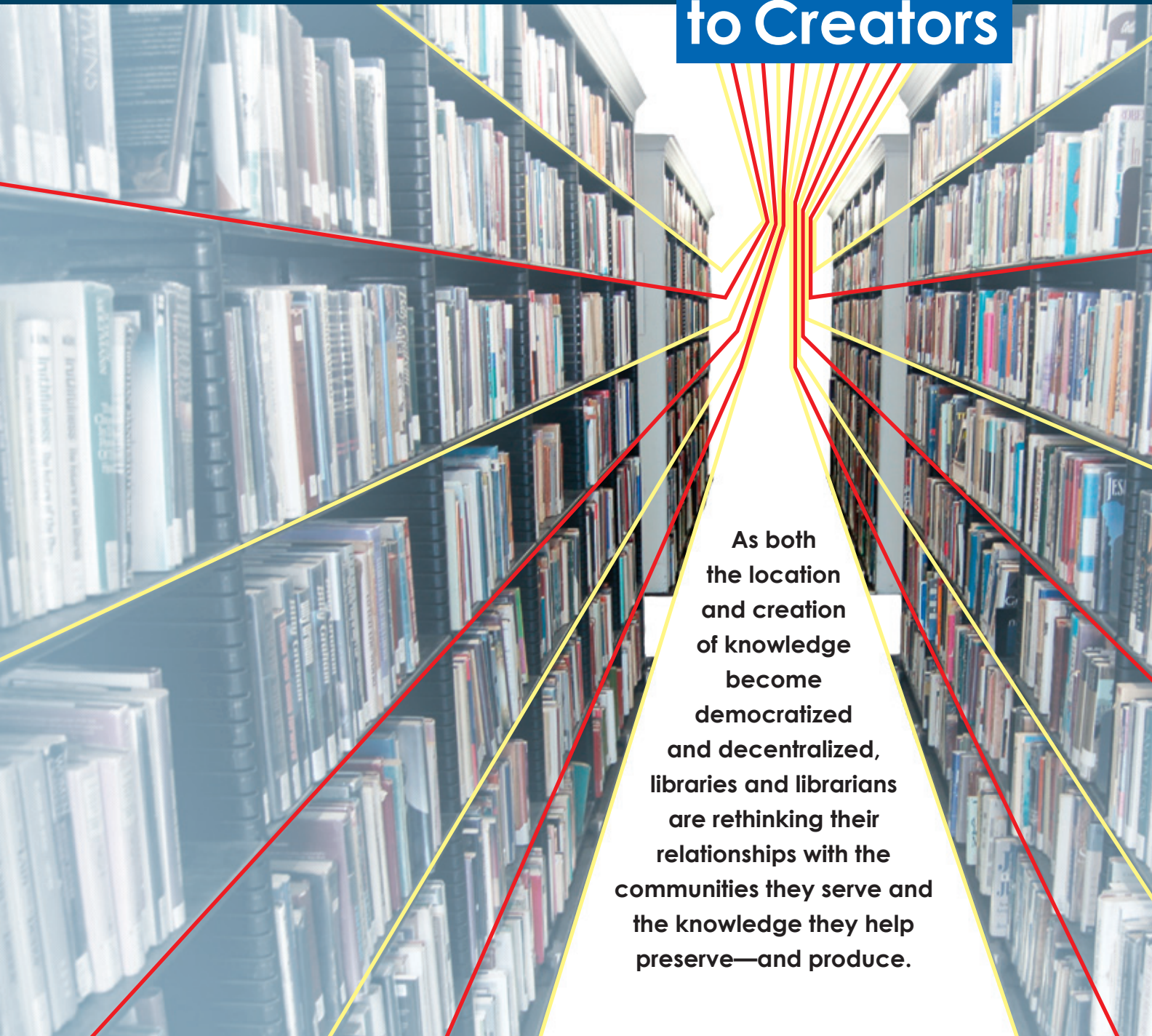


Library Futures:

From Knowledge Keepers

to Creators



As both the location and creation of knowledge become democratized and decentralized, libraries and librarians are rethinking their relationships with the communities they serve and the knowledge they help preserve—and produce.



By Sohail Inayatullah

The future of libraries appears bleak, from many perspectives: Demographically, credentialed librarians are aging; technologically, the information explosion has led to the *cybrary*, or e-library. The age-old tradition of the library as “the collection” is now being challenged, as is who should organize and collect that information.

In Australia, libraries are increasingly being perceived as costs rather than investments in the exploding global knowledge economy. Indeed, one political leader considers librarians merely glorified typists.

Under threat of possible defunding, one 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 Australian state, and many other regions around the world.

Foresight work for libraries is not new. For example, I previously led a workshop at the city level that explored four different futures of the library. These four scenarios were:

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 center.
3. The center for knowledge expansion, with librarians becoming highly skilled knowledge navigators.
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 from this exercise was that the library as currently constituted would not continue.

Library Futures in Historical Context

As stable as libraries seem, the institution of the library has changed

throughout history. The advent of the printing press moved book making and collecting from the monastery and out of the painstaking efforts of monk scribes. Libraries became largely private and were considered elitist, since they benefited only the few who could read; then libraries became a public space, funded by the public instead of by wealthy benefactors.

And now, the recent digitalization of the world is leading to even more dramatic transformations. Confronted with competition as knowledge bases, libraries must redefine themselves, their services, business models, and missions. In a world of edutainment and peer-to-peer information sharing, libraries could become not just warehouses of knowledge, but also laboratories for creating it.

For the recent strategy sessions in Australia, a wide variety of stakeholders—board members, librarians, citizens groups, community boards, corporations, and others—were all called on to articulate alternative futures of the library. This enabled everyone to break from the traditional mind-set of the future as business as usual, where experts keep on doing what they have always done, even if it no longer meets the changing external reality or their vision.

The library leadership team was clear that, while scenarios were part of the solution, it was more important to find a new narrative that could shape the cultural changes required to invent the new library.

These futures sessions were conducted in the context of innovations and transformations already under way in the library, such as changes in room design (greener, more informal), co-location (e.g., in shopping centers, as part of city redesign), and experimentation with 3-D printers.

The goal of the sessions was to disrupt the organization so that a range of new visions could emerge for consideration. Part of the success of this process was that other localities also followed suit. Of course, they, too,

faced similar and continuing budget issues and challenges from citizens, including a drop in numbers of books loaned and tensions with publishers on the sharing and pricing of e-books.

Creating Narratives and Scenarios

The process that led to the new narratives and scenarios was a modified “six pillars” 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.
4. Deepening the future—analyzing core metaphors and myths of current and future libraries, using Causal Layered Analysis.
5. Creating alternatives through scenario planning.
6. Transforming the future through visioning and backcasting.

Two parts of this process are crucial: the expression of anguish and personal challenges that the librarians faced and the exploration of alternative futures. What stood out most in the working sessions was the desire to change in order to meet the changing needs of citizens. The future was not just about adapting to the information explosion, but about the desire to co-create and to make the library a more active space of knowledge creation, as opposed to a passive, museumlike 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 challenged by shrinking budgets. This was not a denial of, or aversion to, the world knowledge economy, but an acknowledgement of the painful environment they inhabited.

But this was not the only story.

Some participants 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. A more apt metaphor—given that librarians were in the midst of this dramatic shift without a clear end state—was that libraries were a puzzle with parts that keep being created, with no final solution in sight.

One participant, a science-fiction aficionado, saw librarians’ role as the builders of holodecks, 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 idea, another participant saw the future library as the relationship between atom and electron, a sharing of energies. This meant moving from the expert model of classification and curation to the co-sharing, co-creating, and indeed co-curation model of knowledge. This is a model described by R. David Lankes in *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (MIT Press, 2011).

Each of these metaphors pushed the boundaries further. But perhaps the metaphor that was most convincing, and had the greatest traction, was that of the innovator in the gardens. In this story, the librarian is the experimenter, willing to take conceptual risks, to play, and to rethink in-

formation and knowledge.

While this storytelling was imaginative, it was based on a reality of angst. Watching market pressures challenge what these library professionals believed was a public good, an ethical right, was demeaning and depressing. Many of the librarians participating in these workshops and at many levels of governments clearly would have preferred the stable world of organizing books and continuing the grand tradition of what is good, true, and beautiful. But they knew the external world would not allow this past to continue. New futures were required. New stories linked to systemic changes and a shift in worldview were necessary.

Visioning New Futures for Libraries

To begin to see the power of foresight in creating a new future, the workshop participants conducted a Causal Layered Analysis of the old and new stories.

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 from expert to co-creation. And finally, the story changed from the “keeper of the collection” to the “innovator in the gardens.”

Causal Layered Analysis provided

Future Libraries: Causal Layered Analysis

	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, 3-D printing, braincaps, virtual programs, books, and e-books. Redesigned library spaces
Worldview	Expert	Co-curation, co-creation
Myth/Metaphor	Keeper of the collection	Innovator in the gardens

Where Ideas Breed: Libraries as Liquid Networks

Information no longer resides solely—and statically—in books. So libraries need to become “liquid networks” for ideas, says Thomas Frey, executive director of the DaVinci Institute and the Innovation editor of THE FUTURIST.

Frey proposed this new view of libraries at a recent “Future of Libraries” conference organized by the American Library Association at the Library of Congress. If our goal is to find a place to amass and organize all our ideas before they evaporate, new technologies have provided numerous alternatives to publishing books and shelving them in large buildings—podcasts, blogs, PowerPoint presentations, infographics, and an array of cyberhosts for sharing pieces of our minds.

“We literally have thousands of placeholders for our momentary flashes of brilliance,” says Frey.

“Much like planting seeds into the freshness of damp soil, these memes have the organic potential to spring to life bursting into a colorful bouquet.”

But what happens when other innovative idea depots displace our favorite social and intellectual networks? Do we really expect Wordpress and Blogger to last as long as the Library of Congress?

“The reality is that most public and private companies tend to have a rather short life expectancy, and some concepts come with a far longer gestation period,” Frey observes. “That’s where the more stable storehouses of information at public libraries come into play.”

The Library of Congress itself is aggressively capturing and archiving this massive flow of data surging through the world’s databases, servers, and clouds. That’s nearly half a billion tweets a day,

according to Frey. This is part of the Library’s goal to preserve first-person history, and suggests how the liquid network paradigm of libraries could take shape in the future.

“Every social network, discussion forum, or live webcast has become a cosmic breeding ground for liquid networks and how ideas often have sex with other ideas,” he says. In other words, ideas need a place to mingle, attract each other, and procreate.

Using iterative business models based on sharing ideas and inviting comments, feedback, and collaborations, libraries could thus transform themselves into an “environment for clustering great epiphanies.”

Source: “Liquid Networks: A Breeding Ground for Ideas” by Thomas Frey, Futurist Speaker blog (August 12, 2014), www.futuristspeaker.com.

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 were powerful, this group—and other libraries where the futures process has been conducted—also desired to explore alternative futures, to mitigate risk, and to find alternative solutions.

Four scenarios have stood out over the past few years of workshops I have conducted with library professionals. These are:

- **The Digital Dinosaur.** In this scenario, the operating narrative is “libraries are quieter than ever.” Fewer citizens borrow books. The median age of the librarian keeps increasing. Budgets continue 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?

In this scenario, publishers still do not allow the sharing of e-books among local, city, and state libraries, ensuring the final nail in the institutions’ financial coffin. Niche spaces continue, for example, in rural areas or poorer nations where broadband costs are still high and Internet penetration is 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 knowledge and information.

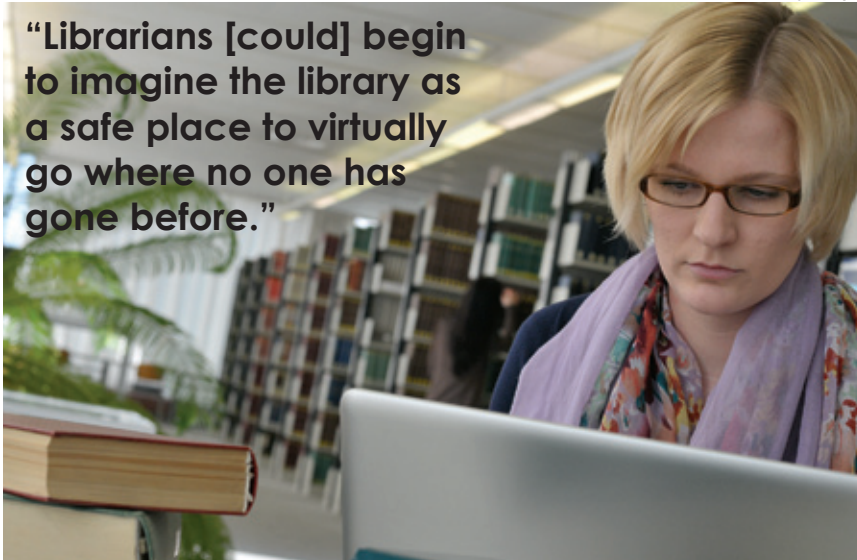
This type of co-creation and community happens in a number of areas, such as conducting workshops for the elderly on financial planning or retirement futures, or using 3-D

printers and other new technologies to create interactive and “wearable books” (devices such as those developed by MIT’s Media Lab enabling readers to feel the same sensations experienced by characters in the story). The physical library could even move into airports or other city spaces—for example, using traditional phone booths as mini-libraries.

Librarians in this future would need to give up some of their expertise; rather than being the ones with the answer (“where is this book?”), they will navigate with other tech-savvy citizens to envision and co-produce new potential realities. They would still organize the library space and nurture continuous innovation.

One Australian local library has already noticed the beginning of this future, where visits now exceed books loaned—wisely tying its bud-

“Librarians [could] begin to imagine the library as a safe place to virtually go where no one has gone before.”



get 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 long-promised developments in brain science and virtual reality, librarians begin to imagine the library as a safe place to virtually go where no one has gone before.

In this future, librarians would work with AI companies to create virtual educational spaces. These could include reenactments of major historical events or possible scenarios of the world in the future. While private companies will certainly lead in this area, libraries would become places where such holodecks or braincaps (direct brain-computer interfaces) are available to the public. Librarians move from being knowledge navigators to being experience creators and navigators.

At heart in these last two scenarios is the notion of trust, as Lee Rainie, director of Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project, has suggested. 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.

Philanthropic organizations will be as important to libraries in these scenarios as public support is to ensure stable funding. Generally, when the issue of charging a minimal fee

has been raised, librarians are incredibly cautious, as this starts a slippery slope toward widening knowledge gaps. There needs to be a space where information is truly free.

• **Library as Publisher.** This fourth scenario emerged not from the various groups participating in the foresight process, but from the state library’s own innovation team, which sought to create a new publishing platform. The library would radically change from collecting, organizing, and storing books published by others to becoming a publisher itself.

While the obstacles to this future are many, there appears to be an open niche between self-publishing and being a major multinational publishing house, with its cost challenges. Young, up-and-coming authors could get their start by publishing with a local library. Other 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.

Which Way for Libraries?

Certainly, these scenarios are not mutually exclusive. There will be many libraries and librarians who go the way of digital dinosaurs, as 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.

With the move to greater social connection, rethinking 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 in 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. (Work in this area includes the virtual reality experiences developed by Oculus Rift, for instance.) 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.

What is clear for librarians is that they can be at the center 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, that traditional story—library as archive, librarian as search engine—is nearing its end; networks of networks of computers and servers can do those functions much better, though they still can’t tell a story about it.

The expressed preferred narrative for future libraries—innovators in the gardens—provides flexibility and purpose, and helps librarians rewrite their future. □



About the Author

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