

# Library Leadership in the Digital Age – Harvard Graduate School of Education

By Rob Castles

I was given an extraordinary opportunity to travel to Harvard University in March this year to attend the conference, **Library Leadership in the Digital Age**. Hosted by the Graduate School of Education it was aimed at library leaders in academic, school and public libraries and provided a rare opportunity to hear from speakers at the cutting edge of new developments in libraries and digital information.

The Conference was moderated by Maureen Sullivan, the past president of the American Library Association (ALA) and Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) and began with a presentation by Jim Neal, University Librarian Emeritus, Columbia University and President-Elect of the American Library Association. He challenged us to consider the trends provoking new thinking about the 21st century library and whether 20th century visions and skills still matter.

How do we align with the objectives of our users and how are we essential to the communities that we serve? How can we build organisations that are more oriented towards research and development, entrepreneurial initiative, and strategic thinking and action? What is the political advocacy role of the library? What are the implications for library expertise, structure and culture? What do we mean by innovation and what do we mean by transform?

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Neal encouraged us to think more globally about our libraries. In an era of rapid change in digital information it is obvious that we must be more proactive in our approaches to resource management. The discussion generated by his talk centred on the possibilities for more collaboration and the sharing of resources between libraries of all types. Information is not free and if schools are going to have equal access to quality digitised information we need to get better at sharing these resources in a more flexible way.



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Neal set the scene for the keynote speakers to offer their insights into the digitised library world. Chris Bourg, the director of Libraries at MIT provided her vision of the information environment of the future. Focusing on electronic access and the fact that it has made research much more productive, she insisted that libraries need to go further now that machine learning is

already a part of our lives. Machines are learning from data, finding insights and patterns without being programmed where to look, data now driving the machine. Her view is that libraries must learn to adapt to this new future and that we can design libraries that maximise these new developments. Bourg suggested that more than ever it is our role to continue to be effective stewards of libraries and librarianship and she reinforced the idea that libraries and librarians must be at the forefront of these developments to best advance the creation, dissemination, and preservation of knowledge in an equitable way.

It was very exciting to have David Ferriero, United States Archivist, as one of the keynote speakers. He took an active part in the three-day conference, speaking and presenting on a panel as well as contributing during audience discussions. In his keynote address he spoke about his experience of coming into an organisation with long-held traditions and work practices and driving change in a positive way. He had many interesting stories to tell us about the National Archives and his commitment to making them as accessible as possible to as wide an audience as possible, particularly young people. He encouraged all of us to develop a habit of learning and create a learning culture in our work spaces to get the best out of ourselves and our staff.



David then teamed up with Carla Hayden, the 14th Librarian of Congress, for a panel session where they regaled us with their experiences of running two of the most iconic public institutions in the world. Both working in roles they love, they were incredibly inspiring in the way they talked about libraries and librarians. Carla Hayden was particularly eloquent in her praise of the potential for good that libraries can do for the world. Her background as a public librarian has influenced her attitude to libraries being vital community spaces that bring life and energy to their communities. Her decision to keep the Baltimore Public Library open during the 2015 riots in Baltimore was a great example of her commitment to meeting community need during a time of crisis. She spoke passionately about the urgency in producing the scholars of the future and the role that librarians can play.

One of the biggest issues facing institutions that are custodians of important archival material is the shift from analogue to digital. Both emphasised the importance of getting as much of their archival material in their collections into digital form so that they will be more readily accessed by a wider audience. In the forefront of their thinking is the issue of equity and the need to ensure that scholarship is available to all. There are barriers of course. Cyber security threats are real – there are approximately 10,000 attempts a day to hack into the National Archives. The ability to get into a system and change things is an enormous risk. Paramount is the need to consider how future generations will access this digitised archival material given that technology changes so rapidly and how we read things electronically will change along with it. The whole session was fascinating and provided a rare window into the day to day machinations of these two great institutions.

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Dan Cohen is the Director of the **Digital Public Library of America (DPLA)**. A similar project to **Trove** but on a grander scale, the DPLA offers open access to an eclectic range of archival material housed in American libraries and other collections. Its scope is enormous and it is a fantastic example of where digitising information has enabled the serendipitous linking of previously unconnected sources of information on

similar topics. What the DPLA strives to do is reunite materials that have something in common. This synthesis allows for extraordinary research opportunities for future scholars. A work in progress, they are planning to link up collections of archives across the whole country. **Europeana** is a similar project in Europe with the same ambitions. Our own Trove, a project managed by the National Library, has had a more chequered history in terms of its funding and support, but is working to establish a similar digitised archive. Dan Cohen had some very practical advice about attracting users to access research information. He challenged us to think about what our libraries are trying to do and what we are telling our users when they walk in the door. He reminded us that users approach the library in very different ways and we need to accommodate those different needs. This applies in both the physical space and online where the entry ways are probably more important when attracting younger students to access scholarly material.



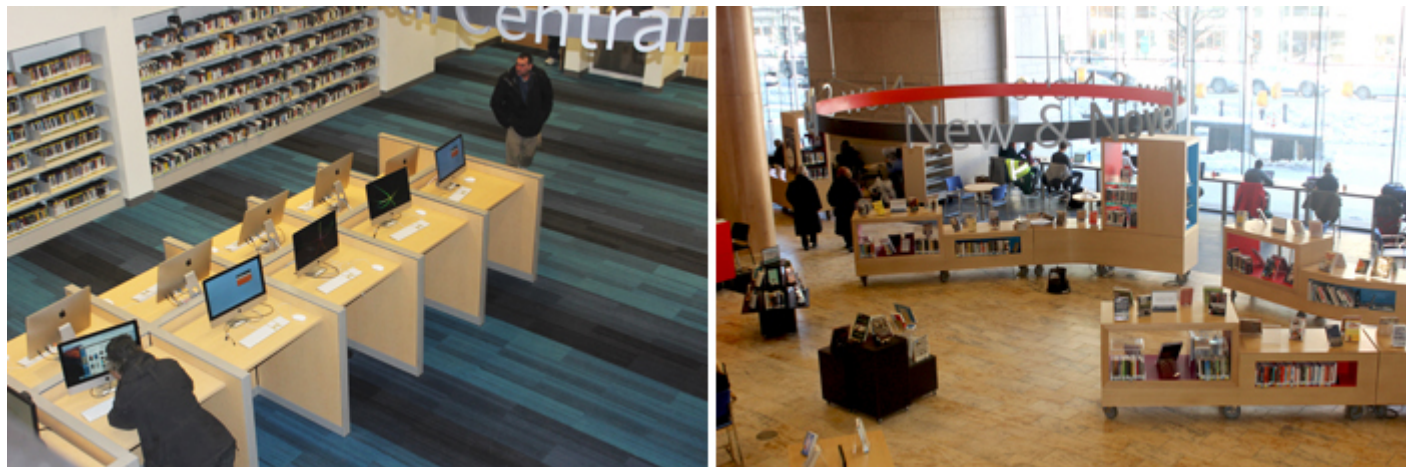
In the early evening of the second day, donning our coats and braving the cold and snow, we walked to the Cambridge Public Library. The original building was built in 1889 and has recently had a 100 million dollar renovation, adding a state-of-the-art additional wing. It is a beautiful library that is a wonderful community hub. Always packed at weekends it offers a whole range of areas to work, socialise and read. The young adult areas were particularly interesting in the ideas they had employed to engage their users. Maria McCauley, Director of the library, has transformed the library into a vital learning and recreational space for Cambridge residents. She spoke to us of her vision for the library and the possibilities they see for future development.

On our last day we were treated to a fascinating panel discussion with Tom Blake, Digital Imaging Production Manager and Digital Projects Manager at Boston Public Library, Stephen Chapman, Manager, Digital Strategies for Collections, Harvard Law Library and Robert Cox, Head of Special Collections at UMASS Amherst. They spoke about their approaches to the digitisation of library collections and the great value they see in its scholarship application. The Harvard Law School project to digitise all American case law is an inspiring story of their determination to make their valuable collection freely available. Harvard holds one of the best American case law collections in the country. They are currently in the process of removing the spines off all the books, feeding them through a machine reader and producing digitised copies. The paper copies are then rebound, shrink wrapped and placed in their archive. Their goal is to digitise all case law so that it is freely searchable. All three were passionate in their belief that valuable archive collections should be accessible for all scholars, not just those who can afford to pay for it.

Robert Cox discussed his support for the archival processing known as maximal processing. While the trend has been for archivists to carry out minimal descriptive work to hasten the availability of archives to scholars, Cox argues that it has come at a cost. If the description of material is too minimal it impacts on the ability of researchers to connect with that material. His approach at UMASS has been to approach collections on their merits, he claims there is great value in rich description cataloguing to aid the serendipitous nature of scholarly research. As he pointed out, collections will be more frequently used when they are more frequently discovered and this becomes more important with digital archives. Cox argued that too often we assume that researchers are familiar with their subject matter and this is not always the case (Cox, 2010).

Tom Blake was especially passionate about the value of digitising collections and the role that large libraries can play in supporting scholarly research. The Boston Public Library has undertaken a major project where they offer their services to other libraries in the Massachusetts area to photograph, digitise and post images to

digital Commonwealth, the state's consolidated online library. The process is free for public institutions while private organisations pay a fee. What this project does is provide digital access to a wide collection of archive material not previously accessible to all scholars. It's a fantastic initiative.



Our final session was presented by Maureen Sullivan, past President of ALA, and Michael Barker, Librarian from the Phillips Academy, Andover, near Boston. Michael is currently the Director of Academy Research, Information and Library Services at Phillips Academy. In his role he oversees the library, Institutional Research, and Makerspace programs. He also supports the assessment of innovative projects incubated in the Academy's Tang Institute – hub for innovative teaching and connected learning. A private boarding school, Michael spoke about the transformative changes he had introduced in his library to engage more widely with the school community. His aim is to create a community of learners by providing spaces for students to create (makerspaces) and to be creative thinkers by engaging in forums to discuss and debate ideas. Andover offers a very privileged learning environment. Through their alumni they are able to draw on a wide range of guest speakers from all walks of life. While Michael's experience was somewhat removed from my own school situation, his energy and enthusiasm for creating a positive learning community in his library was very appealing.

It was a wonderful three days of sharing ideas and learning about exciting new developments in libraries and digital information. It was a great privilege to be a member of the Harvard community and the librarians I met from the Harvard Libraries were incredibly generous, allowing me to tour several of their libraries and see some of the special collections they house. The Widener Library, the Houghton Library and the Harvard Law School Library were special highlights. I was also able to visit the Boston Public Library, an incredibly beautiful library that has had a massive modern renovation added to its original building. Dynamic and engaging it offers a wonderful service to all ages in the community in beautiful architect designed spaces.

I came away from this conference inspired and energised about the future of libraries world-wide and the possibilities offered by new developments in digitised information and the potential on offer to all of us. I am convinced that schools should be at the heart of this revolution.

## References

Cox, Robert S. (2010) 'Maximal Processing, or, Archivist on a Pale Horse' in *Journal of Archival Organization*, Volume 8, Issue 2, Accessed from the Australian National University.

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