

The Transformation of Libraries

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Wilcox, AZ

For centuries private and institutional libraries have been about the storage and retrieval of information on paper. They were hushed spaces where stern librarians guarded the paper and maintained the decorum. Even public libraries bent towards this model. But,

today, public libraries throughout the US, in fact around the world, have transformed themselves in the span of fifteen to twenty years. They embraced the internet, have become a key access point, and expanded into a place for engagement, learning, and creation. This transformation occurred based on the values held by libraries and their users, direct input from users, and the library staff's guidance and experimentation.

Since 2009, I have been involved with the Hudson Area Library (HAL) (HudsonAreaLibrary.org) serving on the Board of Trustees from 2010 to 2016, including five years as the President. During this period we renovated a late 19th century armory



Tucson, AZ

into a new 21st century library. Over this time I have visited over 60 libraries throughout the US and in a number of other countries. These have ranged in size from a store-front library in a remote town in Arizona to mega monster libraries in major cities; Phoenix's Burton Barr Central Library occupies 280,000 sq. ft. on five levels and a brand new 1,076,000 sq. ft. library in Guangzhou China.

By comparison our new HAL library occupies 13,500 sq. ft.¹

¹ A typical Walmart Superstore, like the one in Greenport NY, is 179,000 sq. ft.

But size or architecture, it turns out, is not what is remarkable in these libraries. Rather it is the consistent experience one has inside their doors. A visitor entering a library with a question, experiences without exception the following: the staff or volunteer greets you, listens to your request patiently, and either answers it or directs you to a person who can answer your question. Second, on every visit you see a broad range of people, young, old, professional, children... using the library. Some come for computers and the Internet; others to look for books and magazines; some to attend classes, get DVDs; others work at tables or cubicles on homework or research for a project; small groups work together around a table or in a small meeting space, I could go on.

So, how is it that libraries have been able to effect this enormous transformation? How did they change from being so purely about knowledge on paper into locations offering traditional books, magazines, and newspapers as well as the latest digital technologies? How did they become centers of learning and engagement for their communities? How do libraries continue to transform themselves? These are not trivial questions.

In the corporate world there is a theory of creative destruction² that explains the demise of companies that can not transform themselves to meet changes in technology, markets, and society. In the private sector and in our political rhetoric this is a celebrated feature of capitalism.

When one looks at libraries from the perspective of the for-profit private sector, transformations like these are quite unlikely, even more so for the enormity of the changes. With the rise of the internet in the late 1990s, and its near ubiquity by the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, many claimed that all of human knowledge would be universally searchable and accessible via a computer. It seemed that we were at the end of the era of books, magazines, newspapers, paper-based knowledge entirely.

A threat such as this strikes at the very core of an organization's reason for being. For example, the value to the user of the telegraph system in the 19th century could not survive the value of speaking over the telephone. Similarly, the use of steam engines to power manufacturing operations did not survive the arrival of electric motors. Today, most small bank branch offices will not survive the emergence of banking services on smart phones. When one can photograph a check for deposit through a smart phone app, the reasons to go to a physical bank will continue to erode.. Transformation is an attempt by an organization to respond to changes that are

² See Wikipedia on this term and Joseph Schumpeter for a little background.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creative_destruction accessed 05012016 and
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Schumpeter accessed 05012016.

fundamental to either the value of its products or services or the methods by which they are produced and distributed.

How then were public libraries able to face this existential challenge - the apparent disappearance of paper-based distribution of knowledge and the vast increase in access to knowledge through the internet? It is libraries' superior ability to communicate with and understand their users needs that is at the center of this transformation supported by core values held in common. This has enabled the professional staff and governing boards to develop, deploy and adapt new strategies. In this way libraries have found their way to a new set of functions (aka *The 21st Century Library*) and new relationships with their users.

Transformation Process

The successful transformation of an organization or institution is a process that involves several phases³. First, the organization must **perceive the threat** that the environmental and technological basis of how it is acting today is changing in ways that will threaten its existence. These changes may undermine its capacity to meet the needs of its customers or users and stakeholders in the case of libraries. Or, the customers may simply be disappearing as a new solution replaces an older one. For libraries, the internet's appearance was proclaimed by many to be a death knell. Who would need books, magazines, or newspapers, if everything was available on the web?

Second, the organization must **develop a response** to these threats. These responses may require the organization to completely re-think what it is about (its purpose and values); change both how its users think about their participation; and how it produces products and services. The response evolves into a **strategy of action**. Employees, customers, vendors, investors and other stakeholders have to be won over through good communication and then, delivering the goods.

For libraries, the transformation required a radical change from being predominantly about access to knowledge stored on paper (storage, search and retrieval) to an organization that provides access to digital storage,



³ A caution here. This is not a mechanistic, linear process. It is iterative and typically fraught with mistakes, back and forths, trial and error.

digital search, digital consumption, and digital production all while continuing to provide those traditional paper-based services. Fortunately, the shock of these changes was softened by the fact that the search function for paper materials had long been digitized. Modern information technologies were hardly a sudden intruder in libraries.

Further, this new model of library services recognized that simply providing digital resources was not sufficient. Users needed to learn how to access digital information, how to evaluate it, and how to carry out their own creative processes using new tools (web browsers, word processors, spreadsheets, audio and visual editors, and more). Today many of the required software tools, computers and internet access are too expensive for many people to own themselves, so libraries stepped in to provide them. Staff and volunteers learned new skills most frequently involving computer technologies.

Along this path of change other demands emerged. Despite the fact that people are spending more time living on the Web (think Facebook, Pinterest, text messaging, etc.) people still like to get together to share common experiences. Lectures, music, readings, discussion groups and more have increased. Libraries have created spaces for people to work together on projects, homework, small business startups, impromptu meetings of all sorts. So, libraries began to grow meeting rooms, big ones, little ones, - ones where not even the tapping on a keyboard is allowed - teen rooms, pre-teen and children's rooms. Here in Hudson this is summed up by the phrase describing our vision of library as a place to **Learn, Connect, Engage, and Grow**.

Before exploring in more detail why libraries were positioned to respond positively to the challenges facing them, here is a note about the present and future role of paper-based knowledge. Libraries are not now nor will they in the foreseeable future be a totally digital world. First, though some have pronounced the death of books, our own library has seen a steady increase in circulation of books and this trend is seen elsewhere. Second, the total number of books published in the world has increased enormously since the dawn of the Internet age. The publishing industry may be in a tumult because their traditional business models are no longer working but the number of books published in the US alone rose from 215,777 in 2002 to 316,480 in 2010.⁴ Wikipedia reports 2.2 million new titles worldwide in 2012.⁵ In the US less than 10% of book sales are e-books⁶. So, the age of paper is not quite over. In part this is because paper is still a delightful way to read. Paper is still the superior storage medium. No digital storage format has lasted more than ten years. Try to open a Microsoft Word document you created in 2001. Broken. Open a paper book published a century, even

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bj-gallagher/book-publishing_b_1394159.html accessed on 5/4/2104

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Books_published_per_country_per_year access 5/4/2104

⁶ See this article for 2015 sales results in the US: "AAP StatShot: Trade Sales Up Slightly at Year End 2015", <http://newsroom.publishers.org/aap-statshot-trade-sales-up-slightly-at-year-end-2015/> accessed 05022016.

three centuries ago, The type face and language may be a bit archaic, but entirely readable. Only water and fire are hazards for paper, not changes in computer technologies.

To return to our story of transformation, a distinguishing feature of public libraries is that they have a long history, more than 175 years of history in the US, and have long held and acted on a set of common values. The American Library Association lists these as⁷:

- Access
- Confidentiality/Privacy
- Democracy
- Diversity
- Education and Lifelong Learning
- Intellectual Freedom
- Preservation
- The Public Good
- Professionalism
- Service
- Social Responsibility

These values are powerful. For anyone who uses libraries regularly and even more so who visits lots of libraries, these values are not just empty rhetoric. They are present and acted on universally. Significantly, these values are even more powerful and meaningful because they are substantially the publicly professed ideals of the country.

Just to take **Access** for example. It is a commonplace of our political rhetoric that every citizen deserves equal access to the opportunity to develop and grow to their full potential. In the library this is an actual fact. Anyone can walk in the door, sign up for a library card, take out books, use reference materials, ask professional librarians questions, sit at the computers for Internet access or to write a paper, attend a lecture, workshop, or a Lego mashup. In the case of our library that really means the resources of the 65 libraries in the Mid Hudson Library System and, if required, many libraries beyond. Everything is free.

Access is the central value for the transformation. The whole purpose of a library is to provide access to human knowledge. Viewed from the perspective of this value, the transformation of the library is only a transformation in the methods and tools for access - the addition of digital resources to the traditional paper-based ones. When you

⁷ <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/corevalues> accessed 4/23/2016.

combine other values with Access the addition of digital resources is a completely natural and required response.

One can see the parallel tracks of access everywhere in the library. Just as libraries have long worked to increase literacy and learning throughout life using paper-based resources, now digital literacy and learning shares space and time right along side. For example in our area for pre-K children we offer both the traditional Story Time Nook for reading aloud to the smallest users as well as specially outfitted early literacy digital workstations. As has been noted by others, children today are born swiping.



Hudson Area Library, 51 N. 5th St. Hudson, NY

Step back now to these values: **Professionalism**, **Service**, and **Public Good** which apply mostly to the institution, staff and volunteers in the library. They are key to how libraries have been able to transform themselves. When you combine these with the continuous input from our users and others in the public about what they need you have the recipe for the transformation.

The transformation of libraries has occurred through the intersection of common values, a professional staff, and community oversight through library boards of governance.

Our library staff is a professional staff. They are trained in Library Science, or as it is now called Information Science, and committed to personal growth in the field. Part of their job is to bring the trends in the world beyond Columbia County into account as they plan and work on the future of our library. This gives us access to thinking far beyond the knowledge and skill set of the library's users or Board of Trustees. There is a whole world of discussion in the blogosphere about the future of libraries. So, there are tens of thousands of library professionals and academics around world researching, thinking, sharing, planning, and building the new future.

The concept of **service** is deeply engrained in library culture. Think of that moment standing in front of a library volunteer or staff person with your question. They are entirely ready to help. You are not made to feel that you are interrupting some

important task. You are their important task. This experience is central to the day to day work of the library.

Service is central to the day-to-day experience in a library. Library culture and training instills behaviors of listening to users. In the library the question might be, “Where is the bathroom” or “Why does time move forward?” You actually have to listen carefully to get ready to help. In the private sector listening is a topic of endless campaigns by corporate leadership and management gurus. They even have a special lingo for it, “active listening”. Yet, little listening takes place; mostly the communication reverts to the one-way sales pitch. In the library, the staff and volunteers take every question seriously and will seek to help a user find the best answers.

It turns out that if you listen you can find out what people want and need, where these needs are trending, what people really value. The corporate world hires expensive marketing firms and data miners to research what people value. The Web is beginning to change this, but that is another story. In a library, people walk right in the door and tell you what they need. Why are users and visitors comfortable doing this? They have a clear understanding of the values of libraries. They have a demonstrable sense of ownership over their library.

Now add in **Public Good**. The library is here to serve individuals but also the public as a whole. The library works explicitly to increase the total skill set, the total knowledge base of our community.

Confidentiality and Privacy: libraries do not gather information about what any individual reads, asks about, attends, nothing. When the Patriot Act came into force in 2011, libraries demonstrated their commitment to this principle by publicly challenging the law’s requirements for libraries to gather information about users’ reading and other activities. Some deleted information from databases and most changed practices to prevent the gathering of private information about library users.

Education/Lifelong Learning: libraries have always been involved in helping people achieve educational objectives and be lifelong learners. Today this is a much more vigorous feature of library programing and facilities.

Intellectual Freedom: Unlike our political, religious, social, and commercial institutions, libraries universally defend and uphold intellectual freedom as a right of users and our society. Over the last fifty years this has evolved into a vigorous policy. Our library has a Materials Selection Policy that reflects our commitment to intellectual freedom.⁸

⁸ See our library’s policies on confidentiality, material selection, and internet access policies here: <http://hudsonarealibrary.org/about-us/library-regulations/>.

Preservation refers to preserving historical materials themselves and preserving our local history and cultures. Though we are a small city, Hudson's very founding ties us back to important events and trends in the 18th century - whaling for example, and, moving forward in time, to those in the 19th and 20th centuries. In my travels to libraries over the past years I noticed that virtually every library has a local history collection, some like us, a Local History Room. As proven by our Local History Room, there is an active interest and support for local history resources and programming. Local history is one topic where we provide key resources. Most of the materials have not been digitized. It will be a long time if ever before even a large share are digitized. More significantly, our Local History Room is a focal point for local historians to gather, for others to ask questions and enter discussions.

Now we can try to fit all of these factors together into a picture of how and why libraries are succeeding in responding to the enormous changes in our world. While the private sector celebrates its "creative destruction" of companies, libraries are well on their way to completing a first wave of transformation. And we are seeing success in terms of continued increases in the participation in library programs and greater use of our facilities. Libraries are accomplishing this by listening continuously to users and incorporating the new ways we find and use information, how we create new knowledge, into what we have come to call the Library of the 21st Century. All of this is occurring while building on the values that are central to our history. These values, and the transformations driven by them, have larger salience because they are commonly-held with our members and stakeholders in the larger society. These values enable and energize the library. They keep us on the right track.



Challenges Ahead

Though I have been celebrating the virtues of the public library and the remarkable transformation we now see coming to fruition, our libraries must continue to transform, a sort of permanent revolution.

The Pew Research Center published a study⁹ in December 2013 that illustrates broad support for libraries coupled with a poor understanding of what libraries do.

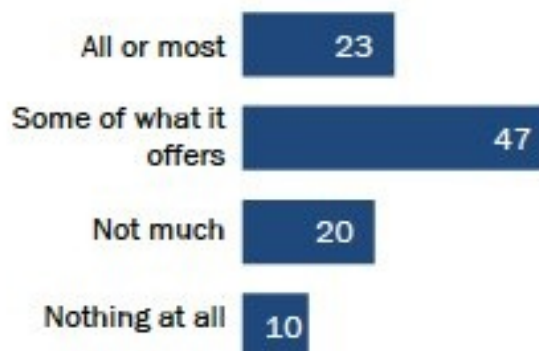
“Some 90% of Americans ages 16 and older said that the closing of their local public library would have an impact on their community, with 63% saying it would have a “major” impact. On the other hand, 30% knew little or nothing of the services available to them. 47% knew “some of what it offers”. Only 23% indicated that they knew “all or most” of these services.

This enormous disconnect between support and awareness of what libraries provide indicates that libraries, including doubtlessly ours, are doing a poor job of communicating with users and non-users. We are perhaps too happy with the high levels of support without acknowledging that this support rests on a poor foundation.

When we reflect on this data we need to think also of how our public officials view libraries. They probably

How well-informed do you feel about the different services your public library offers?

Do you feel like you know...

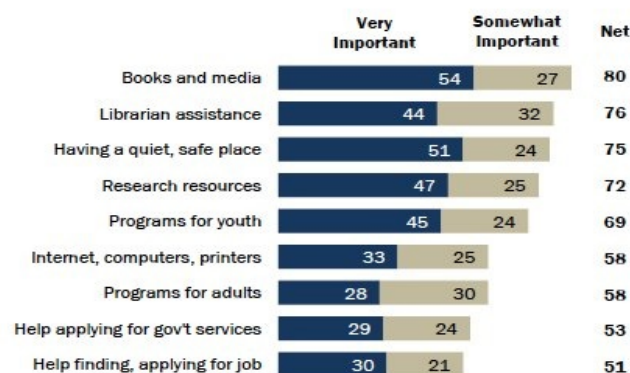


Based on Americans ages 16+ who have ever used a public library (n=5,393)

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

How important are these library services to you and your family?

Among Americans ages 16+ who have ever used a public library or had a household member use a public library, the percentage who say these services are...



Source: Pew Research Center's Library Services Survey of 6,224 Americans ages 16 and older conducted July 18-September 30, 2013. The margin of error for the overall sample is plus or minus 1.4 percentage points. The survey was conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

⁹ “How Americans Value Public Libraries in Their Communities” accessed 05/01/2014: <http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/12/11/libraries-in-communities/>

have views very similar to the general public. Improving their understanding of the value of libraries to their constituents is likely to change their approach to funding them. Similarly we need to engage the local business community and demonstrate the connection between a great library and a good business environment.

Engage is one of the four action verbs that we use to describe our library (remember: **Learn, Connect, Engage, Create**). There are many ways users already engage through the library. One in particular, engaging in the creation of new knowledge and skills is perhaps the most powerful. The act of creating something new has enormous impacts at the personal and social level. Creation, innovation, invention, design, construction, these are all at the core of what it means to be human. I have described part of our mission to be moving the library from being a point of consumption of knowledge to a point of creation of new knowledge. We need to embrace the needs everyone has to be creative. While we should not think that we will become a center of dance, music, theater, blacksmithing, computer hacking.... nevertheless we can be an important entry point for these. We can be at the center of the written word, history, especially local and regional history, family genealogy, current events and politics, and much more. We can do this in ways that avoid merely telling. Our programs need to encourage and sustain people to engage with new material and create their own synthesis; invent their own views and stories. In our role providing Access, we can leverage our technology tools to bring new skills and methods to the creation process. Audio and video production is more accessible than ever.

While our library users reflect the diversity of Hudson, Greenport and Stockport, we need to broaden the participation of every section of our community. Though the library today is doubtless the most democratic institution in our community, we should not fail to make changes in services and programming to deepen access and encourage involvement. Diversity means the presence and engagement of our entire community. It is a demonstrated fact that many heads are better than one, so we need to reach out to assure that we provide an environment where the many heads can feel comfortable to achieve their needs to learn, connect, engage, and grow.

As I am writing we are raising money to complete the fitting out of the renovated Armory as a library. This is a significant task. \$2 million is a large sum in a community of 12,000 (that is our service population in Hudson, Greenport and Stockport). We have made significant progress towards this goal. Longer term, we need to do some serious thinking about how we fund the day-to-day operations of the library. In a political environment in which all expenditures by government are suspect, we will need to work carefully to achieve a sustainable balance between public tax revenues and private donations and grant funding.

On the other hand we should be more aggressive and better organized to attract and utilize volunteers. The diversity of our community presents us with significant

opportunities to generate programs and services based on the talents, skills, and experiences present in the community. This both helps to keep our costs down, but, perhaps more significantly, engages and enlarges the energies present in the community.

Conclusion

HAL and other public libraries need to continue to build on their well-established values. A key component must be to more deliberately build awareness of these values and their expression through services, collections, and programs. These are what bring to life what otherwise would be empty rhetoric. And the values will continue to provide direct connections with the changing needs of users and the community thus improving responsiveness to changes that will come in the future.