

Each month, OPINION features contributions from invited guest writers. The opinions expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Library and Information Association.

ARE WE READY FOR A TRULY SEAMLESS DIGITAL FUTURE?

It's become a tradition that communication and information technologies change so fast it's hard to keep up. Sometimes it's also hard to get past how we can now do things to the question of what we will actually do with these powerful new capabilities. The State Library of Victoria's newly appointed Director of Digital Strategy, Peter McMahon, is exploring a "location-agnostic" future enabled by digital technologies.

Digital futures is a strange idea - in that it draws a distinction between an online and terrestrial experience that is rapidly dissolving. In the retail sector, terms like 'show rooming' and 'physical/virtual' (the practice of creating retail shopping spaces for ecommerce merchants) are being invented to capture the behaviour of a growing consumer group that shifts channels in ways that defy the previous on-and offline boundaries. Universities find the definition of online learning increasingly less meaningful as blended models make online and onsite learning natural parts of the same study mode.

I'm not suggesting that 'digital' doesn't exist - but more so that the role of digital strategy is progressively less about crafting a stand-alone digital experience, and more about ensuring that digital and physical play to their respective strengths and provide a blended experience that is relevant and consistent to this inconveniently channel-agnostic visitor.

With this in mind our focus is upon ensuring that our digital presence is at the heart of what the library does and is, and upon working toward a whole of library approach that provides a location-agnostic visitor experience.

This is significant for two reasons; firstly, because it sends a strong message about the increased importance with which the library views its digital activities, and also because it signals a willingness to explore, confront and ultimately leverage the underlying issues and opportunities that digital technologies present.

It is important to note that while these issues might appear unique to the sector, at their heart they are common to any sector where emerging technologies bring into question the nature of what the entity does, where its value lies and how that value is delivered.

In other words, libraries share these questions with virtually everyone.

They are questions like - what will it mean when the majority of our services are delivered to people that we never meet? How do we explain our role to new generations of potential visitors who see Google as the frame of reference for "finding things"? How do we draw new audiences to us and establish low-cost relationships that add genuine value? What is the role and relevance of a catalogue system? How do we deliver information and draw out curiosity in a broad group of consumers who are trained to expect instant gratification, and who do not understand what libraries do? How do we go beyond simply replicating the current physical experience online and develop an evolving blended experience that seamlessly blends the physical and the virtual?

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They are big questions and they are same questions that universities, banks and the private sector are struggling with as the landscape continues to shift and ripple around them.

While some might blame technology for this shift, the fact remains that the needs of digital consumers have changed and there is a significant opportunity to move libraries into new spaces – and to find new ways to reclaim some of the historic roles that libraries have fulfilled.

Technology has the breathtaking ability to enable new models at the same time as it systematically and dispassionately dismantles the old. It has the power to leverage the best of a traditional model and give it new vitality. It is this power to enable re-invention that we are seeking to harness.

In the case of the State Library of Victoria, we continue to approach the digital space as one of the places where we can most readily re-invent the traditional roles of the library.

Building upon the foundations created by our digitisation program, online catalogue and digital object management system, we are now looking to continue that evolution, and leverage the opportunities offered by new technologies to enhance the library's position as a place for discovery, for the generation of new ideas, and a place to interact, learn and exchange ideas in ways that would not have been possible even five years ago.

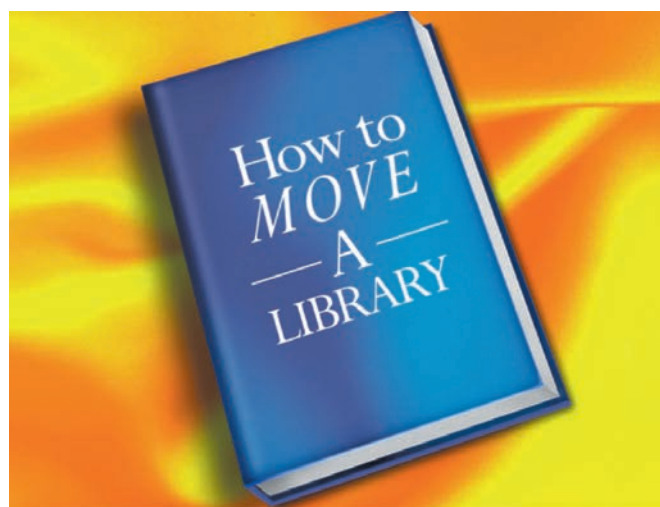
As a result, we are reshaping our approach so that our digital strategy helps inform every aspect of the library experience. Beyond the development of new online

search and discovery tools and the creation of new ways for our web visitors to create and contribute content to our collections, digital considerations also extend to our digitisation program priorities and activities, our ongoing storage plans, and the way that we introduce digital technologies to enhance the narrative that weaves through each of our exhibitions and adds value to our events.

Of course, change is never without trade-offs. Whilst the reducing number of books in public spaces provides a physical reminder that the role of the library (and that of the librarian) is undergoing rapid change, it also provides the opportunity (and the space) to showcase activities within the library that are currently invisible.

In particular, flexible space and the falling cost of digital display technologies is a potent combination which allows us to showcase the exceptional and often overlooked work of our collection librarians – and allow the public to interact with new collection items that would be otherwise too old, valuable or fragile to be displayed.

In essence, digital technology is simply an enabler – but it provides some extraordinary opportunities to craft a cohesive experience that evolves the library by using its core strengths in exciting new ways.



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