

O'Connor, Steve and Peter Sidorko. **Imagine Your Library's Future: Scenario Planning for Libraries and Information Organizations**. Oxford, UK: Chandos Publishing, 2010. 213 pp. 75.00 USD. ISBN-13: 978-1-84334-600-5.

The timing for **Imagine Your Library's Future** couldn't be better: technological and social transformations are converging on the ancient institution of the library at the same time as are global economic crises, with the result that many of the traditional purposes and functions of the library are being fulfilled by other means just as governments are facing massive deficits. Ensuring that libraries remain relevant, vital and innovative into the future has never been more essential, so a manual for navigating this highly unpredictable environment would be most welcome.

But, alas, not this one.

While at its core there may be useful guidelines and advice here — enough perhaps for a substantial and practical journal article — as a book, **Imagine Your Library's Future** is a significant disappointment.

The book's ostensible purpose is to assist library leaders in organizing and running consultation processes within their institutions to help chart their libraries' futures (towards what the authors refer to as the "Preferred Library Scenario"), and these steps are outlined between pages 113 and 135 — a mere 22 pages out of the book's total of 213. When boiled down, the advice they offer here is commonsensical, if somewhat naive: gather your stakeholders, understand their issues, get them to work together, conduct some exercises to generate ideas, draw up potential scenarios for the library, shop these around with broader stakeholders, the public and administration, and then agree on which is preferred. The remainder of the book addresses why such exercises are necessary, what issues are facing contemporary libraries, what goes into scenario-making, and how to implement the preferred scenario once it is arrived at.

Unfortunately, what could have been both a critical and practical guide is, instead, a superficial treatment of a complex and problematic process wrapped in extremely conventional — even banal — observations and enough out-of-context quotations to make an undergraduate blush. The book hardly seems to have been proofread, let alone edited. It is replete with almost every imaginable grammatical and syntactical sin, from subject/verb disagreements to split infinitives, redundancies, and numerous mangled efforts to combine present and future tense. Paragraphs meander from one subject to another with such abandon that they give the impression of having been transcribed on a Dictaphone after a night out at the pub. Most significantly, the writing is often just plain incoherent. What, for example, is the reader to make of this passage?

*Copyright is in the public domain. Plagiarists are found relatively easily on the Internet, as evidenced in recent cases involving a politician in Australia as also with a number of other countries, through the use of software tools such as Turnitin (p. 19).*

To illustrate their principles, the authors present a number of “exercises,” none of which are numbered or named, which is only the beginning of their remarkable inscrutability. The exercises are further divided, for no discernible reason, into two parts that in some cases serve to essentially answer the questions posed but in others appear to be instructions for the facilitator. As such, the exercises offer little more than confusion.

In what is probably the worst example, on page 50 participants are asked to “assess...the percentage of resources available to your library's users” and the “percentage of print acquisitions coming into your library right now” as well as “the percentage of information gained through access to the information on the Internet.” While the accompanying graph makes it clear that participants are really being asked about the percentage *mix* of their libraries’ media holdings, each one of these statements is so poorly worded that they beg a different question that would bog down any attentive focus group. Is there a “percentage of resources” that is *withheld* from the users? What is meant by “right now,” and would such immediate data even be available? And just how could anyone assess the “percentage of information” gained over the “information on the Internet”? It’s difficult to believe that these exercises were ever field-tested.

Finally, the authors present a number of “case studies” of libraries in which scenario planning was undertaken, most which were written or co-written by the books’ authors, ensuring not only further examples of the book’s unfortunate prose style but a congratulatory tone where a critical and balanced examination would have been more useful.

Authors Steve O’Connor and Peter Sidorko are veterans in the field of library management in Australia and Hong Kong and presumably know their subject well. In terms of the broader contexts they seek to establish, however, they are rather out of their depth, opining throughout on the nature of society and social change, apparently unencumbered by the burden of having read any actual social theory. To cite but one example: they muse that the goodness of any given technological development depends on the uses to which it is put, as if the Frankfurt School philosophers had not long ago demolished this instrumental view of technology. As a consequence, the proposed deliberations are absent any substantive recognition of power relations, conflicting ideologies and the influence of competing social interests — in short, of the political and economic realities in which any public decision-making must of necessity take place.

The book’s particular fault is that it is about planning but devoid of planning theory. Even something as basic as Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber’s famous (1973) formulation of “wicked problems” would have been immensely useful here<sup>1</sup>. Wicked problems, wrote

Rittel and Webber, have no agreed-upon causes, no end point, are always symptoms of other problems, and are so affected by every intervention that they can have no ultimate solution.

In other words, all planning problems tend to resist the tidy processes and simplistic advice outlined here.

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<sup>1</sup> Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 1973, 4: 155–169.