

A Space for Innovation: Proposing a Maintenance Schema for Library Work

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Abstract: This column proposes a schema to help librarians identify and communicate the importance and function of maintenance in library practice in order to challenge uncritical views of innovation. Understanding maintenance as an interdependent and multi-faceted concept, essential to library work and practice, challenges the narrative that innovation alone can solve problems caused by limited budgets and insufficient staff. The proposed schema can be engaged at both microscopic and macroscopic levels, benefiting individuals, specific departments, and entire libraries.

Keywords: *maintenance, infrastructure, innovation*



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A recent call for proposals (CFP) for a special 2020 issue of *College and Undergraduate Libraries (C&UL)* serves as an artifact of the library profession's acceptance that constant innovation is a necessary imperative in the twenty-first century library.

Keeping up with the constant development to library technology services and practices can be a challenge for any library—there could be financial, space, or staffing constraints in addition to other potential detractors. However, there are also ample opportunities to excel in specific areas of library technology in order to better serve our library users in their research and knowledge creation journey. Academic libraries can share their innovative implementation and management of technologies or technology related services and practices.¹

To be sure, technological change in libraries is expected. How librarians keep, or are perceived to keep, pace with technological change, continues to be debated both within and without the library profession. This call serves as an example of the uncritical view of the constraints that affect libraries (e.g., lack of funding, staffing, space, political capital), as well the role innovation is presumed to play in addressing those constraints. Regularly presented as the solution to all problems, innovation has become a euphemism for “doing more with less.” This normalizes the lack of investment in libraries, obscuring what is needed to foster critical practices involving innovation. “Being innovative” obscures what is needed to maintain more prosaic aspects of library work. It is all a recipe for burnout.

The failure to critically engage with innovation is not unique to librarians. Benoit Godin, a scholar who has studied the evolution of the concept, writes, “There...is a profound absence of reflexivity in the imperative to innovate; innovation is always good” (Godin, 2015, p. 154). It is not hard to understand why; the idea of innovation prioritizes the new and connotes progress. Maintenance, with its emphasis on necessary but mundane tasks, is not exciting. It is easy to neglect maintenance, which is “...resistant to easy measures of success and progress” (Acker et al., 2019, p. 17). Yet, there is

¹ See https://think.taylorandfrancis.com/cfp_library-technology-innovating-technologies-services-and-practices/.

little in the library that does not need to be maintained. Collections must be developed; physical and virtual spaces must be managed; and instructional services must be designed and delivered.

Positioning innovation as the only solution, and linking that solution to the future of libraries, distracts librarians from identifying and developing intentional maintenance practices focused on managing and sustaining library practices and services. Maintenance provides space for engagement and a rhetorical means to understand how innovation can fit within the constellation of a library's work, rather than judging that work by innovation's ever-advancing finish line.

We present a conceptual framework to help librarians identify and communicate the importance and function of maintenance which will challenge the uncritical views of innovation. In making the practices of maintenance visible, we can frame the planning and the infrastructure necessary for sustaining innovation. More importantly, this increased awareness becomes a tool for advocacy, rejecting the notion that we should "do more with less." To be clear, we do not reject innovation. We reject the uncritical embrace of it. Innovation must be balanced by, and pursued within, a philosophy of maintenance.

Defining Maintenance

Andrew Russell and Lee Vinsel define maintenance as "all of the work that goes into preserving technical and physical orders" (Russell & Vinsel, 2018, p. 7). In their estimation, the vast majority of work humans do is maintenance. They argue, "[t]he most unappreciated and undervalued forms of technological labour are also the most ordinary: those who repair and maintain technologies that already exist, that were 'innovated' long ago" (Russell & Vinsel, 2016). This vital work literally helps the world function. Practicing maintenance simultaneously builds and reinforces infrastructure, the networks that support the functioning of an organization. Supportive infrastructure, in turn, enables maintenance to be practiced. Infrastructure is not self-healing nor inherently resilient; it "constantly

has to be repaired, rebuilt, extended, shrunk, adapted, readapted, continually redefined and reengaged” (Edwards et al., 2011, p. 1409). In a library, building and maintaining infrastructures requires physical labor. This labor has mental and emotional costs. The drive to innovate often focuses on individual effort, “...the permanent pressure to optimize the self” to overcome obstacles, and fails to account for such costs. (Schaffner, 2017, p. 206). When innovation is presented as the sole solution, the additional resources and energy required to be successful are rarely considered. Russell and Vinsel’s definition intentionally “excludes emotional or social activity (such as the maintenance of friendships or one’s own morale)” (Russell & Vinsel, 2018, p. 7–8). We argue that physical, mental, and emotional labor are inextricably linked. Any framework that aims to achieve a compassionate balance between maintenance and innovation must consider the whole individual.

A Maintenance Schema

To create supportive infrastructures, we must identify and communicate the importance of maintenance practices in library work. We need a conceptual framework that highlights the critical elements “built into the scaffoldings and protocols that constitute the base on which staff and patrons can operate” (Mattern, 2017). These elements should encompass the material means that support the work, non-material circumstances that affect the power to act, the personal and collective ability to sustain an activity, and the capacity to recognize how each of these elements work together to shape the what and the how of the library. Focusing on these elements provides librarians with a language for advocacy that pushes back against innovation’s vague promises of transcendence. We believe this schema can be engaged at both microscopic and macroscopic levels, benefitting individual departments and entire libraries. This column, however, focuses on applying the maintenance schema at a macroscopic level. We are writing a more in-depth article, which will explore these practices at a microscopic level.

Resources

Resources are the material sources of support. This includes things like budget, technology, buildings and spaces, and collections. Collectively, resources support the work of the library. But they must also be individually maintained. Deferred maintenance in any area is evident in the form of reduced hours, outdated technology, crumbling buildings, and aging collections. The lack of investment in a library's resources limits what is possible. Operating and innovating within these conditions is the motivating premise behind the *C&UL* CFP. Doing more with inadequate budgets or staffing levels encourages the creation of temporary workarounds rather than the development and maintenance of long-term models that support both innovation and the existing work in the library. The availability of resources impact the philosophical platforms on which the library builds outreach and instruction, as well as infrastructure and technical services. The resources available directly impact the energy required to maintain different aspects of the library.

Platform

Platform is the set of non-material circumstances that affect one's power to act. These circumstances include the relationships between colleagues in one's department, other departments within the library, and departments and offices across the institution (e.g., administrative offices, information technology, and student affairs). Social and political circumstances are inevitably part of these relationships, affecting the perception of library's role in the campus culture and curriculum. Navigating these dynamics can take considerable resources and energy (discussed in the next section). Healthy relationships, which value the work of the library and foster infrastructures to ensure success, can develop and maintain environments where librarians do not feel pressured to do more with less. Unhealthy relationships, which eliminate resources and demand energy, place the onus on the library faculty and staff to find solutions (i.e., to innovate) to problems caused by entities outside the library

(i.e., the administration). While that may absolve outside entities of direct responsibility, it does not ensure a functional platform. Innovation alone cannot form healthy relationships. Individuals in library leadership may be forced to reconcile competing priorities. Innovation can be used as the frame for demonstrating the value of the library's services and outreach. But normalization of innovation should be resisted as the sole solution to the problems a library faces. The maintenance schema presents one possibility for pointing out the limitations of this approach while providing some means of engaging with new ideas in the context of the library's capabilities. Librarians should not simply respond to new ideas with a blanket "no." The schema can be used to identify the infrastructure needed to realize those ideas within the present state of the library.

Platform provides a good example of how the elements of the schema are present at macroscopic and microscopic levels. At the microscopic level, the library guides its practices through policy, which functions as a type of maintenance. Policies, for example, regarding fines or book checkout limits are artifacts reflecting a library's approach to an idea. At the macroscopic level, policies of the institution shape and form the practices and work in the library. University and library policies, at times, come into conflict, limiting opportunities to act. For example, if the library would like to move towards doing away with fines but the generation of fines is viewed by the university as undercutting some of the library's costs or that there are job descriptions tied directly to the fine policy and so doing away with the fines would potentially result in losing a valued member of the library staff.

Energy

Energy is the personal and collective elements required to sustain an activity. To understand the concept of energy, it is helpful to briefly discuss some of its constitutive elements. The first element is ability, the individual and collective skill set that exists within the context of staffing levels. The second element is commitment, the willingness of individuals or groups to engage with an idea or

initiative. The third element is morale, the emotional investment in the work of the library. The fourth element is stamina, not just what is able to be done but how long it can be sustained. Like resources, these elements collectively provide the energy to sustain the work of the library. But care and attention in these areas must also be individually maintained to ensure robust infrastructures will provide library workers with enough energy to devote to efforts. The energy required to be constantly innovating, especially in the face of considerable constraints, is potentially overwhelming. Burnout becomes a real possibility. These efforts test ability and stamina, subsequently challenging commitment and morale. Burnout, however, should not be considered an unavoidable outcome of working in academic libraries.

Vision

This brings us to vision. Vision is the ongoing act of recognizing the interdependence of the elements of the schema—energy, resources, and platform—and how together they shape the library as a physical place and the work that takes place within the library. Vision requires a multi-sensory approach to understanding. To illustrate, consider a conversation with a colleague. You are not just listening to the individual’s words. Their tone of voice, demeanor, and hand gestures all shape how we respond to a person in conversation. Using institutional memory and personal history to better understand that person in their past and present, can serve to identify points of friction requiring care and specifically act against potential burnout. Vision, then, demonstrates our care for others. When others can perceive being seen or heard, it is connected to the degree to which they feel cared for. The authors of “Information Maintenance as Practice of Care” define care as “...an ongoing set of negotiated, contextual, and interrelated responsibilities, practices, principles and values” (Acker et al., 2019, p. 15). This definition demonstrates how care is actively practiced, intersecting with and explicating our discussion of vision. By forming a holistic view of maintenance, we see what energy is being spent, what platforms are available and what resources could be marshaled to accomplish a

truly incredible library initiative. Taking all of this into account, gives us a sense of the infrastructure necessary to maintain it into the future. Maintenance creates a space for innovation, and, in doing so, mitigates against unintended burnout.

Conclusion

Each of the schema's elements is already present in library practice; we are simply giving each of them a name and illustrating their interdependence. Resources, platform, energy, and vision in the CFP referenced at the beginning of this column are an invisible presence. The emphasis on innovation overlooks the foundation laid or supported by elements of the maintenance schema. The act of seeing the work of maintenance holistically can inform the kinds of infrastructure that enable innovation. Innovation does not extend the limits of human possibility. Innovation produces "...a decisional burden which itself requires a comprehensive structure of repair and maintenance" (Graham & Thrift, 2007, p. 3).² In other words, innovation requires labor. Sustaining this labor demands purposeful support and planning that recognizes all elements of the schema.

Thus, we are arguing for a shift in language and conceptualization from innovation as savior to thinking about maintenance and innovation together. We recognize that this shift is difficult, both politically and institutionally. The maintenance schema is a way of rendering invisible labor visible. This can help to highlight the areas in the library that are being successfully maintained, as well as identify areas that require development. By providing a language, librarians have something to use in broader conversations with leadership in and outside the library. We are continuing to develop and

² Graham and Thrift are talking about repair in this article but the idea that innovation is free of repair is short-sighted at best. Understanding that innovation brings with it a "decisional burden" contextualizes the work necessary to support whatever that innovation is in the context of institutional work.

refine our own thinking on library maintenance and welcome hearing from you in how you are wrestling with these questions in your library practice and work.

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