

## THE FUTURES OF THE LIBRARY AND LIBRARIAN<sup>i</sup>

From “the keeper of the collection” to “the innovator in the gardens”

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### GLORIFIED TYPISTS

Libraries, globally, are not in an advantageous space. The medium age for the credentialed American librarian continues to creep up (41% of librarians were in their 50s in 2005).<sup>ii</sup> The information explosion while leading to the cybrary or e-library foundationally challenges the age old tradition of “the collection” and thus who should organize and collect information. The futures of the library to many is bleak.<sup>iii</sup> Indeed, the premiere of one Australian state allegedly commented that librarians were glorified typists, one step below sanitation workers in worth to the state’s economy.<sup>iv</sup> They were clearly, in his mind, a cost, and not an investment to the exploding global knowledge economy. And – here is the stinger – their budgets would continue to decrease and by 2020 or so, the state government would cease to fund them.<sup>v</sup>

Shocked by this conversation, the State librarian immediately began to articulate a strategy forward to transform the library system. The analysis and scenarios below are based on workshops held with citizens, stakeholders, and librarians from this state, and many other regions around the world.

Foresight in library is not new. For example, an earlier workshop at the city level explored four different futures of the library.<sup>vi</sup> These were the (1) the lean, mean, information machine focused on market needs even at the risk of becoming the Mclibrary, (2) Return to community, to civilizing citizens - a place of meeting as opposed to an information distribution centre, (3) the center for knowledge expansion with librarians becoming highly skilled knowledge navigators and (4) the Offshore call center, essentially the death of the library, swallowed up and outsourced by the market of global digital content suppliers. What was clear was that the library as currently constituted would not continue.

### CONTEXT

The historical context of these scenarios and foresight projects is:

the library, while appearing to be stable has changed throughout history. It has moved from being elite based, for the few that could read, to being a public space, and funded by the public as well, instead of by wealthy benefactors. And while the advent of the printing press changed the nature of the library, moving it from the monastery and the painstaking efforts of monk scribes, the recent digitalization of the world is leading to even more dramatic transformations.

The current issue was that the library had now, as evidenced by the remark of the Australian premiere:

... entered a contested domain – its definition, its bundle of services are up for grabs – who defines it, who pays for it, what are its basic purposes? And with the onset of edu-tainment and as the peer-to-peer knowledge revolution, might libraries become places not just for receiving knowledge but for directly creating knowledge.

The strategy sessions developed by the State's chief librarian utilized the creativity of Board members, librarians and various stakeholders (citizens groups, community boards, corporations and others) to articulate alternative futures of the library. This was done so that they would not enter the future with the traditional mindset of the used future in which experts keep on doing what they have always done even it no longer meets the changing external reality or their vision. As well, the leadership team was clear that while scenarios were part of the solution, more importantly was to find a new narrative that could shape the cultural changes required to invent the new library.

These futures sessions were done in conjunction with innovation already underway in the library – changes in room design (greener, informal), co-location (in shopping centers, as part of city redesign) and experimentation with 3D printers, for example. The foresight aspect of the change, while integral, was not a one pony horse race; rather, the intent was to disrupt the organization so that a range of new visions could emerge and populate the emerging evolutionary landscape. Part of the success of this process was that other localities also followed suit. Of course, they too faced, and continue to do so, similar budgetary issues and

challenges from citizens, including a drop in books loaned and tensions with publishers on the sharing and costing of e-books.

The process that led to the new narratives and scenarios was a modified six pillars<sup>vii</sup> foresight process which consists of: (1) Mapping the future searching for the critical pushes, the emerging images of the future and the historical weights; (2) Anticipating the future, searching for emerging issues that challenge the current map of the future; (3) Timing the future, a search for macrohistorical patterns, from the Khaldunian decline to Sorokin's pendulum; (4). Deepening the future, an analysis of core metaphors and myths of current and future libraries using causal layered analysis; (5) Creating alternatives through scenario planning, and (6) Transforming the future through visioning and backcasting.

Two parts are crucial. First the anguish the librarians spoke of, the personal challenges they faced, and second, the alternative futures. What stood out most in the working sessions was both a desire to change, to meet the changing needs of citizens, not just the information explosion but the desire to co-create, to make the library a more active space of creation as opposed to a passive, museum receptacle of books.

A dominant story was that librarians felt "caught between two worlds" - the world of the collection and the emergent globalized, privatized, customer-led world with the challenge of shrinking budgets. This was not a denial or aversion to the world knowledge economy but a reality of the pain they inhabited.

But this was not the only story. Some commented that the library was like a butterfly, in the midst of transformation. For them, this meant excitement and exploration. Others felt that the metaphor of the butterfly was too rigid. More apt given that librarians were in the midst of this dramatic shift - with the end state not clear - was that libraries were a puzzle where the parts are not set but keep on being created, appearing, with no final solution to the "fit" in sight. A librarian, a science fiction enthusiast, saw their story as the builders of holo-decks as in the *Star Trek* television series. They create the informational and knowledge rules allowing citizens to experience other worlds. The library was thus still structured with clear roles for the librarian but within that space citizens could explore and live in "amazing new places." Furthering this, one librarian saw the future library as the relationship between atom and electron, a sharing of energies. For them, this meant moving from the expert model of classification and curation to the co-sharing, co-creating, indeed, to a co-curation model of knowledge.<sup>viii</sup> Each of these metaphors pushed the boundaries further. But

perhaps the metaphor that was most convincing, that had the greatest traction, was that of the innovator in the gardens. In this story, the librarian is the experimenter, willingness to take conceptual risks, to play and rethink information and knowledge.

Certainly, this story telling while imaginative was based on a reality of angst. Watching market pressures challenge what they believed was a public good, an ethical right, was demeaning and depressing. There were clearly librarians in these many workshops and many levels of governments who would have preferred the stable world of organizing books and keeping the grand tradition of what is good, true and beautiful continuing. But the external world, they knew, would not allow the past as currently constituted to continue. New futures were required. New stories linked to systemic changes and a shift in worldview were necessary.

To begin to see the power of foresight in creating a new future, they conducted a causal layered analysis (cla)<sup>ix</sup> of the old and new story. In the alternative future, measures of books loaned became people entering the space of the library (physical and virtual). Systemic changes included moving from books to new technologies and ensuring that libraries were redesigned to take full advantage of them. The worldview shift was that from expert to co-creation. And finally the story change was from the “keeper of the collection” to the “innovator in the gardens.”

	Current	Emergent
Litany	Budget based on books loaned	Budget based on people traffic
Systemic	Books organized by categories controlled by librarians budgeted by governments	Workshops, 3d printing, braincaps, virtual programs, books and ebooks - redesigned library spaces
Worldview	Expert	Co-curation, co-creation
Myth/	Keeper of the collection	Innovator in the

Metaphor		gardens
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The cla provided a map forward: a new story, a new worldview, a new strategy and a new way to measure the future. But while the vision and strategy was powerful, this group – and other libraries where the futures process has been conducted – also desired to explore alternative futures, to mitigate risk and find alternative solutions.

Four scenarios have stood out over the past few years.

These are:

**The Digital dinosaur.** In this scenario the operating narrative is: “libraries quieter than ever.” Fewer citizens borrow books. The median age of the librarian keeps increasing. Budgets continued to be slashed as legislators believe that market mechanisms can better serve the needs of citizens. After all, are not Google and its successors better collectors and organizers of information. Publishers still do not allow a sharing of e-books between local, city and state libraries ensuring the final nail in the financial coffin. Niche spaces, however, continue, for example, in rural areas or poorer nations where broadband costs are still high and internet penetration low.

**The One Stop shop** that facilitates co-creation with the community. In this scenario, the operating narrative is: “the heart of the community.” Even while fewer citizens borrow books, more citizens physically visit libraries and e-visit cybraries. Libraries work with citizens to co-create. This happens in a number of areas: (1) Workshops for the ageing on financial planning or active ageing or retirement futures; (2) Safe spaces for teenagers, or places parents give permission to teenagers to spend after school; (3). 3D printers and other new technologies galore, such as smart interactive and wearable books or friendly robots. For example, the librarian in this future would work with a child to design a dinosaur or some other model. They would then 3d print the image. The child would go home with the drawing and the plastic dinosaur (and over time a smart dinosaur); (4) Other public issues that are relevant for workshops – public health, for example, even yoga, and (5) Moving the physical library into new city spaces, for example, using traditional phone booths as mini-libraries or airports as libraries.

Librarians in this future would need to give up some of their expertise moving from having the answer – where is this book – to navigating with other tech-savvy citizens to co-produce

new nominations of reality. They would still organize the library space, and indeed given the limited attention span of citizens, to lead and nurture continuous innovation. One Australian local library has already noticed the beginning of this future where visits now exceed books loaned. They have wisely tied their budgets to “people through the door.”

**The Amazing new place.** While the first two futures deal with immediate and the medium term future, this third future is longer term. Based on developments in brain science and virtual reality (promised for decades) librarians begin to imagine the library as a safe place to virtually go where no one has gone before.<sup>x</sup> In this future, librarians would – working with AI companies – create virtual educational spaces. These could be a re-enactment of major historical events or possible scenarios of the world in the future. While private companies will certainly lead in this area, libraries become places where such holodecks or individuals braincaps<sup>xi</sup> are “loaned” free to the public (or create a special for fee room). Librarians move from being knowledge navigators to experience/being creators and navigators.

At heart in the second and third scenarios is the notion of trust<sup>xii</sup>. Libraries retain the space of public good in a market-oriented world. Citizens need to believe that librarians will act in their best interest and not for profit. Legitimacy is foundational

To ensure funding, along with state funding (local, state, national and global levels), philanthropic organizations will be important. Generally, when the issue of a minimal fee has been raised, librarians are incredibly cautious, as this starts a slippery slope. There needs to be a space where information is truly free.

However, a fourth scenario emerged, that of the **library as a publisher**. This was not developed by various groups in the foresight process but by the State library’s own innovation team. For them, they sought to create new publishing platform where the library would radically change from collecting, organizing and storing books published by others to themselves becoming a publisher. While the obstacles to this future are many, there appears to be niche space between self-publishing and the cost challenges of being a major multinational publishing house. For libraries, with the trust and the library cards of millions of users, it may be possible to thrive in this new evolutionary niche. Citizens – not for the world famous writers – but younger up and coming authors could find their feet publishing with a local library, especially if it was a local topic. Citizens could then “like” the book or publicize it. As well, libraries could lead in the new arena of publishing smart interactive and wearable books.

Certainly these scenarios are not mutually exclusive. There will be many libraries and librarians who go the way of digital dinosaurs – the asteroids of the digital and brain revolutions and the waves of privatization lead to their extinction. And there may be places for retro-libraries – as with long playing records, a return to quality and social equity. The move to social connection and rethinking of the physical space of the library becomes a way to draw in the crowds: those looking for help in the e-world and those looking for safe places to connect on new arenas in the knowledge economy. The braincap virtual future is longer term and dependent on virtual technology actually working and software being developed that can create new knowledge spaces. The last scenario of libraries as publishers is likely a niche innovation. However, it could become a new source of income and connectivity that could well help libraries not just survive the immediate future but flourish in the long term.

And there are other scenarios. From the viewpoint of digital natives,<sup>xiii</sup> libraries become peer to peer "bit-torrent" networks, all books, ever, available on your mobile device.

## THE LIBRARIAN

What is clear for librarians is that they can be at the centre of a global knowledge revolution. However, to do so they will need to challenge their traditional story of the keeper of the collection. In any case, it is nearing its end – Google and bots can do those functions much better (though they still can't tell a story about it). The preferred new narrative of innovator of the gardens provides flexibility and purpose, and helps rewrite their future. It also provides an openness to explore alternative futures and not only avoid but find a home for the (ageing) digital dinosaur even as new worlds are created and navigated. Librarians, perhaps more than other professions, are at the heart of major technological and economic disruption. They can certainly lead the way and innovate, or they can watch their core values disappear and live out a dying used future.

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<sup>i</sup> An earlier version of this appeared as "Library futures: from knowledge keeper to creators," *The Futurist* (November-December 2014) 25-28.

<sup>ii</sup> Denise M Davis, "Planning for 2015: the recent history and future supply of librarians," American Library Association, June 2009, [http://www.ala.org/research/sites/ala.org/research/files/content/Librarystaffstats/recruitment/Librarians\\_supply\\_demog\\_analys.pdf](http://www.ala.org/research/sites/ala.org/research/files/content/Librarystaffstats/recruitment/Librarians_supply_demog_analys.pdf), accessed 18 June 2014.

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<sup>iii</sup> For a great analysis of the current crisis, see Steve Coffman, "So now what: the future of librarians," (January-February 2013), <http://www.infotoday.com/OnlineSearcher/Articles/Features/So-Now-What-The-Future-for-Librarians-86856.shtml>, accessed 18 June 2014.

<sup>iv</sup> Private conversation with senior manager of a State library.

<sup>v</sup> Of course, the premier is no longer an elected official and libraries still continue!

<sup>vi</sup> Sohail Inayatullah, "Which futures for the libraries?" *Foresight* (Vol. 9, No. 3, 2007), 54.

<sup>vii</sup> Sohail Inayatullah, "Six Pillars: futures thinking for transforming," *Foresight* (Vol. 10, No 1, 2008), 4–28.

<sup>viii</sup> For more on this model, see R. David Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2011.

<sup>ix</sup> For more on this, see: Sohail Inayatullah and Ivana Milojevic, eds., *CLA 2.0: Transformative Research in Theory and Practice*. Tamsui, Tamkang University, 2015.

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.psfk.com/2014/06/virtual-reality-filming-techniques.html#!0vyJL>, accessed 18 June 2014.

<sup>xi</sup> <http://gadgets.ndtv.com/science/news/new-brain-cap-technology-could-let-pilots-fly-planes-by-thought-532165>, accessed 18 June 2014.

<sup>xii</sup> For more on this, see Lee Rainie, "Seven questions librarians need to answer," <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/04/10/the-future-of-libraries/> (10 April 2014), accessed 18 June 2014.

<sup>xiii</sup> Mark Prensky has coined this term. See: [www.marcprensky.com](http://www.marcprensky.com). Accessed 12 April 2015.

