The Entrepreneurial Librarian

by Linda Heald

This paper was given to the 20th Annual ANZTLA Conference in Sydney, 2005. Numerous video clips were used throughout the paper to illustrate my points. I have modified the paper for print and giving references to the movies cited and the web addresses used.

The image and stereotype of the librarian

The 1947 Vocational Guidance Film "The Librarian' (Twogood, 1947 - view it at www. archive.org/details/Libraria1947) offers us a glimpse into the image of the librarian at that time. It presents librarianship as a vocation that "gives full enjoyment to the Librarian and radiates it to the public", panning to the kindly looking, middle-aged lady smiling benevolently at the patrons.

How does one recognize a librarian? The stereotype of our profession is very familiar - a very dull, earnest body, usually female, with glasses (probably those little half glasses), her hair in - yes here it comes - a bun, wearing sensible shoes, support hose, tweed skirt, droopy sweater. (Hall, 1992)

And the stereotype of what we do? Well, we guard the books, chase people with overdue loans and say "Shh" a lot.

In many ways we are confronted each day with the ghosts of this stereotypical librarian:

* when our students timidly come to ask for help and firstly apologise for interrupting us
* when a student greets you in the hallway with a guilty smile and the words: "I'll return my overdue books tomorrow"
* when there's some surprise that you actually have a life outside the library and that it might be interesting, or even remarkable

* when it's assumed that when the students aren't around we don't have much to do - libraries are, after all, such quiet places....
* when the person that you've just met learns that you are a librarian and says "oh – you don't look like a librarian", or "that would be a great job – reading books all day".

What do we do with these stereotypes? How do they affect the way we see our profession? Should we try to change them?

Once the stereotypes no longer hold the essence of what we do within them, they become caricatures and eventually fade or grow into new images. We can, through what I am calling an entrepreneurial approach, bring about these changes and move towards a new dynamic in the role and practice of the librarian, and of the role of the library within the organization.

First, let's take a brief look at the two aspects of the stereotype: what we look like and what we do.

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What we look like

Females have been heavily stereotyped. Ask any person on the street what image comes to mind when they think of a librarian, and they'll probably say an older woman, with her hair in a tight bun, wearing glasses, a cardigan, and sensible - meaning ugly - shoes.

Positive and negative images of male librarians are not as strong in popular culture. Despite the fact that Casanova was a librarian for 13 years, the image of the male librarian was often portrayed as shabby, bald, shy, fastidious and, often, a bachelor.

One example is Peter Sellers who plays a small town Welsh librarian in the 1962 movie *Only Two Can Play*. Lewis, the librarian is portrayed as lecherous and bored with his books and his users.

## As for what it is that librarians do ...

Scenes of librarians "ssh-ing" hapless borrowers are not hard to find in the movies. *Bob the Builder*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and, as if to prove the ingrained nature of the habit, even the ghost librarian in *Ghostbusters* 'sshh-es' the Ghostbusting trio. Not content to 'sshh' in the movies one librarian (tongue-in-cheek) has set up a web page where you can be 'sshh-ed' whenever you wish. (http://www.stevegarwood.com/sshh/)

And as to our work in the library – how are we portrayed? From the officious, futuristic librarian in *Star Wars Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*, complete with bun, to the polite but unhelpful librarian from *Men of Honour* (also complete with bun). Moving to a more alternative look of spiked hair and contemporary dress, the librarian in *Bob the Builder* still becomes a little petulant when she can't stamp the book, and is very fast with the sshh-ing! Evie, the librarian in *The Mummy* manages to hold intelligence and incompetancy in tension as she single handedly demolishes the library she is to assist in.

Then there is the classic, Marian the Librarian from *The Music Man*. Straight-laced, yet intuitive of people's better sides, her library is taken over for a song and dance number that reflects both the rigidity of the environment and the idea that perhaps she has other dreams beyond the role she plays as librarian.

But the news is not all bad - did you know, for example, that Batgirl was a librarian?

(see http://www.naughtykitty.org/librarian.html)
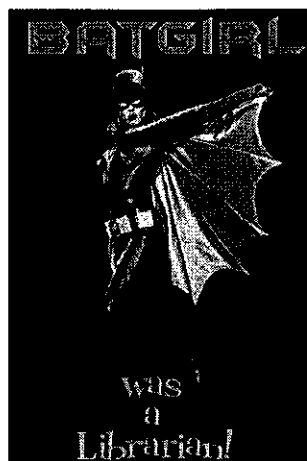
The Librarian in the movie *Black Mask* gives a positive image of male librarians. Despite the fact that he is shy, and somewhat unsociable at work, he is a jokester outside the library with his friend. He is also a physical marvel, able to fight many opponents successfully without getting hurt. When he chooses to lead a normal life he works in a library. In 1957 Katherine Hepburn gave a positive image in the movie *Desk Set*. Bunny, her character, is incredibly intelligent, being able to answer most questions asked of her without looking them up. She has a good personality, she is playful with her co-workers, and perhaps most shocking of all, she has two men pursuing her.

Librarians have been portrayed as having interesting lives – look at the librarian in *How I fell in love with a librarian and lived to tell about it* (Ellis, 2003) or a recent release, The Librarian where mild- mannered librarian David Goldberg is plunged into a dark and frenetic, paranoid world in which knowledge is a dangerous thing, and the most dangerous man is the fellow indexing the archives. (Beinhart, 2005).

And of course, there's Giles, the Librarian in *Buffy the Vampire slayer*. The character of Giles in the television series was an interesting portrayal of a librarian. He portrays the

librarian as enormously intelligent, literate, genteel, sensitive, and devoted to patrons. Whilst he also conforms to the stereotypes of bookish, stuffy, reserved, technophobic he has, according to some writers, done more for the image of the professional librarian than anything in the past 50 years. This wily and attractive professional, is our hero librarian: a pop culture idol whose love of books and devotion to research hold the key to saving the universe – every week.

In 2003 we came to a new place in how we are seen as librarians, with the arrival of the Librarian Action Figure - Nancy Pearl. Not only is she dowdily dressed and sensibly shoed, her action is a SSh-ing motion. Yet the doll is a best seller.

The figure was modeled on a librarian from Seattle named Nancy Pearl and having heard Nancy speak at the 2005 Sydney Writer's Festival, it was clear that she did it a little 'tongue in cheek'. She made it clear that the choice of clothes on the doll were not hers – she had arrived for the digitalization in a smart outfit she'd bought for an up market speaking engagement. The manufacturer made the changes to fit the stereotype.

But I think it's a sign of our maturity as a profession that we can see the funny side of this. Well, some of us at least. The doll caused considerable controversy among librarians.

On Web sites and discussion groups, in phone calls and e-mails, librarians from as far as Australia have made it clear how annoyed they are with the doll and Nancy Pearl, the 58-year-old real-life librarian who posed for the action figure. One unsigned e-mail accused Pearl of setting the profession back 30 years. (Librarians oppose sshing action figure, 2003) But I think it became a best seller because librarians liked the joke. I think we've come of age a bit and recognize that we are more than the stereotype. And, more importantly, we do more than the stereotype.

Where did this bookish, unapproachable image come from?

Origins

Work done by the early librarians contributed to a negative public image. The Harvard Library Keeper was first appointed in 1667. It was a male only position then and his duties included sweeping the floor, dusting and arranging the books and airing the Library once a week. Library hours were 11am – 1pm daily, loan periods did not exceed one month and only the professors could borrow. The library keeper was required to do an inventory each month and it was not uncommon for the library keeper to have to pay for any unaccounted for books at the end of his tenure. This sort of practice today could take our efforts for overdues to new heights.

Reference or instructional services were non-existent. The Library keeper collected the circulation fees from the students and, given that there were closed stacks well into the 19th century, the librarian was seen as the sole keeper, the guardian and protector of the books. Is it any wonder that the popular perception of this librarian was grim, grouchy, eccentric and, then, male?

At the turn of the twentieth century, librarians were still seen as caretakers of books and the space they occupy. Although there was considerably more to the job than that, anything other than shelving and circulation was kept out of the public view. As a result, while technological and societal changes were occurring rapidly on the outside, the library seemed to remain static. While the ideas contained in the books may have been progressive and exciting, the task of cataloguing them by Dewey order certainly

wasn't seen to be.

In recent years, the collective stereotype of the dowdy middle-aged woman in sensible shoes, the library sentinel guarding against the slightest whisper of conversation - and the book-stamping control freak - have met a reaction on the web. What has been mobilised is an army of loud, pierced, punk, belly-dancing, barbarian, leather-clad, and laughing librarian web pages such as:

- The bellydancing librarian
- The Lipstick librarian
- The modified librarian
- The adventures of Conan the Librarian
- The rabid librarian
- The rogue librarian
- The anarchist librarian

The new breed of librarians are those who say that the term "sensible shoes" might one day refer to footwear with locator devices, who want to be heard and seen, and who know how to blog. So the caricatures continue.

Other ways of looking at it...

Monty Python's sketch *The Gorilla Librarian* look a slightly left field view.

The Chairman of the interview panel explains library policy to the applicant for the position of Librarian, who appears to be a gorilla.

Chairman: "Oh, no, don't be sorry. You see, I don't believe that libraries should be drab places where people sit in silence, and that's been the main reason for our policy of employing wild animals as librarians." (The Gorilla Librarian, nd)

I think that new directions can take some instruction from Terry Pratchett's librarian in his fantasy Discworld novels.

The Librarian started off as human but an explosion of magic introduced him to 'unexpected apehood', and he just preferred it that way. The character is written as intelligent and exemplary in his devotion to the library. In one of the Discworld novels he goes through a few other physical changes, for reasons too hard to explain here. At various points in the story he changes into something that relates to

(See http://www.au.lspace.org/art/kidby/xmslib.jpg)

where he is - a hot water bottle, a book, a shell - and in all these changes he keeps his most distinctive feature, his tuft of red hair, and adapts to his new environment and form (Pratchett, 1998). I think that in our changing environment, that this is a good analogy for us.

Adapting and changing the image

It's not so much the image itself that matters, but in the way it then affects what we do. As I suggested earlier, we can disempower it by finding new and innovative ways to be librarians. As we become flexible in our situations, taking our equivalent of the tuft of red hair, we can change as our circumstances change around us.

The changing environment of College Libraries

Education has become, whether we like it or not, a market driven industry. Some years ago, I managed the Library for a commercial provider of tertiary education. The college was totally market-focused and driven. This had significant impact on Library processes and policies.

Now I don't believe that most theological institutions are there yet, however I believe that market forces will increasingly come into play in the next few years. I was Librarian at St Mark's National Theological Centre when they signed an agreement with Charles Sturt University to provide a Bachelor of Theology course. My own College, Morling, is moving to diversify and move into new markets to both expand the

vision of the College – and to create a stronger hold in the changing education sector. This year Counseling Courses have been stepped up and we have affiliated with another College for post-graduate teacher training.

In this market driven scenario, the place of the Library can change as we come to be judged more and more by the same standards of quality, excellence and accountability as all other sections of the institution. In this climate, resources provided for the provision and development of library services are being more closely scrutinized.

We know that we are indispensable to our institutions, but we can no longer assume that our institutions know. There have been some developments in the Sydney chapter where full reviews of the Library services have taken place and in one instance cutbacks in Library staff have resulted. We need to take the initiative in looking at our services and ask 'do we need to do things differently to stay in step with the changes that are happening around us?'

I believe that we cannot afford to hold on to all the aspects of the traditional models for the provision of library services – even given that theological libraries serve religious institutions, which, in my experience, are often years behind in their embracing of technology and change.

And here's where the idea of us being entrepreneurs comes in.

So, what's an entrepreneur? Johnny Hart has a B.C. cartoon in which Wiley's Dictionary defines 'entrepreneur' as 'A person who does everything he can think of to keep from getting a job.' Well, maybe not. Innovation depends on organized abandonment. When the term was coined 200 years ago the entrepreneur was seen as someone who upsets and disorganizes, because to get at the new and the better, you have to throw out the old, the worn, the obsolete, the no longer productive, as well as the mistakes, failures and misdirections of the past.

Entrepreneurs are themselves the subject of stereotypes. They are seen to be risk-taking innovators, individualistic, believers in themselves and in their own competence, regardless of the views of others. They are seen as stubborn, selfish, insensitive to the concerns of others, at least when these concerns get in the way, sometimes arrogant and ruthless. All in all, not the role model you'd want for a librarian in a theological library.

But this is not where I'm going with this.

It's the entrepreneurial spirit we want to look at. Entrepreneurs innovate. They look at a situation or task from a different angle and see new possibilities. In some ways, many of us in smaller or one person libraries have been operating as entrepreneurs for years. But so far we have largely done this in the context of our traditional library practice framework. I think that the parameters are changing. Not only is the educational scene changing, but so is the demographic of our users. (This was clear from our multicultural session at this Conference when Judith Bright told us that other cultures questioned even the way that our knowledge is organized.)

Innovation

I'm talking about a response to the changing educational environment around us that is open to innovation, is open to asking the questions: Why do we do this -this way? Do we need to do this at all? Given our limited resources, is there another service that would be more useful for our users? Should we look at the way we provide this service in a different way?

Because simply to do what we have done, better will leave us, as a profession, standing still in a world that is changing around us.

At Morling College, I'm dealing with things now that were not in my job description this time last year. I have become, as the book title so beautifully puts it, an 'accidental systems librarian'. With a change of library system, I am in the process of tailoring the system to meet our library's needs. One area is working through what a catalogue has to do and be for the users that we have. How radical a question is that! Could we have imagined 20 years ago that the catalogue was going to be so – flexible? That the five by threes that we took such meticulous care of would be doing so much more in this digital format?

The catalogue can be more than it's ever been – not only a link to our holdings and databases for on site users and off - but allowing our users to view websites, e-journals and e-books, we can attach exam papers and closed reserve documents and items for distance education students. New technology allows video footage and a searchable transcript to be loaded and viewed on the same screen. So, in our context, a video and transcript of a lecture could be added to the catalogue, and the student could watch, listen, and read as they went, and later search the transcript.

It is essential to keep up to date with the new developments that could be relevant to our clientele. ALIA's magazine *InCite* is a great source. As are trade shows and of course, the web. Let me encourage you to keep up with what's happening in the library world and network through the Association.

Sometimes the opportunity to innovate can come from other directions

- unexpected successes or windfalls – a programme or resource you've tried is successful, so you begin to expand it.

- the opportunity to make physical changes to the library.

- unexpected problems when an area is not working effectively, e.g. the reservation system . In assessing what needs to be done and what the system needs to do new directions can be established.

- The changing education environment itself has some changes that need to be responded to. Areas such as the increasing use of flexible delivery. Morling has 200 distance students and up to this year they have all been that – distant. We now have distance students in Sydney suburbs and several that live on campus. Suddenly the parameters have to change. We can't continue to operate as we always have done.

- The changing technology environment – for example using suppliers who can streamline our purchasing, subscription agencies who can mange e-journals. Even book covering machines that can take the

time to cover a book down to about 10 seconds.

Peter Drucker, a management guru, argues that innovation should be based on an analysis of opportunities, that it should be kept as simple as possible, that it should start small, and that innovation should be for the present and not for the future . (Drucker, 1985).

He gives a useful framework to think about innovation. What is needed is:

1. A clear definition of organizational mission

For us this is tied to our institution's mission statement.

2. Realistic statement of objectives

These can be looked at for all the separate processes in the Library.

What is our objective in relation to, say, overdue books? To get them back in a reasonable time? To reduce the number of overdue letters, accepting that there will always be books overdue? What is it that we need this procedure, this service, to do?

Or in other areas - is the reservation system working to the best advantage of the students? Is the web page the clearest and most useful introduction to the Library's services?

3. The recognition that a failure to achieve objectives requires the redefinition of these objectives in terms that can be achieved

If we fail to achieve those objectives, particularly if it is related to inadequacy of resources, do we reassess? Do we ask ourselves if the expectation to provide this service is realistic, given our staffing and financial resources? Do we consider that perhaps it can't be done in this way any more, or that perhaps this process shouldn't be done at all? Do we ever get above the deadlines or housekeeping tasks to assess exactly what is happening?

In our belief in the 'goodness' of our service we might take a personal responsibility for providing it, regardless of our resources. Do we see that by extending ourselves and our staff

we will somehow justify more resources in a financial climate that does not back this up?

We can choose to deal with declining resources by assuming it's temporary and keep on going regardless, or by trying to absorb the cuts, or by choosing to ignore the increased pressure. However this inevitably places stress on everyone involved and is based on the absurd notion that somehow we can find more hours in the day.

Or we can re-examine and change how or indeed if, it is to be done at all and not fall back to known methods and just keep sending out the letters, stop the borrowing rights and so on and so on.

4. The need to look at innovation as an opportunity rather than as a threat.

Herein lies the opportunity for innovation – the entrepreneur looks around   - options will suggest themselves as long as we concentrate on the objectives and not the processes themselves.

We must concentrate on results rather than budgets and apply a healthy dose of innovation and entrepreneurial thinking to the processes.

It doesn't have to start with major areas of library operations, in fact. Drucker states that it's better if you don't. He advises starting in small areas or in simple processes. (Drucker, 1985)

Let me encourage you to go back to your libraries and continue to be proud to be the librarian in that place. You have the skills, you have experience, you have a network of people in ANZTLA who can contribute ideas and experience. There are all sorts of possibilities as to how you can make your library service the best it can be within the resources and skills that you have. Be innovative in your response to the changes that come. Change the culture. Disempower the stereotype.

Make the library a central part and even a marketable factor of the institution by the provision of relevant, timely and innovative services. Take up the entrepreneurial spirit!

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