

Moving beyond the echo-chamber

Opinion

Personal views on
professional issues

Information professionals are mounting a good defence of their worth and value to critics. But who's listening, asks **Ned Potter**.

RECENTLY CAME across the term 'echo-chamber' for the first time. It refers to ideas being transmitted inside an 'enclosed' space, and therefore being amplified or reinforced – by like-minded people, quoting the same sort of beliefs back at you. It struck me that this might be something which we suffer from in the library community. In particular there is a diverse and quite vociferous online community of information professionals, bouncing brilliant ideas off one another. The great and good of what has been termed the 'biblioblogosphere' often engage in lively and informed discussions about library advocacy, emerging technologies and trends, and the changes the profession is undergoing. But what if we're only really preaching to the converted? What if we have our own echo-chamber, beyond which lie the people we really need to be convincing of our continued relevance and worth?

This was really brought home to me after a blog-post from the marketing guru Seth Godin.¹ Godin has a huge global audience, via both old and new media; his blog is the most popular marketing blog in the world, and his books are best-sellers. He turned his attentions to the library at the start of the year, posing the question: What can we do to make libraries relevant in the digital age? He went on to suggest that the net has turned things upside down – 'information is free now' and libraries need to 'train people to take the intellectual initiative' to find and use information themselves, and to connect with others.

This provoked quite a response in the biblioblogosphere.² Many were angry with the very question he posed – we are relevant in the digital age, they cried. Others pointed out that we have been training people to take the intellectual initiative for many years now, thank you very much. Almost all were frustrated that the misconception that 'all information is free' online was being perpetuated by someone who really should know better. The vast majority of the more than 30 blogs were thoughtfully argued, passionately articulate defences of the profession. They took the opportunity to set the record straight and set out the essence of what we information professionals do, and how and where we do it. It was actually quite inspiring.



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However... Godin's blog does not allow 'comments' so no one could respond directly to him on the same platform he used. In fact, as the responses all came from library-bloggers, they were almost all read only by those fellow librarians who follow library blogs. While Godin's original indictment of the state of libraries and their problematic future was probably read by millions, the brilliant dissections of his (flawed) argument, and the hugely positive summaries of the modern library profession, were read by only a fraction of that number. More to the point they were read only by those who already know how good libraries are. It was like a kind of echo-chamber squared: someone outside the chamber reached everyone, but our riposte reached only ourselves. And, make no mistake, Seth Godin speaks for most people – whatever the merits of what he said, his view is representative of the majority. We must address this view publicly, and not just within our own closed shop.

You may ask why I'm writing about this in *Update* which, limited in circulation as it is to those who are CILIP members (or those taking out a subscription), is the very definition of an enclosed space. Well, library advocacy itself needs to take place in public arenas, but the discussion of how to get our messages out there needs to start locally.

We can learn from the example of Toby Greenwalt, who not only wrote perhaps the most popular and commented upon blog-post on the whole Godin-gate affair, but reached out beyond the echo-chamber by writing a response in the *Huffington Post* (the hugely popular online paper).³ Greenwalt's article is entitled 'To know the library is to love the library. But who knows the library?' This is a key point – we need to expend our effort on making people aware of what we do, so they can make an informed decision on whether they need our services or not. There's no point in trying to 'convert' the actively hostile, and our devoted patrons don't need any further convincing. It is the indifferent whom we should target with our marketing resources. Greenwalt ended his article with the question we should all be asking: 'If you're not a library user, how can we prove ourselves to you?' [U]

References

- 1 bit.ly/echochamber1
- 2 bit.ly/echochamber2
- 3 bit.ly/echochamber3

■ Ned Potter blogs at www.thewikiman.org/blog