Seeing the Forest for the Trees on Mars: Locating the Ideology of the "Library of the Future"

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It is a singular irony that a profession so fundamentally concerned with the workings of an ancient institution of memory should be so fixated on—even obsessed with—the future. Yet for many decades now, library practitioners have been generating a vast (and still growing) literature concerned with the "library of the future." A search for this phrase in the Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts database yields 456 articles, while a Google Scholar search delivers in excess of 5,600. Sampling this literature reveals it to be replete with hopes for exciting, high-tech possibilities, yet also fraught with an existential fear of institutional and professional obsolescence. In the face of rapid external technological developments, including television, CD-ROMs, personal computers, the internet, and new media, library practitioners have speculated endlessly on the impact these will have on the academy as well as on library collections, facilities, services—and the very need for librarians (Drabenstott 1994).

While much of this literature may be classified according to its technophobic or technophilic tendencies and stated imperatives for radical versus incremental change (Pyati 2007, Sapp and Gilmour 2002)—including some contrary views rejecting the all-digital future (Crawford and Gorman 1995)—what is largely absent from these articles and books is a theoretical understanding of the underlying ideological bases of their arguments, notably a tendency to embrace technocratic and neoliberal information-society discourses (Pyati 2007). The literature is also fairly instrumental in its focus on institutional priorities to the exclusion of extrinsic or transdisciplinary perspectives. Reconsidering these prescriptions for the future of the library through the transdisciplinary lens of futures studies—the study of how societies may achieve preferable futures while avoiding potential threats (Niiniluoto 2001)—affords us critical perspectives on their ideological foundations. Such perspectives also compel us to interrogate totalizing discourses regarding technologically driven futures for their colonizing potential to preclude more pluralistic alternatives (Sardar 2010).

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Case in point: Hal Niedzviecki's 2015 book *Trees on Mars: Our Obsession with the Future* locates our culture's fixations in what he calls our *future-first* thinking, which he views as a toxic and anxiety-generating ideology that leads to "anxious, plaintive, almost existential questions" about the future (Niedzviecki 2015, 222)—a theme that runs through the LIS literature. While Niedzviecki's book is not about libraries—indeed, the term "library" does not so much as appear in the index—a review of the "library of the future" literature nonetheless reveals a number of themes consistent with his critique.

In Niedzviecki's view, our culture's obsession with the future is no longer about pursuing visions for—much less creating—ideal societies as it is about the goal of "owning" or "seizing" the future by disrupting the present, with the concomitant belief that we must do away with anything that impedes access to the future. Most obvious of the intersections of his thesis with libraries is his observation that individuals "eagerly bring new technologies into our lives with very little consideration for how each hyped, supposed innovation is going to alter our day-to-day [experience, even though] the story of technology is littered with unintended consequences" (224). In a similar vein, LIS scholar Ajit Pyati writes that "at worst, [library] literature is plainly celebratory, often exhortative, and full of vague and dire threats of the results if we do not embrace information technology more thoroughly and enthusiastically" (7).

Fetishizing technology, however, is only one problematic aspect of the future-first ideology that Niedzviecki identifies in his search for a more humanistic perspective on the future. A Toronto-based novelist, essayist, cultural critic, and self-described contrarian, Niedzviecki is the author of a number of previous books, including *We Want Some Too: Underground Desire and the Reinvention of Mass Culture* (2000) and *The Peep Diaries: How We're Learning to Love Watching Ourselves and Our Neighbors* (2009).

With *Trees on Mars*, he takes the reader on a tour through the twenty-first century's landscape of the future—one fuelled by amorphous, vague aspirations and littered with all-too-human victims: young entrepreneurs betting their futures on designing apps of dubious utility, universities casting aside their humanities programs in favour of "degrees in disruption," job-seekers trying to tailor their resumes to demonstrate they have "visionary product insight" and can "continually reinvent" themselves (55), and precariously underpaid, just-in-time warehouse workers who are driven to the edge of exhaustion to ensure the rapid delivery of our latest gadgets—which corporations will inevitably strip-mine for our data.

While individuals and institutions alike are acculturated to plan for their own futures, Niedzviecki points out that this planning has generally been undertaken so as to be able to continue doing what they have always done—not to disrupt and

destabilize it, which is the impulse at the core of the ideology of the future. As a result, Niedzviecki writes, “we are adopting a techno-scientific notion of owning the future as a replacement for the social certainty we crave and have now irretrievably lost” (125).

A review of articles about the “library of the future” published over the past quarter-century reveals this literature to be fairly riddled with the sort of deterministic, totalizing, future-first techno-enthusiasm that Niedzviecki describes. Libraries, we are repeatedly told, must undergo “radical reinvention” and engage in “disruption” so as to “become different types of organizations” (Mathews 2014, 17, 22). This requires “abandoning formerly successful approaches and technologies” (Stoffle, Renaud, and Veldof 1996, 213) and “positioning ourselves for constant change” (Mathews 2014, 21), through a “total embrace and implementation of [the] underlying philosophy and values” of constant change (Stoffle, Renaud, and Veldof 1996, 224). In this way libraries can be better equipped to “be involved in inventing the future” (Spies 2000, 127), a future replete with possibilities:

> Libraries and learning organizations such as the university, no longer constrained by space, time, monopoly or archaic laws . . . [can be] unleashed by technology and empowered to serve all humankind . . . these disruptive technologies are stimulating the appearance of entirely new paradigms of learning and research that could not only sweep aside the traditional campus-based, classroom-focused approaches to higher education but seriously challenge the conventional academic disciplines and curricula. (Duderstadt 2009, 222–224)

To ensure that this future is “seized” (Kountz 1992, 40), librarians must “retool themselves” (Drabenstott 1994, 175) because, after all, “to buy the future . . . [t]here really is no other choice” (Stoffle, Renaud, and Veldof 1996, 222). Even now, when by any imaginable standard of the 1980s or 1990s the library of the future has surely arrived, it is still apparently not enough: two of these quotations have appeared in texts published since 2009. Again, Niedzviecki’s words resonate: “The more . . . old ways and patterns we hasten to destroy, the further we seem to get from any kind of meaningful end point where our anxiety abates and we learn to love our new era of endless change” (237).

Most troublingly for our purposes as professionals attached to institutions with deep and ancient historical roots, Niedzviecki stresses that this “permanent future” discourse is one that valorizes billionaires such as Amazon’s Jeffrey Bezos, who are seen as the ones “owning the future,” as opposed to governments or institutions of higher education, which in previous decades led such high-tech achievements as the Apollo program and the development of the internet. Yet, the more these institutions orient themselves to the values of constant disruption, reinvention, and entrepreneurial individuality, the more they are actually undermining themselves, for they are unwittingly contributing to a discourse in which they are seen to have

no place: “the best institutions are the ones laying the groundwork for their own obsolescence” (Niedzviecki 2015, 234).

Contrary to the exhortations for constant change all around us, Niedzviecki reminds us that “we [as a species] don’t have a history or tradition of living and desiring constant change” (168). Indeed, he argues, the most successful cultures—such as the Chumash who have occupied California for thousands of years—have prospered precisely because they maintained and passed on their knowledge and practices with very little changes, rather than actively seeking their disruption.

For Niedzviecki, the nadir of our current future-first thinking is the movement recruiting volunteers for a one-way trip to Mars. This barren dream is encouraging people to leave behind their spouses and families as well as everything else they have ever known just so they can stake their own claim on what they perceive to be an inevitable future. But such dreams also require turning our backs and giving up on Earth—the ultimate rejection of all things past. In response, Niedzviecki can only leave his readers with but one goal for the future: reclaim meaning, truth, and what is good about the human project, even in the absence of hope and in a world crumbling around us.

Carrying this argument forward to libraries, we can begin mapping out future pathways characterized by stability and enduring principles rather than constant change. Critical futurist Ziauddin Sardar proposes a skeptical discursive model, recognizing the inherent “wickedness” (Rittel and Webber 1973) of any problem considered by futures studies. As such, Sardar’s notions of futures studies’ inherent location in the present remind us that our conversations about the future of libraries have a very real impact on their contemporary existences. Sardar’s further emphasis on the legitimacy of—and need for—diverse knowledge systems when contemplating the future also has the potential to temper and decolonize technocratic impulses.

Through the future-library literature, practitioners have been negotiating the tension between the ideology of chasing the future on the one hand and cherishing the security of tradition on the other. The danger this discourse holds for libraries—in light of Niedzviecki’s analysis—is its pressure to “jettison the past, eradicate stability [and] adopt perpetual change as the only possible meaning. The era of permanently chasing future is the age of perpetual anxiety” (Niedzviecki 2015, 230). Our institutional and professional anxiety is based on “future failure. . . . We fear being left behind,” and so we “approach the future with, at best, a kind of compulsory, corporate enthusiasm that occasionally gives way to fatalistic existential dread” (236). What we have failed to recognize is that these contradictions, born of imposing future-first instability and disorder on an ancient institution predicated on order and stability, can be self-perpetuating. As French poet Paul Valéry observed,

> The future, like everything else, is no longer quite what it used to be. . . . We used to consider the unknown future as a simple combination of already known things, and the new was analyzed according to its unoriginal elements. But that is ended. . . . Why? Because the . . . modern world is assuming the shape of man's mind. Man has sought in nature all the means and powers that are necessary to make the things around him as unstable, volatile, and mobile as himself. . . . If . . . we imprint the form of our mind on the human world, the world becomes all the more unforeseeable and assumes the mind's [own] disorder. (Valéry 1948, 135, 143–144)

In imprinting the neoliberal values of disruption and constant change on libraries, they will themselves then tend towards disruption and volatility—ironically making their futures ever more unforeseeable.

Trees on Mars aids us in identifying these potential risks in our future-library discourses, while pointing to the need for transdisciplinary perspectives—such as those of futures studies—regarding alternative pathways to enriched, more humanistic and pluralistic discussions about the future of libraries.

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