

LIBRARY POLICIES AND SOCIAL POLICY ISSUES

Even where library technology doesn't appear to interact directly with policy, technology decisions need to be measured against appropriate policies. This chapter deals with two areas in which policy may affect technology decisions: library policies and missions as well as social policy issues.

Do you consider your library's policies and mission when making technological choices and when considering new media and services? That's the question addressed in the first part of the chapter. New technology-dependent services frequently result in better service for one group of users; the question is whether that gain widens social inequities to an extent that's unacceptable for the library's broader mission. It's not an easy question to answer.

The remainder of the chapter considers a few of many broad issues of social policy that may affect library technology choices. Examples include the so-called "information commons"—partnerships among related institutions, formal standards to provide policy frameworks for technology, and such indirect social issues as open source software.

Technology and Your Users

When you abandoned your card catalog for an online catalog, did you promote the change as an improvement for your users? If you've been around long enough to remember, was the public reaction wholly positive? If so, you're in the minority—for good reason.

The shift from card catalogs to online catalogs—now nearly universal—may be the classic twentieth-century case of a library technology wrongly assumed to be entirely positive in its effects. Librarians knew that online catalogs would allow new forms of access. Librarians also knew (but rarely mentioned) that card catalogs were becoming insupportable; interfiling cards required too much reasonably skilled labor, and the catalogs themselves took too much valuable room.

For the earliest online catalogs, selling the change as a clear positive required selective reporting. With slow, cumbersome, multistep search methods, early online catalogs certainly required more effort to locate a known title (or find items on a subject) than their low-tech predecessors. Catalog response time and flexibility have improved, but many users still find online catalogs cumbersome and more difficult than card catalogs.

This example stands in for more recent examples because it's an old story and one for which it's hopeless to make a case for retaining the old instead of (or alongside) the new. Many users flocked to online catalogs. Others either stopped using the catalog or resented the library's disregard of their preferences and needs. It's not unreasonable to suppose that, in many public libraries, the disgruntled users (many of them older) were also the library's best users and supporters—at least until the library seemed to favor technology at the expense of some users.

Technological innovations that improve service for some users can degrade service for others—or leave the impression that the library doesn't care. Self-charging systems speed library service for people comfortable with them, but if circulation-desk staffing is reduced too much as a consequence, that may slow checkout for those that don't get along with the self-check systems. *All* computerized service offerings alienate users that aren't comfortable with computer technology, both because the services make them nervous and because they feel failure makes them look stupid.

You can't and shouldn't ignore new technology, yet you can be sensitive to its impact on your user population. If your mission is to serve *all* users, and particularly those underserved by the rest of society, then you need to find ways to offer equivalent service to those that aren't early adopters. Failing to do so sends a strong message to some users. It's probably not a message you intend.

New Media and User Acceptance

When your library began collecting audio CDs, did you stop buying LPs immediately? For that matter, did you adopt audio CDs as soon as they emerged (in the early 1980s), or did you wait until patrons started expressing interest?

The same questions can be asked for DVDs as replacements for videocassettes, CD and MP3 audiobooks as replacements for audiocassette audiobooks, and—potentially—ebooks and ejournals as replacements for print books and journals.

When funds and space available comfortably exceed direct needs, the choice is easy. Good libraries will begin collecting and circulating new media as soon as it's clear the media will survive, offering higher-quality services for early adopters within the community. But those libraries will also keep acquiring older forms until it's clear that few users have any interest in the old.

Unfortunately, few real-world libraries have the freedom to choose consistently "and" rather than "or." More unfortunately, libraries intent on keeping up with the latest media may jump into a medium before its viability is assured. That may leave a library with expensive, useless resources, probably acquired in lieu of resources that would still be used.

Knowing When to Move

There's no sure way to predict the right time to add a new medium or new service. It requires a balance: knowing your community, knowing your mission, and knowing your budget and other resource limits. Public libraries may be able to finesse the issue with the help of Friends groups, groups that can underwrite new-media collections before the library's ready to shift its regular acquisitions budget. Larger libraries may need risk budgets to test new services and media early on, with the knowledge that some of the tests won't turn into long-term services.

Some earlier shifts may have been simpler than later shifts. While sales of vinyl LPs and turntables have actually been *increasing* for the past few years, that increase does not suggest that most libraries should rebuild or maintain their LP collections. The new sales are among high-end audiophiles and other special groups. Few audiophiles borrowed LPs from public libraries because of the risk to their own systems. Heavily circulated LPs almost were

always seriously damaged; damaged LPs can damage stereo equipment.

Some librarians might wish to slow or ignore new-media transitions despite public demand. Some public libraries find VHS a more congenial medium than DVD. While the quality is lower and the medium *should* be shorter-lived, patrons treat DVDs in ways that make them more damage-prone.

Since most households still have VCRs, there's a case for maintaining and possibly expanding existing VHS collections—but that case weakens every year. The medium is dying (albeit slowly) and the difficulties of DVD (which aren't so much the medium itself as they are the results of patron abuse) must be balanced against library policies of building and maintaining collections that meet community needs.¹

What's Next?

One possible transition already is on the horizon, but probably several years away for most libraries: the move from DVD to high-definition (HD) videodiscs. That move lacks the reassuring character of the LP-to-CD shift. It's nearly impossible for a DVD to damage user equipment, and HD discs will likely be even *less* durable than existing DVDs.

The move also raises all the technology and policy tradeoffs of quadrasonic sound, for those librarians that paid attention to the four competing versions of that temporary phenomenon. Currently, it appears that *two* HD videodiscs will appear: Blu-ray and HI-DVD.

The good news is that both Blu-ray and HI-DVD players will be able to play DVDs as well, so libraries can build and maintain DVD collections without fear of full obsolescence. It's also possible (even likely) that universal players will emerge, just as they have for the two high-resolution audiodisc competitors (DVD-Audio and SACD).

Surprise! You've Got SACD

Some new media come into libraries without deliberate acts on the part of librarians. Because included with books that the library purchased, your library probably owns CD-ROMs that you didn't buy intentionally. More recently, your library may well own SACD high-resolution "CDs" even though you've chosen to ignore this market deliberately, given the small number of users for whom such discs would be desirable.

Why? Because Sony and other music publishers have produced quite a few dual-layer SACDs, where one layer is a standard CD and the other layer is SACD. In some cases, such as remastered Bob Dylan and Rolling Stones recordings, the *only* discs on the market are such hybrid discs, and the labels may downplay the SACD feature. The price is the same. As far as your library is concerned, it's just buying more CDs. That may be the optimal case of new media and new services: new technologies that *transparently* serve those not ready to adopt them. Unfortunately, such transparency is still the exception, not the norm.

Technology, Service, and Equity

Libraries should serve the underserved: That's almost certainly part of your mission. Libraries should keep up with new technology: That's almost a given. But the two don't work together necessarily. While assistive

technology (not discussed here because it almost always serves library policies directly) may assist the underserved, many other new technologies move in the other direction.

What about wi-fi support in the library? It could be a fine idea—unless those with wi-fi devices receive superior library service to those who can't afford PDAs and notebooks. At that point, you're serving the overserved, increasing social inequities and undermining your mission.

It's not that simple. For some younger users, you may *need* technology-based services to provide service they'll find useful. But it must be a balance. If reference librarians give priority to IM and other virtual reference transactions at the cost of those waiting for face-to-face assistance, how does that square with your mission and your community's needs?

An extreme case arose out of the CIPA controversy. Some librarians suggested that high-speed wireless could eliminate the problem: Just get rid of the library's filtered Internet workstations altogether and offer Internet service entirely over the wireless network. That would (temporarily) eliminate the CIPA problem—but it would entirely undermine the work of the Gates Foundation to make libraries the place where *anyone* can use the Internet, including the poor and homeless. Such a change would eliminate an annoying difficulty by making the library a place where the haves get more and the have-nots lose again.²

You can formulate your own examples. Weblogs and RSS feeds for lists of new books improve library service—but if they come at the expense of printed new book lists, they are inequitable for those library users that don't get aggregators or the Web. If there are no paper lists, then such innovations still reduce overall user equity, but in a manner that's almost impossible to avoid entirely. You probably can't and shouldn't avoid technology-based services simply because they almost always work better for your wealthiest and most advanced patrons, but you must look at balances in every case. If you're spending \$10,000 on hot, new tech services, have you considered \$5,000 for adult literacy, outreach, and other programs that directly serve those most in need?

Libraries and the "Digital Divide"

Libraries can't eliminate inequity, but thoughtful librarians will strive to minimize increased inequity. The curious phrase "digital divide" describes a real issue and a range of issues that may reflect crisis-mongering more than reality.

Libraries have been effective agents in reducing the *real* digital divide, the inability of many people to gain access to the Internet and digital resources. Almost every modestly literate American with adequate eyesight and the ability to use a keyboard now can use the Internet, unless they're in a community with no public libraries or one of the few American public libraries that still lacks Internet access. Total lack of Internet access has almost disappeared as a digital-divide issue.

That doesn't eliminate the digital divide, at least not according to some commentators. Many Americans don't have Internet access in the home. Many more connect via dial-up rather than broadband connections. Computer and Internet skills vary widely.

A surprisingly high percentage of Americans don't regard the Internet as essential for living a good life. They're right—and they're right in part *because* of libraries. Libraries provide the physical books that most people still prefer to ebooks, and they provide them at no direct cost to the reader. Many of us find it easier to locate books we'd find interesting on the shelves than we do over *any* Internet system, be it the online catalog, Amazon, or some Google equivalent.

It's wonderful to provide access to licensed databases on home computers, *particularly* since those with slow connections or no computer at all can get the same access by coming into the library. (Of course, if you only have one computer for every 10,000 people in your community, you're back to serving the overserved and increasing inequity.) Theoretically, adding PDA-formatted access to those databases increases the digital divide. Realistically, it adds new services to those that can use them, without taking away from others.

It's all a matter of balance and assuring that policy comes before technology.

Library Technology and Social Policy

Libraries use technology to maintain their roles in society. Librarians may consider formal and informal social policies when selecting technology. Below are a few examples.

Technology and the Commons

Libraries represent one form of social commons: places available to all to use as appropriate without direct use fees, jointly funded, with established policies to prevent abuse.

Some thoughtful librarians and scholars see the resource commons of public libraries as part of a larger information commons, a policy concept that relies on technology for any hope of realization. The fundamental concept of an information commons is that of open information resources, linked together and serving as a public alternative to the increasing commercialization of the Internet and other information resources.

The information commons may include not only libraries but also the software commons (open source software), licensing commons (the GNU General Public License or GPL and Creative Commons licenses), open access publishing and OAI repositories, institutional commons, and subject matter information commons.

Grouping all these commons into one overall structure may add coherence and help achieve a critical mass. On the other hand, it may dilute the effectiveness of individual initiatives by positing an overarching set of goals only partially shared and assuming common methods that don't exist.

The idea of an information commons is controversial but worth considering. The ALA Office of Information Technology and Policy supports the notion and maintains *commons-blog* as part of that support. The ALA Web site includes a good introductory white paper on the topic, *Libraries and the Information Commons*. That paper and a much longer policy report from the Free Expression Policy Project (by former ALA president Nancy Kranich) should provide enough background for you to determine whether the information commons concept is one your library should support actively. As

a starting point, consider the two paragraphs that begin *The Information Commons: A Public Policy Report*:

The Internet offers unprecedented possibilities for human creativity, global communication, and access to information. Yet digital technology also invites new forms of information enclosure. In the last decade, mass media companies have developed methods of control that undermine the public's traditional rights to use, share, and reproduce information and ideas. These technologies, combined with dramatic consolidation in the media industry and new laws that increase its control over intellectual products, threaten to undermine the political discourse, free speech, and creativity needed for a healthy democracy.

In response to the crisis, librarians, cyber-activists, and other public interest advocates have sought ways to expand access to the wealth of resources that the Internet promises, and have begun to build online communities, or "commons," for producing and sharing information, creative works, and democratic discussion. This report documents the information commons movement, explains its importance, and outlines the theories and "best practices" that have developed to assist its growth.³

Technology and Partnership

Increasingly, technology serves to reduce the distinctions among libraries, museums, archives, and other agencies. Libraries should work together with other agencies to serve common policies and missions. Technology, particularly Internet-based technology, assists that effort considerably.

Traditionally, museums have maintained large collections of unique artifacts, only a few of which are available for public display at any time. Public display normally includes interpretative materials that add value to the artifacts. With the Internet, a growing number of museums provide online access to digital renditions of most or all of their collections, allowing users to browse and otherwise locate images and artifacts of interest—but without the interpretation and organization provided in exhibitions.

Traditionally, libraries have provided full access to all of their collections, allowing users to browse and otherwise locate items of interest—and providing relatively little interpretation or organization (beyond subject headings for catalogs and call numbers used to facilitate browsing). With the Internet, a growing number of libraries mount online exhibits of sorts, providing coherent access to specific groups of items, sometimes with added interpretation and organization.

The two types of organization increasingly find common ground. That's also true of archives, either as separate organizations or as divisions of libraries and museums. Technology helps libraries, archives, and museums work together—and helps each of those institutions establish partnerships with other related institutions.⁴

Public libraries also have common interests with community service agencies. Libraries and museums work with schools and institutions of higher education to serve common goals. The intersections may go much further: Libraries, museums, and archives increasingly work with commercial licensing agencies to make best use of the unique artifacts they own.⁵

Libraries have used technology to support policies of sharing for decades, but most of that sharing was within groups of libraries. Those groups have increased in complexity and power over the years, and the policy issues have become more complex as technology has made sharing more feasible and effective.

What's new in recent years is the growing reach of policy-based common initiatives beyond libraries to other agencies with common goals. The goals must be based on social and institutional policies; given sound goals, technology provides the tools to make them work.

Standards: Policy Frameworks for Technology

The National Information Standards Organization (NISO) works to create technical standards that will improve library operations. Many of those standards affect technology, from Z39.2 (the underlying standard for MARC21) to Z39.88 (OpenURL) and beyond.

Technical standards serve as formalized policy frameworks to encourage interaction and competition. For example, Z39.50 (a standard for computer-to-computer search and retrieval of bibliographic information) makes it possible to acquire a metasearch tool from one company and use it to search databases run by many companies—as long as those companies support Z39.50. Without such standards, interoperation would only work within one vendor's products or because of bilateral agreements between vendors.⁶ Standards open the environment.

As a library-oriented standards' developer, NISO has established exemplary policies. NISO tries more than many other standards' developers to assure that adopted standards represent complete consensus as nearly as possible. NISO also, uniquely among ANSI-accredited standards' agencies, makes all of its standards (draft and adopted) freely available for downloading. That openness further lowers the bar for competition and encourages libraries and vendors to understand and use standards.

Social Policy and Technology Decisions

Sometimes policy and technology influence one another indirectly. Some social policies aren't directly tied to specific technologies, but may affect library purchase and use decisions.

One prime example is the use of open source software. Open source software differs from traditional software in two key regards:

- The source code for the software is freely available, at no charge for downloading with nominal charges for distribution. The software in compiled form is usually also available for no more than distribution charges.
- Open source code can be modified and used in new programs—but, for most open source licenses, the new programs must *also* be open source.

Open source software is neither public domain nor inherently free. If software is actually in the public domain, the second key regard can't be enforced. Public domain materials can be used in any way and without restrictions on pricing for those uses. Open source software may be freely available, but companies can and do charge for packaging, support services, training, additional software, and all the other steps from pure software to real-world systems.

Librarians that regard open source software as part of the information commons, and that believe libraries should be part of (and support) that commons, should favor open source software over traditional commercial software when open source offers reasonable alternatives. That's a technological choice to support social policy. It may not be a feasible choice,

and it may not be the best choice—but it’s worth considering if the social policy makes sense for your library.

Thinking about Social Policy

The examples here don’t exhaust the ways library technology and social policies interact. They do illustrate the need to be aware of policy issues when making technology decisions.

When a vendor says it offers linking mechanisms that are newer and better than OpenURL, ask about interoperability and openness to competition. If your integrated library system follows as many standards as possible, you may be able to “de-integrate” the system as better or more cost-effective modules become available—but if the technology was developed without regard for policy frameworks, you’re stuck with a single vendor or with a massive change.

Your library almost certainly works with other libraries in various networks. Today’s technology should encourage you to work with other cultural, educational, and community institutions as well. You may frame that work in terms of developing a larger commons; you may look at it as a way to gain synergy from the various strengths of the museums, archives, schools, community services, and other libraries in your community.

Technology can undermine policy. Policy may limit technology, for good or for bad. Combined thoughtfully, policy and library technology work together to make libraries and their services stronger.

Notes

¹ If it seems as though the VHS-to-DVD transition has been much faster than the LP-to-CD transition, that’s because it has. No consumer entertainment medium has reached a majority of United States homes as rapidly as DVD.

² It also wouldn’t solve the problem, most probably: Once Congress learned this was happening, it would modify CIPA to require that all subsidized Internet access be filtered, rather than tying the filtering to library-owned computers.

³ Nancy Kranich, *The Information Commons: A Public Policy Report*, Free Expression Policy Project, 2004.

⁴ The current motto of RLG, the author’s place of employment, is: “Where museums, libraries, and archives intersect.” That intersection relies heavily on technology.

⁵ Check <http://trove.net> for a freely available example of a current RLG initiative in this area. In this case, RLG Cultural Materials, a rapidly growing set of digital representations of cultural artifacts owned by RLG members, is made freely available in low-resolution watermarked images, many of which are available for immediate licensing through commercial agencies.

⁶ That’s not entirely true. Metasearch tools also used “screen-scrapers” and other methodologies in order to use resources with proprietary interfaces. Such methods are inherently more complex and less stable, likely to break each time a database provider changes its displays or interface.

[www.fepproject.org/
policyreports/
InformationCommons.pdf](http://www.fepproject.org/policyreports/InformationCommons.pdf)

<http://trove.net>