

Peter Heron and Joseph R. Matthews (eds.): Reflecting on the Future of Academic and Public Libraries

Reviewed by Jane Mansfield

American Library Association 2013. ISBN: 9781856049481, 242pp

This book is a great resource for library managers and for students of librarianship. I think those who are concerned about the future of libraries may also find this text informative and possibly inspiring. The co-editors, Peter Heron and Joseph R. Matthews, present a series of forecasting tools, possible scenarios and discussions from academic and public library directors. There is an emphasis on forward planning and the use of scenarios. The use of scenario planning as a technique was new to me and I suspect that other tools that are presented in this text may be new to others.

The editors are a strong team and their backgrounds indicate the level of expertise present in this book. Peter Heron is a Professor at a Graduate Library School (Boston) and is the principal faculty member for the doctoral programme: Managerial Leadership in the Information Professions. Joseph R. Mathews is a consultant specialising in strategic planning, assessment and evaluation of library services.

Some of the statements in the book may initially appear to be startling or negative: 'let's face it: the library as a place is dead' for instance (p. 4). However, the main thrust of the book comes from these premises. The above quotation, which is taken from an EDUCAUSE conference, concludes with 'We need to move on to a new concept of what the Academic Library is'. The book presents

scenarios for public libraries as well and many of the issues facing libraries affect both sectors. These issues are summarised as: financial crisis, spatial crisis, use crisis, and accessibility crisis. Heron and Matthews examine trends that are specifically facing American libraries, but these are almost identical to those facing libraries in the UK or many other countries. Information technology is one of the major influences. E-books, cloud computing and Google mean that users are now more likely to search for (and find) things themselves.

Another statement presented in the book is: 'Acknowledge that the library's OPAC is not the place where individuals look for information - it is the last option, or not even recognised as an option' (p. 10). The authors offer SWOT analyses, along with TEMPLES analyses (Technology, Economy, Markets, Politics, Law, Ethics and Society) as part of the preliminary scoping for scenarios. There are environmental scans for public and academic libraries (p. 29, p. 35). There are also useful excerpts from research into the future of libraries, including forecasts from pundits such as Thomas Frey. Frey suggests that there are ten trends that will affect the future of the public library. One of these is that we are transitioning from a product-based economy to an experience-based economy. Books are moving from being a product to being an experience (p. 35).

The main focus of the book is to present tools for strategic planning, and this is where the scenarios come in. Hennon and Matthews describe how to build scenarios. They also provide examples of how scenarios have been devised and used. The detailed table outlining four scenarios from New South Wales State Library shows 30 different questions for each scenario. These questions begin with 'what is the value placed on the physical library' and the answer is different for each scenario. Other questions concern energy efficiency, viewpoints on expertise and information supply, pricing and so on (pp. 62-63).

This is a detailed work offering practical tools for library managers. I especially appreciated the way that the authors use real-world examples and the fact that the authors recruited library directors. The library directors work with and comment on the scenarios. Whilst the text is mostly written by USA academics and most of the examples come from outside the UK, I think that UK managers would feel that the research, ideas and tools presented are highly relevant and useful to their own workplace.

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