we using a diversity of listening styles and strategies? I don't know. Your mileage will vary because of the diversity of information, learning and decision

environments that SLA members excel at serving. I still believe that we should pay attention to what's out there whether we're hearing it or not!

And what become of my grandparents' fish and chips shop? I don't know. I do know that my relatives in the UK are very well off as fish & chips barons with a lovely chain of take-away shops, horses and a good life.

Maybe every canary isn't right.

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