

Looking Ahead:

A Report from the Monroe County Public Library Futures Committee

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Library Futures Committee—Charter and Process

Social and technological changes that are sweeping across our culture have the potential to greatly impact the Monroe County Public Library and its role in serving our community. Primary among these changes are the growth in popularity of digital technologies that encourage people to use alternate services in place of those traditionally offered at library buildings. Now that books, movies, and music are available wherever there is a network connection, how will the library's role as a media distributor change? Furthermore, as people's experiences with social networks, information gathering, and even civic engagement are seen as more and more rooted in a web environment, to what extent will they still utilize the spaces in a physical library? To what extent can and should libraries develop new roles to adapt to these changes?

As a tool for exploring these questions, director Sara Laughlin chartered the Library Futures Committee to:

- Encourage and promote interdepartmental discussions and participation about future library services
- Explore possible scenarios and futures for the library
- Be a resource for our upcoming strategic planning process

In March 2011, the Library Futures Committee began holding bi-weekly meetings. Our first task was to isolate the trends and issues we felt were most pertinent to discussions of the library's future. We posted a general question on our staff intranet about what the library would look like in ten years. Melding the responses we received with concerns raised by our managers, administrators and committee members, the group generated the questions that form the backbone of this report:

1. In ten years, what will the library's core services be?
2. How can libraries meet the challenge of promoting, delivering, and discussing books with the community in the new era of e-books?
3. Should the library become involved in the production, distribution and/or archiving of local content?
4. What impact will new literacies have on library services?
5. How will the library incorporate new technologies and services that will transform facilities from places where things are stored into spaces where community members are encouraged to work, create and build?
6. Will the library's role as a gathering space and community center become more central to our success?

Subcommittees were formed to research these topics and to solicit further staff participation through:

- Staff Day sessions in October 2011

- Participation in an online class regarding the library as a community center
- Meeting with a potential content and curation vendor (E*vanced)
- Site visits to four digital creativity centers—YouMedia at Chicago Public Library, Blue Island (IL) Public Library, Skokie (IL) Public Library and Gail Borden Public Library (Elgin, IL)

We encouraged further consideration and feedback on the topics by posting a series of questions sent to all staff by the director. We also distributed an online survey to help us measure staff perceptions about the importance of these issues. Each subcommittee was responsible for generating a report based on their research, discussions, and staff input.

We do not feel that the above topics represent the entire range of issues that the library will need to examine in moving forward, nor have we addressed some of the crucial, attendant topics such as changing budgetary and staffing needs. However we think these represent the most vital issues facing the library. Their thorough discussion should be instrumental in informing the forthcoming strategic planning process.

1. In 10 years, what will the library’s core services be?

When library staff was offered a chance to imagine the library in 10 years, four core roles emerged:

- Access (primarily to information services)
- Collections
- Literacy
- Gathering space

One staff member said that a library is a “physical space and a virtual space that engages, educates and entertains us and encourages us to achieve the best qualities of being human: learning, growing, sharing, and always being curious in the world.” This statement reflects many current thinkers in the library realm who envision a central role for user experiences in and through libraries. Stephen Abram, a professional who blogs about library trends, suggests that libraries offer transformational experiences for the visitor who finds conversations, spaces, and experiences, rather than collections of items or pieces of information as the basis for future readiness (35-36).

This hope was echoed by other staff who talked about the importance of the library as a “discovery place” for children and adults, as a place that nurtures diversity and civic dialogue as well as one that provides free access to a world of needed information and different viewpoints. The striking commonality in all of the feedback about this question is the underlying assumption that, despite the technological and social changes, the physical and virtual services of a library will remain central to the lives of individuals in our community.

Research Librarian Steven Bell asserts that it is time for libraries to “think less about the goods, services and content libraries provide, and focus instead on the value that our user communities derive from the services and content” and that it is up to librarians to “prevent libraries from becoming one more example of an industry that was disrupted by new technologies because it thought it was in the information business but failed to understand what people really valued about its services” (50-53). Library staff echoes this sentiment in their focus on the value of user experiences. They say that our building will provide interaction spaces, both formal and informal, for community members to counteract increasing social isolation; it will house, or be a portal to, collections of materials that will educate and entertain; and it will be home to a staff that helps everyone (on both sides of the digital divide) navigate the increasingly complex and overwhelming world of information. Staff thinks that the

services of a library are essential and eternal despite some substantial threats that range from budget cuts, Amazon lending services, and do-it-yourself publishing, to questions about how nimble the library can be in the face of rapid change. Staff believes that although formats and delivery systems may change, the building itself houses resources, personnel, and services that will have continuing value. They also suggest that we increase our virtual presence through tools such as Facebook and mobile technology to help promote and market our services.

We wonder if the community sees the library in a similar light. We hope that the strategic planning process will reveal:

- How our community values the current services we provide
- Concerns community members have about the future of the library
- New or expanded services community members would like the library to provide

2. How can libraries meet the challenge of promoting, delivering, and discussing books with the community in the new era of e-books?

All the established industries focused on the creation and dissemination of media (book, magazine and newspaper publishers; music and movie studios) are facing an uncertain future as formats and distribution methods change. Some formats may disappear entirely; others may coexist indefinitely with new digital counterparts. Regardless, the industries will need to adapt and evolve, and so too will libraries, which have long depended on publishers as the source for content that draws many of their users.

As unlikely as it is that the physical book will disappear completely, the observed growth in e-reader and e-book purchasing and borrowing represents changes that the library must address with increasing technological nimbleness and strategic decisions. Similar challenges will be facing libraries as disc media disappear.

From statistics indicating that one in six Americans are using an e-reader (Miller 32-34), to publishing data that also reflects strong growth in e-reader and e-book markets (Reid 18), current literature is rife with speculation and discussion about the future of books and libraries in a digital world. In a chapter of *No Shelf Required 2: Use and Management of Electronic Books*, Joseph Sanchez asserts that:

The digital revolution has already succeeded in creating an environment of doubt and insecurity across the field, as libraries have lost their roles as information gatekeepers. The advent of e-books has only exacerbated the problem, because publishers and vendors want to control content, placing libraries in an increasingly marginalized role” (Polanka 171).

He adds, “When the nature of the book is challenged and redefined, so too is the very nature and essence of library” (171).

In his article, “Libraries, Ebooks and Competition: At the Tipping Point,” Eric Hellman sees a threat in the changing relationships between publishers, distributors and libraries. He writes, “The survival of libraries will depend on their ability to take advantage of e-book technologies to deliver new kinds of value, even as competition arises in the delivery of their traditional services” (22-23).

In a contrary view, Rebecca Miller sees opportunity. She says: “...despite the ebook hype, and fear about the demise of libraries, the library experience is enriched by ebooks as another popular addition to collections already rich with various formats that keep users coming back” (34).

Another view suggests a traditional role for libraries as they face a proliferation of digital materials. John Green, for example, asserts, “Libraries will be the most important home for books that aren’t blockbusters but deserve to stand out from the crowd” (42). Green also believes that library staff will continue to provide valuable services to readers. “How,” he asks, “in the unmoderated sea of crap, would anyone ever find anything worth reading?” (28).

We took the concerns represented in the literature to library staff. Are books our brand? Is the reading life an experience that will continue to be part of the library world? If so, how can we integrate e-books and e-readers into our future as well?

Library staff believes that books and the promotion of reading constitute a significant and valued part of what we offer our community. The potential for this value to be undermined by the growth of digital technologies and products is perceived as real and imminent. In our 2008 community survey, the act of checking out a physical object (print or disc) was the number one purpose people cited for visiting the Monroe County Public Library (2008 MCPL Strategic Plan). If e-book use continues to soar, how will the library stay relevant to the reading life of our community when residents do not feel it is necessary to visit the library itself to find a desired book? Will our reader’s advisory and reference services be trumped by web offerings that cater to similar needs? How can we compete with vendors like Amazon who present simple-to-use, streamlined interfaces that contrast with the library’s waiting lists and authentication requirements? Will authors, publishers, and distributors of intellectual property (whether it be books, magazines, movies, or music) develop technology solutions and business models that include libraries?

To change these threats into opportunities, the library needs to address two major challenges. First, how can the library endure and thrive as a place where people can continue to find the technology, lendable books and expertise to support the community’s reading needs in a digital world? Apart from the free nature of our lending practices, what can we do to seamlessly integrate these new products and tools along with their attendant processes (collection development, circulation, training for staff and patrons, etc.) into our budget and services? Second, how can we promote reading, sharing, and the enjoyment of books across the ages and in all formats? What services, spaces, staff competencies, and marketing should the library be developing to nurture the community’s reading life?

During a staff day session with library employees, we outlined some of the ways the library is currently supporting reading needs in a digital world. For each of these existing services, however, there are enormous opportunities for change, expansion, and growth. As we listed the positives—a relatively robust book collection and budget; access to online books; staff training in e-readers and e-books; partnerships and programming that support authors and literacy; our reader’s advisory blogs, databases and other content; spaces for reading and discussing books; and staff members dedicated to sharing the joy of reading for all ages—we also highlighted ways the library could meet the challenges of the future. Some of the suggestions bear serious consideration:

- Examine and recommend models of e-book lending as well as to address the possibilities of lending e-readers and other mobile technologies. Fast-track the decision making process. (See chapters in *No Shelf Required 2: Use and Management of Electronic Books* for an overview of different lending models.)
- Develop an e-lending philosophy and circulation policies that will meet community needs while maintaining the free lending practices that differentiate us from other distributors.
- Develop a new budgetary and acquisitions model that can respond to the growing e-book demand for all ages. Will patron-driven acquisitions (“give them what they want”) meet the

needs of the community? Or is the traditional librarian-guided collection development model still the best course? Should funding for e-books be any different than for print?

- Continue focus on readers' advisory training.

For the second challenge, promoting the reading life, we advocate these steps:

- Pursue the development/purchase of an integrated catalog function that allows for reader feedback, reviews, and rating of books.
- Provide programs for all types of reading related groups—perhaps as partnerships, perhaps as casual, patron-driven events. Explore the lending of book sets (as either physical items or e-readers with pre-loaded titles) for books discussion groups to borrow.
- Create a space that provides customers with enhanced access/services/technology and comfortable environments in which to explore and discuss books in all formats.
- Develop dynamic web pages and resources that encourage patrons to utilize our collections, to talk with our experts, and to share with a community of readers.
- Extend the reach of all of our reader services and collections to the community via a well-developed marketing and promotional campaign. Utilize new technologies as a major arm of this strategy.

3. Should the library become involved in the production, distribution and/or archiving of local content?

Collectively, public libraries already distribute digital media and have huge purchasing power. New services like OverDrive and Freegal are allowing us to make e-books, e-audiobooks, and downloadable music available to our patrons. But it is far from clear if such digital distribution will smoothly ramp up and eventually come to meet local users' needs similar to distribution of physical media. Some major publishers (Simon and Schuster, Penguin, Macmillan, Hachette) have refused to make their e-books available to libraries. Very little in the way of music and movies is currently available, due to restrictive digital rights management. The publishers themselves are being squeezed, both on the retail end by the dwindling number of outlets and on the supply side by authors who now no longer need a publisher to get their work distributed. Public libraries wanting to freely distribute media that otherwise might be purchased many more times by individual users are perceived as just another threat to profits and shareholder interests.

If the traditional publishing pipeline is replaced by large digital content aggregators contracting directly with content creators like writers and musicians, and if those agreements do not allow for distribution to public libraries, what other role might the library play in ensuring that residents of their communities have access, regardless of their ability to pay?

In a blog post that engendered widespread chatter in the library profession, Seth Godin argued that worrying about e-book lending models is missing the point. Librarians who do so, he argues, are "...defending (the) library as warehouse as opposed to fighting for the future, which is librarian as producer, concierge, connector, teacher and impresario." Other library professionals look at the disarray the publishing world is experiencing and see the potential for libraries to be sidelined and devalued. A recent article in *Publisher's Weekly* underscoring the importance of librarians warns:

The copyright bedrock upon which libraries are built...stands to be trumped by contracts in the digital age. And if one accepts that the future of reading is digital, the e-book discussion becomes much bigger than libraries angling for access to bestselling e-books; it becomes a fight for their future" (Albanese 33).

Albanese also warned of future irrelevancy when he said, “If libraries cannot lend popular, current e-books, they risk being seen as outmoded” (22).

In response, many people have advocated that libraries look at the possibilities of being content creators—primarily of locally created content. A number of chapter contributors in *No Shelf Required 2: Use and Management of Electronic Books* outline the possibilities and problems of libraries as content creators. Thomas Peters, for example, asserts in “Libraries as Zones for Content Creation, Indie Publishing, and Print on Demand” that connecting readers and authors is what libraries do best and that we “need to ramp up activities and services that were largely handled by publishers and booksellers during the print era” (Polanka 169).

Given that library staff members believe that the collection, organization, and dissemination of books and other media types will continue to be one of our primary services, we asked how they would feel about the possibility of being content creators and/or archivists. The rise of high speed data networks has created new distribution methods for novels, non-fiction, music, and movies that will soon change (or make irrelevant) many of our internal library processes. Digital items require no labeling, no shelving, no check-in or check-out. This represents a major change in the way libraries may provide services.

As Amazon comes to dominate the distribution of books to an ever greater degree, with iTunes playing a similar role for music, and likewise Netflix for movies, perhaps there are new opportunities for libraries.

Should we consider becoming publishers/distributors of content that is of interest to our users, but is not available from the giants of the industry? We already do this through CATS, our community access television station, which has long been making locally generated video content available, and through the Indiana Room, which more recently has begun creating and distributing digital content. Is there a way that the library could tap into the vibrant, creative, artistic community in which we live? Will local musicians, filmmakers, and authors who are not under contract with major publishers also welcome the opportunity to have their works published by such a respected and accessible player as the public library? Can existing in-house services be the models for further development of digital content? Informal discussions with local musicians indicated a high level of enthusiasm for such an initiative.

To pursue this concept of "Library as Publisher," we would need to:

- Establish policies for what kinds of content we would host
- Develop format standards, submission procedures, and evaluation criteria to determine the basis for accepting or declining submitted works
- Address the copyright, licensing, and any other legal issues surrounding the distribution of third party content
- Purchase and/or develop a platform for making this content searchable and downloadable by library customers.
- Decide whether we want to treat access by local users (e.g., library cardholders) differently from access by those outside Monroe County.

It would require a significant amount of time and energy to do well, with some new staff capacities and perhaps an editorial board. We see it as an interesting avenue, providing online access to materials not available from Amazon, Overdrive, or Freegal, of interest to our community, and supportive of our local creative scene.

4. What impact will new literacies have on library services?

While knowing how to read and write are still basic literacy skills, an individual who is prepared to thrive in today's world must have an expanded literacy tool box and competencies. Various terms such as "transliteracy," "digital and media literacy" or "metaliteracy," these competencies highlight the complex relationship between different tools, media, and learning processes that problem solving, reflection and engagement require in the 21st Century. As Renee Hobbes in *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action* explains, digital and media literacy:

...encompasses the full range of cognitive, emotional and social competencies that includes the use of texts, tools and technologies; the skills of critical thinking and analysis; the practice of message composition and creativity, the ability to engage in reflection and ethical thinking; as well as active participation through teamwork and collaboration (17).

The challenge for the library and its limited staff time and financial resources is how to support the development of all types of literacy. With 66% of fourth grade Indiana Public school students scoring below proficiency levels in 2009, Indiana children need traditional reading and writing help as well as new digital literacy skills ("Early Warning!" 43). Adults, as variously situated with technology and opportunities as they are, cannot be taught this literacy tool box with a one-size-fits-all approach. Recognizing the need to empower Indiana residents with a full range of literacy skills, a group of Indiana educators have formed the Hoosiers and Information Literacy (HAIL) Project. In a presentation to library staff, Carrie Donovan, IU librarian and HAIL member, outlined the difficulties of teaching information literacy skills to all ages. She also debunked the myth of the digital native:

Young adults who grew up with digital technology are interested in using new tools and diving right in, but they don't intuitively know how to do research or analyze information. They don't know how to use these tools to harness information (Donovan).

The library's current strengths are found in our extensive website with access to online information content; programming for early literacy; Summer Reading programs that encourage the maintenance of reading skills; school-year support for students through homework help, visits to schools, library tours, and deeper engagement in classroom assignments; support for adult literacy; and our technology training classes for adults. More can and should be done on this front. Staff outlined a variety of approaches to promulgate and encourage all ages to acquire reading, writing, as well digital and media literacy skills. Along with ideas about the digital media center and associated technology, library staff believes that we need to devote resources to the design and implementation of:

- Programs designed to specifically develop digital and media skills for residents of all ages
- Promote increased community support for early literacy initiatives as central to life-long success
- Engage in a public relations campaign that promotes the value of digital and media literacy skills and encourages patrons to evaluate and use the appropriate information sources
- Look forward enough to understand new digital divides and challenges. If technology becomes cheap and completely mobile, how will the library serve the information needs of the community effectively?

As one staff member said, "A literate person will have to be a constantly learning person. There must be new, less expensive ways to create/recreate literate persons." How can the library help the community to create these literate residents? How can we give people the tools for a successful life? If most families will have access to internet connections in their homes, will bandwidth and devices be the basis of a new digital divide that will impact community members?

5. How will the library incorporate new technologies and services that will transform facilities from places where things are stored into spaces where community members are encouraged to work, create and build?

Library futurist Joan Frye Williams views the future library as a “kitchen”—where patrons can collaborate, create and share—rather than a “grocery store” where the ingredients sit on a shelf waiting for someone to take them away and use them elsewhere (Williams). There are many researchers who echo or even extend this metaphor by focusing on libraries as experience zones—as spaces where meaningful connections and experiences happen. In “The Emerging New Library/Librarian Experience,” Stephen Abram talks about how libraries can co-create experiences with information seekers. He highlights the importance of collaboration and community. His model describes information professionals working within teams to achieve institutional and community goals. He asserts that it is not just a matter of providing users with information and materials. It is collaborating and acting as “partners in knowledge creation.” Libraries are answering the call, exploring ways they can become the nexus for cooperative and collaborative learning and experiences for all ages. Chicago Public Library's “YOUmedia,” Baltimore's “Storyville,” and business, homework or study centers where people can come together to produce their products are just a few examples of this type of endeavor (Abram).

“Public Libraries Daring to be Different” also outlines a variety of projects that exemplify projects of this kind (Donel and Mille). Requiring nimbleness in technological adaptation and innovation, deliberately designed spaces and services, as well as staff members who are trained and savvy, it is easy to take this vision even further by considering the role of the kitchen in everyday life. Not only is a kitchen the spot where nurturing food is produced, it is also often discussed as the heart of a household or family. The role of the library as gathering space resonates in this arena as well.

Staff discussions about future services incorporate the kitchen metaphor very nicely. These innovative ideas highlight roles that might be useful frames for our inquiries to the public about the future of the library:

- Support our community's “inner geek” by creating a community based collaborative learning environment where people can learn to use, create, modify and repair new technologies and communication tools. A staff member said: “This would place the library at the center of community learning and build a citizenry that can both use and create new technological tools.” For staff, enhanced research, mentoring, and teaching skills would be essential for successful employment.
- Be the center of our community's information needs. As well as being available in the library and online, librarians would serve on community groups as professionals who navigate the information world and whose expertise is central to community decision making and problem solving. The library and its staff would become central to everyone in the community for assistance in finding, using, and analyzing data. In effect, any community-based collaborative work would have the library and its resources, as well as trained staff, on board.
- Fill the need for collaborative and exploratory spaces by creating a digital creativity center for all ages. Teach, mentor, and support social and digital media learning and creation, and tie these services to job training, education and support for the arts. (See Gathering space/Community Center below.)

These and many other ideas have the power and potential to move traditional services into the future and to help the library become a center for creative and collaborative endeavors.

6. Will the library's role as a gathering space and community center become more central to our success?

Ideas about libraries as gathering spaces are part of many contemporary library vision and mission statements and library literature is replete with articles about the importance of welcoming spaces and creating a place for community connections. Current discourse about libraries as gathering spaces goes a step further and talks about the importance of the library as a civic organization—a place that encourages community members to become active and knowledgeable citizens who participate in community-based discussions and decisions, political and other. Libraries do this by providing the spaces, activities and programs that bring together disparate groups in a community.

The Library Futures Committee identified six library functions that, when considered together, outline services we feel might establish the library even more firmly as a community/gathering spot:

1. Library as third place—a place between home and work/school where people can participate in continued learning and pursue opportunities for social engagement (Scott).
2. Active partnerships with other community organizations and informal groups. As a way to maximize dwindling resources and avoid competition, partnerships also enrich the library's role as a community center (Ito, Mizuke, et al).
3. Programming focus, providing experiences for families, children, teens, and adults. This is the bread and butter of libraries who want to be seen as community centers and the challenges of doing this in both physical and virtual spaces is of immediate concern (Edwards, Biando, Rauseo).
4. Arena for civic engagement—look at ways the library can enrich/formalize the role we play in producing an informed citizenry via civic forums, expanded coverage of government meetings, and other programming (Scott).
5. Services for disenfranchised communities and under-resourced individuals—how can we utilize social media and digital tools to publish content from disenfranchised groups as well as generate opportunities for personal growth and education? (Maxwell).
6. Small business resource—providing resources to businesses that will support the growth of local economic well-being via collections, information resources, collaborative work spaces and trained professionals (Edwards, Biando, Rauseo).

Echoing many of the previous recommendations, and building on existing strengths and the principles of neutrality and open access, the library will need to consider the following actions to extend our role as a community gathering space:

- Enhance broadband capacity for improved network access.
- Create a digital creativity center for social-based learning and digital media creation.
- Explore and implement programming that utilizes digital/social media.
- Explore and create ways that enhance the library's physical and online spaces while retaining a safe, neutral character that promotes community building.
- Create a one-stop, online source for civic engagement, from access to materials and community specific content to a vibrant social forum for civic issues and discussion.
- Expand our beneficial partnerships with other community organizations.

Some staff suggestions related to specific library spaces and functions include:

- Provide more spontaneous ways for patrons to gather by granting immediate access to meeting rooms, study spaces, etc.

- Consider an expanded infant and toddler room for play groups, the equivalent of a Learn and Play Space for older children, and a series of interactive “literacy spots” which would support the cognitive and social development of children.
- Replace and/or enhance our performance and display spaces so that we serve an expanded arts mission and community

Conclusion

Through our work, the Library Futures Committee has explored some of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for the Monroe County Public Library. We hope that our carefully selected questions and the responses they have generated from our research and staff responses will serve as valuable resources for the strategic planning process. As the Strategic Planning Committee moves with its work, it is essential to know if the public wants and expects the library to:

- Be a space for creative and collaborative work for all types of work and enjoyment
- Serve as the hub of community activities and dialogue
- Be the place where they come to share reading and books
- Create, distribute and archive local content
- Provide learning opportunities for the public in literacy skills needed throughout their lives

If these roles are determined to be central to the library moving into the future, we would like to highlight some of the organizational responses that staff suggested:

- Staff development so we can effectively teach and mentor our patrons towards digital and media literacy
- Technological and organizational nimbleness
- Effective and widespread marketing and promotional work
- Spaces that facilitate digital literacy and creativity

We strongly support these actions and believe they should be an integral part of the library’s next strategic plan. We look forward to meeting the challenges of the digital world head on and urge you, the authors of our new Strategic Plan, to carry our strengths—free and open access to information and information professionals; information resources that meet the needs of our community; programming and expertise to promote all kinds of literacy and learning; and spaces where people can interact, share and experience—into the future of the Monroe County Public Library.