

The Future of Libraries: A Value Proposition

Sarah H. Scott

San José State University

In our studies thus far, we have considered the historical roles, missions and values of libraries, the characteristics and organization of information, and the impact of technology upon libraries and society. A central theme that has emerged from our studies is the question of what the future holds for libraries and the factors that are shaping and will continue to shape that future. I believe that the key to answering this question lies in an examination and articulation of values. While it is true that many outside forces, such as technological advancements, economic conditions, and political movements, may influence the nature and reach of libraries and their services, it is up to libraries themselves to articulate the values and missions that will keep them an important, relevant, and empowered part of society well into the future. By maintaining an awareness of both their historical traditions and their present achievements and challenges, libraries will be able to formulate a vision for a future in which they will not only survive but also thrive.

Throughout history, libraries have played a variety of important roles. As Rubin describes in chapter seven of our textbook, libraries have, at various times, functioned as records archives, centers of scholarship and research, emblems of personal status, places for spiritual and religious reflection, promoters of national pride, a means of self-improvement, promoters of commercial profit, and servants of the public. While there have always been certain characteristics that virtually all libraries held in common (at the very least their collections of written materials), the diverse history of libraries underscores their fundamental adaptability to social contexts and the variety of social needs from which they have sprung. In addition to the variety of roles and functions that libraries have performed, they have also operated at varying levels of technological advancement, and as our course lecture on “The Information Explosion” from week two points out, they have often been among the earliest adopters of new technologies (p. 8). In fact, the means by which libraries have performed their services and the forms in which they have stored and made accessible their collections have continually evolved over time. From the inventions of the printing press, the card catalog, microphotography and computers to the development of online technologies, CD-ROMs, the Internet and the World Wide Web, technology has dramatically altered the shape of library services at every step. In the context of values, the willingness of

libraries to address social needs and their openness to new technologies indicate a high value of efficiency and a desire to provide easy and open access to high quality information with a minimal investment of time and effort on the part of library users.

Although attempts to identify a general set of values within the field of librarianship have met with controversy and disagreement, Rubin points out that certain basic values have emerged, including service to the patron, intellectual freedom, information literacy, and equal access (p. 302). The fact that there is disagreement about values not only indicates that different libraries serve different purposes but also suggests that each and every library needs to identify and articulate its *own* values and mission in order to remain relevant. As we have seen in the past and even today, libraries do not always survive the influence of politics or popular opinion. If a library fails to demonstrate its own value, it can be destroyed. And since libraries are usually accountable to people or organizations outside of themselves, it is in their best interest to align their values and missions to the values and needs of the communities they serve.

As libraries are confronted by a continuous stream of new technologies, some predict that they will meet their demise and that “their electronic competitors will render them obsolete” (Rubin, p. 26). However, as Rubin points out, the number of libraries in existence continues to grow, and especially in this period of economic uncertainty, people continue to flock to their local libraries in search of job and educational resources, Internet access, entertainment, and social interactions. As long as people continue to use and support libraries, they will remain an important part of our society. And libraries still have many important roles to play. As technological advances threaten to deepen the digital divide, libraries help to ensure that everyone has access to technology and information, regardless of their social or economic backgrounds. As people spend more and more time engaging with technology, libraries help to ensure that they also spend time engaging with one another. As the amount of information available through the Web and new media grows exponentially, libraries help to ensure that high quality information remains readily available and easily accessible. And as more and more information goes

digital, libraries continue to emphasize the need for preservation. By knowing the ways in which they are being used and what their users expect of them, libraries can stay relevant in spite of new competition.

In the August/September 2009 issue of *American Libraries*, Steven Bell argues that the future of libraries lies in designing meaningful library user experiences (p. 51). Today, in the wake of a severe economic recession, as people seek to simplify their lives, a value that is emerging is the desire to collect experiences rather than possessions in order to create meaning. Bell argues that “libraries can offer meaning across the entire spectrum of what is important to people,” by helping them gain a sense of accomplishment, being a place where they can indulge in the appreciation of the arts, stimulating creativity, and connecting them to their communities (p. 52). Part of the human experience is the search for value and meaning, and as people seek out ways to create meaning in their lives, libraries have the opportunity to reassert their relevance and usefulness. By remaining flexible and self-aware, continuously reevaluating themselves and their roles in society, and expressing and articulating their values, libraries will remain a vital part of our society regardless of where technology takes us.

References

Bell, S. J. (2009). From gatekeepers to gate-openers. *American Libraries*, 40(8/9), 51-53.

Bontenbal, K. *The information explosion* [Word document]. Retrieved from

<https://liffey.sjsu.edu/section/default.asp?id=FALL%5F2009%2DSJSU%2D200%2D200%2D14>

Rubin, Richard E. (2004). *Foundations of library and information science* (2nd ed.). New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc.