



OPINION

Each month, OPINION features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

OPINION

Libraries never change (or do they?)

Wayne Bivens-Tatum is the Philosophy & Religion Librarian at Princeton University. In the course of his research, he came to muse on the seemingly ever-present discussion of change and libraries. Why is change so constantly desired – even demanded – of us?

While doing some research for a project on libraries and Enlightenment, I ran across an article by Grace O. Kelley on the "The Democratic Function of Public Libraries" that presents some familiar criticism:

"The library, even more than other institutions, seems not to have been altogether a true part of the social process. In some way, it has been switched out of the current of social change, occupying a niche or eddy of its own. For a long time it seems to have been but slightly affected by the forces which have been changing the rest of the world. One looks in vain in histories of culture and education for studies of the modern library as an active force which is making its impress upon the social fabric. Due to the nature of its organization and of its service it has been possible for it to continue to function largely on its original indefinite ideals and, in a sense, to let the modern world go by.

Not only our knowledge of the world, but the world itself, keeps changing from day to day. 'The inescapable drive of change under the accumulation of ideas and traditions, under the relentless impacts of science and invention,' make a fixed regime impossible. 'An industrial civilization founded on technology, science, invention, and expanding markets must of necessity change and change rapidly.' Any institution which does not change too, adapt itself to the times, and become part of the onward 'drive of change,' will be pushed aside to be left perhaps for a time to make a harmless life of its own."

The most interesting thing for me about the article was when it was written. It's from *The Library Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Jan., 1934), and yet it seems as timely as today's headlines, blog posts, or conference presentations. I left out a middle paragraph that helps fix the date of the article more.

"On the whole, the public library still has its eye on a state of society which it considers to be more or less permanent in nature. It is academic in its ideals, and to it the world's 'best books' of literature and fiction are still of superimportance; it seems sometimes 'unaware of the words, thoughts and things that science and invention have brought' but which in the long run must be heeded. The effect on general reading of the auto, the radio, the talkie, the news-reel, the tempo of modern life and of the machine age in general, is only confusedly sensed."

I almost wrote that this paragraph dates the article, but I don't think that's true. The effect on general reading of the talkie and the news-reel is still

probably "only confusedly sensed."

What has changed isn't the criticism of libraries for not adapting rapidly enough to social and technological change, but the assumption of what changes they should be making and why. The problem, according to this article, was that public libraries had no clear concept of their clientele, and thus offered reading that may or may not have been appropriate. However, the purpose of the library was to offer reading, especially reading designed to further the education of the masses in a democracy.

Kelley makes a lot of the distinction between public and special libraries. "The primary aims of both relate to knowledge: in the case of one, to the spread of the fruits of knowledge among the people; of the other, to the extension, through aid given to research and study, of the boundaries of knowledge." Public libraries weren't adapting fast enough to the specialisation of knowledge, and were with public funding attempting to supply reading of interest only to specialists. Instead, she argued, libraries should be supplying general reading that makes the rapidly increasing specialist knowledge accessible to the public. In fact, "librarians may well encourage writers to couch their findings in understandable and illuminating form, and, at the same time, improve their own equipment and facilities for distributing this product freely to eager readers." At first I thought this placed an unrealisable goal before librarians until I considered the enormous expansion of reference publishing in the decades after this article was written.

This isn't a serious issue now, if it ever was one, so that's at least one problem we've solved. The practical concerns of the time are as dated as the principles and hopes. Kelley, also writing in a time of economic uncertainty, was still hopeful in a way I'm not sure we would be capable of today, even if we were prone to think in her terms. Here's her concluding paragraph:

"For we can have faith to believe that the intelligent reading of worthwhile books on important matters that are of mutual interest both to the reader and to the author will result gradually in a clearer understanding of the changing concepts of society and all of its problems. This in turn will lead to a more effective and enlightened control over social conditions, increase the probability of happier and more successful living, and in this way justify the vision of democracy."

It's an attractive vision in some ways, but one I doubt many librarians would believe these days. There are certainly plenty of worthwhile books on important matters being written, and to some extent even read, but few still have any faith that more people reading good books (or even being more educated, for which "reading good books" is just a metonym) will lead to a clearer understanding of social problems or a "more effective and



Reclassified but demand steady

The federal government has revamped its occupation categories under the new Australian and New Zealand Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO), placing library and record keeping staff in the 'information and organisation' occupations and reporting a significant drop in sector numbers that is only partly due to the reshuffle of categories.

The new ANZSCO category is defined as working in "support organisations, government, individuals and the community by analysing, organising and managing information and data, and providing advice on policy, business and organisational methods, and the value of property and other items."

According to the latest skills research by the Clarius Group, new technologies, increasing demands to digitise records and succession planning are reportedly driving changes across a wide range of industry sectors in which information and organisation occupations are found.

Technologies driving this change include e-readers, smart phones, and tablet computers.

Skills requirements are being reshaped by the challenges of technology, retirements, and increasing requirements from both the private sector and all levels of government.

The sector is reportedly shrinking dramatically, dropping from 23 700 workers in the June 2011 quarter to just 13 900 in December reporting.

Library and information sector recruitment firm The One Umbrella says the changing requirements are revealing shortages of archivists and records staff with sentencing (document destruction) and electronic documents management experience for the business and public sectors, while there is a continuing demand for cataloguers, teacher librarians, and library-experienced sales consultants in the library sector.

Succession planning and up-skilling of existing staff remain ongoing concerns for many employers.

enlightened control over social conditions," and even less faith that public libraries are an essential part of that process.

This snapshot of library criticism from 75 years ago shows us both that libraries have in practice and principle changed dramatically in that time and in unpredictable ways. The only thing that hasn't seemed to change is the relentless criticism we apply to ourselves and our profession, the insistence that we are out of touch somehow with the larger world, that we've been "switched out of the current of social change, occupying a niche or eddy" of our own. Unless we assume that libraries suddenly began changing and adapting in response to this article in the *Library Quarterly*, we have to assume that such wasn't true then, and we have no real evidence that it's true now. What we have instead are insubstantial panics and false prophets of doom, and in this area it's true that libraries haven't changed at all.

Wayne Bivens-Tatum
Philosophy & Religious Librarian
Princeton University
rbivens@princeton.edu

Wayne also teaches arts and humanities librarianship programs for the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science. This article first appeared on Wayne's blog, *Academic Librarian* (blogs.princeton.edu/librarian/2010/04/libraries_never_change/) and is reproduced with the author's permission.

Reward yourself and get recognised!

- ➔ Turn your experience into a qualification!
- ➔ Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for existing skills and study
- ➔ Study whilst continuing to work and enhance your career prospects
- ➔ Enjoy the benefits of frequent contact with friendly, experienced trainers
- ➔ Enrol into either the Certificate IV or Diploma of Library/Information Services and apply for RPL
- ➔ Nationally recognised qualifications



Library Training
Services Australia

1300 17 15 60

www.ltsa.edu.au