Which future for libraries?

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Abstract

Purpose – *Innovation in information and communication technologies, combined with change in social and cultural attitudes, is raising questions about the future for libraries and librarians. This article seeks to examine alternative futures that were developed at a workshop organized by Brisbane City Council in June 2006.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Through the discussion of provocative discussion points, four possible futures emerged – ''the lean, information machine'', ''co-location for community capacity building'', ''knowledge navigator'', and ''dinosaurs of the digital knowledge era''.*

Findings – *The library is undergoing a foundational shift in services, design and purpose. To survive and thrive in the future libraries will have to adapt to these changing conditions.*

Originality/value – *The article identifies some key strategic questions for libraries, particularly those provided by municipal authorities. These strategic questions remain unanswered but this article contributes to the debate.*

Keywords *Libraries, Librarianship, Digital libraries, Communication technologies*

Paper type *Case study*

Will libraries becoming increasingly virtual, the librarian becoming a knowledge navigator? Or will libraries disappear as the world goes wifi – will Google become the future library? Or will place remain central, as libraries become anchor tenants in co-located in commercial and public transit-orientated developments? Or is social justice what libraries are really about – a place for empowering, for creating a better society, finding spaces for young and old, for books and digital media?

Any one of these futures, and other futures, are possible. 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 has 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.

At the most foundational level, the library has 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.

These questions and futures were explored recently at a meeting on the futures of public libraries sponsored by Brisbane City Council. Representatives included directors of the Brisbane City Council library, head of facilities, social planners as well as representatives of the community, for example, publishers, website designers, architects, futurists, directors of policy think tanks and academics[1].

Using methods and tools from the emerging field of Futures Studies, participants articulated issues likely to dramatically impact the library and scenarios of the futures of the library[2].

Provocative discussion points

Some of the emerging issues included:

- Local and state governments dramatically decreasing their funds for libraries – other financial models – user pays, McLibrary.
- Continued development of skill sets and training for librarians, focusing on community engagement, content creation and use of emerging technologies.
- Libraries become places for incubating community innovation, co-creation and engagement in culture and knowledge.
- Users changing from the young to the aged OR from the aged to the young.
- Libraries buildings as examples of ''green'' and even developing cradle to grave green technologies for books and for facilities design.
- The library as a place for escape from a chaotic world, e.g. the slow movement: slow time, slow learning – slow everything – as the world quickens and moves to hyper-time and culture, libraries find niches by providing places of quietness and calm.
- The librarian becoming a digital avatar, interacting with users, learning about their changing needs, and even in the longer term, organizing our memories.
- The off-shore call center library.
- Death of the book – continuing emergence of new media formats.
- The disappearance of local government.

The impact of these emerging issues point to libraries changing dramatically from today – particularly in the areas of funding and location; purpose and skill sets for librarians and core activities.

But would libraries be more digital or slow; for the young or the aged; in suburbs or co-located in denser cities? Which future?

Scenarios were the tools used at this meeting to manage the complexities and the alternative futures.

Scenarios of the future

Four futures emerged.

The first was ''lean, mean, information machine.'' This future would arise from concern about the costs of buildings, space becoming too valuable and libraries moving down the list of core priorities for funding.

Libraries in this future would need to seek funding through philanthropy to supplement government funding. The choices would be: from the user, from community groups, from Federal and Global grants and from corporate sponsorship. With the expected rise in triple bottom line reporting, it was anticipated that corporate sponsorship may become more attractive as libraries would be an easy and safe way to show that they were good corporate citizens – helping young and old.

The role of some librarians would shift, becoming entrepreneurial, a broker of services and entities (community groups, corporations, city, state and federal authorities).

Library employees would drop dramatically as much of what needed to be done could be managed by AI systems. Humans would still be needed but not in large numbers.

Customer satisfaction would be their priority. Librarians would take a commercial market orientated approach to better meet their changing needs. If libraries are valued they will remain.

While there would be critics from the social justice camp, saying the library had sold out, it has become McLibrary. No more free lunches, or we pull our own weight. Indeed, libraries in this future would become increasingly innovative, as they would be competing with other knowledge and information providers. They would however not have the public's trust but corporate funding would ensure the best services. And while covers of books may have corporate logos and indeed some libraries would even have digital advertisements that change based on the users spending patterns, by and large the deeper mission of the library of creating a more civilized world does not change. At least not in 2026, by 2050, the invisible hands of the market may lead to different outcomes.

The second scenario was the opposite of this. Civilizing the world, civilizing ourselves is the foundational purpose of the library. No corporation should fund it, as over time market values would poison human values.

The purpose of the library is that of community builder – providing ideas to all, those who can and those who cannot afford. Books cannot be overlaid with digital sponsorship, purity must be kept.

However, the best way to serve as community builders is to go to the community. ''Co-location for community capacity building'' was the title of this scenario. Libraries move to areas of intersection – of young and old, poor and rich, information savvy and digitally challenged. Among possible areas could be transport hubs. Libraries could continue to develop as anchor tenants, co-existing with other government service providers, with coffee shops and commercial tenants. As passengers stepped out of light city rail carriages, they would enter the library. In front to them would be transparent glass, the lighting illuminating knowledge.

Libraries would have multiple shifting rooms, focused on the needs of different groups. Or libraries could segment, based on citizen travel patterns. Some libraries would be more classical – book focused, other edutainment, others as places for social community groups to meet . . . Or libraries could change during the day – shifting who they were from noon to three pm to evening time.

The librarian would need to be multi-skilled, understanding the diverse needs of different age groups, ethnicities, community groups – engagement with the community would be primary. The library in this future would model what it meant to be civilized: deep and diverse democracy!

In a third scenario, the library and the librarian becomes a ''knowledge navigator''. Users would see and then create – use information to create new knowledge, new communities, learn and recreate. Libraries would be a hybrid of physical and virtual space with cutting edge technologies, cultural maps of the world, to help users develop their interests, find connection to each other and find their place in the changing digital world. The library would be an ''experience''.

For those new to the digital world and for emerging technologies they would, it could train them, ensuring democratic and enabling access for all; for those adept, it would create games for them to learn, indeed, gaming may become a metaphor for the library. Users would find their knowledge treasures through clues left by the knowledge navigator or other users engaged in knowledge sharing and production – the division between the fun of electronic gaming and the seriousness of the library would breakdown. Public space would become an open and porous, local and global public space.

The last scenario, takes the knowledge navigator future but makes the tough observation – given the billions of dollars Google and other web engines have to play with, and given the skill sets of their employees and owners, what makes us think libraries can survive. Are they not the ''dinosaurs of the digital knowledge era''. The globalization of the coffee shop eats up one market; digital search portals eat up another market, until through continuous dis-aggregation there is very little left. The future of the library is easy to predict – there will not be any. Funding will move to other core areas for cities – traffic, water, dealing with global warming, competing for young people in an aging society; post-oil energy problems.

Libraries will slip down the priority radar as they will not be seen as a response to these issues. And when senior citizens threaten to vote out councilors who do not fund libraries, other providers come in and argue they can meet the needs of the superannuation rich (and even poor) in far more effective, efficient, cheaper ways.

Many librarians as well are unable to meet the challenge of the skills shift. They are unable to be relevant with the new world disorder. Customer satisfaction, emotional intelligence, cultural ways of knowing are all wonderful ideas, but not valued by customers when everything is online. As the library monopoly dies, other competitors enter the fray and foundationally change the nature of the library. A few survive as some still want to see and touch books, but with the virtual book about to include physical senses, the writing is already on the virtual wall.

The library is dead! Long live the off-shore call center library!

Which future?

Will one future emerge triumphant? Or will there be a mix and match? What should cities do? Is the best strategy to focus on the similar parts of each scenario, i.e. innovate, explore changing customer needs, understand the user base is segmenting, rethink design? Or should they go down one scenario and hope it is the correct future? Or should a city segment by areas? In the city center should the focus be on co-location? In outlying areas, should we move toward the knowledge navigator? And in suburbs, would a mixture of the two be best? Should certain libraries be assigned as ''slow libraries''? Should brokering with the world digital players begin, working on creating new business models for the future library?

These and other strategic questions remain unanswered. What was clear is that the library is undergoing a foundational shift in services, design and purpose. Some see the library as a dinosaur; others believe that to survive and thrive, the library too must globalize and privatize; others believe that libraries create communities, they build shared futures and should be above market rationality – their purpose is to empower not to commodify; and still others believe that to enter the emerging digital world economy, libraries must challenge their own views of order and elitism and enter the messy world of knowledge co-creation.

For the librarian, this can be both a trying time to be working, or the best of all possible times, where new futures are emerging, and where she and he can weave the strands of alternatives and create a new future for and of libraries.

Notes

1. The workshop was facilitated by Inayatullah. Sandra Dean, Sharan Harvey and Michael Lockwood, all of Brisbane City Council, spearheaded this foresight project. Thanks to Sandra Dean and Sharan Harvey for editorial comments on earlier drafts. And thanks to all participants for their ideas.

2. For more on this, see www.metafuture.org and Sohail Inayatullah, ''Questioning the future: tools and methods for organizational and societal transformation.'' Tamsui, Tamkang University, 2005.

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