Essay for the 2018 Birdie MacLennan Award

Transforming the Information Community
Tessa Minchew

I have spent much of my career in librarianship hearing that the profession is in a state of radical transformation. As a mid-career professional, it is now apparent to me that this transformation was never going to occur in some great, single moment of combustion. It has been, and will continue to be, pushed forward by a myriad number of people running through a myriad number of iterative processes. Those of us executing these processes are not mere cogs, rather partners in the growth and success of libraries and of the larger information community. By extension, we are also facilitators of the growth and success of all whom we serve. Though we may not always receive due credit for it, librarians and other knowledge workers have a great willingness to embrace the transformative, particularly through the iterative. In this willingness, we will find a crucial key to our profession's continued value in the twenty-first century information sector.

As previously alluded to, there are so many ongoing processes of transformation in the library and information community that a short essay could not hope to even skim them all. Being an electronic resources librarian, and more broadly a technical services librarian, there were several specific points that sprang to mind when contemplating the essay topic. First, we are all very familiar with the issue of shrinking budgets and staffing, a now unavoidable constant in our field. Not so long ago, technical services began to turn to automation, of cataloging in particular, to address

these concerns. When handled correctly, automation was a boon. It was not, however, a panacea. Technical services departments can still benefit greatly from reorganization and redesign with an eye toward creating more holistic processes. We should continue to examine how often we are "touching" a resource and how we can shorten its journey from acquisition to access while still providing and maintaining the high quality metadata so vital to discovery.

A natural impulse might be to search for other high-tech approaches to transforming our work, but the more low-tech approach of cross-training should be one of our next priorities. Though admittedly labor-intensive in the beginning, training all technical services employees in as many acquisitions and cataloging functions as possible reaps long-term benefits by greatly reducing hand-offs and time spent on duplicative or repetitive tasks. In addition to streamlining work that is now being handled by an often dramatically reduced number of staff, this increased efficiency can also free time for value-added projects like the cataloging of unique materials, professional development and continuing education (particularly for staff who have not historically received support for such activities), and experimentation in areas that will represent the work of the future, work that will be less production-oriented and more project-based. As well as being given appropriate training and support in expanding their areas of expertise, employees should also be encouraged to feel ownership of their work, contribute ideas for enhancements to workflows and processes, ask for additional training when needed, and recognize that their willingness to

embrace evolving roles within the organization will create a stronger, more dynamic, more sustainable future for the profession as a whole.

Transformation of the technical services department cannot stop with cross-training. Over the years, the point of access to library resources has moved from the printed card catalog to the OPAC to the discovery layer, each phase a seismic shift in library culture and the public's relationship with it. Rather than seeing this evolution as an arc with a beginning and an end inside the library's walls, I view each stage as bullet point on the itinerary of our collective journey. Fully exploring the world of non-MARC metadata will be the next stop on the trip. Linked data, BIBFRAME's use of it in particular, has the potential to lead us outside the immediate sphere of the library and further integrate us into the more broad information community.

While improving processes within our own departments is always of value, we need to branch ever outwards. Interdepartmental communication and collaboration has become even more crucial to the overall success of the library. Moving away from service silos opens up new opportunities for growth. Further partnerships between the library's information technology, public services, and technical services departments can result in an enhanced experience for patrons and informative, innovative projects for employees. Expanding further outwards, librarians have been rethinking and reinventing the most foundational approaches to our work for quite some time. Even prior to the advent of the World Wide Web, libraries were beginning to experiment with models of access versus ownership, experimentation that continues to this day and is perhaps most currently visible in the profession's critical reassessments of the value of the "Big Deal."

Regardless of the many different transformative processes we will continue to execute, it is unlikely that the library and information community will see much respite from quips about our impending demise at the hands of the open internet and our other perceived competitors. Those unfamiliar with our profession may enjoy taking the occasional potshot at our continued relevance, and it is not incumbent upon them to educate themselves as to our worth. It is our responsibility to relate that reports of our death are not only an exaggeration, but a gross inaccuracy. Communities like NASIG give librarians and knowledge workers the tools we need to both address this inaccuracy and ensure that it does not become our reality.