

LIBREAS PODCAST #4

Michael Buckland im Interview.

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Über/About: The iSchool project in Berkeley, the redesign of Library Services, Emmanuel Goldberg and his knowledge machine, and Web2.0 technologies in Libraries.

00:11

LIBREAS: We are happy to interview today, Prof. Michael Buckland. Could you tell us something about the iSchool project in Berkeley?

Michael Buckland: I should be glad to. The school of Berkeley started in 1919, as a school of librarianship. During the 1960's, the range of expertise on the faculty was broadened. More faculty with different backgrounds in engineering and philosophy and so on. All of these people had something interesting and useful to say about libraries, but many of them had not been professional librarians. In the early 1970's, the campus decided to review the situation. And they came to the conclusion, that although it was a wonderful thing to prepare librarians and to do research in education relating to librarianship, there were actually other important needs, outside of libraries, that had to do with the marking and the parking of documents and data for folks to use. And so there was a report which said, that the scope of the school should be broadened. And I was invited to go to Berkeley as director of the school, and my mission was to make that happen. We expanded the name of the school to School of Library and Information Studies, not science it's not very scientific studies. Now we made a mistake because those words are not in alphabetical order. Really, the name was so long that nobody could remember it, including the university administration, so when they thought about us, they said "well that's the school of library *aaa*", it would have been much better if it had been School of Information and Library studies then they would have said, well that's the school of information *aaa*.

We made that transition gradually and slowly and I think it was a pretty good transition. In the early 90's, 1990's, there was a terrible economic problem. The number of professors was

reduced by nearly 20%, quiet remarkable. And the chancellor, the equivalent of the rector, decided that he would have to kill some programs and for unclear reasons he decided that he would close the School of Library *aaa*.

This was really quiet silly because at the one time he was talking about the information society and at the other time he was planing to close the only school on the campus that was directly concerned with this. In the end, he found that he could not close it because there was too much protest from outside the university and also there was really very little reason, it would not in fact have saved very much money. So he created a very high powered committee called “The Information Planing Group” and I was on it and other people were on it, but it was clear from the membership that this was a committee expected to come up with a good constructive solution. A wise administrator picks the result and then decides on the process, so you can tell from the process what was intended and it wrote a report, which is available on the iSchool web site, declaring what there should be. Now because of the political background, the committee was expected not to discuss the existing school, but only to look to the future so everybody would follow Berkeley’s brilliant leadership. And that was done; but on the one hand it was for us in the school as if all of our birthday were happening at the same time, because the report is, was what we had been trying to do without much support from the university. On the other hand there was a political problem because if we said this is what we had been trying to do, then that would mean that the chancellor had made a big mistake. Chancellors don't make big mistakes so there was a political price and that was a fiction that it was a new school and this political fiction has been very difficult, it's not been handled very well. Now we have wonderful students and we have a very strong faculty. I would say that we had the same problems that all the other iSchools do.

And that is, is this. If you are a library school focused on libraries it's pretty clear what you do. But when you use a word that has so little effective meaning like information, then different people can put different meanings to it and also there is a tendency to reduce information to information technology. This is a big strategic mistake.

So, at the moment the school is still quiet small, it's beginning to build a sense of culture, a sense of community and thinking about what it should do. But it's not yet, it's not yet quiet got it as it should be and I think that it won't be right until people recognise that the reason why an iSchool is needed, is because it matters what people know. It matters to the individual, it matters to society. You don't want to go to a dentist, who doesn't know what they're doing. When people are planning to do something to knock your house down you want to know about it. So, what people know is really very important in society and that should be the focus

of an information school and unless you do that you tend to reduce to a situation where your concern with information technology, data processing or you really have no focus, and I think that's the challenge facing all of the schools.

07:51

LIBREAS: I read the phrase „The redesign of Library Services“ on your website. What is that phrase to you and what implications has that message to you?

Michael Buckland: Well, there is a story behind it, of course. In the 1980's, I was the chief bureaucrat for the University of California. Nine campuses, it's a very big system and over a 100.000 students and enormous library collections, and part of my role was planning. And there had been a very effective plan. That is what I would call “The first stage of using computers in libraries”. That is to say the procedures, the methods, the catalogue, the circulation. These things were now done by computer but the resources were still primarily on paper. Bibliographies were increasingly digital. So, that is what I would call an automated library. You have the paper library where both the books and the records are on paper or cardboard, then what I called the automated library, where the collections are primarily paper but what the librarians do, uses computers. And that's the situation we were in, in the early 1980's. We had a wonderful online catalogue called ‘Melville’ that was very good, a union catalogue. And the question was how to move towards the second phase, where increasingly the resources would be digital. One could call that an electronic library or digital library, differentiated from automated library by the resources being digital. Now, every actual library will be some mixture but these are sort of ideal types the paper library, the automated library and the electronic library.

And I was responsible, for preparing a detailed plan for the University of California system, for its libraries. There had been an early plan which had been very effective, a ten year plan, but it was ten years old and if the bureaucrats and the state government noticed that it was ten years old then, they would stop sending us a lot of money and we would need a new plan. So we prepared a new plan. In the end the bureaucrats didn't notice that the old plan, which was bringing a lot of money under certain formulas, was obsolete. So we decided not to tell them that we had a new plan and the new plan was administratively suppressed, it became disappeared and I thought this was rather a waste of my time, I put a lot of work into that. So, I had the idea, that it could be put to use in a different way and, having worked with a lot of

committees in the university mostly with professors but librarians and students and administrators and also bureaucrats of the state, which were very important. You have the legislative committee you have the treasury, the department of finance and so on. And I thought it would be useful to try to write a book for the following purpose, imagine that a university or maybe a public library has a major strategic decision to make, what kind of new building should they have, what kind of strategic plan should they have, what kind of a new director should a library school have?

So, they often create a committee to think about it. Now the one thing you can be sure is, that most of the members of the committee will not have thought about it before. So I thought, what would be the most useful document to put in the hands of members of such a committee when they begin their work, assuming that they have not had an opportunity to think very much about what library do and how the technologies are changing. So I took the university library plan and I removed University of California from it, systematically. And I began to make the language simpler and clearer and shorter and simpler. It was an interesting exercise in writing because at the beginning of one summer, I had the substance of the text exactly as I wanted it, but I spent the whole summer rewriting it, sentence by sentence, until I felt every sentence would be clear. And that is the book, that was published called “Redesign of library services : a manifesto”. A manifesto is something that just make things clear, it doesn't necessarily argue and it doesn't necessarily cite authorities it just lays it out. And the word redesign was very deliberate. The point is that libraries depend very heavily on technology, because they deal with physical bits of paper, information as thing, you know. If you can drop it on your toe, it's physical. And one of my responsibilities had been to try to explain to the state that they needed to pay 18, 17 kilometres of shelving, every year. That's a lot of stuff. But a change in the technology, although important, does not change the mission or purpose of libraries at all. It means that there's different opportunities there is a difference between the purpose and the process. The purpose of libraries is to help people become less ignorant, the process depends on the situation and technology. And here was a wonderful situation, where there was not necessarily any change in purpose, but really for the first time in a hundred years the options, the possibilities of the process were open and changing and so that's a great challenge and it needs thinking through, but the difference between the purpose and the process, the ends and the means, was central. And that is what I was trying to do with that little book. The book “Redesign of library services” was published by the American Library Association, it sold quiet well for a while, but I think they decided it was about computer and therefore it would be very obsolescent and they let it go out of print. So, I persuaded them to

give the rights back to me and the university library at Berkeley republished it online, so you can read it without pain.

16:31

LIBREAS: Talking about another book “Emmanuel Goldberg and his knowledge machine” which was published 2006, written by you. Why did you publish a book about history of information science now, and what does it mean to you?

Michael Buckland: Well it was a wonderful opportunity, the story of Emmanuel Goldberg. It began with some dead birds. I like little museums and when I was the bureaucrat I would walk across the campus between two offices and there was a museum of vertebrate zoology. It had an open house, the public could come. The first time in 75 years, so I thought I should go because after another 75 years I might be not interested. And it was full of nasty skeletons in liquids and furs, but there were beautiful cabinets and in them were dead birds and I thought to myself, this is irrational. This campus is very short of space, but a wise man had told me, that if something seems irrational the explanation is probably that there is a rational and you just don't understand it. So, I thought to myself why would you have a lot of dead birds in the middle of the campus? Woodpeckers, and it occurred to me as a librarian that clearly they were for learning, to teach the students and to do research, really this was a dead bird library. Because the function of the birds was the same as the books on the shelves, you could, students could learn and researchers could discover things that may have or may not have already been discovered, but at that time at the late 1990's the terminology of information science was not yet ready for the idea of dead birds as documents. Well, I would talk to anybody about this, because I was planing a book called “Information and Information Systems” to generalise notions of libraries but I had and I didn't know quiet how to include museum objects as documents. Well then it was pointed out that this very same discussion had been written in 1951, by a very clever librarian in Paris, Susan Briet. And she picked up on ideas, by an eccentric Belgian lawyer, called Paul Otlet, that archaeological traces and museum objects had to be considered in the same sort of way as books and periodicals and models and so on. So, as usual my best ideas had already been had by somebody else before, but it was also clear that people had forgotten this.

In the United States everybody was talking about an arrogant engineer called Vannevar Bush, who wrote an article, “As We May Think”, that everybody cites. People imagine it's about computers but it wasn't, it was about a microphone reader. And clearly if this interesting stuff

had been done in continentally Europe in French and in German, before the Second World War, it was impossible to say that Information Science had begun in America in 1945. So, one day I read one, too many silly statements about Bush as the father of Information Science and I said there must be more of a story. I'm a librarian! I'm going to find the story, but I didn't quite know what to look for. I remembered that Robert Fairthorne, an Englishman, who was active in documentation before and after the Second World War, had done the unimaginable. He had written an essay, that was critical of Vannevar Bush. So I went to find it and he said: Well, none of Bush's ideas were new and the machine he was talking about appears to have been invented by a doctor E. Goldberg of the Zeiss company around 1930. One sentence! But I had never heard of an E. Goldberg. I didn't, none of my friends had heard of E. Goldberg, who was E. Goldberg? Well, I looked in the normal places, I could find nothing. But eventually, I found a doctor dissertation, of Leipzig, of 1906, a German doctor dissertation of that period have the students Curriculum Vitae on the last page. So, I found he was a Russian and one thing led to another. And so I have had a wonderful time, for 15 years, rediscovering one of Germany's great inventors. And yes indeed, he patented an electronic search engine in 1927, but nobody knows. Even the Zeiss company does not know. There, he was the, he became the founding "Generaldirektor" of Zeiss Ikon, the famous, the worlds largest camera firm, the largest company in Dresden. Recently a three volume history of the Zeiss companies was published, it does not mention Goldberg as active in Zeiss Ikon, but anyway its been a wonderful, interesting story, because I found his son, his daughter and I have interviewed people who worked with him, I found his personal file in the archives in Leipzig it's a long story we don't have time for it all but it, long and complicated story, because there was no secondary resources and I had a lot of fun, but it changes, it should change anybody's understanding of the history of the field.

22:56

LIBREAS: What is your opinion on implementing Web2.0 technologies such as blogs, virtual communities and so on into the library environment?

Michael Buckland: Well, Web 2 is very fashionable at the moment, I find it difficult to decide what is foolish enthusiasm and what is sensible. The reality is that good libraries have always been very engaged with their users and the most important American contribution to library science, with the British was the role of a readers advisor, who will help people. Now, technology such as blogs and virtual communities are among the important options that are

opening up. The most important thing the director of a library can do, is to be engaged with the community. If you're the director of a public library you should spend a lot of your time in the office of the mayor and the city council and the city offices and a good director of a university library would spend a lot of his time outside the library dealing with the community and this also applies to all the library stuff. So I don't have much of an answer for you, I think that in principle it's not much of a change. Technically there are new options and they should be used. Some will work well and some will work not so well but it's nice to have new options.

24:51

LIBREAS: Coming to an end, why did you choose a career in LIS?

Michael Buckland: Well I'm not sure that I have really. The story was, that when I was a teenager my good bourgeois parents kept asking me what I was going to do, when I grow up. Decoded that meant which profession was I going to go into. So I decided that the only way to stop them asking was to declare something, I would give them an answer. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I thought that libraries were socially useful institutions and probably there are pleasant places to work, I thought, so I said well I'm thinking of being a librarian, but it was only a provisional commitment and I said I would be a librarian until I find something more interesting to do. And that, that's still my situation, after 40 years. They were surprised because becoming a librarian was not one of the profession that they had thought of. And I don't think they were very enthusiastic about it, but they were honourable people and they had ask a question and I had give them an answer and after all it was my life and not theirs, so temporarily provisionally, I'm a librarian.

LIBREAS: Thank you very much for the interview.