Defining relevance

By Justin Unrau.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the ominous title "Are We Irrelevant Yet? Facing Up to the Hardest Thing" Vancouver Public Library Systems Librarian Philip Hall's Friday BC Library conference session was packed to standing room only. The attendees were treated to a tour through the history of how humans have thought about libraries, information and our roles, but also came away with a possible test for how to determine whether what we're doing is actually relevant to our mission without fear or fretting.

Hall suggested that the Enlightenment shaped the way our dominant culture thought of knowledge as finite and organizable, which as we keep on existing we've realized becomes less and less true. He then demonstrated some ways to think through our universe of knowledge that's too big to know.

Though the Enlightenment model is wrong, traditional library methods and systems still kind of work (if we squint) so we're lulled into thinking we're doing okay. The idea that Google is good but a librarian is better is just something we use to make ourselves feel better, since for most people Google is actually good enough. Which is kind of scary if we don't know how to accurately judge our own worth.

The key to thinking differently about our relevance, said Hall, lies in getting away from operating out of abstract fears. The question of relevance is easily confused with popularity (he pointed to DVD circulations buoying up everyone's circulation stats), but the big question is whether basing our business on fluff and propaganda is the way to make sure we're doing our jobs well.

Hall argued that we can measure our relevance if we get away from rootless abstraction and to a simple two-part formula (which he lifted from his geography studies): Librarianship is about Information Transfer (or Knowledge Enhancement or whatever your preferred term is), plus Anything Else. This kind of approach means when we're looking at the relevance of a given service we offer, we can look at the first side, make sure it fits into the domain of information transfer, and only then look at the other reasons we might want to do it (including funding, popularity and politics).

The point was that looking at our services from this perspective changes our methods from defending an abstract rootless outmoded idea of our role into tackling concrete issues. Our relevance may be changing, said Hall, but if we have a way to grab those changes we can be more assertive in empowering people with knowledge. And that is relevant to everyone.

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