

Neither a Luddite nor a Lemming: Librarians as the Lorax in our GenAI Obsessed World?

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Introduction

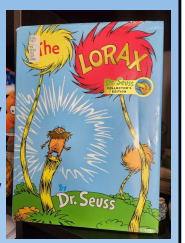
- The Lorax
- What is the librarian's role here?
- How things work at Michigan
- Bouncing forward?

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The Lorax

- The Lorax was written in 1971 by Dr. Suess (or Theodor Seuss Geisel if you remember your cataloging class in library school).
- Dr Suess said the book "came out of my being angry. The ecology books I'd read were dull…" (Lebduska 1994).
- This book was likely the first environmental work many children (now adults) were exposed to.
- *"I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees."*

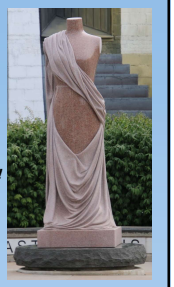


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The Lorax



- The Once-ler (who you never see), has discovered that a product could be made from the Truffula Tree's tuft – the Thneed.
  - *"Look Lorax," I said. "There's no cause for alarm.*
  - *I chopped just one tree. I am doing no harm.*
  - *I'm being quite useful. This thing is a Thneed.*
  - *A Thneed's a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need!*



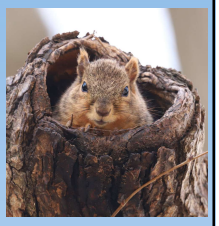
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The Lorax



- As demand grows for Thneed's, more and more trees are removed.
- The Lorax then leads out the bears, the birds and the fish for their land and water without these Truffula trees is not inhabitable.
- The story actually begins at the end, with the Once-ler telling his story of woe to a young visitor.
- The destruction had already happened.



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The Lorax



"A Thneed's a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need!"

- The appeal of GenAI is absolutely understandable.
- We have been using AI for years in many forms
- GenAI has the capacity to not only augment our work, but complete some of it on its own.
- With GenAI - we have
  - the capacity to "do more with less."
  - the capacity to meet unrealistic deadlines.
  - the capacity to "do more with fewer."

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The Lorax



- With GenAI - we have potentially the gift of time.



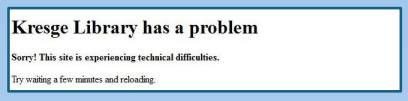
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What is the librarian's role here?



- In the world of GenAI, our work as librarians has not really changed all that much.
- We help people find data, articles, books, reports and other secondary research to advance and idea further dive into a subject.
- We also help people understand the availability and complexity of data – countering assumptions that everything is available somewhere.


Kresge Library has a problem

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What is the librarian's role here?



- Some of the issues librarians see here are in two major buckets
- Issues that are Information Related:
  - Accuracy of Results
  - Appropriate Use & Licensing
- Issues that might be Societal or Ethical:
  - Privacy
  - Employment
- Like the Lorax, we ca bring these up – and faculty or students may or may not listen.
- We have to be OK with that (because it is happening anyway).

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What is the librarian's role here?



- Raganathan's Five Laws of Library Science (1931)
- 4. Save The Time Of The Reader
- If you really want to save the time of the reader – not only find the items they want, but also summarize it for them.



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How things work at Michigan



- The University of Michigan has gone all in - https://genai.umich.edu/
- Upon his sudden departure, President Santa Ono listed accomplishments during his tenure and started with this (message to community – May 4th, 2025):
  - Artificial Intelligence and Digital Innovation
    - Prioritized the strategic expansion of artificial intelligence, making Michigan the first university to offer custom AI tools to our entire academic community.
    - Forged transformative partnerships with OpenAI and Los Alamos National Laboratory and launching a new $1.2B artificial intelligence research ecosystem.

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How things work at Michigan - Faculty



- Two recent requests at Ross
- Faculty wanted all press releases from Fortune 1000 companies for 15 years – to analyze via text mining.
  - Were not happy with RavenPack (scored assessments) or TDM Studio (cloud based assessments of smaller data sets). Dow Jones would not pull the content.
- PhD student wanted more detailed car registration data. We could not purchase – cost was well over $300K USD.
- Data requests appear to have increased recently (possibly because they moved to the library group).
- For more on Ross and AI – visit - https://michiganross.umich.edu/about/AI-at-michigan-ross
- Using GenAI is simply using the most cutting edge tool – so it is front and center with many researchers.

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How things work at Michigan - Students



- Anecdotally, we are seeing students use GenAI as something in their toolkit.
- Conceptually, the more that they use it college, the more they will need this when moving into a career. They may not have the muscle memory to do the critical thinking.
- They are using it for the note taking capacity in Zoom (including the ability to catch up if they arrive late).
- They are using it to synthesize an break down larger reports (maybe despite the inclusion of an executive summary).
- Some students are using it to get their research started.



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How things work at Michigan - Students



- We continue to receive requests to track down citations to documents that do not exist. Chasing phantom citations is not something new, but it has increased for sure.
- Noticed numerous ads on YouTube from Grammarly – especially towards the end of the term - when I am on campus.



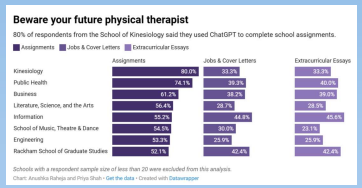
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How things work at Michigan - Students



- Michigan Daily Assessment of use of ChatGPT in February 2024.



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How things work at Michigan - Staff



- One case study from the GenAI site discussed the benefit of invoice processing at the Shared Service Center (SSC) on campus.
- GenAI can be more sophisticated and beneficial than processes previously used like RPA (Robotic Process Automation).
- See - https://genai.umich.edu/use-cases/327

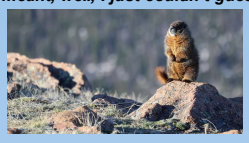


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Bouncing forward?



- At the end of the story, the Lorax simply left.
  - *"And all that the Lorax left here in this mess*
  - *Was a small pile of rocks, with the one word…*
  - *"UNLESS."*
  - *Whatever that meant, well, I just couldn't guess.*



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Bouncing forward?



"But now," says the Once-ler,
"Now that you're here,
The word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear.
UNLESS someone like you
Cares a whole awful lot,
Nothing is going to get better.
It's not.



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Bouncing forward?



- This is a pragmatic position we find ourselves in.
- In a service mode, we should strive to help our community succeed, right? If these tools get them there, that is good, right?
- Librarians are not the captains of this ship – nor should they behave that way.



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Bouncing forward?



- The Lorax was there to attempt to have the Once-ler change his ways. But his arguments were not compelling to the Once-ler.
- Librarians raising concerns about GenAI might lead to the same result as in the Lorax.
- Our information landscape is changing before our eyes it will continue this way whether or not we think it is a good idea.

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Bouncing forward?



- In GenAI, we find a world full of Luddites and Lemmings.
- The Lorax seems to be in the middle ground.
- But in actuality, the Lorax was right – but they did not listen to the warnings.
- So keep talking, maybe someone will care.



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Thank you



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