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# Changing Needs, Changing Roles

## *How Public Libraries are Expanding Traditional Service Models to Best Serve Their Communities*

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In the fall and winter columns I wrote about our year-long RUSA strategic planning process. In the fall I described the work of RUSA committees and task forces that have led to our current point in planning. In the winter I shared information about some of the initiatives that have been implemented as a result of the existing plan, specifically the work of the RUSA Leadership Development Task Force, and I offered suggestions to individuals interested in applying for new jobs in libraries.

In this column I'm taking a wider view of some of the trends that are impacting reference and user services, in public libraries specifically, and looking at a few of the creative ways that public libraries are meeting the needs of their communities, sometimes in surprising ways, as they develop new initiatives. These programs and services are allowing communities to engage with the public library and its materials (electronic and physical) in the manner, and often at the time, that they desire.

Why the focus on public libraries? First, it's what I know. My career has taken me from newbie book-shelver to circulation supervisor to library associate at Baltimore County (MD) Public Library (BCPL). That led to an MLS degree and coordination of Maryland AskUsNow!, a statewide virtual reference service provided by a partnership of academic, public, and special libraries. Five and a half years as the associate director of the Western Maryland Regional Library then followed.

All of these experiences were physically located in public libraries, as is my current job as the senior administrator for public services at the Harford County (MD) Public Library (HCPL). Though my decade of work with RUSA colleagues has provided terrific insights into the work of people from outside of public libraries, I proudly admit that my public library experience has formed my service bias. BCPL's retired director Charles Robinson's "Give 'em what they want" philosophy is at the core of what I do.

Second, I realize that we have more academic than public library representation among our RUSA membership, so my current role as president is somewhat atypical. I've learned many useful things from my academic library colleagues in RUSA, so I see my role as a way to "give back" to some extent and share insights from public libraries that might be adapted to service models in other types of libraries.

I recently reviewed our RUSA Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians ([www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/professional](http://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/professional)), which a task force is revising right now. I'll admit that sometimes I feel our formal "Definition of Reference" is too limited for practical use in public libraries, but I appreciate how the competencies

define and broaden the role of Reference and User Services librarians as a whole. These skilled individuals are “librarians that assist, advise, and instruct users in accessing all forms of recorded knowledge. The assistance, advice, and instruction include both direct and indirect service to patrons.” From this perspective, it doesn’t matter if we think of an activity as reference or a user service. I appreciate that flexibility, and it helps provide the broader context for the range of services that I see as relevant to this topic for public libraries.

I’d like to focus on initiatives that I’m familiar with at my own library system and take a look at programs at other libraries that serve as excellent models for innovative engagement with communities in the areas of reference, information provision, and materials advisory. I’ll touch on some of the trends, look at examples of how these trends are shaping service of all types, and consider some ideas for future initiatives.

What are the relevant trends shaping new library services? Our Strategic Plan Coordinating Task Force has been reviewing a set of secondary research in order to best understand the environment in which libraries—and by extension our RUSA members—are working. I recommend reading three resources:

1. *The New Media Consortium (NMC) Horizon Report > 2014 Library Edition* examines key trends, significant challenges, and emerging technologies for their impact on academic and research libraries across the globe: [www.nmc.org/publication/nmc-horizon-report-2014-library-edition](http://www.nmc.org/publication/nmc-horizon-report-2014-library-edition)
2. *Aspen Institute: Rising to the Challenge: Re-envisioning Public Libraries*: <http://csreports.aspeninstitute.org/Dialogue-on-Public-Libraries/2014/report>
3. *Pew Research Internet Project: From Distant Admirers to Library Lovers—and Beyond: A Typology of Public Library Engagement in America* includes an abundance of data about how people engage with information and their relationship with libraries: [www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/13/library-engagement-typology](http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/13/library-engagement-typology)

My understanding of trends impacting libraries has also been influenced by internal working documents developed recently by John Carlo Bertot and Johnna Percell at the University of Maryland College Park’s College of Information Studies for the school’s MLS Advisory Board, of which I’m a member. They’ve done a stellar job with their trend review, and I hope they consider taking it to publication in some form.

I see these three key trends guiding the development of the majority of our new services and program initiatives across public libraries:

1. The Big Data explosion of the past two decades continues to influence the development of library services. From information scarcity to information overload, libraries are finding better ways to deliver targeted content that is relevant to our users. Not only is this happening through

improved online searching of catalogs, databases, and websites, but also through the types of collections and training that we are offering to our communities, which are specific to individual interests and needs.

2. The Digital Divide is an ongoing problem, particularly for rural communities where market incentives have not been powerful enough to result in expanded high speed data networks. As a pseudo-governmental entity, the public library can often take advantage of publicly maintained networks and may be the one facility available to all that provides people the opportunity to dependably use communication platforms and engage in media that require a broadband connection. The library is also well positioned to foster partnerships and provide the safe space, hardware, and software needed by members of the community to come together, learn from each other, and create.
3. Children who are exposed to Early Learning initiatives are more successful and better prepared for school. Children develop most of their capacity for learning during their first three years of life. Those who are able to begin developing language and literacy skills starting at birth will enter school ready to learn and be better positioned for success later in life. Public libraries have recognized this need by educating parents and caregivers so that we can have a direct influence on the improvement of our communities. This is also a workforce and economic development issue because an educated community is better prepared to innovate and address the challenges of the twenty-first century.

How are these trends shaping the design of service? Much of what we do in public libraries is empower people to develop skills and become the experts so that they can create interesting content that is relevant to our communities. Using a train the trainer concept, we can then expand outwards embracing more of the community with each program, bringing in more people and new ideas.

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## PARTNERSHIPS AND STEM

One hot area for both collection development and programming is in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Librarians across our branches are providing programs on themes such as bridge design and construction, physics, architecture, and inventions as well as sponsoring science clubs. These programs provide positive fun opportunities for learning for both children and adults.

Public libraries can expand on their basic capabilities through partnerships with other government agencies and community organizations. These partnerships allow us to maximize efforts and take advantage of the resources offered by others in the community that share common goals.

One great example for HCPL is our partnership with the Northeastern Maryland Technology Council (NMTC). NMTC

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## FROM THE PRESIDENT OF RUSA

sponsors Science Cafes that are a fun, free way for families to learn about science and technology topics that impact people's everyday lives. The science cafes occur monthly from 7–8:30 p.m. at our Bel Air Library in the central part of the county, and the schedule seems to work well for that period of time after dinner and before bed. These have drawn many participants, and we're now in the early phase of expanding this partnership toward developing a new program series focused on supporting innovation and invention.

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### THE COMMUNITY AS CONTENT CREATORS: INNOVATION LAB

The Innovation Lab will be the community's digital media lab and will serve as a creativity space for digital media production, allowing for learning and experimentation. Located at the Abingdon Branch of HCPL and set to open in January 2015, the lab is being designed for the creation of digital video and audio, graphic design, and electronic publishing.

Our lab will also contain 3D printers, serving as a place for students or entrepreneurs to design and create product prototypes that support our county's focus on developing additive manufacturing as an engine for economic development. Through use of the lab, our intention is for people who might not have access to these resources on their own to have opportunities to be exposed to this type of technology. Our customers then become creators.

This is a pilot project, and we couldn't have done it without the generous financial support from a local bank (Rose-dale Federal Savings and Loan Association) and the Friends of the Abingdon Library. We're envisioning that the lab will launch with strong support from library staff through classes and hands-on instruction, but as we train more people from the community we will eventually have a cadre of invested volunteers who we can rely on to teach others, decreasing need for the library staff to be directly involved in providing support. If the project is successful, then that will inform our future plans and determine if we should renew staff engagement and expand the services being offered.

Something we may want to also consider is expanded hours. Though expanding hours can come at a high cost, some public libraries are finding success in offering targeted expanded hours on a scheduled basis, which creates a special experience and destination for people who are especially interested. For example, one Thursday a month the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh–South Side remains open from 6:00 p.m. until midnight for "Work Nights" (<http://carnegie.library.org/worknights>). The nights are focused on networking, building connections with other innovators, and linking creators with resources for research and technological advice from library professionals.

What other forms of local content can we facilitate the creation of? Our temporary art and photography exhibits are very successful and draw hundreds of people. Should we also consider making online exhibit space available on our

library websites? One project I'm hoping will be a success is from the Madison Public Library (WI). They've developed an online service called Yahara that supports local music and local musicians. The music is free to anyone with a library card and provides an additional opportunity for content creators and communities to meet. See the library's website at [www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/collections/yahara-music-library](http://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/collections/yahara-music-library) or [www.yaharamusic.org](http://www.yaharamusic.org).

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### EARLY LEARNING AND EARLY LITERACY

We at HCPL have had forty years of experience in developing community volunteers to help serve the library's customers. This is essentially the model that was developed for our Sharing the Gift program beginning back in 1975, which is a story time program staffed by community volunteers who have been trained by children's librarians with materials supplied by the library's Learning and Sharing Collection. The Learning and Sharing Collection, one of the first collections of its kind to be offered by a public library, is made up of developmental learning materials for young children and adults that enhance reading readiness skills. Training of this type has the advantage of allowing us to share knowledge with a group of people at once, which could also be seen as an efficiency over the traditional transaction-based one-to-one reference interview.

Our latest use of this model for our youngest customer is the Little Leapers 3.5 Digital Camp, launching in April 2015, which will have our librarians provide instruction to parents and caregivers on digital literacy skills and how to help their children develop their abilities using click and swipe actions on laptop and tablet computers. This program is intended to develop the digital literacy skills of preschoolers and to provide a model for parents on how to interact with technology and media in a healthy way. The program consists of a series of six sessions of camp for children ages three to five accompanied by an adult, with no prior computer experience needed. Each class will be a thirty- to forty-five-minute session. Parents are given a handout for each class that includes links to the websites used, a written description of the skill, and additional reading.

We continue the legacy of the Learning and Sharing Collection with new offerings, including those for both children and adults. Book Groups to Go and Jr. Book Groups to Go provide ten copies of a selected title along with a book moderator's binder, all together in a sturdy canvas bag. The materials are available for a sixty-day loan period and are the perfect way to bring the joy of book clubs to a broader audience. In addition to encouraging literacy, our Little Leaper and LEAP kits encourage scientific exploration and are also examples of initiatives that wouldn't be possible without the support of community partners. Little Leaper kits are developed to excite children from birth to five years of age about science and math. Each kit includes pre- and early literacy skill building tools on themes including "I am an Entomologist," "I am

a Mechanical Engineer,” and “I am a Paleontologist.” Kits for the older preschoolers include clothing such as a lab coat or vest or hard hat to incorporate imaginative play as part of the experience. There is something to gain the interest of every child, and the kits provide an ideal way for parents to explore with their children.

LEAP kits are circulating collections of high-quality science equipment, materials, and resources, including books, DVDs, posters, and other materials that create a complete learning package. These are targeted for children in grades 3–8, however many kits can be used by younger or older audiences. Designed to allow families to explore and play at home, the kits include a diverse assortment of high-tech gear, including microscopes, rock collections, and all of the components needed to build a programmable robot.

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## MATERIALS ADVISORY

Our Materials Advisory services have been helped by the integration of e-book and audiobook content with our standard online catalog, allowing discovery of material in one coordinated place. This is still not consistent across all vendors and ILS products, but progress continues to be made. As libraries expand their offerings of streaming movies and music, we should also consider expanding our programs to engage people in discussions about those materials. The added benefit of asking people to experience online content prior to a discussion is that you can select titles that have unlimited access, allowing everyone who wants to participate to get the book, movie, or music in advance. At HCPL we offer both Hoopla and Freegal Music. I would like to see us offer discussions that draw attention to these music and movie resources. I can envision discussions about music evolving into live performances, which would allow for making connections between our digital materials and performers and providing another opportunity for community members to share their work and broaden their audience.

One of the key ways to draw in new customers to the libraries and increase use is through reading programs. Once someone is in the door, there are many more opportunities to show them the breadth of current public library offerings. HCPL's Winter Reading Program operates from January to March and offers high school students and adults a very cool stylus pen from the HCPL Foundation when they register and a mug from the Library Friends when they complete the program. The program encourages adults to read, participate in book discussion groups, and attend author readings. The

theme and color scheme of the program changes annually which has generated fun mug collections for many of our participants.

Summer Reading at HCPL is targeted at infants through high school-aged children, but many libraries do have successful summer reading initiatives for adults as well. In 2014 we at HCPL were able to have one of our best years on record with more than 17,000 children participating in the Harford County Public Library's Summer Reading Program and over 100,000 books read!

We're also experimenting with engaging people in comfortable environments where the perceived restrictions of the library may not apply. Books at Bars is a monthly book discussion hosted by the Anne Arundel County Public Library (MD) where participants meet for drinks and book discussions at local restaurants or taverns. We are grateful to both Anne Arundel County and the District of Columbia for sharing their tips about how to engage with the businesses and establish expectations. HCPL has just launched our own program, Books on Tap, with the motto “Eat, Drink, and Discuss: Bold Titles, Refreshing Talk!” By using popular social media sites such as Facebook and Meetup, libraries can grow our customer base, broaden awareness of library materials, and support local businesses and communities.

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## CONCLUSION

If you'll be attending the ALA Annual Conference 2015 in San Francisco, we have very exciting news! We'll be taking a deeper dive into some of these trends and their impact on libraries during the RUSA President's Program with danah boyd (Saturday, June 27, 2015, from 4:00 to 5:30 p.m.). Danah will present, *It's Complicated: Navigating the Dynamic Landscapes of Digital Literacy, Collapsing Contexts, and Big Data*. She will describe the crucial role that librarians play in guiding these conversations as she weaves together her research on youth culture with her analysis of the “big data” phenomenon. Danah is a principal researcher at Microsoft Research and is a 2008 PhD graduate of the School of Information (iSchool) at the University of California-Berkeley. Her research focuses on the intersection between technology and society, and she blogs at [www.zephorias.org/thoughts](http://www.zephorias.org/thoughts). Her book, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, is also available for free download at [www.danah.org/itscomplicated](http://www.danah.org/itscomplicated). This program is organized by the 2015 RUSA President's Program Planning Committee and the RUSA Just Ask Task Force.