# Introduction

*Abstract*

*Since my first issue on gadgets back in 2010, there's been enormous change in the world of personal electronics. This chapter looks back at the previous "Gadgets and Gizmos" issue of* Library Technology Reports*, judging how well I did with my predictions back then and setting the stage for why libraries should care about gadgets for the next couple of years.*

Way back in April 2010, *Library Technology Reports* published "Gadgets and Gizmos: Personal Electronics and the Library," but it was January of the same year when I turned in the manuscript for editing and effectively locked down the content. That report covered a lot of very exciting technology for the time, focusing on e-readers, personal media players (PMPs), media capture devices, and a few odd or unusual pieces of gadgetry that seemed interesting.

Nearly every single thing about it is now irrelevant at best, and downright ridiculous at worst.

There is a small mention of the iPad in that original report, but only because it had been announced just a week or so before the manuscript was locked down for publication. Imagine that: I wrote and published a report on personal electronics that came out in 2010, and it didn't have any real information about the iPad in it. As anyone reading this in 2012 or later knows, the iPad has been the most successful new personal electronic device in history, selling more units in less time than anything that came before it. More important, it redefined an entire genre of computing, setting a standard for information interaction that is still being worked out. I published a guide to technology that missed the biggest tech shift of the decade and talked about how companies like Copia, Plastic Logic, Spring Design, Blio, Flip, and Zune might be things you wanted to watch.

Boy, did I ever screw that up.

Copia and Blio have become also-rans in the e-book race, with the major providers (Amazon and Barnes and Noble, with a side of Apple) effectively owning the market for e-books. The Plastic Logic QUE e-reader and the Spring Design Alex were dead out of the gate, with the QUE never even making it to the gate: it was never even released to the public as a product. Microsoft finally killed its Zune products this year, so those are dead, and Flip was purchased by Cisco and subsequently killed. The portable video camera market is mostly getting consumed by the cellular phone, as is the pocket camera market.

Of the twenty-three or so gadgets that I mentioned in my original report, at best and being very kind to myself, only eight or so are still viable products on the market that I would still recommend purchasing.

This just goes to show how hard it is to see where the technology future is leading us. I'm not claiming to be Nostradamus, but I pay a lot of attention to these things. And if I screwed it all up as badly as all that, what hope does someone who couldn't tell a Kindle from a Nook have? That's why it's more important than ever that libraries and librarians act as information filters for their community. When patrons ask if they should buy the new Kindle they heard about, someone in your library needs to be able to answer basic questions about it. That person should try to provide some resources that might help patrons determine if the Kindle or the Nook is a better fit for their reading habits, or if they should splurge and get that iPad thing they've been seeing the commercials for.

So while I do my best to present what I think are interesting and intriguing technologies for libraries

and librarians to think about, history has shown that it's hard to predict exactly what's going to take off and what's going to flop. It's even harder to make that distinction for libraries, since our needs are so distinct from those of the average individual buying a piece of personal electronics. For instance, the fact that the Flip video camera is dead for consumers and the demand for small, cheap video cameras is disappearing thanks to the rise of the mobile phone with camera built in doesn't immediately reduce the need for the device in the library. People still want to check out a video camera occasionally, and the Flip is the perfect option for us to check out. Library demand for gadgets doesn't follow the consumer curve all that closely, and we often have needs that are served by older technologies.

With that said, the best way to prepare for the future is to understand what's coming. While the timeline for sunsetting technology in a library is longer than that for the general public, we are still expected to know and understand what's going on in the personal electronics space as long as our patron base is interacting with iPads, Kindles, Nooks, and other tech outside the library. In my previous Library Technology Report on gadgets, I identified three reasons why libraries should be paying attention to these technologies:

1.  **Patrons use them and increasingly expect libraries to be aware of them.**
    As libraries move from "temples to the book" to a service-based collection of information resources, using the things that your patrons are familiar with is more and more important. Especially as we move to digital collections, we have to stay on top of the methods of accession of those digital collections, which are almost universally personal electronics these days. Gadgets and libraries are going to become much more tightly integrated as we move through the digital conversion in the next decade or so.

2.  **They often change the nature of information interactions.**
    You have a much richer, multimodal experience with a number of these gadgets than you do with the traditional print world. When it's possible for you to read text, click a link to a video, and then leave a comment correcting something about the original text, your relationship with the consumption of media has changed. Libraries and librarians need to understand this changing landscape, and the windows through which we interact with this new world of information are gadgets.

3.  **They provide interesting opportunities for the delivery of content, something libraries should always be interested in.**
    Libraries have always been the democratizers of content. We step in to distribute the economic burden of information and allow access to those who could not afford to own the information themselves. As our content becomes increasingly digital, these gadgets give us the delivery mechanism for the content. In the traditional library, the content and the delivery device were one and the same: the book, the magazine, the journal. In the digital world, the two are distinct, but that doesn't give libraries the liberty of continuing to be interested in only one of the two pieces of the access puzzle.

Since writing the original text in early 2010, I've had the opportunity to present on this topic around the United States. Doing these presentations helped me to distill the message down to the essence of why I think this is an important topic for libraries. That distillation has been said again and again by me, from state to state, regional library group to national conferences, and that distillation is that "experiences become expectations."

"Experiences become expectations" is just shorthand for the idea that our patrons have experiences with information systems and their personal electronics outside the library walls. These experiences then set their expectations for information interactions when they come into the library. This is the reason that we as librarians have worked so hard for the last ten years to emulate Google in our search for the perfect federated or discovery-layer system. It's not because they give objectively better results (they almost never do, when measured against traditional measures of accuracy). But they are what our patrons expect because they are used to getting incredible results from Google, and they don't understand (nor should they) why our library resources aren't the same.

One thing that hasn't changed in the two years since the first "Gadgets and Gizmos" is that personal electronics are becoming an ever-more-necessary focus of libraries. Our patrons are increasingly coming to expect that our resources will be available and easily used on their devices, and our role as a democratizer of technology is stressed as libraries try to ensure that everyone has the ability to use the latest and greatest in electronics. Libraries are the democratizer of information, and as information is increasingly amorphous digital content, we need to be familiar with the containers that give our digital bits form and substance.