

Thoughts from the State Librarian

By Christie Brandau

I was chatting with a media relations person last week and she told me about a new trend: hiring firms to insure that your name or product is featured prominently on search engines such as Google. In other words, we could pay for our library's name to pop to the top when people type in the word "library"! I knew that search engines could be manipulated, but I didn't know that manipulating them was a thriving business!

This again is another reason that libraries are vital in the 21st century. A recent posting making the rounds of library blogs is called "Are Librarians Totally Obsolete? 33 Reasons Librarians and Libraries are Still Extremely Important". The author's most compelling argument is number 20: "the wisdom of crowds is untrustworthy, because of the tipping point":

The high visibility of certain viewpoints, analysis and even facts found online through social networking sites and wikis is engineered – ideally – to be the result of objective group consensus. Google's algorithm also hinges on this collective principle: rather than an in-house "expert" arbitrarily deciding what resource is the most authoritative, let the web decide. Sites with higher link popularity tend to rank higher in the search engines. The algorithm is based on the principle that group consensus reveals a better, more accurate analysis of reality than a single expert ever could. Writer James Surowiecki calls this phenomenon "the wisdom of crowds."

In a vacuum, crowds probably are very wise. But all too often we see the caveat to James Surowiecki's crowd wisdom in Malcom Gladwell's "tipping point", which, in this context, explains that groups are easily influenced by their vanguard – those who are the first to do something and who automatically have extra influence, even if what they are doing is not necessarily the best idea.

The highly social nature of the web therefore makes it highly susceptible to, for example, sensationalized, low-quality information with the sole merit of being popular. Libraries, in contrast, provide quality control in the form of a stopgap. Only information that is carefully vetted is allowed in. Libraries are likely to stay separate from the internet, even if they can be found online. Therefore, it is extremely important that libraries remain alive and well, as a counterpoint to the fragile populism of the web."

That, in a nutshell, is why libraries will remain vital. Our collections are not selected solely on the basis of popularity or by socially acceptable subject, but also on the basis of quality and authenticity. Search engines may be able to be manipulated by the market, but we just don't hear much about libraries being paid to push particular information... and we probably never will!