

The 21st-Century Patron

by [Eva McDonald](#)

I've been researching the future of libraries and library collections, but no matter which journals, presentations, podcasts, blogs, and wikis I read or listen to, I can't help feeling that there's some critical piece missing in the discussion. I believe that critical piece is the patron. Something interesting is happening to patrons that will affect their relationship to the library and the collection, and that something will, in turn, have a direct impact on the mission, scope, and future of the institution.

People who write or talk about the internet often use terms such as "paradigm shift," "new epoch," "wired revolution," and others that evoke a radical transformation. One phrase that seems to be gaining momentum was coined by Clay Shirky, the internet pundit: "phase shift." Shirky prefers "phase shift" because recent history has shown that there is nothing gradual about internet adoption. As soon as developing countries have the infrastructure in place, everyone seems to start using it overnight. But what, exactly, is the radical transformation being referred to by experts? I think that the revolution is the creation of the 21st-century user.

If you've studied history, you've run across the idea of parochronism. Parochronism occurs when you inadvertently project your thoughts and knowledge and feelings onto an event in the past

that you are studying. For example, when I taught history to undergraduates, they would always remark on how stupid the people in medieval times must have been. After all, wouldn't simple observation and basic calculations reveal that the planets revolve around the sun, and not around the earth? It was always satisfying to explain that in the middle ages, authority trumped everything, even observation. If the church said that the sun and planets revolved around the earth, then it must be true, in spite of observations to the contrary. To the medieval mind, all that is material is illusion anyway. As Paul wrote, "We see as through a glass, darkly." The lesson: one can't assume that people from other eras think like we do, yet that is exactly what we do when we try to predict the future of collections. We fall prey to parochronism except that, rather than looking to the past, we project our knowledge and way of thinking onto future generations.

Mark Federman is the former Chief Strategist of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, and is now at OISE. Carrying on McLuhan's work, Federman makes a strong case for modes of communication shaping consciousness and identity throughout history. His argument goes like this ... In the prehistoric era, before the invention of writing, everything was communicated orally. An esteemed person

was someone who could recite the history of the community faithfully. If you were an esteemed person, you might be a ruler, and your domain would extend as far as the spoken word could travel without loss of meaning (signal lossage). The extent of the kingdom would be the area covered by one degree of separation, e.g., a village. Who you are in this time period is equal to where you fit in the village hierarchy.

About 4000 BC, humans invented writing. If you were an esteemed person, you could read and write, and if you were a ruler too, your domain could extend beyond the spoken word. As long as there was someone else who could also read and write, you could transmit your decrees to them without any signal loss over time or distance. This new mode of communication transformed the community's relationship to other communities. Who you are in this time period is still community-based, but rooted in a more complex and extensive hierarchy.

Fast-forward to the 15th century and the invention of the printing press. We all know what happens next: the masses get their hands on the Bible, literacy spreads, people start having their own ideas about the church (among other things), and the western world enters a long period of secession and reform of both church and state. Who you are in this time period is no longer determined by the community alone, but by the individual. The late 15th century marks the beginning of individualism, an idea that gained currency through the Enlightenment of the 18th century and industrialism in the 20th century.

With the invention of the internet, Federman thinks we are again entering a new epoch of communication that will define the consciousness of mankind, and fundamentally affect how identity is constructed. He sets the beginning of this era as 1995, the year when Netscape had its initial public offering, forever validating and cementing the internet as a permanent technology in the collective mind of society.

Cast your mind back to 1995. If you recall, what we now know as web 1.0 was the passive web, with a one-way flow of information. There was text and pictures to be found, but not much audio and video due to bandwidth issues. The interactive part of the web was confined to BBSs and news groups. The software required for the former (web browsers) was different from the software required for the latter (news readers).

A few years later, server space became inexpensive and regular people starting putting up websites. Blogging software made it easy for the average person to create and maintain web journals, without knowing any HTML coding. When the comments feature was added to blogging software, we saw the beginning of web 2.0.

Federman thinks the reason web 2.0 is so revolutionary is that we're entering an age of mass collaborative intelligence. One can see this collaborative intelligence at work in Wikipedia, Flickr, and other sites that fall under the broad category of social networking. Anyone born after 1995 is growing up in a world that Federman refers to as "UCaPP": ubiquitous connectivity and pervasive proximity. This is an era which produces content and immediate responses without signal loss – an instantaneous feedback loop. This is a generation for which it is not only commonplace but expected that you have conversations with everyone else in the world. Federman theorizes that this new mode of communication will cause individual identity to be replaced by collaborative identity. In other words, who you are in this time period is no longer determined by the individual, but by everybody else.

Those of us born in the last century are enculturated to believe that the individual matters, that the individual is responsible, and that the individual determines her own identity. I believe that we're beginning to witness the erosion of these ideas, concepts that go back to the Enlightenment. Federman says that the full transformation of western society cannot happen until everybody

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who was born before 1995 is dead, but that it is inevitable.

I believe Federman is correct, and that we're starting to see the phenomenon of this new enculturation happening in high school and postsecondary students, people who were between two to 10 years old in 1995. For example, this youthful generation seems to have a complete lack of concern about privacy on the internet. They have no reservations about posting personal information on the web, such as real names, addresses, phone numbers, class schedules, photos, and so on. I've heard the argument that someone who does not post her private information on the internet must have something to hide. Given the risk of identity theft, this reasoning appears illogical, but for someone whose identity is constructed by the collective, it makes sense. All these other people in the world determine your identity, so you have nothing to hide from them.

Another example is how this cohort uses social networking tools such as MySpace or Facebook. If I join a Facebook group, it's because I have an active interest in the subject and find it a convenient way to keep up to date with the latest news. Once I am no longer interested in that subject, I leave the group. I've observed that members of this younger demographic join many, many groups, sometimes hundreds of them. They can't possibly keep up with all the news, and in fact they don't. These groups are added because they are facets of that person's identity, an identity that is not only constructed online, but projected and maintained online as well.

I don't have the space in this article to cover what I think are other key aspects of this new wired generation, but I believe it's important to keep in mind that when we're making predictions about the future of libraries, we're talking about serving a population that thinks quite differently from our own, due to their radically divergent enculturation. Friends, things are about to get interesting.

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