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What the Service Element of Technical Services Means to Me

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“In the future, everyone’s going to say,

Come down to the library, we’ll have a wild time, shall we?”

—Eddie Izzard

I’ve always been an organizer. From my early days of re-arranging my mother’s books, to my current position as metadata maven at a local health sciences university, I put things in different arrangements to make sense of them. I enjoy providing access between the information source and the people who need that resource, and this is what motivates me to continue to advocate for the necessity of Technical Services.

When I first started cataloging I saw it as a basic data entry clerical task. Information A goes in Field B. I was learning the recipe, but I didn’t see the whole banquet. About this same time, I started library school, and as I learned about service design and user needs, search behavior, and integrated library systems, I grew to understand that in any setting it is important to have a system of organizing information. I’ve always known this intuitively, but now I was learning the theory along with the practice. For some reason the image of all the books in the tower library of the monastery in *The Name of the Rose* wouldn’t leave my imagination. Isn’t providing access to information the service we Technical Services librarians provide? How could the monks not provide access to all those books?!

It’s not hyperbole to say that service is what librarianship is all about. Look at how we label ourselves: Access Services, Public Services, and Technical Services. Study the definitions of “service” and one sees variations of meaning from the delivery of goods to consultation to animal husbandry. I prefer the first definition of “service” at Dictionary.com, “an act of helpful activity.”

What about the service of Technical Services specifically? What “acts of helpful activity” do we exhibit and aspire to? This definition is simple and direct and inclusive of the holistic component of community that I find in my everyday work. Service is an attitude and an approach to the world that says, “I’m part of a larger community and what I do affects that community.”

In the last decade there’s been a lot of talk in the library literature about becoming “user-oriented” in our services, as if we’ve never considered the needs of our users before. We’ve *always* been focused on our users; that’s not new. I concede that we used to have the expectation that they would come to us because we had The Stuff. Now that geography is unimportant in the digital age, we’re rightfully readjusting to meet the Ultimate Service Goal of providing information Anytime, Anywhere, Any format.

Technical Services departments have traditionally included the units of Collection Development, Acquisitions, and Cataloging. As we negotiate the changes that technology brings, many Technical Services departments are expanding. My department, for example, currently includes these units: Collection Development, Acquisitions, Cataloging, Electronic Resources, Digital Resources, Data Curation, Scholarly Communications, and Systems. I know from looking at the web pages of other academic libraries around the country that this expansion of services is happening all over. I expect that in another five years our department will look completely different. What I don’t expect to change in Technical Services will be our service orientation to our communities. Our individual job titles may change, our department names may change, the services we offer *will* change, but our service-oriented approach to bridging the gap between information and users will remain the same.



When I teach new catalogers, and now metadata specialists, I give what I jokingly refer to as my “Cataloging Changes the World” speech. I don’t think people understand how much I really believe in this idea. I want my students to understand that metadata isn’t just “Information A goes in Field B,” as I learned it so many years ago. I want my students to understand the underlying truth of how the act and art of metadata description can fundamentally change a person’s life.

Consider how different your life would be if you didn’t read that book or see that movie or hear that music that changed your worldview. Consider what it was like finding that all-important information that changed your world. Metadata, combined with the data itself, is what drives databases and information retrieval. If the data in the database is incorrect—e.g., containing spelling or transposition errors—or misapplied, then one is blocked from finding the information one needs.

Take the humble 245 2nd indicator. For the non-catalogers in the audience, that’s the Title field in the MaRC record that tells the computer to skip over initial articles and other leading characters at the beginning of a title. When this data is incorrect the item might as well not exist, unless one can figure out a different search that works. It’s a very small piece of data. Its value can be a number between 0 and 9, but it makes all the difference in the world to the user trying to find that item.

When I first read David Weinberger’s book *Everything is Miscellaneous*, it angered me so much I had to put it down. I interpreted his thesis as, “Any system of organization is unnecessary.” It didn’t help that I seemed to be hearing that from other sectors in library land. “Everything you’ve been doing up to this point in Technical Services is wrong. What were you people thinking? Nothing you do makes any sense for the Digital Age.” Hang on a blessed minute! Technical Services is the access bridge from the item to the patron. Please don’t tell me that my service of making stuff available and searchable is wrong!

I realize now that Weinberger was trying to say that classification focused *only* on physical inventory is outdated in the Digital Age and I agree with him on that point. I’ll take his thesis a step further and say what we need now in the era of electronic information glut is *more* description, not less. Just as we’re getting to the good stuff in our electronic capability to organize and view in different modes, let’s not revert to a status of non-quality by throwing everything on the virtual floor in one big unsearchable pile.

We’re getting to the point where search systems will take our cataloging and classification data and allow us to discover what we need from different conceptual angles—for example, linked maps of subject areas. This semantic searching—cousin to the larger vision of the Semantic Web—will enable librarians and researchers to realize the benefits of the metadata we have worked so hard to input. In addition to providing access, the next product of this service will be increased interdisciplinarity.

As a user, finding an item when you need it means the world. It doesn’t matter if your need is large or small. It could be a best-selling novel or the newest in cardiac surgical techniques. It could be information on how to complete a will or details of the woodworking tools from the latest archeological find in Sweden. In Technical Services, our service is our presence in the community. In Technical Services, we do all we can to lower the barrier in getting users their information. Poor service is costly, to our users and our reputations. Good service is priceless. 

