Guest Editorial

A New Age of Reason for Academic Libraries[1]

Editor's Note: Speculating on the future (and possible demise) of libraries of all types has been a popular topic in various media and the apocalyptic theme running through recent work can be found in an April 2014 story appearing in *Slate*, entitled "What Will Become of the Library?" Focused on the public library, the author argues that this civic institution is standing "on a precipice" while suffering an "identity crisis" brought on by the challenges of a digital age. Academic librarians may take some solace in the author's conclusion that new spaces such as North Carolina State University's Hunt Library "reflect widespread confidence that universities will always have a place for libraries," but there are certainly others who have been less sanguine about our future.[2] *C&RL* has always provided a venue for thoughtful consideration of issues and trends shaping the future of the academic library, e.g., David Lewis's "Inventing the Electronic University," which will be among the essays featured in our upcoming 75th anniversary issue.[3] When Lewis authored that essay in 1988, he was a librarian at Columbia University, and I have asked another Columbia University librarian to reflect on several recent discussions of the future of the academic library and how they might be further informed by scholarly inquiry.

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During the years 1685–1815, European intellectual life was radically influenced by the Enlightenment, an Age of Reason that challenged traditional authority and advanced improvement through rational change based on principles and evidence. The North American library community, feeling the impact of technological progress, economic pressures, and social and political disruption, has spent the last decade thrashing about, seeking a refreshed purpose and new ways to demonstrate and create value and impact.

A series of conversations over the past year in the North American library community suggests that libraries are ready to move beyond collective "hand-wringing" and forge a new age of reason, a period of innovation built on robust research and development and systemic and collective strategies. Four of these conclaves will be described briefly, and the opportunities for academic libraries and the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) research agenda will be highlighted.

On April 29, 2014, the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) convened a conversation at the New York Public Library on the "national digital platform" and funding priorities for IMLS. A series of panels focused on key themes—infrastructure, content, use, tools, access at scale, and skills—and provoked rich and challenging discussions among the attendees. Several fundamental questions were raised, including:

- How do we move from scattered institutional investment and siloed projects to national programs;
- How do we expand our understanding of digital content creation at large scale to embrace curation, discovery, use and preservation of digital content;
- How do we build tools that are ubiquitous, iterative, transparent and integrated;

- How do we construct infrastructure at a global scale, and create public-private partnerships with publishers, media companies, search engines, and social media to advance digital platform objectives; and
- Are libraries recruiting, developing and retaining the professional staff who can lead in practice and performance?

On May 2–3, 2014, the American Library Association (ALA) brought together at the Library of Congress 80 individuals from all types of libraries and organizations that work with libraries. The focus of the discussion was trends that librarians will need to understand and address in order to lead libraries into the future in all kinds of communities. The attendees were inspired by a series of talks that were both insightful and inciteful: author Stephen Dubner on "How to Think Like a Freak," law professor Joel Garreau on "What Are Libraries Good For?," university president Renu Khator on "Education in the Future—Anywhere, Anytime," and futurist Thomas Frey on "From an Internet of Things to a Library of Things." The discussions informed the implementation of ALA's new Center for the Future of Libraries (http://www.ala.org/ offices/center-future-libraries), which has been established to: help libraries identify emerging trends, provoke conversations on how to shape the future, build connections with experts and innovative thinkers to help libraries tackle these issues, and provide a forum to explore how libraries can help create a better future for individuals and communities. Several key themes and questions were raised over those two days, including:

- What is the role of libraries in the future?
- What are the key values expressed in library service: such things as privacy and neutrality as adopted by libraries in serving users, and such things as trust and equity as placed by communities on libraries?
- How can libraries experiment and take risks to re-envision library services to current and new users?
- How can libraries advance as community hubs, networking and collaborating more effectively with governing bodies and local organizations?
- How can we dismantle the view of libraries as traditional or irrelevant, and rebrand libraries as exciting and progressive organizations that add value and have positive impact?

A concluding session identified barriers that libraries will have to overcome, including: inadequate funding, inability to collect and analyze data to support decisions, competition from the commercial sector, users who want to move faster than the library in embracing innovation, the challenge of mission creep and the difficulty of setting priorities, the context of collaboration and partnerships, and the education and training of library staff.

In the fall of 2013, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) launched a Strategic Thinking and Design process with the goal of defining and supporting emergent roles for research libraries.[4] Prior to this, the ARL strategic plan, historically organized around core library functions, had focused on three priorities: Advancing Scholarly Communications, Influencing Public Policy, and Transforming Research Libraries. At the ARL Fall Forum in 2012, John Seely Brown challenged ARL: "The challenges we face are both fundamental and substantial. We have moved from an era of equilibrium to a new normal, an era of constant disequilibrium. Our ways of working, ways of creating value, and ways of innovating must be reframed."[5]

The ARL process used a 2033 timeframe to predict long-term changes and an evolutionary path for research libraries. The framework sees libraries active across institutional boundaries and much more focused on collaborative roles. Research libraries will engage as an augmented information lens for engaging and empowering individuals, an open symposium for facilitating exploration and exchange within an

academic community, a meta-library ecosystem for powerful collaborative capacity, and a knowledge trust for providing enduring, barrier-free access for all research inquiry.

Ann Pendleton-Julian provided the concept of a "system of action," and five initiatives were proposed for ARL: 1) the collective collection, deep and wide platforms for ensuring knowledge resources are available; 2) scholarly dissemination engines, promoting wide reaching and sustainable publication of research and scholarship; 3) libraries that learn, integrated analytical environments to mine data for transformation; 4) the ARL academy, fostering and nurturing creative, effective, and diverse research library leadership; and 5) an innovation lab, an incubator for new ideas and the seeds of change. The plan also identifies essential capacities that support ARL's future direction: advocacy and policy, assessment, communication and marketing, membership and partnerships.

Also in the fall of 2013, ALA's Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP), with funding support from the Gates Foundation, announced the ALA "Policy Revolution!"[6] The goals were to: establish policy priorities for the library community, to engage decision makers and policy influencers, and to upgrade advocacy practice and capabilities. In support of this initiative, OITP engaged Amelia Bryne to identify key trends driving policy challenges. Ten areas were identified: 1) information technology which is fast moving and disruptive; 2) information institutions which are navigating unsteady ground; 3) information use which is driven by opposing forces; 4) the global context and an interconnected world; 5) the environment and the rise of resilience; 6) demographics with populations that are bigger, older and more diverse; 7) rising inequality and the importance of the public infrastructure; 8) the public sector with continuing and growing budget shortfalls; 9) education which is increasingly self-directed, collaborative and lifelong; and 10) work which requires new skills and new structures. These trends and challenges have raised a preliminary set of policy priorities: telecommunications policy including digital literacy, network neutrality and e-rate; digital content, in particular e-books; copyright; e-government; education, in particular school libraries; privacy protection; intellectual freedom; and open access.

The library community has a strong record of reflecting about the future, but I would argue that these more recent deliberations are far more robust and substantive. The reasoning is more enlightened, and the enlightenment is more reasoned. We are questioning the authority of tradition with new thinking about what we are, what we do, how we are viewed and understood, and how we do it. We are embracing a shifting vision of library as legacy, as infrastructure, as repository, as gateway, as enterprise and as public interest. We are bringing more relevant and sophisticated data to our planning, setting aside our reputation as a knowledge-poor knowledge profession.

Academic libraries have had a strong presence at these meetings, and there is much fodder in the questions that were raised and the ideas that were shared for exciting new research paths and program opportunities for ACRL, including:

- The migration from product to service;
- New approaches to financial and impact value, and the relationship between action and benefit;
- Fresh focuses on organizational culture, and professional preparation and staffing;
- The role of the library in teaching and learning, in research and scholarship;
- Cooperation based less on kumbaya and more on radical collaboration;
- Developing new products and new markets; and
- Leveraging assets in entrepreneurial ways.

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Notes

1. I attended the IMLS National Digital Platform meeting on April 29, 2014, and my commentary draws from the summary prepared by Maura Marx. I attended ALA's Libraries From Now On meetings on May 2–3, 2014, and my commentary draws from the summary prepared by Nancy Bolt. I attended a regional meeting and a design studio as part of the ARL planning process, and served as a member of the work group that drafted the framework document. My commentary draws from the presentation and discussion with the ARL membership in May 2014 and the framework draft document presented to the ARL board in July 2014. I serve as ALA Executive Board liaison to the OITP ALA Policy Revolution public policy advisory council, and my commentary draws from the trends report prepared by Amelia Bryne.

2. Michael Agresta, "What Will Become of the Library?: How It Will Evolve as the World Goes Digital," *Slate*, April 22, 2014 (11:31 p.m.), available online at www.slate.com/articles/life/design/2014/04/the_future_of_the_library_how_they_ll_evolve_for_the_digital_age.html [accessed 12 August 2014].

3. David W. Lewis, "Inventing the Electronic University," *College & Research Libraries* 49, no. 4 (1988): 291–304, available online at crl.acrl.org/content/49/4/291.full.pdf+html [accessed 12 August 2014].

4. "ARL Strategic Thinking and Design," Association of Research Libraries, available online at www.arl.org/about/arl-strategic-thinking-and-design [accessed 12 August 2014].

5. John Seely Brown, "'Changing How We Think About and Lead Change" (paper presented at the Association of Research Libraries Fall Forum, Washington, DC, October 11–12, 2012).

6. "ALA Launches Policy Revolution! Initiative for Libraries," American Library Association, available online at www.ala.org/news/node/9649 [accessed 12 August 2014].