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## The Organized Librarian: An Interview with Daniel J. Levitin

By Meredith Schwartz<<http://lj.libraryjournal.com/author/mschwartz/>> on August 6, 2014(2014-08-06T10:00:18+00:00)

Daniel J. Levitin, author of *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload* (Aug., Dutton) and the James McGill Professor of Psychology and Music at McGill University, Montreal, where he also holds appointments in the Program in Behavioural Neuroscience, The School of Computer Science, and the Faculty of Education, will be one of the keynote speakers at *Library Journal's* virtual event, The Digital Shift: Libraries @ the Center<<http://www.thedigitalshift.com/tds/libraries-at-the-center/>>, which will be held on October 1. In preparation for the conference, Levitin shares with *LJ* his thoughts on how his work can help librarians themselves, and their patrons, find the needle they need in today's ever-growing information haystack.



Daniel J. Levitin

***LJ*: You explain the mission of teachers as training students in critical thinking. How can school and academic librarians best support that mission?**

DJL: Librarians are more important than ever before. [They] are uniquely qualified to help all of us separate the digital wheat from the chaff, to help us understand the reliability of the data we encounter.

School and academic librarians can best support that mission if teachers and administrators get the message to students about the skills that librarians have. At McGill—which has a very distinguished school of library sciences—the librarians hold a rank equivalent to the professors. They are not just valued members of the university, they are essential. If I had to choose between hiring another professor and another librarian, I'd take the librarian in a minute. When I first started my laboratory, the first two people I hired were graduate students in our School of Library Sciences. They helped us to organize all the information we had in the lab, and they put in place a system we still use today.

This book (not to mention my previous two) would not have been possible without the help of several librarians.

How do you make the need and techniques for information literacy transparent? You point out the pitfalls, the hazards in taking information at face value. So you found a weather report for your town on the web. Is it today's weather report? Is the site sponsored by an organization that might have a vested interest in altering the report? You look for medical advice about the safety of a particular drug. Is the advice being hosted or given by someone who might be biased? Say the manufacturer of the drug in question, or the manufacturer of a competing treatment?

### **How well do library classification systems match up with how brains function?**

In one sense, Dewey and LOC don't map to brain function at all. The numbers and letters are arbitrary. There's nothing about 817.7 or TL685.3 that tells you that they are for satire & humor or fighter planes respectively. Of course within that arbitrary numbering system, books that are generally alike are usually found together. There are exceptions. Books on organizational behavior end up all over the place...it comes down to a subjective decision by a human being.

The Ace Hardware model is an interesting one—they duplicate stock based on the fact that many things we're looking for can be categorized in more than one way. They put laundry line both in a homewares/laundry section and in the aisle with all the different kinds of ropes and cords. Dewey and LOC are both great systems, and they've stood the test of time. But we can supplement them without abandoning them. Say you're looking for a book on Japanese Calligraphy. [...] It would be sensible for it to be found either with other books on Japanese culture, or with other books on calligraphy, or visual art in general. Ace would have several books in each. You can't always do that in a library because you may not have multiple copies. But you can take a picture of the book's cover, or display a little shelf marker that lets readers who are browsing in one section that a relevant book is in the other.

### **When should libraries create different-feeling environments for different tasks?**

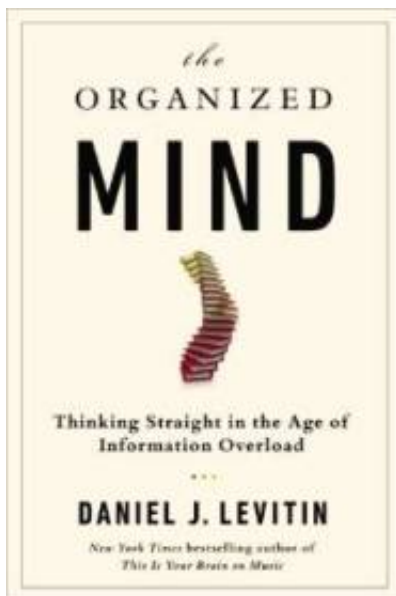
The lessons from cognitive psychology are in conflict about this. On the one hand, we are more productive and can exploit some innate principles of cognition if we have a dedicated place with which to do different activities. Oliver Sacks suggests having two desks if your life involves being engaged in two different types of projects. [...] This is a consequence of evolutionary biology — the mammalian brain evolved exquisite place memory because that

was essential for survival. This is why squirrels have such a good memory for where they buried their nuts. [...]

The space or screen or platform that is dedicated to one single activity—or a class of like activities—serves as an important memory aid for what you worked on before. On the other hand, studies on human-computer interaction clearly show that people are not good at remembering a bunch of different commands or interfaces. You don't want to have to use an entirely different set of commands to navigate an on-line catalog for history books versus art books, or novels versus short-stories. Madness! But then the tension enters: if all the interfaces look exactly alike, you don't get to take advantage of place memory.

What I'd like to see is the same user interface for all kinds of catalog and search functions, but with different colored backgrounds to indicate what domain you're in. That would serve as a contextual cue and reminder. Maybe non-fiction books would be red and fiction would be blue. Journal or magazine articles would have a slightly different pattern of the same color to indicate what they are. You could extend this to the physical space of the library. One color indicates science, another engineering, another arts, another humanities.

**Libraries increasingly see themselves as in the business of facilitating creativity. What can they do to facilitate a flow state?**



<<http://www.worldcat.org/search?>

*q=The+Organized+Mind%3A+Thinking+Straight+in+the+Age+of+Information+Overload&qt=* big thing is to help people to avoid distractions. Libraries could (should?) have a certain proportion of their computer screens blocking against Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other tempting internet distractions. Some of us don't have the willpower to plow through an unpleasant piece of reading or

research, and this can help.

I'm also a big believer in quiet spaces. Public libraries are increasingly allowing for spaces in which talking is, if not permitted, at least tolerated. That's a good idea—if people need to talk, there should be a dedicated space in the library for it. But there needs to also be quiet spaces because the quiet fosters a more intense focus, and helps people to stay on task. When those two things occur, a flow state is much more likely to develop.

### **Since people remember information better if they work it out for themselves, what processes should libraries adopt to help patrons do so?**

The most effective thing I've ever had a librarian say to me is: "Here. This will get you started. Come back to me when you've gotten a little farther into the problem and we'll discuss it some more." It sounds like something I might have heard in grammar school, but I heard it just last week in the San Francisco public library.

### **As more and more information moves from a physical to a digital format, how do we preserve or even improve the experience of browsing and serendipity?**

Serendipity is important for discovery. The scientific experiments I've designed were nearly all inspired by an article that I just happened to come across while I was looking for something else. The way we get that in the digital world is by building artificial intelligence-based recommendation systems. Of course, this is what Pandora is. I've been telling them for years that they should add a serendipity knob, a virtual knob that you turn to increase how adventuresome you're feeling. This translates into how far away from your core preferences you're willing to let them take you, because that can change from day to day and hour to hour.

In a library context, I'd like to see a catalog system or document retrieval system that makes recommendations using AI algorithms. A lot of people think they're searching for one thing, but they're really searching for something different. The recommendations can help them find it. Or to find something else that's even more interesting and relevant than the thing they thought they wanted.

*An excerpted version of this interview ran in the August 2014 issue of Library Journal.*

**About Meredith Schwartz**

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