Library Services in the Future

Traci L Keith

3/18/2012
Introduction

The pessimists in the library world, and outside it for that matter, will either in a gleeful or a mournful manner drone on about how the end of libraries is coming, that books as we know them will cease to be and the repositories for them, for to them that is all a library is, will disappear. On the opposite side of the scale are the optimists who will drone on just as extensively about how libraries and books will always be around and things will never change. Neither side is completely right, but neither are they completely wrong. The realistic view is somewhere in between the two with the evolution of books, libraries and librarians along with the evolution of patrons, the community and society as a whole. Libraries have always adjusted and made changes as the technologies and communities around them have changed and they must continue to do so today. The question is how will the service patrons require in the future differ from what they ask for today? And how will libraries need to change to allow for the required changes in service?

Literature Review

Robert S. Martin, in his article “Libraries and Librarians in the 21st Century: Fostering a Learning Society”, begins by stressing the importance of libraries in working with museums and archives to create a structure that provides access to resources that may be needed for all types of learning, a structure that crosses all agencies and works continuously through all learning environments. Martin believes that libraries exist to serve society, and as society changes so must libraries. Libraries must understand that “the nature of learning and the way learning
interacts with other aspects of our environment – is likely to result in an even more rapid change
[in the future]” (Martin, 2004). He states that there are three environments in which people
learn: schools, the workplace and within their home and community. As the technology of today
becomes more integrated into our lives these three areas are merging so that they overlap, unlike
in the past when there was a clear differentiation between the three. Libraries have to support
this overlap; they have to create an atmosphere which allows patrons to turn information
received in any of the three areas into knowledge that can be used. According to Martin it is
important to remember that whereas in the past the library was about the collection, today and
into the future it must be about the patrons and their needs. Therefore, it is up to libraries to
create a structure that gives access to resources which are needed for all types of learning and
that are able to cross all community agencies continuously through all learning environments
(Martin, 2004).

John Akeroyd begins his article on “The Future of Academic Libraries” with discussion
on how academic libraries are already changing, which can be seen in such things as journals
going from print based to electronic based. While he does not believe that the fundamental
purpose of libraries is changing, he acknowledges that with the number of people who are
entering the actual library going down, with usage “becoming more distributed and more screen
based” (Akeroyd, 2001), libraries have to make changes. Akeroyd recommends these changes
across the four aspects that make up a library: the collection, the space, the organization function
and the service function. The collection is going to have to continue the transition that has
already begun and become more electronically based. Akeroyd believes that with e-books
moving up as the preferred format for students, academic librarians are no longer going to be
able to make the assumption that physical books will be the center of the collection. He believes
that the traditional physical environment of the academic library, the actual space or building, will cease to be and be replaced by “multipurpose learning centers” (Akeroyd, 2001). The function of libraries will continue to be to organize and provide information, but he believes this will take place via the Web rather than within the traditional physical library environment. Libraries will need to create portals and provide resources which are user focused rather than collection focused. This leads directly into the service function, which will be an even more important aspect of future libraries than it is today. According to Akeroyd academic libraries of the future will need to have a complete understanding of their user needs and become fully service centered (Akeroyd, 2001).

In her article “Reference Futures: Outsourcing, the Web, or Knowledge Counseling” Jo Bell Whitlatch outlines what she sees as the best future for reference library services. She considers outsourcing and the use of Web-based programs for automated reference services to be the least desirable options. Both would remove the option for a face-to-face, one-on-one encounter which provides a better experience as well as a more accurate answer for the patron. Instead Whitlatch recommends knowledge counseling based on Total Quality Management (TQM) principles. Her belief is that TQM “has the potential to provide libraries with the information needed to ensure that users continue to value reference services” (Whitlatch, 2003). This will be done by making use of five principles of TQM. First is to put the customer first by changing reference services surveys to include what the cost is to patrons in both time and effort and whether they consider the cost to be reasonable. A second item to include in the new surveys will be information from both patrons and staff on “such factors as reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and service tangibles” (Whitlatch, 2003), which will go towards ensuring that the task is done right the first time. The third involves leveling out the
management structure so that those at the higher levels management will be in contact with the regular patron, and therefore more aware of their wants and needs. Forth is the concept that the library should set standards of service to be met and, once those standards are met, the library needs to reevaluate and raise the standards. These standards should continue to be elevated in this way to continue to improve the services provided. Lastly, an environment of mutual respect and teamwork needs to be cultivated. This can be started, according to Whitlatch, by remembering that a failure is often the fault of the process rather than the individual. In the past Whitlatch believed that libraries and TQM were not a suitable combination because libraries operated with the belief that they had a monopoly on references services. Due to access to information through the Internet this is no longer true, which means libraries need to realign their thinking. More money need to be spent by libraries training library staff in receiving feedback and in providing an effective system of feedback from patrons; degree programs need to include more marketing courses to teach new librarians the art of assessing the information needs and habits of patrons; and, the American Library Association needs to create models of assessment of library services that can be carried out at reasonable costs (Whitlatch, 2003).

In his editorial entitled “‘Distinctive Signifiers of Excellence’: Library Services and the Future of the Academic Library” in College and Research Libraries in January 2011 Scott Walter begins with questions on how research and academic libraries in the future will be judged when the way in which patrons access resources is changing, on how quality will be measured when in the past it was always based upon the size of their collections. These libraries have always taken pride in the uniqueness of their collections, but according to Walter in order maintain pace with the changes of our times they must consider that their collection may not be all that makes them unique. Each of them has services that go beyond their collection, services not provided by other
research or academic libraries. He stresses that understanding and marketing these special
services may in fact, in the future, be as important as, if not more important than, their
collections. University of Illinois is currently working on an initiative to work with librarians
and users to plan and initiate changes that explore what the word ‘excellence’ is coming to mean.
It is based on one main assumption, that:

“...in an era when everything we know about how content is created, acquired, accessed,
evaluated, disseminated, employed, and preserved for the future is in flux, the research
library must be distinguished by the scope and quality of its service programs...” (Walter,
2011).

According to Walter the way excellence is defined is changing. Uniqueness in service is what
will make academic and research libraries in the 21st century stand out, in much the same way
they stood out in the past based on their collections. While the collection still needs to be there,
the creation of a unique service program is not just about the collection. It requires considerable
time, effort and planning and should be recognized for it. He concludes by reminding us that we
need to ask what our users want with regard to services and endeavor to provide those services
and more (Walter, 2011).

“The American Public Library and its Fragile Future” written by Ron E. Scrogham starts
off by stressing how important it is for libraries to recognize in themselves the virtues that make
them unique and to market that uniqueness. The identity the library holds, and what makes it
unique, is very often tied to the identity of the community. Even as this is true, if the library is to
have a future it must meet patrons expectations, even as they change and evolve. Scrogham
continues by discussing how the public connects libraries and books, for recreational reading but
also for a variety of types of research. Due to this it will always be necessary to maintain print
materials of research materials. He maintains that while the Internet is the preferred source for ready reference, anything that goes deeper will need the library resources and a librarian for assistance in first making sense of the information they have found online and second in finding what they need out of the masses of information available. How much assistance they need will come down to what kind of information they are looking for. Despite the continued need, Scrogham states that libraries can learn customer service from bookstores, but must remember they are not in business like bookstores are. The library is not looking for a traditional profit but instead is socially profitable and needs to “...stop measuring its worth by counting circulation and reference transactions like sales” (Scrogham, 2006). Additionally libraries are known for giving access to all users regardless of the information they are looking for, with no discrimination on any basis. They also understand how patrons use the resources the library provides better than anyone else, something Scrogham believes those who design services for libraries forget. Making use of this resource, of the information librarians have regarding their community and collection, would make these designs much more effective (Scrogham, 2006).

Survey Results

The survey returned for this report was completed by the Virtual Services Librarian for the Montgomery Public Libraries. The Montgomery County Public Library system serves a population of approximately 971,000 people, made up of a mix of racial cultures with whites making up the majority at 58%, followed by 17% blacks, 17% Latino and 14% Asian. The breakdown of male to female is split fairly evenly with 52% women and 48% men. Twenty-four percent of the residents are over eighteen and 65% are over the age of sixty-five. Of those over
the age of eighteen 91% have a high school diploma or the equivalent and 57% have at least a bachelor’s degree ("Montgomery county quickfacts," 2012). The library consists of twenty-five branches spread throughout the county, two of which are currently closed for renovations. The mission of the library, as listed on their website is to “offer free and equal access to services and resources that connect the people of Montgomery County to ideas and information which sustain and enrich their lives” ("Mcpl: About us," 2011).

Currently the library makes use a variety of technologies, both internally and externally, to enhance the services they provide to their patrons. These include the library website, blogs, wikis, social networking, online image sharing, RSS feeds, social bookmarking, YouTube, LibGuides, LibAnswers, and QuestionPoint via Maryland AskUsNow. The respondent stated that the library would like to offer more interactive services but face barriers such as the budget, that has been cut severely over the last 3 ½ years, adequate staff and time constraints. Training is offered to any staff that interested in more information on emerging technologies. This training can come from attending conferences, from online training or from continuing college education courses.

The respondent stated that she, in her position as Virtual Librarian, has seen a trend where patrons are moving away from making use of lists of links to websites, such as those provided by the Internet Public Library, and toward more targeting searching. Following along with the ideas stated above by several different authors, she stated that she has gone with what patrons’ desire and is using targeting searching more often. She also stated that more patrons accessing their accounts from alternate locations, and that this, along with decreases in staff due to budget cuts, has resulted in an increase of online requirements and therefore services.
Montgomery County Libraries will continue to see changes happening to their website in the future, as it evolves to keep up with whatever technology will fit within the budget. This will begin with a soon to be released mobile application which will allow patrons to access from more devices and more places. The respondent feels that the use of computer workstations within the library will decrease as the use of mobile devices grows, and for that reason the number of workstations available will decrease over time. While the respondent stated that she does not see e-books overtaking and replacing print books in the near future she does foresee a future in which everything the library holds is in a digital format. At that time she questions if tax payers will continue to be willing to fund the library.

Changes such as the mobile application and regular updates to the types of services provided online show that the library is paying attention to what their patrons want and making an effort to adjust to it. While the consensus of most of the authors surveyed above was that print books will continue to be a major part of libraries for quite a long time, the survey respondent seems less sure and sees the far future without print books. This is one area which could go either way and only time will really tell which viewpoint was correct.

**Conclusion**

As libraries move into the future they are going to have to rethink their value, they are going to adjust to considering it based on what services they provide to their patrons rather than it being based on how many or what books exist in their collection. Libraries will have to structure their resources to meet what users want which may require a departure from what they do now. In the past and continuing today, the concentration has been on the collection, building
it and making it fit the patrons. While this is patron based, it still puts the collection first. Librarians will need to adjust their thinking to instead consider what the patrons want and providing that, building the collection from there. Whitlatch’s belief in the TQM model appears to be well founded; it is user/patron based and rests on asking them what they want and then providing that and more. Libraries of all kinds are going to need to work together and to work with museums and archives to bring information to users. As Martin said libraries (as well as museums and archives) are there to serve users, not just to collect items.

Libraries must become more than just physical spaces that provide materials to check out; they must provide Web access on library based workstations but also increasingly wirelessly and from a distance. As Akeroyd stated physical spaces must adjust to become multipurpose instead of purely collection based. Providing a space where patrons can access library databases and resources, while interacting with other patrons (if so desired) and with access to assistance from a librarian as needed, would be ideal.
References


Appendix

Public Library Services Survey

Thank you for agreeing to take this survey about the current state of public library services and about new technologies for library services. It should take you roughly 15-20 minutes to complete.

Completing this survey and turning it in signifies your understanding that the data will be used for research purposes and indicates your consent. Participation in this study is voluntary, and you may refuse to be in the study or stop at any time. You may skip questions you do not want to answer. Personal identification data, including name and email address, will not be collected and will not be included in any research reports or publications. Contact either the Institutional Review Board at Drexel University (ORCA@drexel.edu) or Dr. Denise Agosto (Denise.Agosto@ischool.drexel.edu) with any questions about this survey.

General Library Information

1. In what state (or country if outside of the U.S.) is your library located? (type in the box below)
   
   Maryland

2. Is your public library part of a consortium?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [X] No
   - [ ] Not sure

3. How many people reside in your service population?
   - [ ] Less than 1,000
   - [ ] 1,000-2,499
   - [ ] 2,500-4,999
   - [ ] 5,000-9,999
   - [ ] 10,000-24,999
   - [ ] 25,000-49,999
   - [ ] 50,000-99,999
   - [ ] 100,000-249,999
Technology Training & Needs

4. Does your library use any of the following technologies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Yes, internally for staff</th>
<th>Yes, externally for patrons</th>
<th>No, not at all</th>
<th>Not sure/don't know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library website</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog(s)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wiki(s)</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking (e.g. Facebook, MySpace)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online image sharing (e.g. Flickr)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSS feeds</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social bookmarking (e.g. Delicious, Furl)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LibraryThing</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify):</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LibGuides</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LibAnswers</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QuestionPoint via Maryland</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AskUsNow</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. What technologies do you feel are most critical to meeting your patrons’ needs online (including, but not limited to, those listed above)?

We should have implemented a discovery catalog with social features, such as Bibliocommons. Instead, we are going with a cheaper, less satisfactory alternative -- IMHO. We should be doing more with screen-capture instructional videos -- no time.

6. Are there barriers that prevent you from implementing new technologies in your library, such as insufficient staff time, limited funds, or a lack of professional development opportunities for staff?

Yes  ☒
No    ☐
Not sure ☐
Limited funds, limited staff, and limited time. Our county library system's budget has been cut severely over the past 3-1/2 years.

7. Does your library or library system offer professional development opportunities related to new and emerging technologies?
   - [x] Yes
   - [ ] No
   - [ ] Not sure

   If yes, please explain.
   System (and state) offered e-book training to all staff this FY.

8. Are there any other opportunities available to you for training related to new and emerging technologies?
   - [x] Yes
   - [ ] No
   - [ ] Not sure

   If yes, please explain.
   Online training; conference attendance; statewide training; community college continuing ed courses (for web design).

The Internet Public Library
The Internet Public Library (IPL), located online at www.ipl.org, is a free library service consisting of two main parts. “Ask a Question” is a free email reference service staffed by library school student volunteers and volunteer librarians. The IPL's online collections include exhibits and resources on special subjects and approximately 40,000 subject-organized, searchable Web links.

9. Have you ever used the IPL Collections (General, KidSpace, TeenSpace, etc.)?
   - [x] Yes
   - [ ] No
   - [ ] Not sure
10. If yes, how satisfied were you with the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least Satisfied</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Most Satisfied</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Depth of collection</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Coverage of collection</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Currency of collection</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Ease of use searching or browsing collection</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Quality of resources in collection</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Overall satisfaction</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. Have you ever posed a question to the Ask an IPL Librarian e-mail reference service?

☐ Yes
☒ No
☐ Not sure

12. If yes, how satisfied were you with the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least Satisfied</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Most Satisfied</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Timeliness of response</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Accuracy of response</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Depth of response</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Overall satisfaction</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☒</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

13. Keep in mind that the IPL wants to be a partner, not a competitor, to public libraries like yours. How could the IPL help you better serve your patrons?

I’m afraid that I find long lists of links not of much use anymore. On our own website, we have really pared down the places that we link to for subject information. People weren’t using the long lists. They’d rather do targeting searching, although who knows if they’re searching well. I would rather do targeted searching, and I feel competent at it.

**Librarians’ Internet Index**

The IPL has recently teamed with the Librarians’ Internet Index (LII), located online at [http://www.lii.org/](http://www.lii.org/), to provide jointly-managed services. LII includes links to more than 20,000 high-quality websites that have been selected and organized by librarians. It also provides a weekly newsletter with updates on newly-selected websites. The newsletter is available free of charge via email or RSS feed.

14. Have you ever used the LII collection?

☒ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not sure
15. If yes, how satisfied were you with the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Least Satisfied</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Most Satisfied</th>
<th>Not sure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a. Depth of collection
b. Coverage of collection
c. Currency of collection
d. Ease of use searching or browsing collection
e. Quality of resources in collection
f. Overall satisfaction

16. Have you ever subscribed to the LII “New This Week” newsletter, either via e-mail or RSS?

☑ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not sure

If yes, what are (or were) your primary reasons for subscribing?

I used to get it years ago--for current awareness. However, that was before everyone and his brother had a website. Now, the expectation is that everywhere does.

17. Do you have any suggestions for improving the LII, either for your use or for your patrons’ use? If so, please explain.

The Future of Public Libraries

18. Over the past few years, have online library services, such as chat reference and online renewals, affected the services that you provide within the library building? If so, how?

Yes, of course. People manage their accounts from home. They download e-books and audiobooks from home. Staffing in our buildings has also decreased considerably, due to budget cuts. In addition, specialization of staff has decreased--fewer programs are presented and everyone is expected to be able to do everything: Adult, Juvenile, Reference.
19. Has the recent increase in the kinds and amount of information that is available online affected your work over the past few years? If so, how?

Yes--see above.

20. How do you think your job is likely to change over the next five years?

I work on the library's website, remote reference services (email, chat), social networking, and troubleshooting access to electronic resources and downloading. I expect that everything will have to move to mobile accessibility. We are about to implement Boopsie and a new website design with a mobile template.

21. How do you think your library's collection is likely to change over the next five years?

Who knows where publishing will end up? Will library lending of e-books survive in the current model? I doubt it. I think the publishers are going to want a pay-per-use model of some kind, even if it's just a copyright-holders' fee of some sort.

22. How do you think your library's public services are likely to change over the next five years?

I think they’re planning Tech Labs in the new buildings. I think perhaps demand for public computer workstations will fall as everything goes mobile and voice recognition.

23. What do you see as the likely future trends for public library services?

I personally think the current model of public library service is going to undergo vast changes in the next 25-50 years. Will taxpayers continue to want to underwrite "libraries" that provide meeting rooms and storytimes but whose books are all digital?
Demographics

24. What are your areas of specialization? (Check all that apply.)
   - [x] Reference services (e.g., information assistance, readers’ advisory, etc.)
   - [ ] Technical services (e.g., cataloging, acquisitions, etc.)
   - [x] Systems, database or network management (e.g., website maintenance, IT support, etc.)
   - [ ] Library administration
   - [ ] Children’s or young adult services
   - [ ] Other (please specify):

25. How long have you been a librarian in a professional-level position?
   - [ ] Less than a year
   - [ ] 1-3 years
   - [ ] 4-9 years
   - [ ] 10-20 years
   - [x] More than 20 years

26. What is your highest educational degree?
   - [ ] Bachelor’s degree
   - [x] Master’s degree
   - [ ] Doctorate
   - [ ] Other (please specify):

27. Age:
   - [ ] 25 and under
   - [ ] 26-34
   - [ ] 35-44
   - [ ] 45-54
   - [x] 55-64
   - [ ] 65 and over

28. Are you:
   - [ ] Male
   - [x] Female