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## **Information Professional Identities and Our Online Reputation** by Stephen Abram

I made an offhand comment a few weeks ago and it appeared to start an entire conversation on the web, blogs and even *Library Journal*! All I said was something like:

“Librarians cannot afford to be anonymous and generic. We have to step up to the plate and put our meet in the game. This means being more up front about what we do and how we specialize in certain areas – functionally, by sector or industry and also by type of library. We need to state that we’re pretty good more often. We want to be treated as professionals and far too many of us seem to hide under the cloak of anonymity. What other professionals – surgeons, nurses, dentists, tax preparers, accountants, and the like – won’t tell you their name right away? Would you hire them or treat them as professionals if they remained anonymous? Would you find them and employ them if they had we pages that described their services but didn’t show their names, specialties, work projects and pictures? Why do I see so many library websites and intranet pages that display a wonderful range of services and so few images and descriptions of the professionals behind the services? Why do so many librarians blog anonymously? How can we expect to raise our professional profile if we don’t remove the cloak and shyness and head out into the big world of professional services?”

OK, I’ll admit it. It was a bit of a rant. It pushed a few people out of their boxes. It challenged some folks’ thinking. A few librarians said they feared being stalked if anyone knew their name. A few had good reason to be slightly more secretive due to their work in the spy business. A few worried that their clients might disapprove and needed to seek permission. A few said their blogs were anonymous because their employers wouldn’t approve of their thoughts! Some of these are valid considerations but most other professions market their individual competencies and special attributes as individual pros and this is even more important now in the special library world. I know that there are good examples of librarians who are out there and promoting their special skills (and indeed the whole information profession) through their blogs, websites, speeches and publications. That’s great but it’s not enough. I think it’s time that we had a wider discussion about this issue, especially since it’s so much easier to promote ourselves and our profession in this century than it was in the last one.

I remember when it was controversial in some firms for the librarian to have a business card. Imagine! That’s just so last century. Of course, every one of us

should have business cards – and our name, title, employer, e-mail address, IM handles, phone numbers, snailmail address, etc. are just basic metadata now. For those employers who won't provide you with one, then it's easy to make one on a laser printer with card stock! You can even make an SLA volunteer card on the SLA website. Either way being able to share your metadata with a business card is just a baby step.

Kids are now taught from a very young age to be able to describe themselves professionally. I was always surprised to be helping my kids with their homework in grade 6 to create their first resumé. This is a pretty traditional format whether you call it curriculum vitae, resumé, or whatever. It's also a good start in the creation of your online identity. Many people start here and it's sometimes useful in your job search to post it online at Monster or Workopolis. Employers can find you.

Now we need to manage our online identities. Sometimes it starts with the job search. It can also start your webpage (or one you contribute to), your MS Outlook contact file, your SLA discussion list membership and postings, your blog presence, and more. Some employers now routinely ask for these as part of the selection process. All of these leave a breadcrumb trail that comprises hints at your online identity and reputation. And make no mistake, like herpes, the Internet is forever! All of these tools leave a reputation trail that must be considered and managed. I have seen people destroy promising careers through ill-considered public comments and others who enhanced their careers mightily through well rounded and intelligent online contributions. We also need to formally recognize the difference between home (personal, family, sports, and hobby, etc.) and work identities (professional, association, and employer). This is complex but not too hard as long as we're aware that we're leaving a trail. People make judgments.

I love the concept of elevator speeches and the like and have written about them in this space before. I also love the concept of collectible trading cards, like those that came with gum when I was kid for baseball, hockey and NBA players. It appears they're for games like Pokémon now. There is an amazing and fun Flickr group for Librarian Trading Cards which is great fun. I like it because it forces folks to define themselves in a succinct way – just like an elevator speech. What are your stats? How many seasons have you played? On what teams? What's your position? I know libraries that have their users collecting the full set of librarian cards! It's a powerful way to get our usefulness and talents across and it's great to align with sports heroes for marketing.

There are other new emerging and important social tools that are already having an impact on our roles and success. Of course, I am talking about such social networking spaces as MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, Plaxo, Ning, Twitter, Google Friend Connect, Plurk, etc. With these important tools we have to play with them a while to understand what their usefulness might be. Some may be

more useful in certain niches than others. Those of us who serve teens might find MySpace better now or scholar's use of Facebook might be more useful for academics. LinkedIn and Plaxo are rising business tools with LinkedIn having a strong media market population. Microblogging tools like Twitter and Google Friend Connect offer other new opportunities to be present in the lives and spaces inhabited by our users, customers and clients. By immersive play with these tools we learn and make judgments on our own. I believe that the spoils go to those who jump in early. I also think that our SLA colleagues are among the best prepared to learn and adapt these tools to our information environments. We can also make judgments about white label social networks in the workplace environment.

The tools I've mentioned above are just a start. They're all necessary to an understanding of the emerging web based social, learning, research and commerce space that will be the norm very quickly. As I write this column on July 8<sup>th</sup>, IBM and Second Life announced that they had made the first successful transfer of an avatar between IBM and Second Life. It's the start of another adventure as the expectation that you will have an avatar will be as normal as that you have a telephone number and e-mail address. It's a bit farther out but we are seeing evidence of the emergence of an environment where gaming, virtual worlds and the web converge - Second Life, There.com; Google Lively, World of Warcraft, GTA, and more.

You can start by understanding the emerging definition of friend – the full range of the word. It's not so high school as best friend or as Paris Hilton as BFF. We need to learn to manage the communities we serve in the context of these new tools – public tools like Facebook and white label tools like Ning. So, how are your friends dividing up? Are they a friend, best friend, family, mutual friend, acquaintance, classmate, teacher, professor, student, co-worker, customer, client, author, fan, hero, colleague, association network, committee member, chapter/division contact, or more?

We need to learn to address the challenging 21<sup>st</sup> century issues in this socially networked world – privacy, DRM, rights, legal issues, ownership, safety, etc. We need to understand the issues related to our photos – are they real, B&W, colour – professional, edgy, silly, embarrassing, whatever? Will we want them to turn up in other contexts? What about our private lives and photos? What about weird Uncle Bill?

Either way, it's time to re-find our voice as professionals. Anonymity just isn't working for us. Professionalism requires that we learn to how to present ourselves, promote ourselves and be where our market of users can discover us and be impressed that we are the sharks in the tank of the emerging information and knowledge economy. Our reputation will play out in the social web space as much as anywhere else. We need to get good at this.

So there you have it. It's time to play again (You'll recognize this as one of my major themes!). Friend me! You can find me playing in most of these online spaces. I'm learning too. You can learn more in the SLA Innovation Laboratory or by participating in SLA's Learning 2.0 / 23 Things. SLA is there for you.

Friend me . . . SLA . . . Let's learn together.

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