Technolust - the fifth column of the information counter-revolution

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I'm going to start with a story about growing up in Tasmania in the 1990s.

The economy wasn't great, with unemployment at around 11%, no economic growth to speak of and a high State debt. In these formative years, I was surrounded by both the defeatists and the hopelessly optimistic. Many said that the Tasmanian economy had no hope and had been on the downward slide since the end of Transportation. Others dreamed of the One Big Project that was going to save us all: the Mt Wellington cable car, the Oceanport cruise ship terminal, the enormous pulp and paper mill, the largest catamaran factory in the world.

The Oceanport company turned out to have $1 to its name, the catamaran company went bankrupt,
the pulp mill dream ultimately saw a prominent businessman gaol for bribery, a Premier resign in disgrace and the state's largest company fall into receivership. The cable car dream quietly slunk away, only to return recently as the economy again started to go sour.

But in the intervening decade, Tasmania's economy flourished. There was no One Big Project that achieved this. There were however lots of small projects. There was the ongoing success of the King Island Dairy. There were dozens and dozens of independent bed and breakfasts serving a growing tourist trade. There was the ever expanding Taste of Tasmania and Ten Days on the Island festivals. There were interstate expansions of home-grown beer and seafood brands Boags and Tassal. There was no one big project, just one big vision – a vision based on contested but broadly shared values of wholesome clean produce, pride in work and lack of pretention. Tasmanians still complain about their economy, but the improvement is obvious to someone like me who left 12 years ago.

Tasmania's problem wasn't a lack of big projects, funding or infrastructure.

It was a failure of self-belief.
We are in an era of unprecedented change for libraries and the life of information. Bookstores throughout the western world are closing down. Libraries in the USA, UK and some in Australia are being defunded or closed. Many question the relevance of libraries, including some librarians. I am again surrounded by defeatists and the hopelessly optimistic. Many librarians appear to be searching for One Big Technology to save us. I believe that just like in Tasmania in the 1990s, this is a flawed search.

I am not here to tell members of the Victorian Association for Library Automation that librarians should not embrace technology. But technology by itself is not the solution to the problems of libraries, because technology is not the cause of the problems of libraries. New technology is simply a fact of contemporary life.

When we introduce a new technology or program into our libraries, we need to be clear about why we are doing it, what it will achieve, and how we will measure its success. To do this we have to return to some basic ideas about libraries and information. If librarians are to successfully position libraries for the future, we must think about not just what libraries could do, but what they are, and what they are for.
A system for sharing ideas

I think it is useful to think about libraries not as buildings or collections or even as services but rather as a systems. A system that combines different practices, approaches, concepts and strategies into a unified whole.

At its heart, a library is a system for sharing ideas.

Each library system works in a slightly different way, but over the centuries four principles have underpinned the way libraries operate:

- Preservation
- Openness
- Freedom
- Privacy

The reason for their primacy is that these four principles are crucial to the efficient and effective sharing of ideas.

PRESERVATION is the thing that ensures we can continue to share ideas between generations. Effective sharing of ideas requires that ideas remain easily discoverable and sharable. We might
also call this 'findability'.

OPENNESS or EQUAL ACCESS ensures that ideas spread as far as possible. The more people exposed to an idea, the greater chance it has of being useful, even if it is only useful because it enlivens discussion or brings together a society in mutual disgust.

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM works together with equal access when it comes to encountering ideas – it is not enough to provide equal access to approved or worthy ideas, we must provide access to ALL ideas. If such access is to be possible, of course, we also need to defend the right to create and record controversial ideas in the first place, otherwise we will have nothing to which to provide access and less ideas will be shared.

PRIVACY is crucial if equal access and intellectual freedom are to be effectively defended. Intellectual freedom means nothing if citizens are constantly looking over their shoulders. The chilling effect of the possibility that a future employer or a government official could discover ones reading history is enough to inhibit intellectual freedom, and this is bad because it slows or stops the sharing of ideas.
Whilst all four of these principles are worthy in of themselves, it is their combination to the purpose of maximising the sharing of ideas that justifies their position at the heart of how libraries operate.

There are many other systems for sharing ideas. Why do we need libraries? What is our 'unique value proposition'?

Libraries are a system for sharing ideas in a way underpinned by the values of PRESERVATION, OPENNESS, FREEDOM and PRIVACY.

This is our 'Unique Value Proposition'. This is what makes us different to Kindle Lending Library, Google Books, Apple iStore etc.

**The Information Revolution / The Information Counter-Revolution**

There have been many information revolutions throughout history:

- Invention of speech
• invention of writing (Mesopotamia, China, South America)
• The printing press with moveable type
• Telegraph & telephone
• Radio and television
• Computerisation and the Internet

The revolutionary pattern is always that more people have access to more information and more people have the ability to disseminate information. That is, it increases both the READ and WRITE capacities of a civilisation). These are not necessarily equal (eg email increases the distribution of the ability to 'write' more than to 'read' whereas radio does the opposite).

In our own time, we have seen an exponential growth in both the ability to read and discover ideas and the ability to create and disseminate new ideas. The combined power of personal computing and open communication standards like HTML opened up almost infinite communication possibilities. The world wide web allowed anonymous or pseudonymous communication and information sharing on a global scale. Project Gutenberg invented the ebook and imagined it as a freely available public good.
It was inevitable that some people would fear this.

Revolutions always upset the contemporary power balance – that's what makes them revolutions. Incumbents will always try to reverse or co-opt the new revolution to maintain their existing power.

- Early writing was restricted to certain classes
- After the printing press a blacklist of banned books was published by the Catholic Church to restrict trade in certain ideas
- The industrial revolution lead to attacks on machines by followers of Ned Ludd
- Revolutions in Britain, France, and Russia to overthrow the tyranny of kings led directly to the despotisms of Cromwell, Napoleon and Stalin.

So we see that every revolution incites a counter-revolution.

In our own time, the counter-revolution fights on a wide front and creates some surprising combinations.

- The sound recording, broadcasting and publishing industries ceaselessly lobby for
strong restrictions and penalties for online copyright infringement.

- Irish newspapers have jointly pushed for a law requiring people to pay them for the privilege of linking to their freely available online content.
- Google, Facebook and some news sites have all attempted to enforce a 'real names' policy to membership sign-ups.
- The Australian Government, having lost the fight for a national internet filter, is now considering a proposal to retain 2 years worth of data on every online action performed by anyone in Australia, just in case they turn out to be a terrorist.
- Publishers, old and new, now provide ebooks under license rather than sale, using licenses to control use and over-ride copyright exceptions, and tracking users' reading habits.
- Companies like Google, Facebook, Twitter, Amazon and Foursquare are explicitly built on business models where they routinely invade the privacy of their users – by design.
- Recent discussions on the HTML5 standard have included a push to put DRM right into HTML.

Some of these technological changes have been presented to us as new exciting products of the information revolution. As in the past, often the
counter-revolution is cloaked in the language and imagery of the original revolution. Just like Stalin replacing the Czar, the tyranny of the publishing and broadcasting barons has been replaced by the tyranny of Apple, Google and Amazon.

As information professionals, this is the one time when we can not be neutral. In the battle over information, we must be partisan. Everything we stand for is under attack.

The fifth column

During the Spanish Civil War, General Emilio Mola told a journalist that whilst his four columns of troops approached Madrid, a 'fifth column' of supporters inside the city would undermine the Republican government from within. As librarians it is easy for us to be seduced by new technologies and inadvertently undermine the values we should be protecting. When we support or accept technologies that contradict those values, we become fifth columnists like Mola's Nationalists.

This is why I choose to talk about our contemporary love affair with new technology. Technology needs to help us to be revolutionaries, rather than collaborationists. And new technology must be useful as a tool, not merely as a symbol.
Paul Saffo says that the best gauge of a device's style quotient is whether it is as useful to its owner when it is turned off as when it is turned on. Saffo says that:

All civilisations fail by turning everything into entertainment and fashion. We need to become more explicit and conscious of deciding to make something new, instead of just doing it because it's novel.

So if the reason you are introducing a new technology is that everybody else is doing it, or you want your library to appear to be keeping up with modern trends, I strongly suggest you think again.

This doesn't mean that you should stop looking for new ideas, new technologies and new solutions. We need to be constantly looking for new ways to serve our communities. But it is important to realise that you are always making choices, even when you're not making them.

A choice to spend money on one technology means less money for other technology. Money for a 3D printer means less money for cataloguing or a new discovery layer, or faster wifi, or whatever.
And sinking into irrelevance by doing nothing is also a choice.

Margaret Thatcher famously said that

The problem with Socialism is that eventually you run out of other people's money.

The problem with technolusting librarians is the same. Finite budgets require careful thought.

When you are considering the introduction of a new technology, you need to consider it in opposition not just to what you currently have, or lack, but in opposition to every other thing you could be spending time and money on. What is it about THIS technology that makes it so much more worthy of your time and money than any other technology? What is it that makes it so useful to your community?

So, what are the features for which we need to look? Steven Johnson's book Where good ideas come from provides great insight and direction for people like us who are in the idea-sharing business. Johnson takes his readers through seven basic concepts that work together to provide a fertile environment for ideas to flourish:
• THE ADJACENT POSSIBLE
• LIQUID NETWORKS
• THE SLOW HUNCH
• SERENDIPITY
• ERROR
• EXAPTATION
• PLATFORMS

So these are the features for which we should be looking, and I could take you through them in more detail, but ensuring a new technology has those features is not enough.

As librarians, the most important question we need to ask of any given technology is not “What are the features?” but rather “What are the consequences?” Specifically, what are the consequences in relation to the Unique Value Proposition we discussed earlier: “Libraries are a system for sharing ideas in a way underpinned by the values of preservation, openness, freedom and privacy.” Sharing ideas isn't enough – it has to be underpinned by our values.

Let's go through some of those values now, and some of the problems we have:
Preservation

- Over the last two decades we have seen the emergence of what has become known as the 'serials crisis'. Static or shrinking academic library budgets have been hammered by ever-increasing costs for serials subscriptions. At the same time, access to journal articles has moved from a model of physical on-site storage of journals owned by the library to one of annual licenses enabling access to electronic files stored by publishers.

- As a profession, we have somehow contrived to almost entirely offload the preservation aspect to journal publishers. But what happens when the publishers goes bankrupt? What happens when their servers turn out to be not as secure as they thought? What happens when your library can no longer afford an annual license?

- Obviously, remote electronic access to journal articles is a vast improvement from an accessibility perspective, but the serials crisis shows what happens if you are willing to trade off one of the four principles against another.

- We are currently in the throes of aiding and abetting exactly the same thing when it comes to monographs. We now have an 'ebook crisis' – not because some publishers refuse to supply ebooks to libraries, but because ebooks are
licensed rather than sold. Because technological protection measures mean that without the publisher's continuing existence it may be impossible to access ebook files even if you have them.

Equal Access

This is the problem that most librarians seems to have a handle on. The actions of publishers in the online and electronic environment have seen access being eroded:

- In the days of hardcopy many university libraries were open to the public, who could wander in and access a journal article. Most journal publishers and aggregators now restrict access through licensing such that only faculty and students have access to journals.

- Similar things are now happening with ebooks, whereby publishers and aggregators are demanding that they effectively decide who is allowed to use the resources that libraries are paying for. By agreeing to these arrangements with regard to geographic residence of members we are allowing publishers effectively to decide who gets to join our libraries.

- DRM and other TPMs restrict access for those with visual, hearing or other impairments. It is
unlawful to break DRM, even for accessibility reasons. DRM also restricts portability. Public libraries in Australia are all too familiar with the disappointed look on patrons' faces when we explain that they can not use Overdrive ebooks with a Kindle.

- There are still digital divide issues, which libraries continue to work on. As information moves more and more online, those who can't afford to be online or can't get decent internet at any price because of where they live, will be disadvantaged.

**Intellectual Freedom**

- Apple restricts what can go in to the iTunes and App stores, and Amazon and Google both have similar powers which they exercise on occasion.
- When books or articles are licensed in the cloud rather than purchased and owned, it leaves open the ability to amend or remove them remotely such as with the notorious incident when Amazon remotely deleted copies of George Orwell's 1984 from customer's Kindles over a problem regarding publication rights.
- Broadcasts and files are now geo-blocked in order to allow broadcasters and publishers to control the distribution of content. A particularly ridiculous example is the BBC
Future website, which despite being funded by UK taxpayers is available to anyone in the world except for those inside the UK. Yes, the BBC is geoblocking people inside Britain!

- YouTube have automatic crawling systems with block content believed to contravene copyright, even if it is allowed under fair-use or fair dealing.

- Facebook notoriously filters and blocks pages promoting breast feeding as its automatic systems classify them as pornography.

**Privacy**

- Overdrive requires users to create an account both for Overdrive and for Adobe. Libraries using Overdrive thus are sharing their users reading data with Overdrive and with Adobe. Have you got a confidentiality agreement with them? To add insult to injury, Overdrive holds this as aggregate data but doesn't share it with its library customers.

- Google Analytics is used by many libraries to get data on the use of their websites and catalogues. Unfortunately you have just shared data on what your members are searching for with Google.

- Facebook is used and promoted by many
libraries, but Facebook was specifically designed to extract and store data about users' private lives. Winifred Gallagher, in her book, New, says that “the fact that Facebook was invented by an anti-social geek who tried to cheat his only friend is not a co-incidence”.

- If you are using cloud storage solutions, where is the data physically stored? Who has jurisdiction? If it is in the USA it is subject to the PATRIOT Act. Until a recent court case the FBI had been able to demand ISPs and other companies hand over data about their users and banned them from telling anyone that the FBI had asked for it.

- If you are using RFID, what information is stored on the tags? Can someone with an NFC-equipped mobile device scan someone's backpack or library card and discover what books they have borrowed? With certain systems the answer is almost certainly yes.

**Solutions**

- The problem of electronic preservation is being tackled by Stanford University Libraries' Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe (LOCKSS) project. LOCKSS does what it says on the tin, providing a distributed repository of journal articles stored locally at the libraries that subscribe – even
after their subscription ends. By putting pressure on publisher to make their titles LOCKSS compatible, libraries can still leverage the benefits of electronic distribution without compromising on their role in preservation.

- The Wikipedia in libraries project aims to leverage the knowledge of library users to improve and extend Wikipedia. Libraries provide a space, technology and advice and invite community members to come together as a group to write or improve Wikipedia articles.

- Wordpress has been forked into a product called BuddyPress, which is an install-out-of-the-box social media tool that can be hosted on your own server.

- Many academic libraries have established open access article repositories with stable Uniform Resource Identifiers. (Green open access)

- Open Access journal publishing is really taking off, and some libraries like the University of Illinois Library publish their own open access journals (“First Monday”)

- Douglas County Libraries has implemented an ebook system whereby they purchase the rights to titles from many small publishers and host the files on their own server. Whilst this is not a perfect solution and still involved DRM, it is vastly preferable to simply relying on Overdrive
or some other third party to control access and selection.

- Jason Griffey has invented the 'LibraryBox' – an off-grid stand-alone router that allows people to simply connect to a wifi signal and then anonymously download files.

- RFID tags can be set up to only record a number rather than any human-readable information such as titles.

- Open Source analytics program Piwik has functionality as good as or better than Google Analytics, but is stored on your own webserver.

- In the early days of the web, the State Library of Victoria set up Vicnet to act as an ISP and a hosting platform for community groups.

- Museums Victoria have developed a product called 'Collectish' and a service called 'Collections Victoria', which is built on Collectish. These platforms allow organisations and individuals to catalogue and display collections of artefacts online for free. Think of it as a bit like a Pinterest for local history buffs and librarians. The privacy statement and terms of use are clear and obvious.

- Trove from the National Library of Australia is also a product developed in house. It was built from scratch by the library itself, and acts as a catalogue for the NLA, an aggregator for
Australian Libraries and a tool for citizens to assist with things like the newspaper digitisation project by checking the character recognition. The NLA went a step further late last year when they released an API for Trove, encouraging others to develop tools that use Trove data in novel ways the library has not thought of or lacks the resources to develop.

We can see from these examples that there are many things to consider when it comes to new technology. As librarians we have a responsibility to consider these things in a more comprehensive way than the average person. But we also have a responsibility to act.

Libraries around the world are under attack. I believe this is not just a misguided belief that the internet serves the same purpose as libraries, but rather it is a deliberate attack on the values underpinning libraries.

As I said at the beginning of this talk, technology is not the solution to our problems because technology is not the cause of our problems. The information commons is undergoing a cycle of Enclosure. We are being distracted with baubles while we are shepherded away from the real action. Who is setting the standards? Who
determines the rules for access? Who is deciding how ideas can be shared, and by whom?

Among our profession there is a terrible fear that we're irrelevant and a desperate attempt to 'prove' that we aren't. I see technolust and the search for the One Big Technology as a sign that we don't want to face our problems honestly. We'd rather chase the latest whizz bang whatsit than work on the harder problems. We roll our eyes at the few who are talking about metadata standards and copyright law reform, and instead spend our time developing iPad lending programs and 3D printer marketing campaigns. We talk about a future of showrooming the latest consumer gadgets, instead of skilling up to build new tools ourselves.

Well, to paraphrase Kevin Rudd,

I don't want to be part of a profession that doesn't make things any more.

I don't mean making fast moving consumer goods with 3D printers, or making social media profiles. I mean making things like Melville Dewey made a new way to organise book collections. I mean making things like Vicnet made a platform for getting whole communities online. I mean making
things like Jason Griffey made a way for libraries to share ideas electronically, anonymously and off-grid. I mean making things like the developers of Evergreen and Koha made new open source library management systems. I mean making things like Museums Victoria made a way for collectors and collecting societies to easily share our heritage.

As information professionals in the midst of an information counter-revolution we have a responsibility to be pro-active about asserting the values our profession is based upon. Indeed, it is not so much what technology we make available to our communities that matters, as much as how we provide it.

If the reason we're not irrelevant is that we don't do or believe any of the things we've done and believed for centuries, then what indeed is the point of libraries?

The thing that will make libraries irrelevant is not that we don't have every new gadget as it is released. What will make us irrelevant is throwing away our unique value proposition. We will become irrelevant when we ask 'what are the features?' without asking 'what are the consequences?"
If you don't want libraries to be irrelevant, you need to make sure you're asking the right questions.

When you think about preservation, you should ask “what sort of library lends books that self-destruct?”

When you think about access, you should ask “What sort of library extends access to information by allowing publishers to restrict access to it?”

When you think about freedom, you should ask “What sort of library finds it acceptable for an algorithm to determine what information its members are allowed to access?”

When you think about privacy, you should ask “What sort of library encourages its community to invade their own privacy?”

Just like Tasmania, it is a lack of self-belief that is the biggest danger to libraries, and a fierce defence of our traditional values that will keep libraries strong, vibrant and useful into the future.

So act boldly when considering your library's next technology project. Make it something based on
our values of preservation, access, freedom and privacy. Make it open. Make it a platform for sharing ideas. Make it useful.

Do that, and libraries will be more relevant than ever before.

This post is the text from a talk I gave to the Victorian Association for Library Automation (VALA) on 27 March 2013.

Paul Saffa quote: Gallagher, W; New: understanding our need for novelty and change; Penguin, 2012; p217.

Winifred Gallagher quote: Gallagher, p173.

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Principles

The underpinning

Over the Centuries
Technolust - the fifth column of the information counter-revolution

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