BOOK REVIEW

Magic and Hyperstreams: Constructing the Information-Sharing Library

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Magic and Hyperstreams: Constructing the Information-Sharing Library
Harold Billings
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Never judge a book by its cover. So goes an English proverb! I admit that this bit of best practice missed my mind at the first sight of Harold Billings’ Magic & Hypersystems. I expected the book to deal with specific types of hype that exists around systems, because, in business English, each competitor adapts the term system with unlimited convenience. I thought the book was probably dealing with issues relating to deconstruction of information-sharing library’s magic. In such a trance, I expected the book would deal with demystifying some of the above, by providing an idiot’s guide to (a) shortcuts to knowledge-sharing using snapshots in a digital and/or cyberspace environment; (b) common-sense roadmaps for digital artifacts found in the deep Web; (c) economic methodologies for sharing intangibles; and (d) an architectural reflection of a plan to store and share competitive intelligence.

When I got the book in hand, I realized that I was wrong, because it dealt with none of these heavenly tracts. The book, in short, had no magic wand. In its 148 pages, the book was simply (albeit professionally and authoritatively) trying to share the best practices in knowledge management—and knowledge management as a domain with a slant toward libraries. It is for whom the bell tolls—simply information-handling processes. Today, information handling moves in two basic steps, as Billings has so creatively visualized: first, in identification, selection, acquisition, processing, storage, dissemination, and so on. Second, in meeting the (actual/potential) information needs of the end-users in the right way, at the right time, and at the right place. With this strategy in focus, the book is a valuable anthology. While most of the articles were previously published, a few are revised for the book, and the first chapter is original. On the whole, these pages contain a currency that is amazing; for instance, issues raised in ’80s and ’90s by Billings are still a major concern for many
professionals who deal with library networks (in relation to technology, people, resources, etc.).

It is worthwhile to glance at the contents for further clarification:

Preface; Libraries and Other Networked Botanies; Magic and Hypersystems: A New Orderliness for Libraries; Governing Library Networks: The Quick and the Dead for the 1990s; The Bionic Library; Supping with the Devil: New Library Alliances in the Information Age; The Information Ark: Selection Issues in the Preservation Process; The Tomorrow Librarian; Library Collections and Distance Information: New Models of Collection Development for the Twenty-First Century; Libraries, Language, and Change: Defining the Information Present; Special Collections: Still Special after All These Years; Shared Collection Building: Constructing the Twenty-First-Century Relational Research Library; Giving Up Prophecy: The Future of Information Cooperation; Index.¹

Let’s get an idea about magic that is contextualized with hypersystems:

Taking a penetrating look at the history of information systems, from the past to the present and future, veteran librarian and digital network expert Harold Billings discusses the impact of the information revolution on libraries and information hubs worldwide. Tracing the seminal origins of the Web to the new, borderless access to information, Magic and Hypersystems is a powerful meditation on how libraries can not only fit into the digital information flow but also capitalize on their role in it. ... Are libraries the centers of influence in the great global information village? Food for thought and fresh ideas for growing the relational library of the future abound in this treatise on equal and limitless information access [cover].

Electronic information is a garden ready to flower, particularly if it will move towards a new distribution, use, and payment paradigm. To some scholars, the concept of an electronic library is paradise at hand; to others it is absolutely terrifying. I suggest that libraries are evolving as bionic libraries: organic, evolutionary, and electronically enhanced. [p.37]

It should not be inferred from this discussion of linking information via digitally based connections that the physical collection has been forgotten. A major feature of this evolving information commons continues to be the growing physical library, with access to its holdings, and enhancements to those holdings, made possible through the linkages and relationships that information technology and knowledge systems are providing. For all that is available on the Internet, this store of superior content far exceeds that available in digital format. The challenge that should most excite librarians is the prospective melding of the physical and the digital, and the creation of a mechanism for fusing these modes of systems with sixteenth-century attempts to order knowledge based on “magic” image-based memory systems—the seminal origins of the Web [p. 3].

In fact, any time an effective content-delivery system is created that will assist the information seeker, libraries should be the first to support such an extension or improvement of their own systems. Systems building on systems—hypersystems—provide the strongest means by which access can be magnified for the content seeker [p.119]

From the contents, it is obvious that each chapter talks in a language that is holier than thou, if not mystical and mysterious. So, if one wishes to see life as it appears in this book, it is more than obvious in Chapter Four: The Bionic Library. So what is bionic library?

This book begins with historical comparisons of the similarities of contemporary information systems with sixteenth-century attempts to order knowledge based on “magic” image-based memory systems—the seminal origins of the Web [p. 3].

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storage and delivery into the fuller bionic library that still lies ahead. This furthers that ongoing pollination of things art and things science towards a new flowering in humankind’s reflections on the mind, our earth, and the universe. A cross-pollination of the physical and digital in our library and Internet collections is the goal, and a shared construction of both will bring a more rapid genesis of the great information commons and relational library growing around us [p. 122]

The book, in general, and the fourth chapter, in particular, textually and contextually connect to a significant aspect that interests historians, biologists, technologists, theologians, linguists, and the like. This connection is an important phase in visualization of a sense of living organism (bio or botanies, as Billings prefers to call it) that dominates, more or less, equally well in the trio of information, knowledge, and library. By reading the book, one would feel that Billings gets the credit for coining the term bionic library, whereas the origin of the idea is from Dr. S. R. Ranganathan’s masterpiece, famous as five laws of library science.2

These five laws date back to 1931, viz., I. Books are for use; II. Every book its reader; III. Every reader his / her book; IV. Save the time of the reader; and V. Library is a growing organism. The last law is our primary concern here. The Fifth Law demonstrates the living nature of information as any other organism. It implies that since information—in physical, print, electronic, digital, virtual modes—continuously explodes, it is a must that designers, developers, facilitators, and users evolve better ways of handling all types of resources (human, documentary, and institutional). This explosion results in a convergence that is unique to the nature of informational context. In addition, care must be taken to regularly assess the convergence. This assessment has to be appropriately reflected in all processes, including interfaces, skills development, and interactive mechanisms. It also implies that there must be built-in ways to add on value at every step in the information-sharing process by constantly adapting better business practices.

While some information specialists prefer to call these normative principles (rather than laws), the structure, value, implications, and applications of the principles, however, remain well established in literature. From the perspective of finding lifeline in the informational context, the last law and its derivations play a significant role. In addition, to this context of giving the credit to history of ideas, Ranaganathan founded a classification scheme based largely on recall value of numbers and has dealt extensively with the magic of mnemonics.3 In this regard Billings’ magic history must be rewritten, for the benefit of posterity.

These details aside, the author succinctly relates the past to emerging interfaces in the library of the future. Such a futuristic dimension is best reflected in the last chapter (Giving up Prophecy). Billings has summarized in this collection his extensive experiences and presented a sumnum bonum of his 25-year career—from grassroots to the bureaucratic heights—building infostructures that sustain any hurricane. Herein, intangibles are so nicely presented that even a novice in the field does not have to reread the text or find much left for imagination. His thought-provoking essays challenge information professionals to accept needed change. He is of the view that those who forget history will be forced to repeat it.

Despite the noise from many quarters these days, there has long been a national information infrastructure. It is called libraries.
But the failure of the library profession to assert the very special and important role that its members have played in creating and maintaining this long-extant infrastructure...has helped leave them without the full stature they should command. [p.75]

Given the strength of the book as a good assessment of successful ventures in information sharing, I recommend it to practitioners in academic/research libraries as well as school libraries.

Notes:

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