Libraries in the Exponential Age
Moving from the Edge of Innovation to the Center of Community

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
Communications and Society Program

Executive Summary

Urban or rural, public or private, large or small, libraries are living in a moment in which they are juxtaposed between their traditional role as a respected cultural institution and their emerging role as a dynamic platform for progress. In an age where innovation occurs at the speed of thought, how can libraries embrace technology as well as employ it to build stronger communities? Library innovation will transform the individual and collective institutions, but more importantly, it also will transform communities.

In August 2015, the Aspen Institute’s Communications and Society Program, with support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, hosted a Leadership Roundtable on Library Innovation, part of the Institute’s Dialogue on Public Libraries project. Leaders and policy makers from government, business and civil society were charged with exploring ways to accelerate the transformation of public libraries, with the realization that transformation will be driven by three factors: (1) new narratives about the library’s role in society, (2) a culture of innovation that promotes new relationships, new networks and new forms of participation, and (3) committed, transformative leadership within the library profession as well as from other community partners including government, media, technology and civic stakeholder groups.

At the Leadership Roundtable, working groups were each asked to explore innovations in library practice in one of three areas where the library serves a critical role in communities: Access and Inclusion; Learning and Creativity, or Public Forum and Citizenship.

The resulting discussions concluded: Technology must become a core competency for libraries, not simply a service offered to patrons. Using yesterday’s tools to meet patrons and community needs is an antiquated model; today’s libraries must anticipate the future needs of clients and community, and innovation is the GPS. Technology is only one part of the equation; technology must be joined by new thinking on the development of human capital in the community and in the library.

The organizational culture of libraries (as is true for most companies and movements) enables true innovation to occur only on the edge of the organization where staffs are less encumbered by expectations of maintaining prescribed pathways. The challenge for libraries is to shatter the organizational paradigm and create new ecosystems that permeate the organization and invite and nurture innovation.
Three roundtable working groups each created strategies through which libraries would be grounded in community priorities and democratic values. The strategies, *Superconnectivity*, *America’s Civic Square* and *App-Library*, each focus on libraries embracing technology as a means of anticipating and addressing community needs. The results would move libraries from a transaction-based way of thinking to a mindset of innovation. Consequently, libraries would become an essential platform for navigating and enhancing life.

The strategies succeed in identifying ways to give libraries a national voice, recognize opportunities for collaboration and integrate new and different library champions.

- *Superconnectivity* recognizes the need to address the wealth gap in order to overcome the inequality of access, inclusion and engagement. The main components of Superconnectivity would be (1) technology ~ libraries would provide high-speed (10G) connectivity, not available elsewhere; (2) people ~ staff would be re-imagined as community activators who facilitate the development of relationships and collaboration; and (3) public space ~ technology and materials would make superconnected libraries collaborative spaces.

Under the banner of “Librarians for America,” the library would serve as an experimental laboratory, attracting a diverse population to test the limits of their imagination. Superconnectivity would create unparalleled access, enable collaboration and increase economic prosperity.

- *America’s Civic Square* would address libraries’ responsibility in the current fragmented media environment to provide a platform for civil discourse and debate. Through a network of libraries across the country, *America’s Civic Square* would provide a social and technological platform that could be leveraged locally and nationally.

As America’s Civic Square, libraries would have an opportunity to curate national and local conversations. Without taking a position on issues, they could build upon their existing assets to address issues as they arise. They would become critical resources by providing data and information and facilitating conversations.

- *App-Library* would use the metaphor and structure of the app environment to design library environments that augment formal education by developing opportunities for learning and creativity in libraries. Anyone could contribute content to App-Library, although libraries would vet the information to ensure it aligns with library and community needs. Once content is approved, App-Library would provide its assets to partners so they can carry out the desired educational experience.

With its two-way process, App-Library would ask for feedback about usage and participation. That feedback, combined with more formal metrics, would enable libraries to update the apps to better reflect the needs and interests of the community.

The three strategies developed by the roundtable working groups look at the evolution of libraries through a lens of innovation. Building on the strengths of libraries, these strategies...
identify tangible, attainable processes through which libraries can become catalysts for creating and sustaining resilient communities.

However, the roundtable participants acknowledged that to progress from idea to execution requires fundamental, systemic changes in the library system as a whole. The considerations include adding financial resources, changing educational curricula in schools of library science, embracing innovation as central to the libraries’ mission, developing metrics and empowering everyone involved to become agents of change.

With a clear vision and confident leadership, the group concluded, libraries have the opportunity today to reposition their role in the community, becoming the top-of-mind resource for providing the tools, space and culture to anticipate and prepare for the needs that will strengthen the communities they serve. This is the defining moment for America’s libraries.