Libraries, Change, and the Future — A TTW Guest Post by Jonathan Pacheco Bell

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jonathanbell/9/
Change is supposed to be temporary. We know change as that transitional, unsettling state between more reassuring times. In our imagination, and as it plays out in life, change happens but then things stabilize. Or at least that’s how it used to be. As the foundational readings underscore, our present era — the hyperlinked, Web 2.0 era — is defined by the characteristic of change. This portends substantial shifts for public libraries.
We knew change was coming. As the below Google Ngram shows, we’ve been increasingly discussing “change” over the last 200 years (Fig. 1). We shouldn’t be surprised that change is now a constant state. Yet some libraries are fairing better than others in this tumultuous time. Recall that libraries are institutions mired in traditions; they’re slower to evolve because of it. Moreover, our public libraries operate under the added burden of entrenched municipal bureaucracy. Combine traditions and bureaucracy and we see why public libraries are less responsive to change. But evolve they must, lest they be outsourced or shuttered.

How should public libraries respond to change? The foundational readings provide direction. Spanning 20 years of thought, the readings outline for librarians a change-accepting mindset and practical approaches to utilize to thrive in this time of permanent change.

Michael Buckland’s 1992 ebook Redesigning Library Services: A Manifesto lays out what’s needed for effective future public library service. Written during the beta days of online libraries, the manifesto calls out public library leaders for failing to plan for service in the coming digital age. “It seems that the relative stability of the past century is but a prologue to another period of radical change” (Buckland, 1992, Ch. 1). Change is a recurrent theme throughout Buckland’s piece. Libraries must deal with considerable change: technological change, the change from Paper to Automated to Electronic library, changes in user populations and cultures, and service delivery updates needed to respond to these changes. Digital resource delivery is championed as a way to keep public libraries relevant and effective in the 21st century.
Michael E. Casey and Laura C. Savastinuk examine the impact of social media on libraries in the 2007 book *Library 2.0: A Guide to Participatory Library Service*. They wrote this book on the cusp of the social web transformation. The iPhone was emerging as the dominant social web-enabling on-the-go device. Social media was transitioning from 1.0 Friendster and MySpace to 2.0 Facebook and Twitter. Blogs, social tagging, and what I call “sharing as default state” were becoming the new norm. Following Buckland, Casey and Savastinuk argue for evolving to digital services and Web 2.0 to ensure the library’s survival. Change is core to Casey and Savastinuk’s thesis. Change is part of their essential ingredients for library 2.0. Change is expected for incorporating 2.0 technologies. The authors provide a “framework for change” to secure buy-in, understanding, and implementation of library 2.0 services. Change is the modus operandi of library 2.0. As Casey and Savastinuk lay out, library 2.0 entails sharing, collaboration, participation, empowerment; it’s also attuned to the emotional needs of library users. Rooted in the social web, Library 2.0 reflects the zeitgeist of today.

Buckland told libraries to think digitally because the Information Age was coming. Casey and Savastinuk told libraries to think socially because the social Web 2.0 had arrived. Brian Mathew’s 2012 white paper *Think Like a Startup* naturally carries the conversation forward. In this era of exponential innovation — exemplified by tech startups — libraries and librarians must start operating entrepreneurially. In today’s environment, he says, “Change is going to be difficult, but the good news is that we know it’s necessary… In fact, this theme of change has become part of our landscape. Change is the new normal. Change is the only constant” (Mathews, 2012, p. 3). He follows with a 10-point manifesto explaining steps to become a change-ready, entrepreneurial library:

1. Be forward thinking to anticipate user needs and desired ends. Learning delivery is no longer the purview of brick-and-mortar buildings; be digital, be online
2. Hire innovators and encourage innovation in library culture
3. Think like a start-up: embrace change, make the library a platform, embed innovation in library culture
4. Learn to fail well: be daring enough to try and to learn from failure, listen to feedback, evolve, look for gaps to innovate
5. Employ a method: Build, Measure, Learn (start-up method) or Learn, Build, Measure (UX method)
6. Aim for 3 essential qualities: usability, feasibility, value
7. Deemphasize assessment which limits innovation
8. Develop a Strategic Culture instead of that boring strategic plan
9. Use a telescope for seeing up and over. Ditch the microscope peering narrowly downward
10. Implement, do it, make it happen!
Indeed, change is the MO for 21st century libraries. Stability is ephemeral. Disruption is normal. Librarians must embrace this paradigm shift. The foundational readings make it clear that: 1) Technology will continue to advance our world and the library mustn’t fall behind, 2) The social web is upon us and libraries must adapt to it; yet libraries must also look ahead for the next era, be it Web 3.0 or some as-yet-named experience, and 3) Library survival requires innovation, courage, future-thought, and follow through.

Of course this is effortless to proclaim in the abstract. In reality, it’s going to be challenging to carry out this new way of thinking for certain public libraries whose institutional cultures, internal protocols, and operational standards resist change. How can we convince reticent library administrators to embrace change, new technologies, and future-thinking? Below are a few of my ideas premised on a plausible deliverable of a public library today:

- **Grab their interest “modestly”** — Sounds oxymoronic but it works. Bureaucracies think new is scary and change is disruptive. A workaround is necessary. We can coax hesitant library administrators into supporting innovative projects, programs, and services if these offerings don’t appear all that scary or disruptive. We can show the benefits of technological change through a modest demonstration project, like a digital community history. Check out these examples from public libraries in East Los Angeles and New York City. Digital histories encompass traditional and innovative archival methods and they’re well supported by constituents.

- **Assure them it’s easy** — Technology, change, and the future can appear complex to hesitant administrators. And yet we know that today’s technology is easy enough for babies to learn. We must parlay that ease. We must demonstrate to decision makers that it’s not that difficult to pull off.

- **Build a team** — Managers like teams because they want staff working together to solve problems. Give them that. Enlist a group of people with a variety of skills. Don’t just focus on tech-savvy Millennials. Enlist people of all ages with project management, writing, coalition building, and people skills. A team effort sends the message that the project is widely embraced — and a team effort will help get it done.

- **Fund it** — Ease management’s knee-jerk and predictable budget concerns by seeking grants to fund the project. Grant funding is available from organizations like IMLS, ALA, and the CA State Library. Decision makers are especially supportive when some other agency is paying.

- **Get buy-in** — Management is always more willing to approve when the community supports the
project. Gaining assistance from allied agencies bolsters your chances. Thus we must conduct outreach and get buy-in from constituents. We should enlist other agencies whose specialized knowledge helps our efforts. It would be foolish for decision makers to disregard constituents’ will, especially when assistance from partners makes the project that much easier to accomplish.

- **Do it** — Whatever it is we envision, our ideas and passions must be turned into action and results. Our team must complete the demonstration project. We must implement it. The community deserves it, we deserve it, and our reticent managers who rolled the dice both expect and deserve it. We will deliver.

- **Market it** — We must be cheerleaders for our demonstration project. We must sustain interest which supports longevity. We must broadcast it throughout and beyond our target communities. In addition to analog ‘word of mouth’ mentions, we must take to the social web to share the project globally via tweets, likes, forwards, Facebook status updates, Instagram pics, Snapchat and Vine video clips, tags, hashtags, Tumblr blogs, and whatever new web outlets emerge on the horizon.

Change is unsettling. It’s nerve-wrecking to be out of your comfort zone. Yet it is those moments that yield learning and growth. Public libraries have limitless opportunities for future-focused development in this era of permanent change. Librarians must embrace change as a way of life.

References


Jonathan is a Los Angeles Urban Planner and MLIS student at SJSU’s School of Information. Jonathan’s professional interests include library design, libraries as public space, and the role of public libraries in urbanized communities of color. His work has been published in *UrbDeZine, Public Libraries, Public Library Quarterly*, and SJSU SOI’s *Student Research Journal*. He earned his M.A. in Urban Planning from UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs in 2005 and studied political science and archi-
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