

INTRODUCTION TO THE ATLAS

atlas |'at-ləs|

noun

1 (pl. **atlases**) a book of maps or charts : *I looked in the atlas to find a map of Italy* | *a road atlas*.

- a book of illustrations or diagrams on any subject : *Atlas of Surgical Operations*.

This atlas is written for you. It seeks to bolster the defiant who stand bravely before the crushing weight of the status quo and seeks to give hope to those silenced by the chorus of the mediocre and resistant to change. It seeks to show the way forward for librarians in a time of great challenge, change, and opportunity. It is also a statement that you are not alone, you are not crazy, you are right: It is not about cataloging, or books, or buildings, or committees—it is about learning, knowledge, and social action.

But being right is irrelevant if it is not followed by real action and change. As I said at the 2002 Virtual Reference Desk conference, we must be brave and bold in addition to being right. We must be brave and stand up to the inertia of colleagues unwilling to change and an antiquated stereotype of librarians within our communities. We must be bold, in that this is no time for small ideas or limited action. A committee on innovation and a few brown bag talks about change are not going to help the world.

The work in the Atlas is founded on the simple precept that the very definition of our field, its perception, and its ultimate effect are in the hands of librarians—our hands. Thousands of years of tradition serve as inspiration for our future, not as a set of shackles binding us.

As Israel Zangwill, the English writer, once wrote¹:

The Past: Our cradle, not our prison; there is danger as well as appeal in its glamour. The past is for inspiration, not imitation, for continuation, not repetition.

The ultimate goal of this book is to enumerate and express the inexpressible: that stripped of your collections and policies and organizations, you still stand noble. Your nobility comes from a mission no less than the preservation and improvement of society. Our nobility is not found in collections, or walls, or organizational structures, or even in our history—it is found in our action. The nobility of librarianship is earned every day by the dedicated action of thousands of individuals around the globe. That nobility is found in inspiring someone to read, in helping someone find a job, in connecting an abused wife to social services to save her life, and in a Philadelphia café at the central library staffed by dedicated personnel in transition from homelessness to work.

The nobility of librarianship is found in schools where library media specialists prepare our future in the children they teach. It is in the government librarian who preserves freedom in the halls of political power. The nobility of librarians can be seen in the corporate offices, hospitals, law firms, departments of transportation, and colleges throughout the world. Although it has been cloaked in an air of service and hidden away behind quaint and romantic stereotypes, it is time for that nobility to shine and to be brought into clear focus for our communities.

NAVIGATING THE FUTURE

There is a theme that pervades this atlas. It is navigation. This is not merely a convenient metaphor or simple literary conceit. Rather, it emerges from the dynamic nature of the topic. Librarians are on a journey that started literally millennia ago and continues to this day. It is a journey that will continue for centuries to come—so long as we don't lose our way. In any journey, there are milestones—key moments that allow us to stop and review our course. As the web explodes, the world economy stumbles, the newspaper industry implodes, the media landscape fragments, and societies around the world face social unrest, librarians have not only an opportunity but an obligation to find their center and the means to continue a centuries-long mission to use knowledge to better understand the past, make a better today, and invent an ideal future.

1. <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/4482.html>

These are lofty goals, and it would be pure hubris to claim that the Atlas could accomplish all of this. Indeed, as is discussed at length, no artifact, however compelling, can accomplish anything. It is only people who make change. The highest hope I can have for this Atlas is to inspire positive change and to move forward a conversation on the role of librarians that has all too often become mired in an obsession with things, processes, and defining boundaries.

The Atlas is also an attempt to answer the most frequent and important question asked at all of those conferences where the preachers, prophets, and demagogues of librarianship speak: “Now what?” The work to recast librarianship to date has focused on core concepts and generating examples. It has lacked a set of marching orders and some key tools in reinvention. The Atlas seeks to be a tool. It is intended to be a textbook, conversation guide, platform for social networking, and inspirational sermon.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE ATLAS

The Atlas is the result of more than 100,000 miles of travel to 29 locations on three continents; input from hundreds of librarians and professors from 14 accredited library programs, 25 formal presentations to more than 50 conferences, and 14 publications. The foundational data for this book come from large organizations and small; national, public, academic, school, and special libraries; associations with local, regional, national, and international reach; doctoral and master's students; librarians, lawyers, historians, programmers, venture capitalists, and teachers. The whole point of all of this effort was to discover and develop a new approach to librarianship from the ground up. This means good theory, good practice, and real examples.

The result of all this work was a concept called “participatory librarianship,” and it serves as the basis for the “new librarianship” detailed in this work. Simply put, new librarianship recasts librarianship and library practice using the fundamental concept that knowledge is created through conversation. Librarians are in the knowledge business; therefore, librarians are in the conversation business. New librarians approach their work as facilitators of conversation. Be it in practice, policies, programs, and/or tools, librarians seek to enrich, capture, store, and disseminate the conversations of their communities.

However, although you will read a great deal about participation, you will not see many specific references to “participatory librarianship.” This is intentional. Modifiers and titles are useful in gaining attention, but the ultimate success of any idea is the loss of a modifier.

“Virtual reference” becomes simply “reference” when the ideas put forth are widely incorporated throughout practice. “Digital libraries” are quickly becoming simply “libraries” as they become integrated into the larger organizations and collections of a library. So too must participatory librarianship, if it is to be successful, become part of the overall concept of librarianship.

The central concepts of participatory librarianship have not changed—that conversation and knowledge are core to all that librarians do. This central principle has been explored, expanded, and detailed over the years. It will continue to be refined after the initial release of the Atlas as well. The Atlas is incomplete, in the same way the field of librarianship is incomplete. New times, new ideas, and new needs within the community create a dynamic world for librarians. Librarians and their work must be equally dynamic.

FINDING A CENTER IN THE DYNAMIC

The Atlas is about reaffirming the roots of librarianship not in buildings and collections, but in knowledge, community, and advancing the human condition (not human documents). The approach outlined in the Atlas does not discount books, buildings, or ivy, but it does put these tools in their proper perspective... as tools. Remember, we are the future of libraries, not buildings, although they may stand for centuries still. We—you and I—are the future of libraries. Ivy may grow on the columns, coffee may well be served, and books may be shelved. But they shall be done so by our decision in response to the needs of our communities.

Some have attributed the dynamic nature of the librarian’s world to technology. The web, social networking, blogging, and so forth, they will say, have totally changed the world, and librarians must abandon old ways of thinking and embrace the new world of openness, participation, and so on. I would say that technology has indeed brought about revolutionary change and indeed requires librarians to adopt (and, I would argue, create) new tools. However, seeing technology as the sole driver for change is short-sighted in the extreme.

Here is the truth: The world is changing radically—just like it always has. It does no good to ignore that librarians and society as a whole have faced times of massive change in the past. Can anyone really argue that the scale of change offered by today’s digital ubiquity (in the so-called developed world) is of greater magnitude than the advent of movable type? Is the Internet a seismic shift of greater magnitude than, say, the advent of universal public education? Is to-

day’s youth culture any more radical than the counterculture of the fabled 1960s—or the beatnik generation? Which is having a greater effect on society: the World Wide Web or the fact that over the past century life expectancy for U.S. citizens has gone from 47 to 77?² Which is a greater challenge to credibility: the fact that I just cited Wikipedia or the fact that three candidates in the 2008 presidential race “indicat[ed] they did not subscribe to Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution?”³

What is amazing is that, through all of these changes and even greater ones over the centuries (the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, indoor plumbing), the concept of the library has survived. To be more precise, the concept of libraries has been able to evolve to meet a changing world. This is an important difference because those who may be comforted that libraries survive should not be lulled into believing either that it has done so by being a fixed point in a world of change or that it has done so without wrenching and fierce debate as to its mission. Just as physicians, universities, and farmers have existed for millennia, they have done so by adapting.

Let me be clear: The world we live in *IS* changing. It is not your imagination. The world of information is moving faster, new technologies are making it to market in less time, new markets are emerging as you are reading this, and, yes, the world we lived in just 5 years ago is now gone. You cannot ignore the change, and you cannot ignore the victories of the past in accommodating the change.

The Atlas before you is an attempt to follow Israel Zangwill’s advice and look to the history of the field for the core and constant while looking to even deeper theory of how people know to help shape the future.

A NOTE ON RHETORIC

The Atlas is a combination of topical map, scholarly theory, practical example, persuasive argument, textbook, and inspirational sermon. The rhetoric seeks to match. There are plenty of sections of the Atlas that do dwell on the scholarly and theoretical. They are not in here to make me sound smart; they are in here because the deeper our understanding, the better our decisions and the better our practice. I shall not, however, shy away from the personal by masking it behind

2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_expectancy

3. <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/06/05/debate.evolution/index.html>

