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The Library Dilemma

The title above is a play on Clayton Christensen's book title, "The Innovator's Dilemma," which I highly recommend for its clearheaded proposition if not for its literary flair. The book uses a 30-year period of optical disc and electronic device evolution to illustrate the trap suggested in its eponymous title. The trap is that one-time innovators of industry tend to become complacent and defensive of short-term self-interests; they become oblivious to and resisters of innovation. Innovations elsewhere inevitably displace their once-lucrative markets, and/or snap up the new ones, eventually.

Are there examples outside the fast-tracking computer industry? Sure. A few weeks ago, I talked about keelboats, Conestoga wagons/prairie schooners, steamboats, and railroads, all in turn transportation vehicles of the 19th century. Aside from railroads, have you ever been on one of these vehicles, or even seen one outside of a museum? All were replaced or diminished by new technologies. Railroads have largely been out of favor in modern times relative to the automobile and airplane, neither of whose commercialization origins have linear roots in the other or the horse-drawn and paddled predecessors. The Dilemma is partly why I have been telling you about the Lewis and Clark Expedition and its means of transportation.

Do you think that commercial aviation and Boeing will not be diminished by another innovation? Think again. COVID-19 and our responses to it are already showing global companies that they do not have to send their reps by air all over the globe. Employees also can often work from home on a regular schedule, and that can be OK. There are personal computers and Microsoft Teams to do the people-to-people, without spending additive days traveling and running up an employer expense account or day-to-day commuter costs.

How does this relate to Libraries? Some Library staff members, too, think largely to protect and build onto the turf they know; their marketing of traditional services, valuable though those services may be (and I think they are!), reflects the Library Dilemma. The individual-accessible Internet is, at its best, real and alluring competition. At no time does this rise to the surface with more poignancy than when it comes time to write the next Strategic Plan. It is difficult to write a real forward-looking Strategic Plan.

Notwithstanding what I just said, the WLN has succeeded at reinventing itself. Clear examples include: (1) generally a focus shift to electronic space over physical space; (2) specifically, institutionalizing the Polaris Integrated Library System of a shared 24/7 collection and various significant upgrades to it over the years; (3) also specifically, a shared electronic book collection to keep up, even lead, with the ongoing print/e-book transition; and, most recently, (4) virtual programming. There is more that is exciting that is in discussion, but that is for another time.

Murrysville Community Library and its Foundation are working on a Strategic Plan 2022-24, which of course has to be self-consistent with the WLN's own Plan. As patrons, you

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should look to those activities and challenge the Boards, WLN and WLN Library members, to make those Strategic Plans meet the times and your needs, to address the Dilemma. This article is my challenge to all of us.

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