“Smelly Knowledge”: An Information Audit of the Sunnydale High Library in Buffy the Vampire Slayer

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Jenny: “Books don’t smell, Rupert.”

Giles: “I Know! Smell is the most powerful trigger to the memory there is. A certain flower or a whiff of smoke can bring up experiences…long forgotten. Books smell. Musty and and and rich. The knowledge gained from a computer, is, uh, it… it has no, no texture, no, no context. It’s… it’s there and then it’s gone. If it’s to last, then, then the getting of knowledge should be, uh, tangible, it should be, um…smelly.” (Buffy the Vampire Slayer, “I, Robot… You, Jane”)

Introduction

The information audit is a well-established technique in contemporary management practices. According to Hannerí Botha and J.A. Boon (2003), the main purpose of an information audit is “the identification of users’ information needs as well as how these needs are met by the information services department” (p. 23). Information managers, knowledge managers and records managers draw on the information audit as an analytical tool when reviewing the efficacy of current
management practices and developing new programs to improve the efficiency of information and knowledge sharing.

The purpose of this project is to apply the information audit to the televisual universe of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*) and undertake an investigation of the types of information sought, used and disseminated within the series’ (fictional) Sunnydale High library. Although this library is not a formal information services department, it satisfies many of the same functions, as it is the central information and knowledge-sharing space for *BtVS* characters. Specifically, the Sunnydale High library is home to a primary repository of textual resources, and serves as a meeting place for information exchange.

This article consists of a brief introduction to *BtVS* and a synthesis of available literature on the role of information and knowledge in the television series. This will be followed by a review of current information management theory, specifically as it relates to the concept of the information audit. Methodology for the study will then be discussed. Finally, the findings of the study will be presented and evaluated.

**Buffy the Vampire Slayer**

In every generation there is a Chosen One. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness. She is the Slayer. (*BtVS*, “The Witch”)

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*) is a serialized television show that originally aired in seven seasons from March 10, 1997 to May 20, 2003. The show takes place in the fictional community of Sunnydale, a typical Southern California city; however, Sunnydale is located on top of a “Hellmouth”, a “center of mystical convergence” and portal between this universe and an infinite number of demon worlds (*BtVS*, “The Harvest”). As a result, monsters, vampires, werewolves, and many other breeds of demon creatures haunt the streets of Sunnydale and regularly threaten to harm or kill its citizens. Fortunately, Sunnydale is also home to Buffy Summers, a sixteen-year-old girl endowed with super-human strength and agility who has been called to a secret order of Vampire Slayers. As Lorna Jowett (2005) has noted, Buffy is “the Chosen One, the latest in a line of female Slayers fated to fight vampires and demons” (p. 19).

In the first episode of the series, the audience is introduced to Buffy as she is beginning her first day of school at Sunnydale High. Buffy quickly makes friends with two classmates: Xander Harris, a clumsy, wise-cracking young man who immediately becomes Buffy’s most trusted and reliable companion, and Willow Rosenberg, an awkward genius who uses her knowledge of technology to help Buffy find information she needs to perform her role as Slayer. In addition, Buffy comes to know Cordelia, Xander’s beautiful but shallow nemesis, and Angel, a mysterious brooding stranger who is later discovered to be a 243-year-old vampire fighting against his own kind. Ms. Jenny Calendar, a computer science teacher, is also part of the show’s main cast of characters.
Notably, Sunnydale is home to Rupert Giles (usually called by his surname), a British expatriate and the new high school librarian. Giles the librarian, however, is merely a cover for his true career as a “Watcher”, an ancient profession responsible for mentoring and training Slayers. Buffy first meets Giles at the Sunnydale High library in the first episode of the series, “Welcome to the Hellmouth”, and he presents her with a leather-bound volume entitled *VAMPYR*. Buffy initially refuses to accept the offer of the book, a symbolic rejection of her destiny, but soon returns to the library to seek help from Giles when a fellow student is found dead in the school locker room. Defying horror movie cliché, Giles does not take the charge to defend his students, but instead turns to his collection of books for information on how to deal with this threat. According to GraceAnne A. DeCandido (1999), “[Giles’s] collections-development policy must be an extraordinary document, [he] has access in the stacks to a vast number of volumes on vampire and demon lore, the occult, witchcraft, spellcasting, and other rarities not usually found among the copies of *Huckleberry Finn* or *Weetzie Bat*” (p. 44). DeCandido goes on to explain that Giles “is our hero librarian: a pop culture idol whose love of books and devotion to research hold the key to saving the universe…” (p. 44).

Despite the fantastical themes of *BtVS*—magic, monsters, and mystical portals into alternate dimensions—the series never under-represents the laborious, grueling reality of methodical research. To the contrary, research is central to the narrative structure of the show. In one episode, an exasperated Willow tells Giles, “You always know what’s going on. I never know what’s going on.” Giles replies, “Well, you weren’t here from midnight to six researching it” (*BtVS*, “Angel”). With Giles as the purveyor of information, Buffy and her friends, often referred to as the “Scooby Gang”, spend countless hours in the library poring over books or exploring the Internet for vital information necessary to help Buffy protect the community of Sunnydale. Giles is always available to provide knowledge or guide the group to an information resource that may hold the clues they need to continue their “slayage”.

The importance of research in *BtVS* has been explored by Michael Betancourt (1998) and Adriana Estill (2007), as has the special position of the Sunnydale High library. Notably, Estill has claimed that the series, at least in its first three seasons,

…consistently addressed how the high school library’s status as place influenced its multiple uses and meanings. The series offers a portrait of how the place of the library is lived and socially produced by the characters who make use of it while in turn acting constitutively to influence their practices. In other words, the library does not act as a simple depository or retrieval space for information. Rather, the library’s place enables negotiations around the acquisition of knowledge, the relationship between research and power, the drive to create community, and the desire for sanctuary (p. 236).

The Sunnydale High library is thus a safe haven for the show’s frequently beleaguered characters, a forum for information exchange and a place for knowledge negotiation and meaning-making. It also serves as a rich, albeit
fictional site in which to perform an information audit.

The Information Audit

Giles: “Willow, we have work to do.”

Willow: “Once again I’m banished to the Demon section of the card catalogue.” (BtVS, “Puppet Show”)

Knowledge workers recognize that information is the most important strategic asset in business. Nevertheless, its acquisition, control, and dissemination are becoming increasingly difficult to manage, as digital technology has improved the proliferation of data to a previously unimagined scope and pace. For example, it is common for organizations to suffer from debilitating information overload, making it next-to-impossible to differentiate between significant information and meaningless data; likewise, data duplication, inconsistencies in data standards, and/or gaps in information plague many organizations, both small and large. When information is needed, it is either missing or hidden within a sea of data. According to Susan Henczel (2000), the challenge for knowledge workers is to “identify the information that is needed to optimize the achievement of organizational objectives, who it is needed by, how it will be used, its source and how it flows through the organization and between the organization and its external environment” (p. 210).

The information audit is the generally accepted management practice of identifying significant information resources and assessing their value. As Henczel (2000) has explained, undertaking an information audit “enables the mapping of information flows within an organization and between an organization and its external environment” (p. 216). In addition, the process helps to recognize and prioritize information needs, identify key resources, and discover inefficiencies or over-provisions of information. Furthermore, information resources are counted and examined while the activities associated with these resources are observed and evaluated (Henczel, 2000). A successful audit not only provides a snapshot of the current state of information management within an organization, but also provides insight into how this management can be improved. The information audit is a critical step in the development of a successful knowledge and/or information management program.

It should be noted that there is no universally accepted methodology for the information audit. Rather, knowledge workers must be flexible in order to compensate for widely different organizational structures, mandates, and information needs. A successful audit, however, should include a number of components that ensure a holistic and comprehensive view of the information environment. Henczel (2000) has described these components as (1) Planning; (2) Data Collection; (3) Data Analysis; (4) Data Evaluation; (5) Communicating Recommendations; and (6) Implementing Recommendations. Auditors must first become familiar with the environment that they are assessing, collect and review data, and then evaluate their findings to expose gaps or over-provisions of information. Once they have
completed their audit, recommendations must be communicated back to the organization and the auditor can help implement any changes. Henczel (2000) has also noted that the information audit is not a stand-alone task, and that it is best performed in conjunction with additional information management activities, e.g. records management and knowledge-mapping, to improve consistency in practices. The information audit should also be performed on a regular basis to ensure that any information program is continuously reviewed and tweaked if necessary.

**Methodology**

Buffy: “It’s all a part of the glamorous world of vampire slayage.”

(*BtVS*, “Out of Mind, Out of Sight”)

The information audit of *BtVS* was limited to the first season of the television series, consisting of twelve one-hour episodes that originally aired from March 10 to June 2, 1997. These episodes effectively represent the use of information throughout the entire series; however, because these episodes took place in the initial season of the show, they also introduced information sources that are referred to at later points in the series. As a result, this is a good point within the whole series to perform a survey of both textual and digital resources. Information received by informants was also analyzed; informants are defined as characters who provide information to the Scooby Gang within the context of the Sunnydale High library but do not engage in research.

Preliminary observations of *BtVS* suggest that information is primarily sought by Buffy, who enlists support from Xander and Willow (and occasionally from Cordelia, although this character does not become a consistent ally until Season Two). In a typical scenario, Buffy becomes aware of a demon, vampire or other evil that is threatening the community, and contacts Xander and Willow for assistance. The three characters visit the library, where Giles provides them with access to a wide range of information resources. Together, they engage in research to determine the best way to handle the threat and, once Buffy is endowed with this knowledge, she returns to the field to slay the demon. In many cases, the information retrieved from the library is also complemented by information received by an informant with particular domain knowledge. In the first season of the show, Angel usually performed this task. The typical scenario is represented in Figure 1 (See Appendix A) as a model of information flow.

For this information audit, observation was the primary method for data collection. Each episode was reviewed in DVD format and compared with the original shooting script, published in two volumes by Simon Pulse (2002; 2003). The script helped to confirm accurate spelling of book titles and other unique language used in the show. A normalized set of questions, included with this paper as Appendix B, served as a structure for collecting field notes for each episode. Notes included information such as episode title, original air date, writer(s), director(s), a summary of the plot, a summary of
the information experience, references to textual sources, references to digital sources, and informant information. A brief sketch of the information problem and the resources used to solve this problem were also included in the data collection process.

Findings

Fritz: “The printed page is obsolete. Information isn’t bound up anymore. It’s an entity. The only reality is virtual. If you’re not jacked in, you’re not alive.”

Jenny: “Thank you, Fritz, for making us all sound like crazy people. Fritz comes on a little strong, but he does have a point. You know, for the last two years more e-mail was sent than regular mail.”

Giles: “Oh...”

Jenny: “More digitized information went across phone lines than conversation.”

Giles: “That is a fact that I regard with genuine horror.”

(BtVS, “I, Robot...You, Jane”)

Information Needs

Information is the currency of the Watcher—Slayer relationship and the system of slaying. In each episode observed, Buffy is responsible for diffusing a particular threat to the Sunnydale community and, in almost every case, she enlists Giles to help her acquire the knowledge necessary to achieve this task. Acting as research assistants, Willow and Xander also support Buffy in her preparations for her Slayer duties. In “Teacher’s Pet”, for example, Buffy discovers that one of her teachers is a “she-mantis”, a giant insect disguised in a humanoid body who preys on young men (BtVS, “Teacher’s Pet”). Before Buffy can rid Sunnydale of this monster, she must first determine how the creature behaves and investigate its weaknesses. While Buffy heads into the stacks to look for books on insect behavior, Willow hacks into the school records to determine the address of the “she-mantis” teacher. Meanwhile, Giles reviews a local newspaper that contains an article about a missing high school student. The three later convene at a table in the library to discuss their findings. Once Buffy has acquired this information, she is able to track the monster to its hiding place and adopt an appropriate tactical approach. It should be stressed that this type of information-seeking behavior confirmed preliminary observations of the series and supported the model described above as Figure 1.

Information Resources

The primary repository of information in BtVS is, according to DeCandido (1999), the “vast number of volumes on vampire and demon lore, the occult, witchcraft, spellcasting, and other rarities” belonging to Rupert Giles (p. 44). In “Welcome to the Hellmouth”, Willow informs Buffy that Mr. Giles, the new librarian, has just arrived in Sunnydale from the British National Museum. She goes on to explain that he brought with him to the United States an extraordinary collection of ancient texts; she is very excited to read them. As the episodes of Season One unfold, Giles reveals that he owns a complete collection of Watchers’ journals, demonology texts that describe characteristics of known demons, and various chronicles that
recount encounters with vampires, demons and other evils throughout the world and across temporal dimensions. In addition, Giles refers to a number of written prophecies, both in bound volumes and on scrolls, which provide information about expected events, such as Buffy’s death at the hands of the Master, and the impending apocalypse (*BtVS*, “Prophecy Girl”). This collection of textual resources forms the core of the information resources accessed by Giles and the gang. *BtVS* characters make reference to the following textual sources, although observations of Giles in the library stacks would suggest that there are plenty more books available for research:

- **Vampyr** (shown in “Welcome to the Hellmouth”)
- **Witches: Historic Roots to Modern Practice** (mentioned in “Witch”)
- **The Pagan Rites** (mentioned in “Witch”)
- **The Book of Aurelius** (mentioned in “Never Kill a Boy on the First Date”)
- Sherman Jeffries’ work on cults (mentioned in “The Pack”)
- The Watchers’ diaries (mentioned in “Angel”)
- **The Pergamum Codex**. This book believed to be lost in the 15th Century, but Angel brings Giles a copy (mentioned in “Out of Sight, Out of Mind”)
- **The Tiberius Manifesto** - This book, like *The Pergamum Codex*, was lost in the 15th Century (mentioned in “Out of Sight, Out of Mind”)
- **Legends of Vishnu** (mentioned in "Out of Sight, Out of Mind")
- **The Black Chronicles** (mentioned in "Prophecy Girl")

Digital resources are also accessed and interpreted by Willow and Ms. Jenny Calendar in their quest for information. In most cases, the information that is sought online is current; Willow, for example, uses a computer terminal in the library to hack into the city planning records to obtain a map of the underground electrical tunnels in an effort to track the movement of vampires during sunlit hours (*BtVS*, “The Harvest”). In another episode, Willow performs an illegal search through electronic student records to find information about a student who is believed to be practicing witchcraft (*BtVS*, “The Witch”). Nevertheless, digital resources are accessed rarely and only if the type of information sought cannot be found in the ancient texts comprising Giles’ collection. Perhaps this is because the Internet is perceived as useful only insofar as it produces data, but not the rich information preserved in textual sources.

It should be noted that while Giles benefits from the technological skills of Willow and Ms. Jenny Calendar, he approaches computer technology with much trepidation. In fact, his refusal to use the computer for research causes much tension in the research space and reinforces a stereotypical digital divide between the wise older Giles, ‘properly’ educated in the British school system, and the bright young Willow, raised on hypertext and instantaneous information retrieval. This stereotype is so evident that it becomes the central theme in the eighth episode of the season, entitled “I, Robot... You, Jane”, in which Willow digitizes an ancient text and unwittingly releases a powerful demon known as Moloch the Corruptor. This situation feeds into Giles’ anxiety over what he calls the “dread machine” (*BtVS*, “The Harvest”).
It is possible to speculate about other reasons why textual resources are preferred over digital resources. As a televisual universe, *BtVS* places much value on the role of the library as a central meeting place for the characters. As Estill (2006) has argued, the library is “easily the most sustained, complex, and intriguing place in Sunnydale High” (p. 236). It is also a neutral space where characters of any generation or circumstance can interact without causing alarm. Estill goes on the explain that the

…organization of the Sunnydale library privileged community, common goals, and a quest for unconventional knowledges are only attainable through collective and physical searches. No Internet threshold, no Web gateway, no magnificent holdings could replace the act of convening at the table piled high with books (p. 248).

Additionally, because the first season of the series takes place in 1997, and before the rise of Google, the average student in the *BtVS* universe would likely never use a computer for any reason other than typing up assignments. With Web 2.0 technologies and the widespread proliferation of Internet products several years away, the personal computer was still a relatively new phenomenon that many assumed was only of interest to technophiles and computer scientists. As the ‘old fogy’ librarian who places such high value on paper documents, Giles does not fit into either of these categories. Thus, considering the relative newness of the Internet, the aesthetic qualities of the library as a setting for research, and generational differences among characters, it is clear that books and other textual documents are preferred over digital resources.

Outside informants who provide key domain knowledge to Buffy and the gang also serve as a tertiary information resource. In the first season, the mysterious, cursed vampire, Angel, often warns Buffy and/or Giles of potential threats. In “Teacher’s Pet”, Angel approaches Buffy in the Bronze, a student hangout, and warns her that the Master’s power is increasing. Likewise, in “Prophecy Girl”, Angel finds Giles in the Sunnydale High library and gives him a copy of the *Pergamum Codex*, a book that Giles believed to have been lost during the 15th Century. At the same time, Angel also confirms that the prophecies contained in the codex reveal that Buffy will face the Master and die. Similarly, Ms. Jenny Calendar provides some domain knowledge to Giles and the gang. Known as a “technopagan”, Ms. Calendar’s job as science teacher is also a cover for her secret duty to avenge the death of an ancestor at the hands of Angel when he was a cruel and murderous vampire (*BtVS*, “Angel”). Consequently, Ms. Calendar is able to provide information that exposes the rather grim history of Angel, as well as help Willow navigate the Internet. Unlike Angel, Ms. Calendar’s work is done primarily within the confines of the library; Angel attends the library only once, preferring to engage with Buffy at night and outside of any formal institution.

**Information Gaps**
Observations would suggest that the characters in *BtVS* do not suffer from either a dearth or an over-provision of information; rather, Giles and the gang are often crippled by poor information retrieval protocols. That is, necessary information is predictably discovered in the library’s texts, but only in a haphazard manner. Willow and Xander spend countless hours reviewing texts rather indiscriminately, flipping through one volume after another looking at illustrations for guidance. Without Giles and his expertise to guide their research, the two might never navigate through the stacks. Observations also suggest that retrieval problems are likely perpetuated because most textual resources comprise a personal collection, and are neither catalogued in a standardized manner nor indexed in a way that would promote their use without prior knowledge of their content.

There are attempts to preserve Giles’ vast textual collection through digitization, but these efforts are limited. In “I, Robot… You, Jane”, Ms. Calendar teaches a computer class in the library—both Willow and Xander are in this class. After the bell rings, Willow tells Xander that she is going to stay in the library to finish up her scanning project. It is implied that Willow endeavours to digitize Giles’ personal collection, but it is unclear how this repository will be maintained or used. As discussed above, Willow ends up releasing a powerful demon by scanning a magical book that contains it, and henceforth the digitization project is ostensibly abandoned.

**Recommendations & Final Thoughts**

The traditional information audit assumes that the auditor has first-hand access to the information space and can administer questionnaires to information seekers, interview knowledge workers, and perform a physical scan of information resources. Because *BtVS* is a televisual environment and access to the information space is limited to observations, it was difficult to comprehensively evaluate information needs and resources. Furthermore, observation was restricted to scenes set in the Sunnydale High library; however, dialogue among characters would suggest that a considerable amount of information gathering is performed off-screen. Despite these challenges, the audit did expose several distinct truths: (1) The vast majority of information gathering work is performed within the library environment; (2) textual resources are preferred over digital resources; (3) informants provide useful domain knowledge, but their participation in the research process is unpredictable; (4) digital resources are used primarily to obtain current factual information such as addresses or maps; and (5) information retrieval is the predominant challenge for Giles and the gang. The findings of the audit also suggest that information retrieval could be improved if Giles’ collection of ancient and rare texts were catalogued and/or indexed to facilitate quick access by Giles and the other main characters. Giles might also benefit from some training in the use of digital resources to help ease his anxiety over the
increasing proliferation of computer technology.
What is most evident in the findings is the observation that Giles and his team of researchers consistently find the information they need to help Buffy perform her duty as Slayer. Even in the last episode of the season, “Prophecy Girl,” Buffy goes into battle knowing that she will die. Luckily, she also approaches her pre-destined death with sufficient chutzpah to return from the dead to defeat the Master.
Appendix A: Figure 1

Figure 1: The Flow of Information in Buffy the Vampire Slayer
## Appendix B: Template for Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Episode #</th>
<th>Episode Title</th>
<th>Air Date</th>
<th>Writer(s)</th>
<th>Director</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

| Summarize the main plot of the episode. |
| Provide a summary of the information experience or information problem in the episode. |
| Describe any relevant dialogue between characters. |
| Where there any specific references to textual resources? If so, describe these sources. |
| Were there any references to digital resources? If so, describe these sources. |
| Did an outside informant aid Buffy and the gang with their information needs? If so, describe this interaction and the information conveyed. |
References


