

# Information makes us human

By Lindsay Willson.

*The opening keynote address at the 2013 BC Library Conference, "From Scroll to Scrolling," was presented by Lev Grossman, bestselling author, lead technology writer, book reviewer, and senior writer at Time Magazine.*

*Joe Jones presented the closing keynote address, "Information Makes Us Human." Jones is Chair of the MLIS Program at the University of Washington Information School and author of the "Internet Librarian" column for American Libraries magazine.*

## From Scroll to Scrolling

In response to the 2013 BC Library Conference theme, "Are we there yet?" Lev Grossman provided a crowded room with a very personal account of his connections to libraries, intertwined with a history of the book, and many laughs. His talk revolved around binaries as they relate to books and libraries; good and evil, danger and safety, nostalgia and progress, ending with a discussion about the physical and electronic incarnations of books.

Like so many of us who work with books and libraries, Grossman has a nostalgic association between his family, childhood and libraries, and underscores how we talk about "libraries raising people" and being our "only friend". To emphasize this idea, he quoted Lemony Snicket: "A library is like an island in the middle of a vast sea of ignorance."

However, he also explained his view of the library as a dangerous place. Grossman engaged the audience with stories about his father, who was a scholar. He had an impressive library, although unlike Lemony Snicket's island oasis, his father's library was an isolated, closed collection, a place where his father disappeared "all day, every day."

He speaks of the public library, on the other hand, as a place where books are "free," "free-range," and "wild". He felt as a child that nobody owned the books at the public library, and no one was there to judge the books you chose. As an author, he uses these images of "wild" books in his own work; in the library at his magic school, shelved books do not remain in one spot, but rather (much to a librarian's horror!) "fluttered from shelf to shelf;" books are free to "interbreed" in his magic school's library.

Grossman iterates a feeling shared by many about books and the future of reading; the loss of the physical book seems to signify a loss of something more. He talks about the physical book and libraries as a "specter" for the thoughts and ideas held within.

In the case of his father, Grossman saw his private library as a physical reminder of his life after he passed away. E-books and e-readers have removed the "ghost" of ideas left behind in print publications, because we are no longer able to read the titles or spines on the shelf, on a table, or in someone's hands. He wonders if we will be the last generation to be "raised" by libraries.

From his own connection with books, Grossman turned to a history of the book, discussing the many incarnations of writing. From scrolls, which were difficult to house and organize and had to be "rewound," to tablets made with wood and a soft wax that could be "deleted" ("the stickies of ancient times"), and finally to the codex, which revolutionized reading. Compared to scrolls, the codex was physically compact, had a "larger hard drive," was double-sided, and made re-reading much easier. The codex gave more power to the reader, with the ability to skim, flip to different pages, bookmark, and more easily compare passages.

Grossman draws a connection between scrolls and e-books in their current form (scrolling!), and wonders if we are reverting to earlier forms of reading. We are losing the physical transmission of books and gaining a silent format that tells us nothing, but rather "talks behind our backs" to social media networks, publishers, and booksellers in the electronic realm.

He reminds us that this is the book's first format change in two thousand years; however, the previous format changes, which progressed over 400 years, are now happening within a decade. We are in the driver's seat of this change.

## Information Makes Us Human

The history of the book was also a main theme in Joe Janes's closing keynote. He stated that while he would not answer the theme question of the conference, he would talk about why it is important for us to think about information in two ways. In our information age, information is "everywhere" and

literally surrounds us (wireless; the cloud); also, we are made of information (genetic code). His discussion about the human connection to information began with a history of the encyclopedia.

The first incarnation, in which Pliny the Elder tried to codify "everything worth knowing," turned out to be around twenty thousand topics. In 1752 Diderot tried to make us "think about thinking" with his *Encyclopédie*, which was censored, resulted in his imprisonment, took years to finish, and had little in common with the unbiased encyclopedias modern readers expect today.

The Britannica's first edition in the late 1700s brought about the authoritative, self-perpetuating idea of the encyclopedia to which modern readers relate. Janes provided a brief history of the founders of Wikipedia and the newest incarnation of the encyclopedia. Technology and changes in our use and creation of information has led to an evolution of the encyclopedia; any author can add any information, at any time. Janes draws a connection between Wikipedia's authors and editors to Diderot's conception of the encyclopedia as a social construct, where many contributors shared their knowledge and interests, in the hopes of spreading that knowledge to future generations.

From trying to codify "everything worth knowing", he moved on to talk about the evolution of the book and publishing, which have changed to meet our altered information needs (books: now there is an app for that!). Other than the book, he used the example of music, in which genres have been suggestive of physical forms. He mentioned concept albums, which had their heyday in the 60s, and have since fallen out of favour. We have moved from curated albums in physical formats, to creating our own mixed tapes, and now digital playlists that we can manipulate. While some forms of information sharing last hundreds of years, others may not (news magazines, perhaps newspapers?). In some cases, we have been using these information objects for so long we may not even realize how important they

are. Now that they are changing, we are taking notice.

Other than making information in the ways Janes has mentioned previously, he talked about how humans also *make* objects informational. We take information from things, such as fingerprints, and then need to manage it somehow. Not only do we have databases for books and printed knowledge, we now have databases for fingerprints. It is in our very nature to not only publish information and put it out for others to see and use, we take information from everything surrounding us to make sense of our world.

In closing, Janes told the story about Cueva de las Manos (Cave of the Hands) in Argentina. Negative images of left hands decorate the walls of the cave, dating back 13,000 to 6,000 years. Today, while several theories exist, we do not know for sure why the people in that area created those images of hands, although scholars keep researching the possibilities. However, this puzzle points to how information drives us: we create it, we use it to answer our questions about the world and ourselves, and it helps shape how we communicate. We cannot be a complex society without storing, recording, and preserving information. As Janes says, information makes us human.

*Lindsay Willson is the Public Services and Business Administration Liaison Librarian at Okanagan College in Kelowna, BC.*



Joe Janes addresses BC Library Conference attendees. Photo by Larry McCallum.