

The Map Library's Future Revisited: A Response

A senior colleague once explained to me that what matters is not the number of articles one publishes, but the impact they have with the readership. Using his yardstick, my article (Keller, 2001) expressing thoughts on the map library's future performed reasonably well. But it did so in part for the wrong reasons. I confess I deliberately wrote the article provocative to solicit response and dialogue. But I have offended some by the style of writing, and by my choice of analogies. I did not wish to cross the boundary to offense. For that I sincerely apologize. Those whom I have offended, please try and look for what I said instead of how I said it.

I followed the comments about the article posted on the various list servers with interest. Thanks also to those of you who e-mailed or wrote in private! I appear to have struck a raw nerve. Some of you didn't like the future I predict. Some of you took objection to the fact that I wrote from a map library user's point of view, and that I have a perceived GIS bias. On the other hand, many of you agreed that the points raised need to be debated, and that some of the points need to be acted on. Finally, there were a number of you from the map library user community who wrote to say that you were in full agreement with what was written.

Scott McEathron's (2001) reply raises some of the issues brought out in the list server discussions. His primary objections, however, appear to be that what I say are assertions and predictions based on personal experience and perception as a map library user without data collection and empirical analysis to back my opinions, and that it is inappropriate for me to speak out without the training and experience as a map librarian.

Is it appropriate for a map library user to express opinion about the future of map libraries? My advocacy for user surveys and market research to understand society's needs and wants for maps, map products and map services is on record (Hocking and Keller, 1993; Keller, 1995a/b, Keller et al., 1995; Keller and O'Connell 1997). I am a firm believer in the users' rights to comment on products and services. My position is that professions, especially those in a service business, should not argue that they know what is best unless they have consulted extensively with their past, present and potential future clients? I agree with Scott, therefore, that we need facts and hard evidence to guide the map library's future. One way to get this is to conduct user surveys and market research. I hope my article and the subsequent discussions are of help when negotiating the necessary funding to support such research.

I decided to put my personal thoughts about the future of map libraries to paper because of a genuine care and concern for map libraries. I care for their future. In my mind there is no doubt that the distinction between a map library and other libraries will diminish in the future, that libraries increasingly will become information commons, and that the digital world will dominate. The key visions I offered were that:

1. there will be a steady switch in emphasis from the paper map to the digital map, and map libraries therefore will have to embrace the virtual medium to survive;
2. successful map libraries of the future will broaden their mandate to become both, digital geographic and associated information resource centers;

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3. in today's political and economic climate map libraries need to seek win-win strategies and collaboration in order to advance; and
4. the future map librarians will have as their primary purpose the dual roles of:
 - i: information filter / information gatekeeper
 - ii: offering assistance with geographic information access and use

Expressing these visions does not imply that I like or endorse them all. Quite the opposite! I love paper maps. I am an avid sailor who has a hard time letting go of paper charts. I watch with great skepticism as fellow sailors progressively switch to digital charting software fully integrated with GPS, radar and all sorts of other electronic gadgets. I am holding on to my beloved paper charts for now. But I know deep down that soon I will be in the minority and that eventually, the laws of marine navigation will change in response to public pressure, making it legal to navigate without paper charts. Scott McEathron may well point out that the above is another assertion I make based on personal experience without having hard data to prove it. But predictions sometimes must be made based on personal experience and gut feeling. Only the future can tell whose predictions ended up right or wrong.

I wish briefly to comment on another couple of points Scott raises. Scott speculates that: "Although important, the GIS community will remain a minority of the map library's users for the foreseeable future" (McEathron, 2001, 4-8. I assume that "the GIS community" he refers to includes all those wishing to gain access to digital data. Let me share another personal observation. Some months ago I had lunch with a very respected retired member of our cartographic community. Chatting about her children's vacation plans, she informed me that she had looked up and studied their holiday destination on the Internet to become more familiar with the region's geography. Knowing that she has an extensive collection of excellent atlases in her home, I asked why she consulted the Internet instead of her atlases. I was amazed to learn that she thought the information easier to access on the Internet, and that she judged the Internet more informative. I learned a lesson that day that makes me ponder Scott's above statement. I believe that his prediction will be proven correct for those map libraries that don't make the transition to the virtual world. These map libraries will run the risk, however, of seeing their traditional clientele diminish as many of the old paper map clients will become part of the digitally literate GIS community. These libraries therefore will likely not be the map libraries of the future.

Further on in his article, Scott acknowledges that the need does now exist for map libraries to offer digital map services, but that "it is not economically feasible for most individual libraries to attempt to scan large portions of their collections". He therefore argues that "it is more economical for users to borrow or at least view the existing hard copy and for map libraries to digitize, if needed, on a "just in time" scenario." My speculations differ. The ability to duplicate and transfer digital maps at minimal cost makes the need for each map library to digitize their collection redundant. A collaborative and coordinated effort by map librarians should allow any one paper map to be digitized once and once only (to mutually agreed to quality standards), thereafter distributing the digital version as required. Such a coordinated effort will be able to take full advantage of what Scott describes as strengths of map librarians, namely the abilities to create metadata and to catalog. Making duplicate digital copies distributed widely also resolves many of Scott's fears of causal factors impacting today's map libraries, such as sabotage, environmental disaster or human error.

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Scott also raises interesting points when noting that “if map libraries, or any library or academic department for that matter, had to realize a net profit in the virtual environment, most would soon fail”, and “furthermore, charging fees that go beyond the incidental material costs is in direct conflict with the missions of many institutions”. Both these observations strike at the core of contemporary debates in society. Fundamentally opposing philosophical and political viewpoints exist in the developed world about the right to charge fees for information gathered and manipulated by the state and by private enterprise, and about the future of government subsidized services versus services delivery by private enterprise. It is exciting to see map librarians actively participate in these debates. This brings me to my last point.

I disagree with Scott that the future of map libraries must remain unanswered until we have solved the general question of the future of libraries, of society and of civilization. To wait is to be reactive instead of active or proactive. Anyhow, the majority of map librarians already are actively and proactively looking for ways to address and manage changing societal values and the technology revolution. It appears that this includes Scott’s map library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a library that already proclaims a digital drainage network as its banner image, and one that does offer a number of digital data access services (see <http://www.library.uiuc.edu/max/>).

I have a lot of respect and admiration for the hard work and visionary efforts undertaken by map librarians. My apologies if this did not come through in the original article (Keller 2001). I took the easy route by writing about the future. You face the challenging task of managing the day-to-day transition. To quote: “Predicting the future is easy. It’s trying to figure out what’s going on now that’s hard” (Fritz R. S. Dressler, <http://www quotablequotes.net/>). Please keep up the good work.

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