

# Get time on your side

Consultant **Matt Finch** (@DrMattFinch [www.mechanicaldolphin.com](http://www.mechanicaldolphin.com)) explains how the fourth dimension can make libraries even more attractive to their communities and funders.

**WE'RE** always talking about what the library of the future might look like, but could a library be a place that *contains* the future? Libraries are already widely seen as safe and welcoming places, but strategy consultant Matt Finch suggests that these values can be enhanced by a free resource – the common ground of an unwritten future. “The future is an excellent place for people to come together because it hasn’t got here yet. It’s just a story which we’re still in the process of telling.”

## A taste of TUNA

Matt works with institutions going through rapid and hard-to-predict change – what foresight experts call TUNA conditions, defined by Turbulence, Uncertainty, Novelty, and Ambiguity.

“Our relationship with information is changing at a great rate,” Matt says. “Even people with very defined roles in our society don’t necessarily know what futures they are going to inhabit. Everyone has to look over the horizon, and that is where strategy happens.”

Matt’s recent contribution to a strategic plan for library and information services at the Supreme Court of Queensland, Australia is an example. “On one hand, you have your dusty law books and judges who came to the profession in the late 70s or early 80s, and on the other you have members of the public defending themselves using an app on their smartphone. At the moment that’s just



**Rob Mackinlay** (@cilip\_reporter2, [rob.mackinlay@cilip.org.uk](mailto:rob.mackinlay@cilip.org.uk)) is Journalist, *Information Professional*.

for parking tickets, but if those apps get any better, how many people will try and defend themselves on more serious charges? The judiciary, too, might find their work augmented by software – imagine the Microsoft paper-clip assistant for judges, helpfully reminding them to be consistent in their sentencing and eliminate bias.

“Alongside these emergent developments, you’re also seeing access to justice issues: who will be empowered to navigate a digitised legal landscape, and who might be excluded? Some legal practices look at the future and say they might not look like a traditional law firm in years to come, they’ll be more like a tech company whose field is law. That’ll present opportunities, as well as challenges, for legal information professionals.”

Even in a field as rooted in tradition and precedent as the law, Matt argues, no-one is



Matt Finch

immune from a disruptive future: “Librarians have to get ready for very different worlds, identifying signs of change and making judicious decisions about infrastructure, training, operational priorities.”

### Tools for understanding value

Strategists use foresight tools which have traditionally been reserved for the boardrooms of big companies, the military and government. Matt recommends two in particular: Value Creating Systems (VCS) enables organisations to map the system of relationships they live in now, and Scenario Planning creates plausible visions for the future systems we might come to inhabit.

“In the VCS approach, relationships are mapped in order to understand how value is co-created within an ecosystem. It doesn’t have to be financial value, and that’s one of the reasons it’s useful for libraries, which sometimes need to express the difference they make in terms that aren’t just about money.”

He gives Ikea as an example of VCS in action. “They don’t just sell furniture, they get customers to pick up the materials from the warehouse and do the building themselves... They’ve even found ways to embrace ‘Ikea hacks’, where people use the materials in ways for which they’re not intended. They offer a lifestyle – the meatballs in the

cafeteria, the quirky product names, the aesthetic – and seek to enrol you in the business of co-creating the home you desire. And once you’re in the system, you’ll keep coming back for more. It’s not so different from a library’s service to the community, it’s just that the values and motives of the organisation differ. You can still learn from the successful strategy.”

Matt says that libraries already enrol people into their system and give them opportunities to create on their own terms – “people who visit the library are users, creators, not just customers” – but that libraries could do more to examine where they fit in, or what they could do to make the wider ecosystem function better for all involved.

Matt points to work being done in places like Hillsboro Library in Oregon. “Stephanie Chase, the director there, and her team, are less focussed on the number of books they issue or the number of people coming through the door. Those are poor measures of a 21st century public library and they also encourage library funders to think of librarians as book jockeys stranded within the walls of their building, never venturing out into the community.

“In Hillsboro, they engage with wider branches of the council and other local organisations. They’re looking at the second

order impact on their community: mapping out relationships and identifying the knock-on effects they need to measure, the ‘splash’ which a great library makes in its community. This also speaks to much wider trends in global governance – organisations, governments, and institutions looking to understand value in terms other than Gross Domestic Product or the financial bottom line.

Libraries need to be at the forefront of exploring new definitions of value, rather than having their value defined for them.”

New forms of value are being explored in other sectors too: “A librarian in a law firm might be offering a rapidly changing range of services to their internal clients. They might have to be designing and devising automated alerts and tools to help the professionals they serve to get the information they need promptly – perhaps even before the lawyers know to ask for it. At the same time they have to make sure their work is visible and valued even when the physical space occupied by shelving dwindles, the bulk of their work is done on a screen, and cheeky junior lawyers might even take credit for some of the research which information professionals are doing.”



For an example of a law librarian finding a novel way to provide non-financial value Matt cites US library professor R. David Lankes in his book *Expect More*. “Lankes points to a law firm librarian who ran a lunchtime seminar for staff called ‘Character Assassination 101’; if you have an expert witness on the opposite side who needs debunking, a librarian can do that for you, or teach you how to do the necessary research. Character Assassination might not be on the job description for many library roles, but it was an excellent way of showing the lawyers she served how her skills and resources made a difference.”

## Looking forward

VCS is complemented by the Scenario Planning approach, which looks at factors in the present to develop challenging visions of the futures we might have to operate in next.

“Scenario planning is a term people often confuse with disaster preparedness or contingency planning,” Matt says, “but it can be understood as a specific methodology which, rather than predicting the future, helps us to identify our assumptions and think differently about what might be coming.”

The example which made scenario planning famous and credible in corporate circles was Royal Dutch Shell’s use of scenarios before the Yom Kippur War in 1973. “Shell wasn’t a dominant oil company in the late sixties, but an executive called Pierre Wack pioneered the scenario

approach to help the firm unearth particularly challenging futures which they might face. When OPEC embargoed the West as a result of the 1973 war, Shell had predicted neither the conflict nor the embargo - but they had, through their scenarios, been rehearsing for a world in which oil producers began to behave like a cartel. They had a playbook of challenging situations which they could respond to more effectively than their competitors.

“Devising scenarios is a collaborative business,” Matt adds, “it works best when stakeholders and voices from outside the institution are invited to join the discussion. This not only enriches the quality of strategic foresight, but can help build collaboration across the wider ecosystem.”

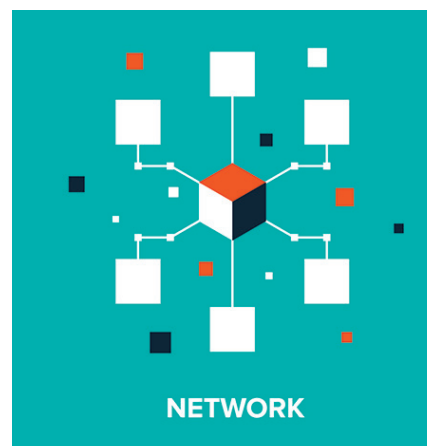
Working with US public libraries, he has found that inviting the community in to co-design strategy allowed discussions of topics which the librarians would have found it difficult to raise. “For one American library service, beset by cuts, it was the community who said, ‘We don’t think you’re ever going to recover your 1990s level of funding from City Hall, so you should consider hiring a full time Fund-raising Manager to seek out philanthropy and to shape library programmes so that they attract funding from other sectors of government.’ The community gave the librarians licence to entertain what was previously unthinkable.”

## Staying off the menu

Matt cites Rafael Ramírez, a professor at Oxford’s Saïd Business School: “He’s fond of that joke, ‘If you aren’t at the table then you’re probably on the menu.’ Libraries need to ensure that they are setting the table in terms of their mission and values, then inviting people around for dinner – demonstrating that they are experimenting to find new and relevant metrics, offering future scenarios which help their parent bodies and funders understand the role they’ll play in the future.”

Matt is now working with libraries in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand to explore strategic co-design – from using the public library to offer scenario planning for a local community, to helping libraries at the national level integrate their values and measurements with those being developed at the highest policy levels.

“In New Zealand, for example, you have a national wellbeing agenda which offers an alternative to mere GDP, this crude measure of whether a nation is doing well. Libraries want to see how that agenda percolates through local government to the level of the council teams that they report to. You can also see how globally, libraries are examining whether it is sensible to yoke their local performance and impact to the achievement of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals”.



## Profession

As a consultant, Matt operates in settings where challenges are acknowledged and action is being taken. His clients understand that they face turbulent futures and are willing to engage with that reality, using innovative tools and experimenting with new approaches. So is he getting a realistic picture of the whole sector? Are librarians ready to take on ambitious ideas like this?

“Most library professionals are aware that our relationship to information is transforming dramatically – both in technological and social terms. Doing nothing is always an option – sometimes it might even be the right one – but it makes sense to consider the futures you might face, and anticipate what you might need to do if those situations arise.

“Opportunity can be found in the most challenging times. Even if you don’t get the future you’d have wished for with a magic wand, if you pay close attention to the system you’re operating in and the way it might develop, there will be a chance for you to make a difference in terms of your community’s need for information and knowledge.

“Scenario planning offers a way to think about precisely the futures which would challenge you most, and anticipate what you could do to thrive in them. With some wit, will, the right tools, and a bit of luck, you could even redesign the system you inhabit, to the benefit of your organisation and your users.” **IP**



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