Where is My Magic Wand?

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Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. – Arthur C. Clarke

Technology *appears* to be a magic wand. It is not a magic wand. For those of us who have worked with technology for more than two weeks this seems obvious. It is not obvious. Technology continues to fool us all the time.

I've been involved in library technology for thirty years and I am still fooled. Things that I have thought over the years include:

> "This new system will solve our information finding needs."
> "This software patch will fix our problems."
> "Google will replace libraries," (actually, a college provost told me this once).
> "VR will replace libraries."

You get the picture.

My first class in library school, back in the dark ages (pre web!) was with Herbert White, the legendary Dean of Indiana University's School of Library and Information Science (now a part

of the School of Informatics). I probably remember more from that class than any other. Herb told us that technology isn't a way to save money; it's a way to do new things. New things drive society forward and often improve our lives.

But the temptation to think it will be cheaper or "magical" persists. The ability to do new things means that we must learn how to *manage* those things. Higher education now includes—and indeed cannot seem to do without—Student Information Systems, Learning Management Systems, WiFi, Firewalls, and people to run them.

Asking "What have we lost along the way?" is almost meaningless. We'll never know. We do know that education is different from *five* years ago, much less thirty.

"Lies, damned lies, and statistics"

We have a plethora of measurement and assessment tools but still struggle to understand what those mean (perhaps it's a quantum physics problem). An analogy might be useful: baseball has become increasingly driven by statistics. The book *Money Ball* shows how a small market team without much money was able to find a way to be competitive while being relatively cheap. For those of you who don't know, they did it through using advanced statistical methods ("Sabermetrics") and ignoring the gut feelings of grizzled scouts.

Technology is great at keeping statistics. In baseball and elsewhere, it's now often called "analytics" and has replaced ERA's and batting averages with a player's WAR ("Wins Above Replacement," of which there are three types!). It can analyze pitching and hitting patterns more reliably than any human ever has. It has come to dominate the major league game.

Similarly in libraries, we can now instantly see how many chapters, articles, and books have been downloaded. We can thus analyze the CPU (cost per use), realign our budgets and buying habits, and take some of the guess work out of collection development.

These are not bad things. But it does tend to replace the "gut" or human aspects of baseball, librarianship, and other human endeavors. Why is that? I guess it partly means no one is responsible for choices (it's the numbers boss!).

I'll let someone else, who probably never saw a baseball game, summarize this:

> The statistical method shows the facts in the light of the ideal average but does not give us a picture of their empirical reality. While reflecting an indisputable aspect of reality, it can falsify the actual truth in a most misleading way. This is particularly true of theories which are based on statistics. The distinctive thing about real facts, however, is their individuality. Not to put too fine a point on it, once could say that the real picture consists of nothing but exceptions to the rule,

and that, in consequence, absolute reality has predominantly the character of irregularity. (Carl Jung)

I think at least some of the motivation toward overreliance on statistics is based in fear. "The numbers show…," "we ran an assessment of the data and…," etc. We need to justify what we've done or are about to do to those with the power and money. This is not necessarily a bad thing! I think it's merely incomplete.

Old Man Yells at Cloud

I know this is how this might come across. It's my version of Don Quixote I guess: to tilt at the windmill of postmodern life. Hear me out.

Everyone has examples of technological failure. For example, Amazon music doesn't seem to understand that there are TWO Eric Johnsons who do *very* different types of music. The same with Chris Knight.

I recently got two tech giants, Amazon and Google, to fail simultaneously! My google cell phone slowed my data plan and it caused my Amazon Music app to drop, fast-forward, and reverse songs mid-stream. Ah, the future; It's glorious!

Information Technology can't create meaning; it can deliver the tools for meaning to be created. IT can do many things more efficiently than manual processes: PCs were first adopted in business environments to be numerical ledgers (aka spreadsheets). IBM was called International Business Machines, after all. Computers as we know them replaced human "computers," who carried out the arithmetic work in physics/engineering/insurance.

Information technology is akin to Dustin Hoffman's character in the movie *Rain Man*, an autistic man with savant syndrome. He could do astonishing mental feats of memory, but had seemingly no idea of what it all meant. This is what makes humans different from parrots or bears, who can be trained to memorize things and patterns. *Meaning is what education is all about*. Or more specifically, the creation of meaning in the mind of a person.

Herbert White used Peter Drucker's work in his teaching quite a bit. Drucker, the seminal business management guru, has probably been taught in more MBA courses than any other person. This quote has stuck with me:

> The 'non-profit' institution neither supplies goods or services nor controls. Its 'product' is neither a pair of shoes nor an effective regulation. Its product is a changed human being. The non-profit institutions are human-change agents. Their 'product' is a cured patient, a child that learns, a young man or woman grown into

a self-respecting adult; a changed human life altogether. *(Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Principles and Practices)*

Drucker was no dreamy-eyed academic and knew that education is fundamentally different than other fields. It's different than manufacturing or baseball. It can create meaning.

Feelin' UI-sed

User Interface (UI) is a whole… thing. I was recently eating lunch with a colleague and we were discussing the dysfunction of much modern tech. "I refuse to use the self-ordering kiosk at McDonald's! It's too confusing!" I agreed and contrasted it with the Costco food court order kiosks. The McDonald's design ethos seems to be that huge flashy animation is better. By contrast, Costco has opted for small and simple (granted they have a much more restricted menu). Costco's works pretty well! McDonald's *looks* great (35-inch screen in portrait mode) but the user interface is a nightmare. Wait you want a DRINK? New menu. Go back. *Where is the actual order?* Good luck on your food journey. (I have unkind thoughts about Marcos Pizza's Android app as well, but will spare you my hunger-induced rage).

My point is that the underlying tech is ahead of the interface design WAY too often. Perhaps they are designing these for people younger than me, but I see a lot of boomers and genXers in McDonalds. We all have gray hair and confused expressions on our faces. The electronic menu behind the counter, where no one is standing anymore, now rotates out every five seconds. How much is a double cheeseburger? No one, *literally no one*, knows. It was there a second ago. Now it's part of the ether. Oh wait, it's back. $2.85. Fries are… gone again.

The Attention Economy

Gentle reader, I know that it feels like there is nothing we can do in the face of these forces but cope. In the words of Marcus Aurelius,

> The more we value things outside our control, the less control we have.

True enough. However, I'm arguing, in a meandering way, for us to come to grips with what we can control versus what we can't. We can control, albeit with difficulty, our attention to what's important. The statistics *can* in fact help us focus on what's important by showing us what we're missing. If people are downloading a book that we have, that's important data!

There is a wonderful biblical scholar on TikTok (Dan McClellan) who wears a shirt that says "Data > Dogma." It's hard to argue with that sentiment. My worry, though, is that Data has

become the new Dogma and has become too much of a focus of our attention. Use your stats to inform your UI, your collections and signage, not to replace your sense of what's important to your users. The users are where the meaning happens.

We may not have a magic wand, but we do have our abilities as humans to engage and empathize with our communities. The results, creating meaning and changing lives, are worth it.

https://wabash.center/2024/01/where-is-my-magic-wand/