

The Hyperlinked Library

by Michael Stephens, PhD

A TTW White Paper



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“The Library is unlimited and cyclical” Jorge Luis Borges

Libraries continue to evolve. As the world has changed with emerging mechanisms for global communication and collaboration, so have some innovative, cutting edge libraries. My model for the Hyperlinked Library is born out of the ongoing evolution of libraries and library services. Weinberger's (1999) chapter “The Hyperlinked Organization” in *The Cluetrain Manifesto* was a foundational resource for defining this model as are the writings of Michael Buckland, Seth Godin, and others. I've been writing and presenting about it for a few years - expanding and augmenting as new ideas and new technologies take libraries in new directions.

In *Serials Review* (2007), I defined the Hyperlinked Library model as

an open, participatory institution that welcomes user input and creativity. It is built on human connections and conversations. The organizational chart is flatter and team-based. The collections grow and thrive via user involvement. Librarians are tapped in to user spaces and places online to interact, have presence, and point the way. The hyperlinked library is human. Communication, externally and internally, is in a human voice. The librarians speak to users via open, transparent conversation. (p. 255-256)

The model incorporates recent dialogues about Web 2.0 by such authors as O'Reilly, and concepts tied to Library 2.0 and participatory service, including ideas presented by Casey and Savastinuk in their book *Library 2.0*.

The model is broader than just online communication and collaboration. It encompasses both physical and virtual space, as well as many types of libraries. Presenting the model to assembled teacher librarians at the Australian School Library Association conference in Perth in 2009, I argued that school librarians could use the model as well to extend support for learning beyond the walls of the school library and engage with students, teachers and administrators in an open, transparent manner wherever the learning takes place.

Adapting to change in a positive, forward thinking manner will be important for libraries. The response to ongoing change should be constant and purposeful – based on thoughtful planning and grounded in the mission of libraries. Hyperlinked library services are born from careful trend-spotting, an application of the foundational tenets of librarianship and an informed understanding of emerging technologies' societal and cultural impact.

Along with adapting to constant change should be a positive approach to challenges currently confronting libraries and information centers all over the world.

An ongoing challenge to libraries is public perception. In 2005, OCLC found that people perceive a narrow view of the library brand. Books was the foremost answer in a survey question devoted to what people think about when they think about libraries. More worrisome for those working in technology-related areas in libraries was the finding that 1% of those surveyed start their information needs at library Web sites. OCLC's follow up report in 2007 noted that use of library Web sites had dropped again – to 22% of the public surveyed. Consider the resources we use developing our Web sites – the return on investment for staff time, money and technology is must be high. The use of open source software platforms / content management systems is one way hyperlinked libraries can boost their online presence ROI.

Another notable challenge currently is flagging budgetary issues. The recent global economic downturn has affected many libraries in the US and globally – some to the point of cutting staff, hours, services and in some extreme and disheartening cases to the point of closing. Making do with limited budgets and resources means we need to be ever diligent with handling our other challenges centered around technology including:

Techno-lust: This challenge is an overarching need for new technology combined with unrealistic expectations for the problems it may solve and too much techno-lust can damage a library's public perception and internal morale. Purchasing technology without a strong connection to the library's mission or technology plan can possibly yield less than stellar results.

Other challenges related to technology include **techno-stress**, when new tools seemingly arrive daily creating an uneasy feeling of anxiety related to understanding it all while **techno-divorce** addresses the culture of perfect in many libraries that prevents us from ending projects that just aren't working. **Techno-shame** occurs when

embarrassed library staff confess they are embarrassed to not be knowledgeable about emerging technologies, while **techno-phobia** creates an atmosphere where no new technologies are explored because of an unrealistic fear. Often, this institution is mired in a culture of perfect – where nothing is done without endless meetings, word-smithing and discussion. In 2010, there aren't resources and time to exist in that paradigm. The Hyperlinked Library is nimble and quick.

Some newer challenges I recently added to the model include:

Techno-hesitation: This library is caught in the mindset of “Let's wait until the next new thing comes out” to try something new. Experimentation with emerging technology should be ongoing. Trial and error and “divorcing” those initiatives that did not work so well leads to more learning and innovation.

Techno-banality: No dumb computers! This library is mired in a culture of overprotectiveness. Technology offerings for library users are so locked down and secure that access is fraught with barriers and blocks. In a time of such emphasis on user experience and library as community space, these barriers have the potential to send users to other locations for access.

Institutional challenges include embedded staff who roadblock new initiatives, silos of knowledge in which institutional memory and procedure is stored in one place/person, and institutional culture based on perfection. An underlying cause of many of this inner challenges to libraries could easily be boiled down to fear: fear of change, fear of technology (as above) and a fear of losing control of our collections in a world where Google is the go to information resource and books download seamlessly to e-readers.

What can meet these changes and challenges head on in the 21st century world of constant change and numerous challenges to the role and place of libraries in our world? The Hyperlinked Library model is meant to define a set of characteristics that when adopted by individual libraries could lead to improved perception, improved use and improved service models for our ever-changing world. Some of the characteristics of the model include:

The Library is Transparent

Transparency in organizations yields an open flow of communication, an involvement of all stakeholders and an honest approach to governance. For libraries this involves offering two communication mechanisms for user interaction and feedback. Tell your users how you are spending their money (via collected taxes, student fees or monetary support depending on the type of library).

Another aspect of transparency is welcoming anonymous feedback, in the form of suggestion box entries or via online commenting. Librarians should not be afraid of anonymous comments. There may be some negativity, easily ignored, as well as some useful insights, ideas and informative questions. One example of this type of interaction

with library staff is the VBPL Talks blog, maintained by the executive leadership team of the Virginia Beach Public Library. Out on the open Web at <http://vbpltalks.blogspot.com/>, the site is a forum for anonymous questions from the library staff to administrators.

Library user involvement is also key to transparency and welcoming users into our spaces and virtual places is paramount. In “The Transparent Library,” Michael Casey and I urged administrators to focus “on user-driven policy not driving users away.” (2008) Understanding how policy impacts user is key as well. Does that sternly worded sign on the library door have to be there denouncing the use of cell phone technology within the library? Wouldn't it be better to encourage considerate behavior and let go of banning devices that connect our users to the world. You might find that a mobile phone interface for the library catalog or “text a citation” features might be more in line with user needs or wants. Michael Casey and I noted: “Focus on understanding those folks who might be breaking your rules by listening to their needs. Then act. You and your users will benefit.” (2007)

The Library Learns and Plays

Henry Jenkins defined **play** in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture* as “the capacity to experiment with one’s surroundings as a form of problem-solving.” The concept has seen a resurgence in organizations as a means to encourage learning and engagement. As part of the Hyperlinked Library model, an organization focused on experimentation and play encourages all staff to learn. That learning will lead to a more informed, engaged staff. A culture of play replaces a culture of perfect.

Play was foundational to the creation of the original Learning 2.0 program - a self-directed emerging technologies course conceived in 2006 by Helene Blowers at the Public Library of Charlotte Mecklenburg County in 2006 for a system wide, all staff included endeavor. Also known as the “23 Things” method, the program has been adopted by libraries, consortia, state systems and national libraries in the United States, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands and beyond.

The global success of Learning 2.0/23 Things programs in libraries is a notable example of an emerging “learning culture” in our institutions. “I believe that this has been one of the most transformational and viral activities to happen globally to libraries in decades,” argued Abram (2008) in a blog post at Stephen’s Lighthouse.

Self-directed, empowered learning based on the concepts of discovery and play within the context of how libraries might use emerging technologies may lead to more innovative uses of those technologies for library services. Currently, I’m conducting an ongoing research project in Australia, measuring the value and impact of the program in libraries. Early conclusions point to the fact that the lasting impact of participation in a Learning 2.0 program can lead to more informed staff discussions and problem-solving with tools highlighted in the learning modules. A stronger awareness of the tools and their use on a personal level - RSS feeds for keeping current as a prominent example -

is another lasting result of the program. See the research site at Tame the Web online for more, including a recent conference paper.

The Library Connects with Users

Creating connections and community for library users is paramount in the Hyperlinked Library model. Peter Block defines community as “human systems given form by conversations that build relatedness,” while Rheingold defined virtual community as “social aggregators that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” Both of these definitions - years apart - have one thing in common. The connections are formed via conversation.

Seth Godin’s *Tribes* explores the idea of interconnected community as well. Godin argues that businesses fail because “they forgot to embrace their tribe” and offers a roadmap for creating a tribe, which he defines as “a group of people connected to one another, connected to a leader, and connected to an idea.” Social Media sites break down geographic barriers and allow groups to form via various communication mechanisms. A tribe can be global or simply based in the library’s community.

Notable examples of creating a library tribe include the social networks created by Hennepin County Library, Roselle Public Library (a Ning site for library card holders) and the community of users who actively comment at Ann Arbor District library’s Web site. Dublin City Libraries One Book program recently created a community for readers of *Dracula*. One commonality of these sites is that conversation is encouraged between all users, including responses from library staff.

From the Netherlands comes another fascinating example of connecting with users. Patrons of the DOK library in Delft will soon be able to record their memories of the town and family for sharing via a wall of monitors called the Agora. Digital images, audio, and video will make up the tapestry of local history available in this high tech setting. Here they transcend the role of library user and become active creator in the collections of the library. Watch for this model to make inroads in other libraries around the world.

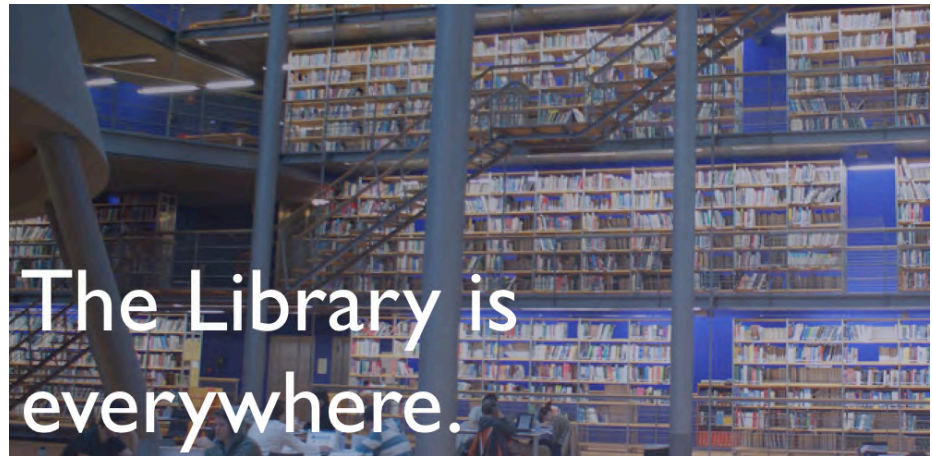
The potential to interact online with a community of library users is promising as we find our way through Facebook fan pages, library twitter accounts, and communities built in sites like Ning or with Drupal. Godin warns, however, that some organizations are stuck: bound by archaic rules or not only avoiding change but fighting against it. This echoes the aforementioned dangers of technophobia as well.

The Library is Everywhere

Beyond creating community, the Hyperlinked Library seeks to put its collections everywhere - available to all outside the walls of the library. As institutions such as Duke University libraries develop mobile applications for accessing their digital collections on the move, we are fast approaching a landscape of ubiquitous library access.

I was recently in Columbia, South Carolina, where I found myself in the hotel bar after a presentation about the Hyperlinked Library model. The bartender was fired up about his

brand new iPod Touch. He was playing the bar's music from it via a cable attached to the sound system, and surfing the Web via the hotel's free Wi-Fi. He praised the access to the Web and his apps and held up the shiny new device and said:



"I have the whole world of information in my hand."

What does it mean in 2010 for a young man – a typical consumer of information – to believe he has the world in the palm of his hand? What does it mean for the role of librarians? For libraries? This will be an important consideration for libraries – how can we compete with ubiquitous Wikipedia/Google access? One solution: making the collection, services and personnel of the library available wherever library users happen to be – in the palm of their hand. The Hyperlinked Library, we might say, has streams of information and knowledge that flow like water to where inquisitive users are thirsty.

The Library Encourages the Heart

The defining element of the Hyperlinked Library model is that the library should seek to encourage the heart of users via every mechanism and every channel possible. Rules and outdated policies fall away in favor of breaking down barriers to service and collections.

Encouraging the heart is satisfying the needs and wants of our users - something libraries have always done. The need for self-actualization, inspiration, basic human curiosity, and support for learning are all part of this concept. Encouraging the heart

might mean beautiful artwork in the library space, a welcoming, engaged staff ready to explore *with* users and a physical/virtual space that is easy and FUN to use.

When asked what I see for the future of libraries - all kinds of libraries - I imagine a space where users will connect, collaborate, create and care.

Connect: Users will connect with each other and with library staff to follow their dreams and get what they want/need. Access to information sources will be unfettered. Support for technology and managing the ever-growing flow of information will be readily available no matter where users are.

Collaborate: Users will meet in groups. Tribes will form based on projects, interests, community need. Spaces will offer the best in collaborative technologies. Learning will occur here as well.

Create: Users will find the tools they need to share their own stories with their family, friends and the world if they so choose. The best technologies and support for these endeavors will be a part of library services. Library staff will become guides and co-creators. Local content will reign as one of the most unique offerings of the library.

Care: Users who interact with a transparent, playful institution grounded in learning, experimentation will surely care about the library. Those who actively participate will remember the library when funding issues occur or needs for more space or more technology must be met. The library is part of the community and the community holds the library in its heart.

These characteristics are just some of the facets of what I believe will make libraries truly innovative, useful and needed in the 21st century.

This article was adapted from a presentation given by the author at the 4th Leipziger Kongress für Information und Bibliothek, Leipzig, Germany in March 2010.

Links:

Ann Arbor District Library: <http://aadl.org>

DOK: <http://www.dok.info/>

Dublin City Libraries: <http://www.dublinonecityonebook.ie/>

Hennepin County Library's Bookspace: <http://www.hclib.org/pub/bookspace/>

The Hyperlinked Library: <http://tametheweb.com/the-hyperlinked-library/>

Research at Tame the Web: <http://research.tametheweb.com/>

Stephen's Lighthouse: <http://stephenslighthouse.com/>

Further Reading:

Casey, M. E., & Savastinuk, L. C. (2007). *Library 2.0 : a Guide to Participatory Library Service*. Medford, N.J.: Information Today, Inc., 2007.

Biographical Notes:

Dr. Michael Stephens is Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Dominican University in Illinois. He spent over fifteen years working in public libraries while developing a passion for technology and the human connections it affords. His recent publications include two ALA Library Technology Reports on Web 2.0, the monthly column "The Transparent Library" with Michael Casey in *Library Journal*, and other articles about emerging trends and technology. Michael also maintains the popular blog Tame the Web. He received an IMLS doctoral fellowship at the University of North Texas, was named a *Library Journal* Mover and Shaker, and received the 2009 Association of Library & Information Science Educators Faculty Innovation Award as well as a 2009 University of North Texas Rising Star Alumni Award. He was named the 2009 CAVAL Visiting Scholar, researching the effect of Learning 2.0 programs in Australian libraries. Michael speaks nationally and internationally on libraries, technology, and innovation. He currently authors the *Library Journal* monthly column "Office Hours," exploring trends in LIS education. He is fascinated by library buildings and virtual spaces that center around users, content, digital creation and encouraging the heart.

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