The future of information and libraries. Interview with Eric Lease Morgan

Por **Jorge Serrano-Cobos**

Resumen: *Hasta cierto punto, la Iniciativa de Acceso Abierto ha fracasado, porque muy pocas personas, incluso en la profesión bibliotecaria, saben de su existencia. Se debe hacer más marketing para hacerla llegar a más personas. MARC ha quedado obsoleto y debe ser sustituido por normas basadas en xml. Con la llegada de Google, la gente no tiene problemas para encontrar información. En cambio los tienen para saber qué hacer con ella. Una próxima generación de catálogos de la biblioteca debe permitir a la gente en primer lugar encontrar lo que buscan en la colección de la biblioteca y, a continuación, poderlo utilizar de alguna manera. Las bibliotecas públicas se dedican a su comunidad. Si sólo se centran en los libros, su futuro es menos positivo, pero si piensan en términos de datos, información y conocimiento, su futuro está limitado sólo por su imaginación.*

Eric-Lease Morgan es director del Digital Access and Information Architecture Department en las University Libraries of Notre Dame, Indiana, EUA. Es muy conocido como analista y comentarista, y por su participación en las listas de discusión norteamericanas (en 2006 fue el creador de Next generation library catalogs o NGC4Lib). Ha recorrido el mundo dando conferencias sobre temas bibliotecarios.

Palabras clave: *Acceso abierto, Comunicación científica, Repositorios, E-LIS, MARC, Web semántica, Profesionales, Google Books, Opacs, Catálogos de bibliotecas, Bibliotecas públicas.*

Título: The future of information and libraries. Interview with Eric Lease Morgan

Abstract: *To some degree the Open Access Initiative has failed, because too few people, even in the library profession, know of its existence. More marketing should be done, thus making more people aware of it. MARC became obsolete and has to be superseded by xml-based standards. With the advent of Google, people don't have any problems finding information. Instead they have problems knowing what to do with once they acquire it. A next generation library catalog should allow people to first find items in a library collection, and then to use the information in some way. Public libraries are devoted to their community. If they focus too much on books, then their future is less positive. If they think in terms of data, information, and knowledge, their future is only as limited as their imagination.*

Keywords: *Open access, Scholar communication, Repositories, E-LIS, MARC, Semantic web, Professionals, Google Books, Opacs, Library catalogues, Public libraries.*

How do you see the future of the Open Access Initiative?

– The workshops at *CERN* have surrounded the *Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting* (*OAI-PMH*), and to some degree the *Initiative* has failed. When it was first introduced more than eleven years ago, the *Initiative* was described as a low-barrier method for sharing metadata. In many way it is/was. There was a lot of research spent on it, and there are many services rooted in the protocol. But in the end, too few libraries, researchers, and scholars truly embraced the protocol to make it really popular. Maybe it was not low-barrier enough.

Initially, the use of *Dublin Core* was seen as a good thing for the protocol, but *Dublin Core* proved to be to ambiguous for most people's use; it was not used consistently.

The discussion of "open access" is another topic. I think the future of open access publishing is bright. The internet makes it possible for just about anybody to publish content. Scholarly material produced by higher education is no exception. With the existence of the internet there is less of a need for traditional publishers who gather, edit, print, and distribute articles. Don't get me wrong. These publishers offer a valuable service, namely admin-

istrative overhead. Yet, they exploit a business model where the primary consumers (faculty) do not pay for their product. Instead, libraries pay for the product. I think that if faculty had to pay for the journals, then many of the traditional publications would become open access publications.

Will there always be different open access penetration speeds between countries?

– Interestingly, I believe the open access "movement" is bigger in Europe than it is in the United States. I believe this is true for two reasons. First, open access is a li-

brary value, and libraries support it. In Europe there are many national libraries supporting open access endeavors. In the United States we do not have a national library. The *Library of Congress* is the library of the *Congress*, not the United States. Thus, we have no national initiative. Second, the United States is very much driven by capitalism. The idea of giving something away for free is looked upon with suspicion. Open access is no exception.

In the future I think open access publishing will increase and slowly become the norm, but just like I do not think traditional libraries will go away, I do not think traditional (scholarly) publishers will go away. They will all exist side by side.

By the way, I wholeheartedly endorse open access publishing and open source software. In fact, I've been practicing these distribution methods for longer than the phrases have been coined.

The library profession is not sufficiently aware of E-LIS. We need to do more marketing.

Yes, I think there will always be different penetration speeds between countries.

What is your perception of informal scholarly communication?

– The definition of "scholarly impact" is changing, but as I alluded to in my presentation, technology changes relatively quickly but human behavior changes very slowly. The technological ability to measure impact through number of hits, number of comments, number of people "following you on twitter", etc., does represent new ways to measure impact on one's community. At the same time, the faculty review boards are made up of older, less technologically savvy people who value more traditional measurement methods. Over time I think the newer impact factors will be influential, but not for at least five to ten years from now.

What do you think of the E-LIS repository?

– I am proud to say that I have deposited materials in the repository, and the repository's efforts are laudable. At the same time I believe two things need to happen to make it a more viable resource. First, I believe too few people in the library profession know of its existence. Consider doing some marketing, thus making more people aware of it. Second, and just about more importantly, consider providing some services against the content of *E-LIS*. For example, figure out ways to make graphs illustrating trends. Provide concordance applications against sets of found documents. Try to discover ways to trace citations or ideas through sets of articles. Create visual linkages between authors and ideas based on the content of the repository. Put another way, try to allow people to do things against the content besides search, download, and read.

What do you prefer? A technologist that has learned librarianship, or the opposite?

– I prefer the opposite, definitely. Professionally speaking, I consider myself to be a librarian first and a computer user second. My professional goal is to discover new ways to use computers to provide better library services and collections. I am a librarian, not a computer technologist. Please do not confuse me with the tools of my trade. A surgeon is a healer, not a scalpel expert. A carpenter is a builder, not a hammer technician. I am a librarian who practices his profession through the use of computers. Just like books, computers are a means to my end –tools– not the end in and of itself.

Are libraries bound to physical objects? Do you think American libraries are ready to deal with knowledge beyond books?

– Yes, in many ways libraries are bound to physical objects –books. This is because our (Western) culture has been bound to the written word for at least 1,000 years, if not more. Much of what we know about the world and about what it means to be human is recorded in books. Based on my experience, the largest departments in libraries are the technical services departments –acquisitions and cataloging–, and they spend the majority of their time processing books. Our profession's "special collections and archives" curate physical items. They work much like museums and other cultural heritage institutions. But I stand on what I said previously: libraries are not really about the books as much as they are about what is inside the books. Data. Information. Knowledge. Ideas. And maybe wisdom. Books are merely a container for such things. It was not until relatively recently that other mediums became containers. Think about the development of the imagery (paintings and photographs), recorded sounds (the phonograph, the record, the tape, and now CDs), moving pictures (movies), and now the written word in a myriad of new forms (email, word processing documents, blogs, wikis). All of these things are manifestations of information, and all of these things are the purview of librarianship.

What would you substitute for MARC?

– The answer is simple. Some sort of flavor of xml such as MARCxml, but more realistically, MODS.

MARC is a data structure designed in 1965 when data was distributed on reel-to-reel tapes. For

The autor interviewing Eric L. Morgan in Valencia during the 4th International LIS-EPI Meeting.

its time it was both innovative and enormously practical. But with the development of relational databases and then SQL in the early 1980s, MARC as a data structure had already lived beyond its use.

Xml, like MARC, is essentially a data structure, but it is much more flexible than MARC. The rules for creating xml are much simpler and at the same time more expressive. More importantly, xml is the language of information on the internet. Blogs use xml. Xml is the language of the semantic web and linked data. Many communities know xml. Only one (small) community knows MARC. To put it bluntly, MARC is obtuse. Consider the user of MODS, MADS, EAD, TEI, rdf, etc.

What is your idea about a "next generation" library catalog?

– In short, I think the "next generation" library catalog is not so much about finding content as it is about using content. With the advent of *Google*, people don't have any problems finding information. Instead they have problems knowing what to do with it once they acquire it. In my opinion, a "next generation" library catalog allows people to first find items in a library collection, and then to use the information in some way. These uses are best articulated with action verbs: add to my collection, annotate, cite, compare and contrast, create different version of, create flip book, create tag cloud from, delete from my collection, do concordance against, do rudimentary morphology, find opposite, find similar, highlight, incorporate into syllabus, map to controlled vocabulary term, plot on a map, print, purchase, rate, review, save, search, search my collection, share, summarize, tag, trace author, trace citation, translate, etc. Additionally, a "next generation" library catalog will be "smart" in that it will know who the user is and provide suggestions just as librarians do now with patrons they know.

Google Books?

– For most people, *Google Books* will be a boon. Do a search. Identify a book. Print parts of the book as necessary. Buy the book if necessary. Done. On the other hand, I'm a bit dismayed that we librarians have "given" all of these books to *Google*, and now it seems as if *Google* is going to turn around and make significant profits from these gifts. Somehow that does not seem right.

Semantic web, databases, and Google?

– I think all of these things will co-exist. There are places for all of them. Each have their own unique advantages and disadvantages. The semantic web will enable the discovery of new and interesting relationships between datasets and information. But it will also be very computer centric; it is not necessarily designed to be used by humans directly. Databases are just about the best way to organize information. Efficient and succinct, but at the same time they

are difficult to search. That is were *Google* comes in. As an indexer it makes thing easier to find, but as a commercial entity it is driven by the "bottom line", and where there is not profit it will not go.

Is there a future for public libraries?

– Yes, there is a future for public libraries as long they can adapt to the changing environment as well as figure out ways to provide services to their communities at a cost amenable to their funders. More than any other type of library, public libraries are about community, and there will always be a need for community centers as long as there are people. Public libraries can provide internet access, study spaces for children after school, reading classes, and places for life-long learners who are not a part of universities. If public libraries focus too much on books, then their future is less positive. If they think in terms of data, information, and knowledge, their future is only as limited as their imagination.

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