

# Librarian Leadership in the Age of AI

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## ABSTRACT

*Librarians have managed and lived through many seismic shifts brought by technology. How should librarian leaders approach the coming anticipated AI workforce disruption?*

## INTRODUCTION

Let me begin with a short anecdote: prior to my days working in the library, I worked as a daily newspaper reporter, covering local politics back in the early 2000's. One day, the editors and owners of the newspaper gathered all the staff together to discuss the challenge of both producing an expensive paper product each day and the dilemma posed by the newspaper's website, which by comparison, offered the ability to instantly update stories in real time and could do so with little regard to the cost of ink or physical space limitations.

Long story short, that newspaper ultimately folded. I loved working there, but, alas, we live in a time when the longevity of an institution or the way we have always done things is under great pressure and change. This might be an example of disruptive innovation, where more nimble, smaller actors were able to challenge and change the status quo.

Librarians are, on the whole, tremendously adaptable people, but change is hard and, sometimes doing everything right does not lead to the desired outcome. My hunch here is that libraries are at a similar inflection point with AI: a collective pool of professionals doing our best work while the world shifts beneath our feet in such a way as to make it increasingly unrecognizable.

Librarians are no strangers to massive technological changes, and there might be a tendency to see this transition as just the latest in a long line of challenges. Consider "American Public Libraries: A Long Transformative Moment," written in 1996, as librarians reckoned with the evolution of the internet. Kent notes, "Throughout the almost 30 years that I have worked in public libraries, librarians have had to respond to continual challenges—from futurists, from technologists, from elected officials, from trustees, and from funders—that the public library was going to disappear."<sup>1</sup> Librarians could point to the shift from paper card catalogs or the shift to the internet age as examples of current leadership challenges already met. However, complacency would be a mistake.

## THE ARTIFICIAL LANDSCAPE

Experts in the growing field of artificial intelligence suggest that the capabilities of large language models (LLMs) that drive the ChatGPTs and Geminis of today will only expand from here. As author and consultant Patrick McKenzie said, "This 'what you see today is the floor, not the ceiling' [concept] is one of the things ... best understood by insiders and worst understood by policymakers and the broader world."<sup>2</sup> Together with the pace of change in this field, artificial

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intelligence will ultimately prove disruptive to all forms of the working world, including the world of public libraries.

Today's LLMs are the building blocks for tomorrow's true Artificial General Intelligence (AGI). These next-generation technologies will, according to some, herald a new way of not just working in the world, but of what it means to be human. Ray Kurzweil's rather mind-blowing *The Singularity is Nearer* posits that "exponential technological trends are leading to a transition that will be utterly transformative for humanity."<sup>3</sup> If we set aside these longer-term implications and look instead at the near-term horizon, we will see that the mere promise of AGI has already had a massive disruptive effect on the workforce.

As of this writing, early 2026, public libraries have begun using Gen AI tools, but larger impacts of AI have yet to be felt. Those days are surely coming. I expect the public sector to face similar pressures in the name of automated savings.

AI has already disrupted entire industries, some suggesting that this technology could "automate more than half of current US work hours."<sup>4</sup> Many of the details of this change are anecdotal. Consider this from CNBC:

General cost cuts may remain the primary driver of recent layoffs, but more corporate leaders are saying that workers need to justify their roles in a world of artificial intelligence, and explain how they can incorporate AI to make their work more productive.<sup>5</sup>

These changes may prove hasty, as the ultimate impact of any productivity gains from these LLM technologies remains unclear, with some experts arguing for limited changes and others higher impact:

Some forecasts claim that artificial intelligence will turbocharge global output by 30 percent per year, but most economists expect it to add only one percentage point to annual growth. AI excels at digital tasks, yet the toughest labor bottlenecks are in physical and social realms.<sup>6</sup>

Parsing out the ultimate economic impact of these changes is beyond the scope of this piece, but it is included here to suggest there are macro forces at work that signal further change. At the Greenfield Public Library, we are using AI to help us plan our editorial calendar and help create timelines and status updates for our various social media platforms. For example, I asked Gemini to create a "conversational style blog post" and "single line description" using one of our calendar event listings. This saved time and used material that we sent out into the interwebs anyway.

Whatever the eventual outcome, the stakes of this transformation for the economy, with the billions of dollars already invested and the ecological implications of data, are truly already massive in scope, making continued disruption very likely.

## **LIBRARIAN LEADERSHIP TRAINING**

It is worth pausing to consider how prepared many library leaders are for this moment. Most of today's librarians get their leadership training "on the job," or through various informal mentoring programs rather than in library school. This gap between what is taught and the needs of the profession persists.<sup>7</sup> Research by Jange confirms this: the identified leadership qualities library workers feel they possess vs managerial traits that library managers need differ.<sup>8</sup>

These leadership qualities echo the people- and service-oriented nature of librarianship. Without compassion, empathy, and commitment, library professionals would struggle to create a warm and welcoming library atmosphere for the community and its employees. Librarians know they need to be innovative, creative, etc., but a consistent lack of leadership training means, perhaps, that the gap between possessed and needed skills persists.

Speaking generally, librarians often focus on the customer service aspect of their roles in institutions, giving the profession a hint of the servant leadership approach. In practice, this style suggests the leader adapt the mindset of a humble servant, seeking to meet the needs of those they serve. This approach suggests the leader's main priority is the well-being of people and the communities to which they belong. The goal here is to help staff and the public achieve the best possible for themselves.

However, given the state of near-continuous societal change, librarians are often called upon to become transformational leaders as well.<sup>9</sup> Transformational leadership focuses on transforming the underlying beliefs and values of staff so they are motivated to do more than they originally intended. In practice, transformational leadership is hard to achieve because it involves building a sense of urgency into an organization to allow it to adapt. Problematically, this same sense of urgency can appear to be a need to serve and is not allowed to fester into the full-blown call to action the approach requires.

Libraries are often filled with problem solvers who like to help reach comfortable consensus, which can undermine the needed changes. These two approaches can bring conflict, either collectively or internally, which often manifests as burnout as people strive to meet unrealistic expectations and navigate challenging times. The takeaway is that librarians are well-suited to typical adaptive leadership tasks, but those same qualities mean that librarians can struggle to produce clear leadership in times of crisis.

## **THE LOOKING GLASS**

Whatever their training, leaders of today's libraries will face a period of great societal change and many unknowns as the AI story unfolds, often with little formal leadership training.

I will close with two visions of what that future might look like.

### ***Collaboration***

In November 2025, McKinsey Global Institute released a study that considered how AI technology is changing the world of work.

McKinsey's report gives an optimistic view of the transformations underway in the world's economy, thanks to the promise of a world defined by a human and robot partnership model. The McKinsey report presents a broad overview of what these changes will mean for various sectors of the economy, including, most importantly, snapshots of the impact on the education and library arenas. The report ends with some guidance for today's leaders as they navigate these changes, suggesting that leadership is crucial as agents and robots reshape work and the economy.

- Workflow re-organization allowing for automation and change
- Organizational transformation through creative collaboration
- Fostering a culture of experimentation and learning
- Ethical decision-making that honors trust and safety
- Intentionally developing tomorrow's leaders to bridge the gap between AI and human work<sup>10</sup>

**Resistance**

The second vision is more bleak.

Civic institutions, as Hartog and Silbey note, offers society a ready way to solve big and complex problems. They are an imperfect answer for solving complex problems, because the processes and policies inside them allow for collective action to deal with problems too complex for any one individual.

In this article, we hope to convince you of one simple and urgent point: the current design of artificial intelligence systems facilitates the degradation and destruction of our critical civic institutions...In short, AI systems are a death sentence for civic institutions, and we should treat them as such.<sup>11</sup>

The article's point is well made, showing how society's core civic institutions—laws, schools, libraries, a free press—are what support our democratic society. Institutions become the vehicles by which information is passed, rules are maintained, and structure is given to solving some of the great challenges of both civilization writ large and becoming better human beings. Think about institutions less as spaces and more about an approach to being that is cultural and human. AI, the paper suggests, undermines expertise, short-circuits human decision-making, and “isolates humans by displacing or degrading human connection.”<sup>12</sup>

Resistance under this model means clinging to the messiness of humanity and trusting in the rule of law, education, and democratic freedoms to build a robust society. Left unsaid, perhaps, is the reality that human systems are far from perfect, but even that imperfection wears a recognizable human face.

**Moving Forward**

Libraries have historically considered themselves important third spaces for people, which will remain true; however, that is not enough. If we consider these emerging technologies as revolutionary as they might be, the building blocks of future technologies, then it may be true that libraries' freedom of access will allow alternative development of technologies undreamt of that are less driven by today's profit motive.

So, protect the institutions, yes, but also broaden the understanding of what that protection might look like and remember the historical roots of our public libraries as places that allowed the have-nots to grow in education and literacy to compete with the wealthier moneyed classes of the day. If we are entering the next Gilded Age, then libraries will be called upon not to merely be places where people can gather, but as centers of community transformation. I think it is important to understand that while institutions seem profoundly timeless, that is not the case. They do close. My instinct is this is a moment when the certainties of the past will not help and may, in hindsight, provide cold comfort.

Even an optimistic reading of the transformation currently underway in today's workforce means that things in the library world will need to radically change and adjust.

These two visions offer almost diametrically opposed leadership tasks, with one calling for a collaborative, human-centered approach and the other seeking transformational-minded leaders who are unwilling to bow to outside pressure. The former suggests leaning into library leaders' core customer service-minded strengths—empathy, connection, support—to develop fruitful technological collaborations. The other calls for more direct confrontation, being willing to

embrace what Julian Birkinshaw calls being “unreasonable” and “imaginative” in the wake of the sameness of AI content.<sup>13</sup>

## CONCLUSION

AI raises the question: is this an adaptive leadership moment or one that will prove to be hugely disruptive? I would expect that libraries and librarians will put this new technology in the adaptive camp, but the reality is that these new technologies are going to be more disruptive than expected. Already, our public faces job loss, disappearing industries, and a radical re-understanding of how to engage with information. The library leader versed in the state of AI needs to be willing to reimagine not just the work of the library in response to these changes, but also to reconsider what the core function of the public library means for a society that has such easy access to informational tools and technologies.

The critical challenge facing the library world writ large is whether it will find a way to offer a voice in this new environment. AI technology has tended to flatten writing, expression, and culture, which leads to an unfortunate blandness, but it will not always be this way. I would argue that libraries, as keepers of memory and holders of collective culture, have an important role to play in this new world. Leaders must stand firmly in the knowledge that they will be called upon to develop new ways of understanding and using those emerging ideas, using the wonderful blend of creativity and compassion that represents the best of what libraries offer to a public thirsty for knowledge and inspiration.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>12</sup> Hartzog and Silbey, "How AI Destroys Institutions."

<sup>13</sup> Julian Birkinshaw, "Leadership Imperatives in an AI World," *Ivey Business Journal*, July 24, 2024, <https://iveybusinessjournal.com/leadership-imperatives-in-an-ai-world>.