

Library 2020: Today's Leading Visionaries Describe Tomorrow's Library

By Joseph Janes. (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013). ISBN 978-0-8108-8714-5

Reflecting on the Future of Academic and Public Libraries

By Peter Hernon and Joseph R. Matthews. (Chicago, IL: ALA, 2013). ISBN 978-0-8389-1187-7
Reviewed by Michael Matthews

When librarians write about the future it is usually framed within the context of information technology, the creative destruction it spawns, and our ill-starred attempts to outpace its influence. Instead of thoughtful analyses of how technology can be used to improve daily human existence or at least mitigate the multiple disparities between the poor and the wealthy, we are presented with bleak scenarios portraying our own obsolescence as an inevitable result of market forces. Other professional literatures, including law, medicine, nursing, and education have extensive theoretical foundations that articulate a connection between day-to-day practices and philosophies of service. These professions are thus able to inscribe a boundary where the market's influence is resisted by an internalized code of professional ethics. Librarianship has yet to establish a robust critical reflexivity, and our futures (as described by our leading visionaries) reflect this tragic paucity. *Library 2020* and *Reflecting on the Future* are the latest iterations in a tradition of literature extending from the mid-1970s

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that valorizes information as a commodity, libraries as private enterprises, and librarians as members of a cognitive elite in the post-industrial society. In the pithy phrasing of John Buschman, these books require a “well-charged BS detector”, (Buschman 2012) one calibrated for detecting the hypocrisy implicit in any vision of the future where the market logic of capitalism banishes all social problems behind a veil of glittering technologies. Of the two books, *Library 2020: Today's Leading Visionaries Describe Tomorrow's Library* commits the most atrocities against reason, probably because the editor asked the contributors to “be bold, be inspirational, be hopeful...be fun, be yourself and for heaven's sake, don't be boring” [v] when envisioning the future. The result is a book brimming with delusions and occasional madness concerning the emancipative role of technology and the infiltration of our profession's service philosophy by capitalist discourse.

Library 2020: Today's Leading Visionaries Describe Tomorrow's Library is the type of book that, like a hopeless drunk on a reality TV show, captures one's attention because of its hypnotic ability to both arouse and appall. The interesting parts comprise an anarchistic ode to the inevitable and well-deserved demolition of the library as an institution of reading which will be transformed one day into a community space of endless, fascinating capacities: “maker spaces” for using 3-D printers, immersive gaming experiences, kiosks for tourist information or selecting the right restaurant, a place to conduct banking transactions, renew passports, a massage studio, etc., etc. In the blue sky speculation of these ardent advocates, the library of the future is a “one-stop shop” that telescopes the functions of various competing public and private institutions under one conveniently located roof, or website, or phone app. The enthusiasm gushes out of the pages with a flood of superlatives, occasionally brought up short by a recognition of perdurable problems, such as poverty, the homeless, and the “digital divide”, realities of such magnitude that their mere mention disturbs these otherwise cheerfully inane meditations like a homeless flasher with Tourette's syndrome caustically announcing his presence at a country club garden party.

Despite being written by serious professionals, many of whom are employed in the upper stratosphere of library administrations, *Library 2020* combines Pollyannaish boosterism with unalloyed buncombe. As anyone who has perused the pages of *Library Journal*, skimmed the offerings of *Computers in Libraries*, or attended PowerPoint slideshows with unassuming titles such as “The Kinder, Gentler Libraries are Dead” may tell you, libraries that do not adapt to the future will, like Panamanian tree frogs, be routinely snuffed out by consumer demand for faster technologies wrapped in slicker packaging. Librarians who believe in building collections instead of offering their customers boutique-level shopping experiences will be rendered obsolete. Meanwhile, those armed with the proper resources, training, and budgets will thrive, and their library (with a

multi-million dollar expansion) may even be featured in *Library Journal* as a stellar example of community boot-strapping. Of course, the *LJ* editors may fail to mention that the local community enjoys a standard of living and tax revenue base comparable to that of Luxembourg.

If *Library 2020* serves as any guide, we are rapidly moving beyond the age of the library as an institution which promotes reading and literacy. The increasing transformation of information from a public good to a privately consumed commodity will render the traditional mission of the library quaint and useless. Librarians should abandon the collection of books because in their digital format they are cheap, ubiquitous, and are readily accessible to anyone with *the money to spend*. Kristin Fontichiaro's opening paragraph in chapter two of *Library 2020* makes this explicit:

Materials are changing so radically, and it's easier than ever for people to access stuff without us. When free Kindle books or Nook downloads outprice (sic) the cost of a bus ticket or the car fuel for a library visit, or when it is faster to search online than to ask the librarian, the library-as-collection is a dangerous basket in which to put too many of our eggs. When books are freely or near freely available elsewhere, being "the book place" is a dangerous stance to defend. Libraries can no longer count on describing themselves as the repositories for stuff. [7]

For whom is it easier to download a book to a Kindle or Nook? Someone who owns the device, most likely a middle-class person with disposable income, credit cards for purchasing books online, and a source of electricity for re-charging it. In other words, not a poor person, and certainly not a member of our nation's burgeoning homeless population. The presumption behind Fontichiaro's breezy remarks is that those who use our libraries are members of the middle class who, because of their comparative comfort and ease with information technology, may not even need the library in their daily lives. The idea that the library's mission is to provide information free of charge does not occur to her, or as she says "*The public good is no longer a sufficient rationale for libraries*", [7] inelegantly negating in one sentence the primary clause of the Library Bill of Rights. A paragraph later she adds "the libraries-for-the-weak narrative is politically tenuous and uncertain" concluding: "*Libraries can no longer portray themselves as supporters of the underserved—their narrative must include everyone.*" [8] Implicit in Fontichiaro's startling assertion is that the narrative of libraries has somehow miraculously excluded the middle and upper classes, whereas the library as an institution has been (and is) constructed and controlled by elites, who established them for the social uplift of the weary masses in the latter half of the 19th century because of a traumatic increase in poverty, immigration, and urban populations. Fontichiaro believes that libraries

should not throw in their lot with the meek of the Earth but serve members of a higher social strata *for the sake of diversity*. Even Orwell would be impressed by Fontichiaro's mastery of Newspeak. After poo-pooing the library's social mission as insufficiently inclusive, her solution for making libraries relevant is to install 3-D printers and open maker-spaces because "a maker-space culture diversifies libraries' long-outdated role as shushing book distributors" and "promotes entrepreneurship to jumpstart much-needed economic growth." [8] It would be difficult to substantiate how the creation of an object using a 3-D printer could ever contribute to a local economy, but she fulsomely presses forward. Later, we learn of another motive for promoting maker-spaces as centers of community activity where patrons feel welcome: "Who needs to feel a (sense of) ownership so they can vote yes for the next millage?" [12] Which sums up the major theme shallowly buried in the sub-text of *Library 2020*: How can we use people to further the end of the library, and by doing so, keep us in high cotton?

There are a few voices of sobriety, including that of Clifford Lynch who seems misplaced aboard this Ship of Fools. The dystopian musing of Peter Morville who believes that libraries will become extinct because of a failure to adapt to technological change is refreshing as a brief jeremiad. Daniel Chudnov's contribution is the most articulate and realistic, although it too occasionally falls into dystopian dithering. Unlike Morville, Chudnov has powerful convictions to undergird his polemical style. A self-described hacker and librarian, he questions the conventional wisdom of reducing libraries to "charging stations with good Wi-Fi and coffee access." [146] He also disputes the nationwide trend of "ship(ping) our physical holdings to off-site facilities... weeding out multiple copies along the way, thinning their ranks and making them less available (to the user)." [146]

Save for these few deviations, the humble book is hard pressed for an enthusiastic champion in *Library 2020*. Most contributors are quite chary of even mentioning the b-word, and when they do it is with an ever-present "e-", or other qualifier such as "electronic" or "digital" preceding or following the tabooed terminology. Print books will be available, but only to satisfy the needs of toddlers or the elderly, "...print books will go away...The big exception will be children's books...Spilling soda on a paperback book is much less of a problem than spilling it on an iPad." [3]

That the market for these technologies is dominated by an oligopoly of tech companies and that our nation's bandwidth is controlled by a handful of cable providers who threaten to charge access according to one's shopping agenda is not of even passing concern. But if the contributors of *Library 2020* seem to be chucking the traditional notion of literacy down the Memory Hole along with any work considered "tl;dr" ("too long; didn't read") in the inimitable phrasing of corporate Internet flack Seth Godin, then they are only responding to an

urgent need among the ALA membership for simplifying complex issues into easily consumable sound-bites. Our conference rosters are packed cheek-by-jowl with high profile members of the information industry and what I can only describe as an apparatchiki of independent journalists and bloggers like Jeff Jarvis of *What Would Google Do: Reverse Engineering the Fastest Growing Company in the World* (2009), and free-market evangelist Steven D. Levitt of *Freakonomics* whose popularization of behavioral economics is a full-throated hosanna for human selfishness. Is it any wonder that our professional literature is bloated with semi-digested bits of Information Society propaganda that all too occasionally erupt in such flatulent declarations as the Annoyed Librarian's contribution to *Library 2020*? Looking to the future she says "libraries will easily be able to (purchase)...more computers...That way the poor who can't afford even a low end computer or an Internet connection will still be able to hunt for jobs, find out the exciting events of the day, or surf for porn." [5] The Annoyed Librarian's adolescent brand of irreverent prose reveals that she is, despite any protests to the contrary, a typical middle class American who equates poverty with illicit behavior.

In a cheerfully dystopian vision, Ruth Faklis says "I predict that libraries will collect an additional surcharge for story time programs, author venues, craft creations, after school programs and the like...the user's library card will no longer be limited to an area of service but rather be totally universal in scope. As long as they pay the surcharge, their quest for information or service will be offered in any location." [98] This begs the question: Money is also universal, so why not shell out a few clams at the circulation desk without all the fuss of waiting for a library card that is "universal in scope"? Faklis is undeterred by the fact her vision is retrograde to the point of being Dickensian. Such a dedication to extracting fees from patrons for services that should be held in public trust makes a stronger argument for the dissolution of libraries than for their preservation. If public libraries privatize themselves through fee structures, we may as well complete the process and resurrect the Victorian subscription library, complete with leather-clad wingback chairs, snifters of cognac, and liveried footmen for keeping out the riff-raff.

With the blessings of future technology, the library's collections will be transformed into electrons, and the library into a community center that sports an infinite panoply of shiny IT devices as featured on the latest TED talk. Sarah Houghton of the San Rafael Library states that in the future "Digital will rule supreme...A library solely based on physical space, media, and services will not be able to sustain itself in 2020 or being (sic) able to attract donors and sponsors." [38] Therefore, libraries should invest heavily in technology so "(f) unding will flow like Pixy Stix from Candy Mountain." [38] It should be noted that Ms. Houghton, unlike the mass of librarians to whom she is proselytizing her vision of the future, is the director of library in a municipality whose

residents enjoy a per capita income (\$43,934) almost 65% over the national average (\$28,051).

True to the conventions of its genre, the contributors in *Library 2020* invariably refer to users of the library as “customers”, rather than as politically empowered “citizens” or as “patrons” who participate in a public trust. The rational appeal of reifying patrons as customers is to enforce habits such as courtesy and helpfulness among the staff, but identifying someone as a customer is freighted with an entirely different set of ethical, legal, and moral obligations. And, as we are quickly learning in this age of computerized systems, our customers can be used as commodities to further the ends of the library-as-enterprise. In *Library 2020*, Gale-Cengage CEO Stephen Abram asks: “the library of 2020 will be everywhere (but) can librarians be everywhere too and delight the user and deliver value too?” [47] Let us set aside the issue of our profession’s reputation for omniscience, and ask “why must we delight the user?” Why “delight” and not educate, organize, counsel, reassure or comfort? Because in the year 2020 library patrons are not readers or citizens, they are customers to whom a library service or perceived benefit is offered in exchange for their continued support. To take this approach to its logical conclusion, one must understand that a customer’s attention-span is short and their tastes fickle, so their perceptions must be strategically managed. One method of customer experience management is to constantly inject novelty, thus assuring amusement and receptiveness. Or, as Marcellus Turner, City Librarian of Seattle said, “libraries must give great experiences” because “Jeff Bezos (said) soon you will be able to acquire anything and everything that you ever want or need online, except for an *experience*.” [91] This is only one of many indications in *Library 2020* that the process of finding information is, in the sagacious consideration of these visionaries, more like shopping than any other activity. In the experience economy, libraries (and librarians) must continually sell an *impression* or an *idea* of their value to the customer. In other words, a brand of customer service that can compete with “Nordstrom and Starbucks.” And how, in this hurly-burly of impression management, symbolic performativity and commodification will we preserve our role as champions of literacy? By relying on Web 2.0 of course! Or as Turner boldly avers: “Reader’s advisory? What about using social-media-savvy bloggers with great followings to help us push our collections in the virtual world?” [92] Here, and throughout library management literature, the de-professionalization of librarianship is coterminous with the advent of a post-literate society.

Unlike with *Library 2020: Today's Leading Visionaries Describe Tomorrow's Library*, I am not so much disdainful of *Reflecting on the Future of Academic and Public Libraries* as I am puzzled by it. It is not so much of a book than it is a collection of documents and occasional commentary glued between two pieces of cardboard. I must confess my own inability to fathom why a publisher

would produce a work complete with cover art, pagination, references, author's biographies, typesetting and the whole costly shebang only to have, in the end, the book equivalent to particle board. Perhaps a short exposition of its contents will suffice to convince the reader that my comparison of it to the amalgamated wood product is indeed merited.

Like *Library 2020, Reflecting on the Future* has few, if any pretenses toward editorial organization. The former is divided into broad, and mostly meaningless categories such as "Stuff" (e-books! 3-D printers!) and Community (Wi-Fi! Starbucks! User fees!), the latter is superficially separated into chapters that share the distinction of being reports of secondary literature, re-hashes of widely available reports, and—in a flash of scholarly effort—summations of an opinion survey distributed by the authors to "several influential library directors" [xii]. In the introduction the editors state that "the goals of this book are to identify relevant literature and possible scenarios and to get readers to think about the future and what the library infrastructure (staff, collections, technology and facilities) will resemble." [xii] The authors have met their uninspired and prosaic goal of profiling future library scenarios, which is to say that this book, on the whole, is unnecessary. A few literature reviews and an independently published article containing the results of the survey would have certainly sufficed.

The book consists of nine chapters and two appendices and features four short essays written by four contributors. The views of the editors and the contributors share the same perspective on what makes libraries ready for the future: Money and lots of it. Of course, such a baldly declarative statement is only implied throughout the text. The reader does not have to exercise much effort to excavate this ever-present sub-text. The clues, like poorly laid Easter eggs, are hidden in plain sight. Chapter Five, "Future Views of Academic Libraries", describes six scenarios that the editors submitted to "twelve library directors at baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral granting institutions" for their august opinion and commentary. Whether the twelve survey participants were evenly split between the three widely varying institutional categories is not addressed; nor is the fact that twelve respondents, no matter how influential they may be, cannot possibly comprise a meaningful study—much less a scientific one.

The six scenarios are listed as "One: The Future is the Present", "Two: Press a Button Library", "Three: The Library is a Learning Enterprise", "Four: Expanding Service Roles", "Five: The Library as the Campus Scholarly Communication Publisher", and "Six: The Library as the More Active Research Partner" [89-96]. The scenarios are seemingly listed in no particular order. However, one readily notices that the amount of money required to fulfill each scenario begins with a baseline minimum of continuing the library's operations "as is" under Scenario One, to breaking the bank under Scenario Six where "The library develops departmental, cross-discipline, and cross-departmental

relationships with faculty and departments engaged in large scale, funded, interdisciplinary research projects to make research findings and data sets widely available.” [135] Of the six scenarios, Scenario Four was believed to be the most preferable, where “The library has greatly downsized its physical collections and traditional services by expanding its digital collection and contracting circulation and e-reserve services from a larger, national cooperative.” [91] The library “outsources services related to collection management and no longer staff a reference desk.” [91] Instead of serving in traditional roles, the staff will “assume expanded service roles and be partners in teaching, learning, and research...” [133] Librarians (the MLS is optional) will no longer provide traditional, library-based information literacy presentations. They will instead be “embedded librarians” who will “spend more time out of the building than in; they may come to the main library only for occasional face-to-face meetings.” [92] Presumably, embedded librarians will use their time for “supporting and advancing teaching and learning pedagogy and *knowledge production for the institution.*” [92] (italics mine) In the future, information is most decisively a commodity, therefore librarians should be *central to the production of the commodity*, rather than serving in a traditional value-added role more consistent with a public service philosophy. As the collections disappear, the staff are migrated out, and the library is converted into a multi-use facility, librarians increasingly follow the “information broker” model first propounded by F.W. Lancaster that valorizes information as a private good. But at least librarians of the future will have attractive surroundings, including a “library terrace... located near the dormitories but enabling librarians to interact with students through...mobile devices.” As a powerful symbol of the paperless society, the terrace would “definitely not contain books and/or support the traditional image of a library.” [95] Books, once the West’s greatest symbol of knowledge and prosperity will become, *mutatis mutandis*, a symbol of information poverty in our near future.

Unsurprisingly, the scenarios set forth by Hernon and Matthews for the public library are equally specious, superficial, and deterministic. They sent their survey to a group of “public library leaders” who, to their credit, mildly objected to the framing of the scenarios. Whereas a more conscientious researcher may have decided to scrap the first survey, write a new one and re-submit, Hernon and Matthews included the commentary as part of “Chapter Eight: Perspectives on Trends and Scenarios in Public Libraries.” Unlike the academic library, the public library has only four possible futures, but each future is predicated on the necessity of community support, which is a euphemism for money. The four scenarios are “Status Quo”, “Living Room”, “Electronic Library”, and the Happening Place”. The scenarios are organized into a lengthy table with twelve characteristics for each. A full treatment of each scenario is not possible here, but the titles alone reveal much. The “Status Quo” library is a typically underfunded

institution with few if any fiscal options, and serves a working class community. It has a print collection, no e-books, a few computers and comparatively low bandwidth. A rather spartan affair, it does not sport any amenities. The “Living Room” provides casual meeting space, a growing e-book collection (balanced by a reduced print collection), higher bandwidth and an area for snacking. Its community previously “enjoyed a robust standard of living” [161] before being struck down by the Great Recession. The “Electronic Library” does not have a physical presence. Containing only e-books through a searchable interface, the EL provides educational programming available “24/7” to “technologically sophisticated” and “transient” [165] patrons who are employed by nearby software companies. Like Scenario Six of the academic libraries, the Happening Place is the ultimate library for the technocratic future: maker-spaces, plush seating, high bandwidth, “Wi-Fi everywhere”, executive-style meeting rooms, publicly accessible computers and freely available software for editing movies and videos, and e-books galore with only “bestsellers in print format”. The Happening Place is, like most info-utopias, cast in the empyrean glow of emancipative technologies. Amenities are noted as “Good coffee and snack food. Wine bar? Comfortable seating and pleasant ambience.” [161]

Public library leaders polled for this survey described “Status Quo” as “Doomed to Failure” [168] and “The Happening Place” as “the only choice for the future.” [169] Unlike the other three public library scenarios, the Happening Place’s supporting community is not mentioned. Instead of the perfunctory details about relative income levels included in the other three scenarios, the editors chose to describe it as “a perfect storm of technology, demographics, and global economics.” [166] Even though “cost savings are secured with elimination of most stand-alone library units and their operational staff”, [166] one wonders what kind of local community could afford to have a wine bar in their library that provided “pleasant ambience” in perpetuity, much less support a library with outrageous monthly Wi-Fi and electricity bills. What tax revenue base could support such an elite, even luxurious institution? Certainly not the working class Status Quo community, those folks can’t even afford a vending machine.

As for the librarians at these public libraries of the future, the implicit message of this book is: Make sure you work in a zip code that is “a perfect storm of technology, demographics and global economics.” In the Status Quo library, librarians offer traditional reference service at the desk, whereas in the Living Room scenario the “staff rove” about the reference area. The Electronic Library has “tech savvy librarians to assist remote users”. Librarians of the Happening Place scenario have left desk duty to subordinates who pass referrals to them as they relentlessly rove elsewhere, perhaps outside of the library. It is striking how the emancipation of the librarian from the reference desk depends on the disappearance of a print collection which is replaced by a wondrous

buffet of information technology gadgetry provided by the largesse of a wealthy community. True to the “information broker” model of professionalism, the librarian engages with the public through an intermediary in a tiered model of reference service. At no point is the traditional mission of the public library as a center for promoting literacy seriously discussed.

Neither of these books present original ideas but rather serve as repositories of our profession’s Gramscian “common sense” on how librarians must respond to the demands of the future. They are records of establishment thinking and how it colonizes our professional discourse and to some extent determines the course of library history. I predict that future LIS scholars will use *Library 2020* and *Reflecting on the Future* as source material for studying how information became synonymous with capitalism, and how librarianship adapted to this wicked turn of events by commoditizing itself under the guise of neutrality. Historians of the library may very well pinpoint when we decided to transform ourselves into self-monetizing subjects and the library into a revenue stream. Perhaps fifty years hence, once this writer’s bones are laid to rest, a librarian may read these books with some discernment and wonder why there was such a heated debate about our profession’s role, why patrons should not be considered customers, and why literacy should remain the library’s primary mission. If she does not, then we—the progressive librarians—did not do our job.

REFERENCE

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