

# Policy Before Technology

## Don't Outkick the Coverage

Brady Lund

In the race to adopt the newest and best, practical considerations for emerging technologies are frequently overlooked. Technology can set an organization apart and, in the case of libraries, be instrumental in helping demonstrate value. Yet, all new technologies carry additional, potentially unpleasant consequences, whether it be threats to privacy and security, barriers to accessibility or risks to health, learning barriers, or exposure to misinformation. Organizations must consider these threats before introducing new technologies, rather than the other way around. To illustrate these threats and their policy implications, I will briefly discuss two popular technologies/innovations—virtual reality and data analytics—and the threats that are often overlooked by organizations and how they may be appropriately addressed by policy.

Virtual reality (VR) has quickly become a popular technology in all types of libraries and learning organizations. As noted in many recent publications, VR provides an immersive and interactive medium to engage with learning and entertainment content.<sup>1</sup> Of course, libraries are always seeking new ways to engage patrons with their collections and services, so it is natural that there would be high interest in this technology. However, I have observed that this technology is frequently made available with little foresight or oversight of potential issues. The engaging interface of VR technology also presents risks to certain individuals. It has been known to invoke seizures among those who are predisposed and can cause severe dizziness and disorientation.<sup>2</sup> These risks are severe enough that the institutional review board at my university required a safety disclaimer be included for any project that utilized VR technology for learning. However, inclusion of a disclaimer is not necessarily common practice in library research and certainly not for non-research projects.

Further, substantial learning barriers should be acknowledged for virtual reality technology. A learning curve is perhaps a less-serious threat, compared to the health and safety risks, but can still lead to non-use or misuse of the technology.<sup>3</sup> Libraries should want as many patrons as possible to use the technology to enrich their lives. This includes individuals who have limited technology experience. It is important to provide education and policy to ensure the technology is used properly, such that the technology will not be damaged, and the user will not quit trying to use the technology due to frustration. Specific policies for the use of VR technology could be integrated into existing technology policy (if such a policy already exists) or created as a new policy. Either way, it should be highly visible, and patrons should be asked to acknowledge it before use. The policy may include elements like that “the patron must follow all library employees’ guidance on how to properly use the VR headset” and “the patron is encouraged to ask any employee for assistance with the headset.” While a library may not be able to foresee or enforce perfect policy for all issues that arise from using emerging technologies like VR, these are some commonsense policy items that protect the user, the library, and the technology while it is in use.

Though a vastly different “technology” in many ways, the evolution of data analytics in modern libraries similarly poses significant threats to library patrons. As opposed to physical threats to well-being, the threats associated with data analytics are mostly related to social, psychological, and economic well-being

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through privacy and security risks. Depending on how data is used, it can be rather innocuous or overtly malicious. It is not always clear when data goes from being innocuous to being a threat.<sup>4</sup> Collecting patron addresses can seem like necessary and acceptable data in order to issue a library card. Libraries could use this data, though, in conjunction with census and other government data, to identify demographics of library users, like the ethnicity of patrons. This could be helpful in knowing, for instance, that a library has a large Hispanic patron-base and thus may want to invest in Spanish-language resources, but it also involves using data that patrons were forced to supply in order to profile them and make inferences about what materials they would like. Understandably, many patrons would likely rather not have private data about them collected and analyzed, even if it could significantly improve services.

There is certain data—like the addresses mentioned above—that libraries must collect in order to provide services. This cannot be avoided. Rather, what should be done is to have a policy that clearly (without much legal jargon) outlines what data is collected and for what purposes it is used. Everyone knows that no one reads lengthy legal disclaimers. While it may be seen as above-board in the eyes of the law, slipping policies that the library knows most patrons would question into a disclaimer is unethical. Any questionable policies or procedures should be made clear to patrons, so that they can make an informed decision on whether to opt out of those services. It is great to have extensive data to improve services, but it should not be collected without *real* consent. No librarian should go home at the end of the day with any question about whether they used proper data collection procedures.

Additionally, there are always risks with the storage and maintenance of data. How is the data being stored? What security measures have been taken? These questions, along with the concerns in the prior paragraphs, are items that would all have to be addressed in an ethical review application for human-subjects research at a university, but could be (and often are) overlooked when it comes to library services and assessment. This may be particularly true at public libraries, which are not connected to an institution of higher education (which provide some ethical oversight).

It is always better to start with a policy than to make one up as one goes along, even if it is necessary to adjust the policy over time as new risks and considerations emerge. For those who are creating a new policy from scratch, one of the best sources of information and inspiration can be the existing policies of other, similar organizations.<sup>5</sup> For example, a large public library may look to the data policies of a similarly-situated large public library for inspiration.

I encourage additional works by researchers within the field of library technology to strengthen evidence-based practice within the area of technology policy formation. It is important to be careful with the design of policy and not to come at it without first doing your homework. Yet, at the same time, it is important to consider the unique context of your own institution. What is a successful policy for one library may not be so for another—you must know your service population and specific space and technology infrastructure and management capacities. Something like the administrative structure of a library system can significantly impact the success of policy implementation.

Policy, understandably, can be seen as a boring—if necessary—part of the proper functioning of a library and its technology. This can lead to policy being something that either is created in haste or after considerable procrastination, or something that becomes the subject of unnecessary, prolonged debate among library administration. In most cases, appropriate policy can, in fact, be quite straightforward, if libraries rely upon existing policy examples, understanding of the technology in question, and a thorough assessment of their library environment to guide the policy-drafting process. Technology policy can be a boring subject, but its necessity cannot be overstated for reducing liability and threats to the well-being of patrons, library employees, and property. It is important to have technology policy in place before the

technology is made available to the public so that patrons can make informed decisions about whether to use the technology and/or agree to share data.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Matt Cook et al., "Challenges and Strategies for Educational Virtual Reality," *Information Technology and Libraries* 38, no. 4 (2019): 25–48, <https://doi.org/10.6017/ital.v38i4.11075>; Kenneth J. Varnum, *Beyond Reality: Augmented, Virtual, and Mixed Reality in the Library*, (Chicago, IL, American Library Association, 2019).
- <sup>2</sup> James S. Spiegel, "The Ethics of Virtual Reality Technology: Social Hazards and Public Policy Recommendations," *Science and Engineering Ethics* 24, no. 5 (2018): 1537–50, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11948-017-9979-y>.
- <sup>3</sup> Amy Restorick Roberts et al., "Older Adults' Experiences with Audiovisual Virtual Reality: Perceived Usefulness and Other Factors Influencing Technology Acceptance," *Clinical Gerontologist* 42, no. 1 (2019): 27–33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07317115.2018.1442380>.
- <sup>4</sup> Yong Jin Park, "Personal Data Concern, Behavioral Puzzle and Uncertainty in the Age of Digital Surveillance," *Telematics and Informatics* 66 (2022): article 101748, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2021.101748>.
- <sup>5</sup> Lili Luo, "Experiencing Evidence-based Library and Information Practice: Academic Librarians' Perspective," *College and Research Libraries* 79, no. 4 (2018): 554–67, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.79.4.554>.