

Desk Shift

By Gabrielle Chantiri

Vesna has a seat at the computer, and I'm perched behind her almost with my chin on her shoulder. She works in Resource Sharing, an "area of responsibility" that used to be called Interlibrary Loans which used to be Document Delivery. There's an agreement amongst libraries nationally and internationally that allows patrons to request and loan physical resources from outside their institution. Vesna has worked at the library for over twenty years, weathering each restructure and the subsequent renaming of long provided services. She trawls through institutional catalogues like OCLC, Subito, and the Bibliothèque Nationale, searching for obscure books at the behest of our patrons. "You're like Nancy Drew," I said, trying to think of a detective. "More like Precious Ramotswe," she replied, chuckling to herself. The library has sent Vesna to Europe for various conferences, making her the sole correspondent with Poland, Budapest and Serbia. She maintains a good rapport with the libraries in these places, observing the appropriate hallmarks of business communication. She begins each email with a genial introduction and ends with her signature, the automated and unremarkable stack of specifics listing her name, place of work; and job title of *Site Services Advisor*. In one case, her job



title catches the attention of a librarian in France or Italy. "Madam," they write, "is your library still being built?"

If we think about public places like a zoo, a hairdressing salon or a church, each is built to serve a particular purpose. What was called to mind by this French (or Italian) colleague when they saw Vesna's title, seems the opposite, a site "under construction." Blue tarps and metal fences barely concealing work—or the lack

Blue tarps and metal fences barely concealing work—or the lack thereof—in a dust bowl covered lazily with drop sheets and murky pools of rainwater where ducks and ibis take shelter in the shade of a dirt pile sprouting grass and zucchini flowers.

thereof—in a dust bowl covered lazily with drop sheets and murky pools of rainwater where ducks and ibis take shelter in the shade of a dirt pile sprouting grass and zucchini flowers. If a library, specifically a university library, is purpose-built for scholarship, teaching and learning, then who or what is the Site Services Advisor? Vesna does the title great service, specifically a *library-related* service. My colleagues tell me stories about the library prior to the 2014 restructure. The library was organised by faculty, so Law, Health Sciences, and so on had a dedicated team of staff known then as “Library Technicians” and Librarians, sitting side by side on the help desk. In this setup staff could learn from one another; technicians gained insight into research approaches and librarians could understand the situational aspects of the library.

This might be an over-simplification of what was once the case, but for me it remains abstract, since the 2014 restructure dissolved the faculty divisions and librarians were subsequently removed from the help desk. From then on, physical resources, memberships, and loans became the jurisdiction of “Site Services.” A Site Services Advisor or Assistant (I’ve been both) works like a street sign, or those green highway

signs indicating kilometres to Kiama. I mostly answer questions about navigating the library: where are the toilets? How do I get to the toilets? Where are the printers? We attend to those questions that fly into your head and fly out just as fast. As the library’s first line of defence, we answer “frontline enquiries” which like its military association means we’re closest to whatever is approaching, be it enemy, community member, staff, student or alumni. We’re trained to identify so-called “client mental models.” A patron’s perception of how the library and its resources are organised can differ from the reality of how the library actually operates. In the words of my head of department, these mental models can influence the way patrons communicate their needs and can lead to potential misunderstandings. To rephrase this, a misunderstanding occurs when a patron’s *perception* of the library confronts the *actual* library.

A common example of a minor misunderstanding would be the assumption that Site Services staff, such as myself, are librarians. Despite the growth in size of facilities and the expansion of library services, the archetype of the librarian has an unsurprisingly firm grip on the perception of the library as a place solely

dedicated to scholarship. Seated in the foyer, the Site Services Advisor is privy to the comings and goings of the library's uppermost layer of strata. Here, a misunderstanding becomes a gateway into the library's historical antecedent, a dissonance between the *perceived* library and the *actual* one. How might we conceive of this discontinuity? If it's a pattern, how does it emerge? And why does it matter, if at all, that it's the Site Services Advisor who sees it?

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I met Andrew K on his first visit back to the university after moving back home to Constantinople. It is a city more commonly known as Istanbul, but one that has cycled through many other names like Islambol, which is why he calls it Constantinople and why he introduces himself as Andrew K. He completed his PhD in 1999, possibly in genetics, though I can't be sure because he said it as he turned to leave, taking the word with him. His degree is irrelevant to our interaction, since despite his time and money he's not entitled to use the library wi-fi. In our system Andrew K is an "alumni," which in terms of demonstrable benefits amounts to very little. Alumni membership includes full access to the library's physical collection and limited (almost non-existent) access to online journals and databases. Locked behind paywalls, the digital collection is perhaps the library's most prized asset, the size of

which completely dwarfs the physical collection. The resources budget is millions of dollars per year and secures the most up-to-date and cutting-edge of research and journals. None of this is accessible with an alumni membership. If this is the patron of the *perceived* library, then the *actual* patron is easily subdued, finding consolation in free drinks at graduation and lite forms of deviance. A month out from graduation you can file your student card as lost. They'll issue you a new card, with a new expiry date, which means concession rates for travel and movie tickets. Find a locker on campus and impound your belongings behind a combination lock. Store a spare towel, underwear, socks and shower cosmetics for when you've finished work in the city and want to spruce yourself up before evening plans. You might even find a friend on the inside who can borrow books for you.

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Site Services Assistants and Advisors spend half their time in the foyer helping clients, and the other half attending to an "area of responsibility," a back of house task that ensures the operational success of the library by maintaining and facilitating access to the collection. "Unit of Study" is the area of responsibility that prepares subject reading lists for each course throughout the academic year, with busy periods punctuating the beginning of each semester.

Academic staff must answer a series of questions via an online ticketing system. They're required to state whether their reading list is "new" or if the reading list already exists and needs to be "rolled over" with minor changes or updates. They give permission, or not, for the library to use other (older) editions of assigned texts, or for the resource in question (book, DVD, etc.) to be purchased. The Advisor receives each ticket and assigns it to the Assistant, of which there are several. The Assistant assembles the reading list using the library information software Leganto which is connected to the library catalogue, allowing for a simple dragging and dropping of citations into the template until completion. "Tags" are a useful feature that allow the Assistant to alert the Advisor of further action required on a citation. If a "purchase request" tag is applied, then the Advisor goes about procuring the new book in accordance with copyright laws and with the help of the Resource Sharing team. Each tag initiates the end of the work of the Assistant, and a beginning for someone else. If a citation has a "digitise" tag, then the desired resource isn't in the online catalogue but exists as a hard copy in the library. Prior to 2014, the Site Services Assistant would've gone into the stacks to find the book and digitise it themselves. This is now the job of the Site Resources Assistant. What once was a circuit of necessary actions has been broken down into a series of discrete tasks and disseminated. As you

tag a citation and wait for someone else to action it you question if "efficiency" is in fact the real goal to such restructuring.

In December 2023, management announced a library-wide restructure, under which the 50/50 nature of the Site Services role would be separated into two distinct factions, namely "Research and Collections" and "Student Engagement." According to the Draft Change Proposal for 2025, staff in the latter would cover service points, navigating locations and sites, use of student facilities (including printers), account management and borrowing, and the maintenance of new technology services such as 3D printers, virtual reality, audio equipment and AV facilities. Though staff could nominate a preference, they had no final say as to which faction they'd be working in. For my colleague Catrina the choice to join the Student Engagement team was a no-brainer; a break from seventeen years of trawling law databases for citations. For the rest of us, the prospective work of the Student Engagement team stretches out like an abyss. Learning how to manage clients is a skill but in terms of expertise, there's an upper limit to what you can gather in a frontline role. Though by no means perfect, the dual nature of the role offered a trajectory and the promise of learning more. The restructure obliterated any illusion of agency. The operational and technical skills gained in our area of responsibility must be put aside until there's the opportunity

for promotion.

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Traditionally the library provided access to a significant portion of valuable research, data and resources. Various social changes have upended the library profession. Libraries within corporatised higher education must now actively promote their relevance to stakeholders. These stakeholders include university staff (professional and academic), students, the university executive who determine how much money the library receives as well as the Department of Education. These demands manifest themselves in the emergent trend of servicing the whole person, with libraries like ours facilitating the social adjustment of students through engagement and outreach. Student Engagement is tasked with creating a sense of belonging and hosting initiatives to reduce stress in students. The library staff organise games and spaces for relaxation, hand out fruit during exam periods and host food security events like “Coffee and Croissants” which offers students free breakfast. Downstairs in the office my colleagues gather in twos and threes to deride the way these initiatives pull them away from the library’s core responsibilities.

Luis, like Vesna, has worked at the library for over twenty years as a Site Services Advisor and represents our team as delegate for the CPSU NSW Professional Staff Union. You’d often see him on the phone pacing back and forth inside

one of the meeting rooms adjacent to the office. “The library had multiple rooms dedicated to different collections,” he tells me. “One for serials, another for curriculum and a room full of CDs and other audio equipped with chairs to sit down in and devices for listening.” In addition to the faculty specific service points attended by librarians and technicians, each dedicated room was attended by a specialist. “The library has capital,” says Luis. In a paper titled “Overdue for Change: Australian University Libraries After World War II” (2018) theorists Philip Goad, Hannah Lewi and Andrew Murray write about the library’s key role in the post-war university building project in Australia. They argue the provision of libraries on Australian university campuses from the 1950s to the 1970s created the core resource for scholarship and teaching, often expressed through monumental modern architectural language and, at the same time, having to respond to rapidly escalating functional and technological needs. They write, “while the function of the library saw limited change during this period, its expression changed dramatically. From early experiments in light-weight, curtain-walled structures to the monumental concrete libraries of the 1970s, the civic presence of the new university library was closely tied to its material expression.” What then, is the expression of today’s academic library?

I talk to Elizabeth, an Academic Liaison Librarian in the Medicine and Health team. “I’m still

In Greek mythology the likeness of library staff can be found in the figure of Charon, the ferryman who carries the souls of the deceased across the rivers Styx and Acheron to the realm of Hades. This may be melodramatic, but figures of a bygone era continue to frequent the surface of the digital waters. Alumni and community borrowers have become ghosts haunting the library extinct.

gathering expertise. I can't imagine running out of things to learn about," she says, "but now that the role has been fragmented, only a few people in the sector are able to enjoy developing their expertise over an extended period of time." Before working at the university she was a high school librarian. "There was the physical tending of the collection," she explains, "as well as facilitating how to use it. This is gone in my role here, because people can teach themselves how to use it. Students are also more likely to access things digitally, so you can do your entire degree without visiting the library." In contrast to librarians, the expertise of the Site Services Advisor is being whittled down into a faceless job. We're an institutional fixture that can be moved about to suit the needs of the site. As Goad, Lewi and Murray point out, flexibility was a watchword of modernisation in the 1950s, a "recognition that not all uses could be foreseen at the moment of design," as Adrian Forty wrote. If it was once the role of the building to "express" the civic identity of the library, then perhaps now it is people who do the work of buildings.

Wayfinding and directional enquiries can be solved on the surface and are, as such, surface-level enquiries. Often more complex questions have to be referred on via obstructive systems like the creation of an online ticket, going onto live chat, or making bookings for a future consultation. These systems privilege a certain pocket of patrons and exclude others. Undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students are entirely restricted from speaking to a librarian face-to-face. In an obviously dissatisfying experience, the patron can only receive direction to resources for self-help and frontline staff are frustrated by diminishing opportunities for developing expertise.

Of course, some people know the library's infrastructure and they continue to climb through and around obstacles with minimal effort, but effort is the operative word for most users who will likely give up at the first hurdle. Misunderstandings are a gateway into the historical antecedent of the library's changing expression, one that's yet to be fully folded into common perception. In Greek mythology the

likeness of library staff can be found in the figure of Charon, the ferryman who carries the souls of the deceased across the rivers Styx and Acheron to the realm of Hades. This may be melodramatic, but figures of a bygone era continue to frequent the surface. Alumni and community borrowers have become ghosts haunting the library extinct.

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Anyone who comes to the library desk asking after a physical corpus is trouble. MM was born in 1932 and worked as a postman in his youth. He was bitten by a total of twelve dogs during his time delivering letters and packages. When we meet in 2023, he's an amateur scholar working on inscriptions from Pompeii. We can't find a physical copy of the corpus he wants but I manage to find it online on the Internet Archive. He doesn't own a computer nor does he have an email address so we organise for him to come in another time, when I'm not on the front desk. On the day of our meeting he's early. "How long have you been waiting here?" I ask. "Since 11.30," he says. "But we said 12pm." "Well, you said 12pm, I said noon, so I suppose that's 12pm, yes." We sit down at one of the community computers and open the document. *You know where you are on the screen with this white arrow, you put your hand on the mouse and with your index finger click just the left button, don't worry about the right one for now. See this magnifying glass, if you click on that you can search within*

the document, so click on it. Now that flashing bar means it's ready for you to type. He talks to me as we turn the corpus pages:

In the Latin if you look up a word it doesn't mean one thing. Victoria, obviously a woman. Salute! Greetings! He says, I ask you that you will run to me, to my help, the help of my life, if you think I have no money. Segata, now I'm not sure if that's a man or a woman. Rogat Salvia, that's definitely a woman, and there's a dirty word after it which I don't bother putting. CVNVS. Luscum, well that can mean one-eyed. Why would it be one eyed? Well, Luscum, is the translation from Latin, of course if you want everything of this to make sense you can forget about it. One-eyed as opposed to half-blind or one-eye shut, this could be Salvia winking. Well, here, it's supposed to be Sara you do nicely, alone you abandon me crippled. That comes from the inscription from the Basilica, 1951. These are the most beautiful photos, do you like pretty pictures? You see that 1959 painting of mercury. Well you can see the difference here: this one was done in 1964. Fresco of Venus being pulled by elephants. And this one was done after a long time. So you can see the value, the photos are going back and back. Whereas all this stuff is being worn off, the wind and rain. I haven't missed a beat when it comes to this. That's an R, you see the next letter, what's that, looks like an O, yeah and the next one, G, and then AMP. That means Rogarth or Lollium, Lollium was an aedile or a duumvir. He didn't write it, a sign writer wrote it. They were the magistrates, he sat there and selected disputes. They're

electoral notices. The rest, see here, is more, you can almost see the L now. It's a particular place where they've got the best preserved. But this one is remarkable, 1959, that's absolutely astounding to have anything like this. How were they so well preserved? Well, they're not well preserved, if you go there now those inscriptions are destroyed, the inscriptions are gone.

He wants me to print out the pages in A3 for him. Even just 100 is good, he says. 100? I repeat. Or 80, he says, not looking at me. In the staffroom I can only manage 30. The printer is particularly loud when you're printing something you shouldn't. You can hear rectangles and squares locking and unlocking, cylinders clicking so fast and that's all just while it's printing. It doesn't include the sounds it makes to limber up. When I finally return with the pages he insists on giving me \$30. He'd given me a green manilla folder and some print outs of Pompeii in pictures. I slip the loose notes in between the folder and papers to stop his insisting, pretending to take it, making the notes not mine yet, not something I had accepted or would accept, just notes and some papers stacked for the purpose of pretending. If I'd put them in my bag that would've been faking for myself but not for the imagined camera overhead. For fear of potential misunderstanding she uses sleight of hand. The authorities see an incidental layering of cardboard, paper and bank notes. Finally, I say I could get in trouble and

he relents, allowing me to "return" the money to him. With all wrongs righted the two go their separate ways, packing up their respective things in the process.

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I met with MM once more after our initial session. This time on the weekend when I would have time to help him properly, which is funny considering my job is to help people like him, though the emphasis is on the aggregate *people* rather than the singular *person* (as far as the library is concerned). I remember on that first meeting with MM my colleague Jordan spied me scurrying back and forth between the printers and on one of my slower lengths he commented on what *excellent service* I was giving.

I mentioned earlier how I'd found the corpus he wanted via the Internet Archive, but of course I didn't write it down. Sitting with MM at the computer I try key words and dates like "Volume I" and "1871." He is convinced the editor is Zelensky but it turns out to be Zangemeister. There are also many variations, i.e., that's French, we want Pompeii. Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum. We're frustrated. He can't understand why I didn't write down the link and I can't understand why my search isn't yielding the same results. After over an hour his requests, propositions and admonitions no longer make sense to me. I'm at work on the

weekend and I'm out of ideas.

If I'm to be successful in helping someone that someone must be referable, able to be passed on. MM is stubbornly impassable, as an alumni with no digital literacy he's unserviceable. The library on the level of the surface in the foyer can't accommodate this complexity, and with my

understanding of the library tied as it is to the public's understanding, nor do I. Surely I should know better than to take work into the weekend, or to get an old man's hopes up, but the library gave me cover. A cloak to hold ajar. In its shaft of shadow, I ferried this visitor from one side to the other and back again. A Sisyphean exercise? An extreme? A star in a constellation.

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