

Notes of Binge Thinker
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The Future of North Texas Library Partners

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Welcome to Notes of a Binge Thinker!

It is with mixed emotions that I write this column. I have tendered my resignation to the organization effective October 21, 2011. I have taken a position with the City of Fort Worth as their Assistant Library Director of Public Services. This will be the last post to the Notes of a Binge Thinker blog. I am hopeful that I will create a new one in my capacity at Fort Worth. If I do, I hope my faithful readers will follow me.

I am very proud of the work I have done with the North Texas Library Partners over the last ten years. I started out as their Technology Consultant and was proud to work with many different libraries on their technological infrastructures and help them plan for a future where technology will take on a more important role within the library's offerings. When I took over as Executive Director, the organization was not well-regarded within the library community. I worked on improving the organization strengths while eliminating its weaknesses. As a result, I believe the organization is now considered a cutting-edge organization working for the betterment of its member libraries and the communities they serve. I also began the long process of moving the organization away from total reliance on the Texas State Library and Archives Commission for funding. This process was completed this last summer when the membership voted to change the bylaws to make NTLP a true nonprofit library support organization. It will work on behalf of its partner libraries to continue the good work started forty years ago.

I am very confident in the future of the organization as my successor; Carolyn Davidson Brewer was my Assistant Director for six and half years. Her decision to come back to the organization set a bright future for NTLP. She is capable, confident and an individual well-recognized for her expertise in library science. We still need a regional organization in North Texas to carry out the work that the Texas State Library abandoned. Without NTLP, I can see libraries struggling even more in the near future.

I want to thank the NTLP Board of Directors for the opportunity they gave me to do so much good in so many communities over my four year tenure as Executive Director. I want to thank my staff for believing in my vision and working to make it a reality. Finally, I want to thank the librarians I have served over the last ten years. It has been a pleasure.

Ebook Future Scenario 4: Ebooks skip the library

Here is my fourth of four scenarios on the future of ebooks in libraries. I couldn't leave NTLP without finishing out my ebook series. Please find my comments following the scenario.

City Manager Ann Stuart read over the library director's report again. It was budget time in the annual cycle and each department head was required to give evaluation reports to the City Manager's office. The report was a description of the programs and services offered by the library during the previous year along with hard quantitative numbers. The city had also starting using Outcome-Based Evaluation to measure effectiveness of its various departments. Benchmarks were engaged to gauge how well the city was doing versus other cities of similar size and makeup.

The library report was alarming although it was not totally unexpected. Numbers were down in all programs and services you would expect from the library. Circulation had fallen by 50% off its peak of five years ago while the number of citizens attending traditional programming had fallen off even more dramatically. People were just not using the library in the same way any longer. The numbers for new programs, like job hunting classes, computer usage and community-based programming aka civic meetings, and ESL classes, had skyrocketed from five years ago. The library had also seen a slight increase in the number of individuals using the buildings. It seems the community needed a place to study, network and socialize like never before.

In looking over the OBE models the library had submitted, Ann saw very quickly that the library staff had anticipated all of this. The objectives seemed to be centered on the new services to show their value to the community while the more traditional services were judged more heavily by their hard numbers than the qualitative information you glean from OBE. The librarians foresaw that the community needed the library for different reasons. It had changed from one of getting books and DVDs to one of community gathering place offering a wide variety of services helping community members with their daily lives.

In thinking back to the times she had interacted with library staff, she recalled a conversation with the library director about the future of the printed book. Federal laws had been upheld to allow publishers to restrict the circulation of ebooks. Libraries were not allowed to offer this digital format to their patrons without paying a hefty fee, one that was cost prohibitive for the library. She also remembered a news report she read this year saying that more than 75% of the books produced today were in digital format. Printed books were now the minority and libraries had suffered in their traditional offerings because of this development.

The library staff had done an excellent job of preparing the city for this evolution. As the librarians predicted, people were still using the library, but for different reasons. The library had diversified its offerings to appeal to as many community sectors as possible. From the very rich to the very poor, it seemed the library was reaching out to the entire community to offer real value.

Ann liked what she saw. I'll have to make a point of convincing the Mayor and the council that the library is an essential part of our community. This data will help me do that..., Ann thought to herself. Let's hope they agree.

Ann went on to the next set of reports.

In this scenario, our society has realized a future where the library can no longer base its main value on serving as a book warehouse for the community. Because of legal decisions, it was not cost effective for circulation of materials to be the library's main service. Printed books were the exception and publishers/authors required a hefty licensing fee for libraries to circulate their digital material. The library either had to evolve, or lose its relevance.

Do I think this will happen to the public library? Yes I do, but not for many years. As a society, we are still facing tough decisions when it comes to how digital material should be handled and how authors should be compensated for their use. I have been encouraged by the recent developments of Amazon allowing their books to be circulated by libraries. Overdrive did a service for all of us by making this happen. We can now serve patrons who happen to have a Kindle. However, Amazon is just one book vendor working with a section of the publishing industry. Until Congress takes the time to review the copyright laws and change them to fit the 21st Century, libraries face an uphill battle in providing digital media to their communities.

What can a public library do to prepare for this future scenario? First of all, I think it is important not to overreact and move too fast to implement changes. You can do certain things to get your community ready for the new paradigm without causing your current value proposition of offering circulating materials to decline too rapidly. In other words, gradually add new services while maintaining traditional services by putting the pieces in place to lay a foundation to move in whatever direction events take the library. If you look at what the Fort Worth Library has put together in their latest strategic plan (can be found in draft form at <http://tinyurl.com/4ysjk96>), you can see a library that is preparing for many different scenarios. Here are some of their ideas (page 3 of the report):

Public libraries in the 21st century:

- Use the latest tools to understand their customers' interests, and meet those interests with a combination of targeted services and collections
- Offer a wide variety of traditional "hard copy" books and media, but also offer the latest in digital content
- Connect with people who prefer conducting library business online—be it reserving music CDs, using a database to trace a family tree, paying overdue fines, or borrowing an e-book
- Are popular with children who enjoy a story time, teens in search of a place to gather after school, and adults seeking a job, taking a computer class, or looking for something good to read
- Quickly adopt the latest time-saving technologies for the public and staff

- Have buildings that are up-to-date and sustainable, in convenient locations with sufficient parking for a quick trip while running errands or a long afternoon of study
- Provide comfortable and space-efficient facilities that are easily adapted to the ever-changing needs of the community

When it comes to digital media, I think public libraries need to stop isolating themselves and reach out to other libraries in the region, state or even nation. Libraries need to come together to collaborate on the future of digital media offerings. We need to build a platform ourselves that will allow libraries to offer digital media to their patrons. Sure, we still need to work out the legal entanglements, but once these are worked out, would it not be better for the library community to have established their digital media offerings on their own terms versus relying on the whims of a particular vendor? There are national movements, aka Internet Archive, Digital Public Library of America, ALA's own initiative, that have already done most of the upfront work for your library. Your chore is to get involved in these movements and make sure the interests of your library and your community are well-represented. If there is to be a national platform for delivering digital media, the time is now to get involved and not when everything has already been decided.

This part of my column has been very enjoyable. I have found scenario planning to be a very informative exercise when it comes to long term planning. I hope that my readers have learned some things about how better to prepare for a future with ebooks. I know I have.