

## ***Trustees in a Search for Web Order***

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To me, preparations for the future launch with critical evaluations of the past—an approach that looks to surface mistakes, precedents, and crucial continuities. American public libraries, for our example, took shape in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—party to what historian Robert Weibe called *The Search for Order* (1967). Then, the U.S. engaged in a transformative switch from rural and agrarian into modern society. The era was riven by rapid urbanization, massive influx of immigrants, and industrialization. The times also featured a major communications revolution. Innovations in printing and paper making met unprecedented demands from mandatory schooling and a newly literate populace. Enterprising authors and publishers joined to foster the Rise of the Mass Press. Popular reading exploded with a seemingly uncontrollable deluge of new genre—illustrated magazines, penny dreadfuls and dime novels, newspapers with comics. The new media spawned other disturbing outgrowths like modern advertising and propaganda.

While drawing on self-help ideals and the era's educational reforms, public libraries were in fact largely shaped in response to that unstable climate. Internal operations fought to bring order to the media revolution. They would ensure an orderly flow of properly vetted materials. The mission expanded to include the Americanization of immigrants. Facilities developed with dedicated reading chambers, but extended as safe civic harbors for women and children. Indeed, these uniquely American, public/private creations emerged as requisite symbols for a civilized, progressive community—as well as helping mark the end of the frontier.

Trustees and their community supporters stood largely alone in forming early responses. By the turn of the century matters had changed. State libraries and representatives from the new field of college-educated librarians had joined the scene. Andrew Carnegie, a legacy from the first generation, followed to further catalyze a national craze. Over time, the institution also evolved an informal corporate order. Trustee retained oversight, yet trended to the background with fiduciary and policy making functions, as well as crucial liaison activity within their community and to governments. Librarians as part of the nation's new professional classes would direct ground operations. They tied to external developments and emerging scientific techniques from the field, like standardized cataloging along with expanded ILL services and children's programming.

### **Enter the Web**

As evidenced by this panel, the comfortable pattern was destined to encounter another communications upheaval. The World Wide Web and post-modern era forcibly intruded during the mid- to late-1990s. Given a bit of incentive from the Gates Foundation, state libraries, and federal funding—public libraries transformed in remarkably short and dramatic order. ILL streamlined and networking prospects with other libraries expanded. Reference would adapt to the realities of a Google. Information literacy training and expanded public services increasingly augmented traditional reading and children's programming. Internal layouts altered too with the demise of card catalogs and rapid ascent of automated terminals. Dedicated space emerged for public Internet and Wi-Fi stations.

Equally important, institutional walls tumbled. The dominant trope of library as building morphed. New homepages constituted a distinctly different and transformative type of branch facility. The library was no longer confined to place or even constrained by local geography. Patrons could

now travel around the world with their local library a click away. Instead of limited hours, services were suddenly available 24/7. Electronic collections enjoined with similar impact. The challenges of binding and housing journals and newspapers could give way to Cloud storage. Materials could be loaned, read, and renewed online. Moreover, virtual holdings altered bedrock ownership principles with licensing and rental agreements.

Today, the inevitability of the Web has been decided. Internal settings have altered. The library website is an expected presence. Despite dire predictions and ongoing cautions, public libraries also continue to survive. Like our 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors, they benefited by proactively extending roles as safe havens and revising educational traditions to accommodate a new medium. Although awaiting definitive study, library directors seem to have taken the technical lead in the rush to respond to the new realities. Based on my experiences, boards in general underwent their own significant transformations in coming to grips and pivoting to deal with the onset of the new age. Trustees across the country stepped forward to enable pioneering recognition of Internet services for their communities.

## Phase 2

Fast forward to this panel. The birthing pains are largely over. Change, however, remains endemic. Unpredictable advances dominate the horizon, and the rapid nature of initial responses may call for fine tuning. Hence, where do we go from here—roughly a generation into our second communication revolution? How to best mature and stabilize the roles of public library for the post-modern Web Era?

If past can be prelude, I suggest that final order calls for more time and ultimately insights from an onrushing Born-Web generation. We've entered a middle or processing phase--one of clean-up, surfacing, and blending. Contemporary trustees engage their directors on an active teeter-totter. Our joint goal is balancing the transformational drivers of electronic media on one side with enduring print-era legacies and established traditions on the other.

### *Web/Database Elements*

On one hand, trustees obviously recognize the impact of the medium per se. That implies consciousness of established Web services along with heightened flexibility for the inevitability and unpredictability of the revolution. To me, it also suggests deferring judgement within the context of professional librarianship. Even the most tech-savvy trustees are advised to rely on their directors, who in turn incur the responsibility of regularly informing their boards on the unfolding state of the art.

Deference, however, does not imply a washing of the hands. Trustees retain policy responsibilities for balancing revolutionary impacts and redefining their institution. The dangers are real. The inherently disruptive nature of the medium demands heightened diligence and added zones of engagement, for instance:

- *Licensing and Contracts:* Electronic collections and Web services persist in expanding the number of contracts. Although directors remain in the lead, such arrangements include fiduciary and legal obligations that fall under the trustees' purview. From my experiences, such documents need to be understood as subject to negotiation, especially on pricing and cooperative purchasing alternates. Boilerplate is often in need of clarification for the library's legal position, including advancing attempts to gain ownership rights. Since not every director will be trained or skilled in such matters, individual boards may want to weigh in or how best to assist.

- *Emerging Threat Arenas*: The Web revolution induces other ripple effects, including heightened threats from:
  - *Computer Security* presents a technical arena that is unfortunately growing in prominence.
  - *Intellectual Freedom and Privacy Challenges* are expected to grow. Rather than reactive responses, trustees may want to take the time to consider the abstract issues and build proactive defenses. For instance, could we bridge from trustee status as a mechanism for determining community values in dealing with censorship attacks?
  - *Fair Use and the Right of Sale* provide the legal underpinnings for library operations and the free-flow of information. Yet, we must recognize they are coming under ongoing attack. Anticipate that the post-modern trustee agenda will increasingly address such issues. Prepare to join a battle to preserve the public good in the copyright arena.
- *Big Data and Community Based Metrics*: Recognize too that Web-based operations come with powerful analytical byproducts. We can expect increasing demands for quantitative data from funding agencies, as well as applications for improving internal operations. Data mining and predictive analytics proffer intriguing potentials, but come with dangers. Metrics bring the temptation to extend beyond managerial boundaries and micromanage operations. Moreover, library statistics are woefully inadequate. Indeed, I strongly advocate the development of simple shared metrics for boards. Such heuristics could help gauge the emerging realities of physical and virtual services for national comparisons and impact on our specific communities.

#### *Community Narrative*

On the other hand and if not already clear, I believe the trustee portion of the balancing act should be particularistic and conservative with a twist. Technology is not my primary focus. Instead, it is the catalytic tool within an inevitable strategic reorientation and my primary concentration as a trustee on the community.

My approaches embrace trend lines on the reinvention of the public library as a special type of multi-purpose virtual and physical civic space. I want the electronic potentials to join within a consciously redefined community narrative. We blend the new with renewed emphasis on established American nationalistic tropes. Tactics are reframed for the times and altered economic realities. For instance, trustees anticipate growing demands for fundraising, but remember to harken to the public library's pioneering role in originating public/private cooperatives. While educational and entertainment services remain, stress is given to traditions of self-help and community advancement for every element of the community. The public library is proactively positioned to expose its practical economic and competitive values to businesses and governments.

Ultimately, the shape of your reinvention and any final order will vary by institution. Consider, for example:

- *Resource Sounding Boards*: Although database and Web selections remain the purview of our professionals, should trustee presence help ensure that selection policies include evaluation tools to reflect the nature of the community and its particular needs? Could or should trustees consider engaging as sounding board to ensure that local context is not inadvertently submerged under the wealth of global electronic resources?

- *Local Culture Forum:* With the Web, the library gains potential as an entrancing venue for the cooperative housing of the community's educational, historical, and cultural resources. The medium, especially with blockchain or newer technologies, readily facilitates linking with other local agencies toward a collected virtual village. Who better to act as intermediaries with local agencies toward such ends than trustees along with foundation supporters?
- *Athenaeum Renaissance:* Finally, having just returned from a long stay in Rome, history beckons. Could post-modern synthesis proffer the renaissance of a long lost ideal? Do we consider combining Web and physical presence across the range of curatorial, educational, entrepreneurial, presentational, and reading roles? Should the trustees' post-modern search for order opt for the public library's original classical position as multipurpose athenaeum that help define their community?