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## Elegy for the News Library



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News researcher **Liz Donovan** died in early December 2008 at age 64. In the thirty or so years she worked in newsrooms she saw, and exemplified, the changes that technology brought to the practice of news librarianship.

**Liz** started her career as a news researcher at the *Washington Post* in the late 1960s. It was an era of paper-based research, news clippings in envelopes in drawers upon drawers of filing cabinets in centralized news archives. **Liz** was **Bob Woodward** and **Carl Bernstein**'s go-to person when they needed to follow the unfolding events after a break-in at the Watergate office building, the coverage of which led to the ultimate downfall of **Richard Nixon**'s presidency.

Here's how **Liz** described the work:

*"I spent a few hours almost every day clipping and filing every mention of the Watergate story from every major paper and magazine we had access to, and working with **Carl** and **Bob** to track events. By the time the case had reached crisis status and **Carl** and **Bob**'s book was published in spring 1974, the clips filled a file cabinet."*

By the early 1980s she found herself in Miami. She was hired at the *Miami Herald* as a researcher where she helped in the switch-over from paper clippings of news stories to electronic archiving. This was an era that required cross-over thinking – thorough research spanned platforms. Researchers had to be diligent in checking resources, both

clip files and the new electronic databases. Dexterity in thinking in both free-text searching online and keywords in the clip files was needed, as was familiarity with the newly expanding access to remote news archives through online services such as *Dialog* and *Nexis*. This expanded access allowed reporters to bring greater context to their news stories – not just what had happened in their own town but how what was happening in their town might be reflected in other towns.

These online database resources were difficult, and expensive, to search and required computer equipment not available in the newsroom. The news researcher was the essential go-between for the reporter and the background stories and documents they needed. **Liz** was, once again, the go-to person for research.

Increased access to other news archives and to databases with magazine articles was joined in the late-1980s with online access to public records. Florida was a pro-access state where “Government in the Sunshine” laws protected and promoted access to government records. **Liz**, building on her paper-based document searching skills, added online searching of documents to her news research repertoire. Access to primary source documents through computers expanded the depth and thoroughness of the research she could provide to reporters. Because personal computers were still not widely available, access to these resources continued to come through the news library. The news researcher was a real partner in the reporting process – delivering a variety of background articles and source documents from a wide array of resources.

The 1990s brought the Internet to the masses. Reporters no longer worked at “dumb” terminals that only connected to the production system - they were working at personal computers that linked them to a rapidly expanding universe of information. **Liz** found a new responsibility -- guiding reporters and editors to the best of the web.

When online access was limited to a few computers in the newsroom and online search services were very expensive to use, **Liz** was an information gatekeeper - an essential partner to the reporter needing to locate information. But in this new world of inexpensive access to the World Wide Web and its information riches she made the transition from being a gatekeeper between the reporter and the information they needed to being an information facilitator – helping reporters help themselves.

What was happening was a shift from “information waitress” where reporters needed the librarian to serve up the information they needed to more of an “information guide” role. Reporters found themselves with access through their desktop computers to archives, document databases, research center studies, and ready reference resources unimaginable in the past.

**Liz** adjusted to this shift. She understood that part of the guide role was finding, evaluating, and organizing links to good resources on the web. **Liz**’s ability to critically assess and then organize links to useful resources was highly valued – and the intranet she helped create was an important part of the newsroom’s information structure. She was an information curator – selecting among the best pieces to add to the collection.

Another part of the growing role as information guide was to provide training. **Liz** worked with reporters and editors to develop their online searching skills, adhering to the idea “give a man a fish and he eats once, but teach a man to fish and he eats forever.” **Liz** was able to give guidance to reporters in a non-technical, news-oriented way, helping them to master the information seeking tasks they needed to perform each day.

**Liz** also worked with reporters creating databases that could be tapped for deep investigative work. In 1999 she worked on the team investigating voter fraud in Dade County which required the building and maintenance of a massive database. Her

contributions resulted in the second time in her career that she was named as part of the team that won a *Pulitzer Prize* – the first was for the Watergate coverage. Her database architecture skills were highly valued.

As the services she was providing to the newsroom became more and more integrated with the reporting work flow, she made the move from sitting in the news library to sitting out on the news desk in the newsroom. She was a partner in the work of finding accurate, relevant, integral information for reporting on important news for the community.

**Liz** continued to embrace new technologies. She started her first blog-style site in 2000. She blogged for the Herald on *miamiherald.com* and started the “*Infomaniac*” blog - one of the first sites focused on news research issues. Her postings expanded her influence from the *Miami Herald* newsroom to a worldwide audience. She continued posting even after her retirement from the Herald in 2004 and right up to a week before her death.

If **Liz** hadn't retired, I'm sure she would have been involved in helping the website at the *Herald* develop and leverage search engine optimization – her understanding about metadata and key words would have been invaluable. I'm sure she would have been excited about developing ways to tap into the expanding resources of social networking both for researching and for creating new ways to reach audiences. **Liz** would have been all over *Twitter*.

As the next wave of web resources evolve and the promise of the semantic web bring a new level of contextual searching, I know **Liz** would have been right in the middle, helping the newsroom make the best use of each new development.

**Liz** loved her work. She was the quintessential news researcher: a detective, a guide, an information manager, a database builder, a trainer, a blogger. There are others like **Liz** in newsrooms all across the country and around the world. Information professionals are helping their newsroom colleagues navigate the ever-changing and continuously expanding information resources available to them through curating, training, and creative searching.

Well, up to a year or so ago they were. I'm afraid that if **Liz** hadn't retired by now, even with all of her skills and vast record of valuable contribution to the newsroom, she would have joined the ranks of bought-out, or laid off, news researchers. As newsrooms scrambled to find ways to stop the hemorrhaging of their operating budgets the news library was often the first to go.

Sad to say but **Liz's** death is, unfortunately, emblematic of the current state of news librarianship in US newsrooms – in many the news library, too, is dead and gone. *The Wall St. Journal* shut down its news research unit. *The Philadelphia* news library went from a staff of 15 to 2. Long-time news research directors have taken buy-outs, walking away with years of institutional knowledge and news sense and a decimated staff to carry on. There is an information management and vision vacuum in newsrooms.

*St. Petersburg Times* news research director **Tim Rozgonyi** sent a message to the *News Library* listserv (newslib) after hearing word from the *Wall St. Journal* researcher **Leslie Norman** that the library was being shut down. I think he does an eloquent job of explaining what role the news researcher plays in a news organization and why the decimation, at best, and elimination, at worst, of this critical role will have negative repercussions for newsrooms trying to create a new future for themselves. Here are excerpts from the announcement by researcher **Leslie Norman** about the closing:

*From: Leslie Norman*

February 5, 2009

*I regret to report that the WSJ Library will cease to exist on March 23, 2009.*

*<We> were given our termination notices today. I have asked to continue on as a consultant with just pay, and not benefits. It's in management's hands now...*

*When I asked who will do research for the reporters, I was told, "No one." The reporters will probably be using a Lexis product called Due Diligence Dashboard (you know how your mom told you "if you can't say something nice...don't say anything at all...") But it cannot replace <our> knowledge about how to research using all the tricks we've learned over the years. We figure that the reporters will probably spend 10 times our compensation trying to do their own research.*

*I love my job very much and I don't see myself finding a news librarian job in the near future. Every day is different and a challenge. No offense but being a public librarian would drive me crazy.*

*I'm even worried about the microfilm. Between where the Proquest historical database leaves off and our PDF archives begins, there is about 10 years where the only physical form of the paper exists on microfilm.*

*There are so many little things about what we do...how do I possibly explain them or even write them down?*

And here is what **Tim** wrote in response:

*I'm very sorry to hear this news. I wish you and your family all the best.*

*Your note, sad as it is, also epitomizes, to me, what news librarianship is all about. While understandably concerned about what your future may hold, you're nonetheless focused on how this will affect the newsroom, what will happen to the microfilm of the WSJ and how in the coming weeks you will ever be able to quantify and document all of the unique and specialized knowledge you hold so that the organization that has deemed you non-essential doesn't suffer.*

*Truth is, you can't. News librarians bring a totally different perspective to the newsrooms in which they work. We are all about service, which isn't necessarily a core value of a news operation. We focus on the past and the future, and think in terms of decades, while most news staffers think about now and tomorrow, with yesterday being but a distant memory.*

*That is the blessing and the curse of news librarianship - we bring a sensibility and set of values that isn't generally shared by the community we serve.*

*The people making the decisions to shutter libraries or gut staffing levels move in a different world than the one inhabited by news librarians. Faced with problems that have been decades in the making, they are grasping for short-term solutions that will allow them to make*

*it through the next quarter, not understanding the long-term damage they might be doing by jettisoning people they see only as "fact checkers" or high-priced data entry clerks. They are demonstrating the same myopia that has caused newspapers to become less relevant than they were in the past and to be at risk of losing any chance of connecting to an entire generation of young people.*

*Who will fill the hole you leave behind, Leslie? It would take someone who values sharing information profusely and proactively, someone who really understands that news content is the one thing of lasting value that news organizations will leave behind, someone who understands the priceless value of today's news content and is willing to take any and all steps necessary to make sure it is preserved for the benefit of the organization and for posterity.*

*Are there any people like that in newsrooms today? Well, yes there are, and they're called news librarians. And the fact that our numbers are dwindling is sad testimony indeed about the state of newspapers today.*

*Again, I wish you all the best, Leslie. You are clearly one of those people who embody those amazing qualities that make news librarians such a unique and important ingredient in the recipe for a successful news operation.*

*Take care.  
Tim*

**Leslie** was the *Wall St. Journal's* **Liz Donovan**. Every newsroom needs a **Leslie**, or a **Liz**, or a **Tim, Sharon, Kathy, Alan, Richard**... In an environment where the information landscape is more complicated to navigate than ever before news and information companies are devaluing the contributions made by information professionals. **Liz** is rolling over in her grave.

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