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BOOK REVIEW

Human Operators: A Critical Oral History on Technology in Libraries and Archives

Edited by Melissa Morrone

2017 | Library Juice Press | 386 pages, softcover | ISBN-13: 978-1-63400-032-1 | \$35.00 print

This ambitious book captures an oral history of technology in libraries from the late 20th to the early 21st centuries. Editor Melissa Morrone, a Supervising Librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library, carried out interviews (mostly via Skype) with 45 librarians and archivists from a wide range of settings and backgrounds. Some of the interviewees could be considered “library famous,” but most were unknown to this reader. Famous or not, most have interesting things to say about the challenges faced by libraries and archives in an era of technological disruption.

The format of the book takes some getting used to. Morrone has left out her interview prompts; we only see the responses, which at first creates the impression that the interviewees are in dialog with one another. In fact, she has edited the responses and shuffled them around to achieve topical coherence. This is a mostly effective strategy, but it would have been helpful if Morrone had added subheadings within the broad topical chapters; as it is, the reader is left to infer the questions the interviewees are responding to. I ended up writing subheadings in the margins to help myself keep track of what is discussed where. There is an index, but it leaves out some important topics discussed, such as Open Educational Resources (OER).

The book is divided into broad thematic chapters: “Before,” “Learning,” “Connecting,” “Building,” “Collecting,” “Accessing,” “Being,” “After,” and “People.” There is inevitably some repetition among the chapters, and some of the interviewees go on longer than necessary to get their point across. The book could probably have been 50 to 100 pages shorter without sacrificing any substantial content.

“Before” is an introduction in which Morrone explains her methodology. She acknowledges her “partialities” when it comes to subject matter, namely “a fascination with



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digital literacy and people's personal learning environments, an interest in free and open source software, and a desire to think through (and combat) oppressive systems including white supremacy and capitalism" (1). The latter explains the word "critical" in the book's title; critical librarianship is also the focus of the publisher, Library Juice Press.

The word "history" in the title is a bit misleading; the emphasis is much more on the present. Most of the history is frontloaded in the "Learning" chapter, in which interviewees share their experiences teaching patrons how to use computers and the Internet in its early days. (Much of this is still relevant, as there are still large numbers of people who lack technological literacy.) Several interviewees talk about how they got the "tech bug" early on and naturally became the go-to person for technology in their workplace. They address the inadequacies of technology education in the library school curriculum and the need to constantly keep up with change.

"Connecting" is a grab bag of a chapter, covering multiple social and productivity aspects of technology. Interviewees are asked what piece of technology is most useful in their daily work. Archivists talk about how their work has supported social justice movements. One interviewee staffed a library in Zuccotti Park during Occupy Wall Street. Another created an archive to document instances of police violence in Cleveland. There are discussions about universal design, accessibility, the digital divide (rich versus poor, urban versus rural), e-readers in schools, internet filtering, and archiving of social media.

"Building" covers open source software, makerspaces, and digital media labs. One interviewee insightfully laments, "Sometimes I feel like our collective imaginations fail us in terms of what the Internet could be, how it could be otherwise" (149). Interviewees discuss the pros and cons of open source versus vendor-managed integrated library systems (ILS), the challenges of archiving online content and media, preservation of government and municipal data, and the relevance (or not) of makerspaces and robotics to libraries.

"Collecting" deals with what many would consider the heart of libraries and archives: the "stuff." This chapter, which probably should have come earlier in the book, delves back into history again, with veteran interviewees reminding us that libraries have always been at the forefront of technology. There is a discussion of e-books and digital rights management (DRM), ownership versus leasing, Demand-Driven Acquisitions (DDA), the open access movement (and its co-option by commercial publishers), the successes and failures of institutional repositories, and Open Educational Resources (OER). The chapter concludes with thoughts about mass digitization and digital libraries.

In “Accessing,” interviewees address privacy. The downside of new technologies that allow us to better understand how our libraries and archives are used is a loss of privacy and anonymity for the user. Security concerns, particularly in special collections and archives, can lead to oversurveillance (including videotaping) and excessive collection and retention of patron data, which is often experienced more acutely by patrons of color. When archives are digitized and made available online, privacy can be compromised, and personally identifiable information (PII) can be inadvertently exposed. This has led to a “do not digitize” movement and a push for the “right to be forgotten.” Interviewees discuss their experiences collecting and curating oral histories, raising issues such as the need for bilingual finding aids and multilingual metadata, and the implications of curating material that may be politically sensitive or carry emotional freight.

The “Being” chapter tackles weighty themes such as the myth of tech neutrality, issues of gender and race, structural oppression, and environmental sustainability. Interviewees discuss their experiences in the workplace, including the precariousness of library funding, the sexism and tokenism experienced by women in technology, and the “pipeline problem.” There is a discussion of codes of conduct at conferences.

In the brief “After” chapter, Morrone allows her voice to enter the discussion. She summarizes her most pressing concerns about technology, which include the “encroaching surveillance nightmare,” the Internet of Things, the centralization of platforms (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple), and big data. She sees her work in digital literacy and inclusion as “empowering people to combat acceptance of the black box of the Internet and its surveillance economy, of the potential loss of net neutrality, of the over-reliance on the big platforms” (364).

All in all, one comes away from this wide-ranging book optimistic about the continuing relevance of libraries and archives in a culture that continues to commercialize and privatize. The interviewees—though chosen somewhat randomly—are thoughtful and pragmatic, and each is in their own way carrying out heroic and important work. Compiling their stories was obviously a labor of love for the author. While the discursive format of the book is perhaps not the most efficient means of summarizing the issues of our time, by capturing librarians and archivists’ own words, Morrone has created a time capsule for any future reader interested in knowing what it was like to be a knowledge worker during the greatest information revolution in history.

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