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BiblioTech

▶ Everyday Library Technology

Will AI Take Our Library Jobs?

[T]HE MORE COMPLEX THE TECH LANDSCAPE BECOMES, THE MORE PEOPLE NEED LIBRARIANS TO HELP LEARN NEW TOOLS AND NAVIGATE OPTIONS.

Similar to many librarians, I often explore libraries I stumble upon while traveling. A few weeks ago, I stopped in Greene County Library in Stanardsville, Va., and admired the hand-painted wildlife mural in the children's area and pop-up study room (a pod for one or two people that can be moved on built-in wheels). On the way out, I noticed outdoor hold pick-up lockers. Customers can scan a barcode to retrieve hold items 24/7. My first thought was, "Neat! Why don't more libraries have this?" My second thought was, "Oh, it might be perceived as taking jobs."

Often, when new technology comes along, the specter of job loss is unsettling. But that isn't enough reason to resist innovations that could improve lives. Most patrons will appreciate being able to pick up holds anytime. Plus, tasks that can be efficiently automated free up staff to engage in more personal interactions and complex projects. (Of course, there are valid reasons for not adopting new equipment, such as affordability, maintenance, and ease of use.)

When it comes to the AI boom, there are many legitimate concerns, such as proliferation of disinformation and plagiarism. However, keeping our jobs the same needn't be one of them. Jobs must change with the times. But they can change for the better if we are proactive about guiding development in the right directions.

There are at least three main reasons why AI isn't going to replace libraries or most library jobs:

- People need and want human interaction.
- The library is a physical place to go and be.
- Librarians have expertise that AI can't replicate.

People Need People

Many people call or come into the library for human connection. Trying to get a real person on the phone for customer service has become a running joke these days—but libraries still provide that. Public libraries are still places where someone with specialized knowledge who lives in or near your neighborhood will answer the phone, even on weekends and evenings. That need isn't going away; if anything, it has increased since COVID-19 put more distance between people. The pandemic highlighted the extent to which loneliness is an epidemic. People, especially those living alone, need somewhere to interact with others face to face. Preschool children and their families benefit from librarians with expertise in early literacy in a manner no screen can replicate. Warm human relationships are something AI can't replace.

The Library as a Physical Space

While libraries are certainly not limited to their physical space, the fact that most include physical space is vital. Where else can people hold meetings for free, hang out with no expectation of buying anything, and commune with others? The pandemic underlined the importance of these needs, as many people began working from home or retired. A lot of people who are working from home are actually working from libraries. Retired people are using libraries for technology they once accessed at the office. For others, the library is a vital third space.

AI can help bring some library services into people's homes and, by taking over some mundane tasks, help librarians get out of the building for outreach and training. Freeing users from having to drive to the library or librarians from feeling

stapled to the service desk can be a good thing. This might mean proactively advocating for the type of higher-level community-enhancing work library staffers can do if they are freed from behind-a-desk stereotypes.

Librarian Expertise

AI will facilitate some aspects of cataloging, such as categorizing and tagging data. It can improve online search and retrieval functions. It can even generate book recommendations and marketing materials. But librarians understand humans and the context behind their reference questions. They are members of the community, experienced with local resources. Librarians have expertise in big-picture conceptualization of library goals and in planning for those while adhering to library ethics and the Library Bill of Rights as defined by ALA.

Improved accessibility is a major benefit AI can confer on library services. AI can help with text-to-speech, language translation, and converting materials into accessible formats for people with disabilities. Library staff can help connect customers with these tools. Librarians, with or without disabilities, can use AI tools to perform their work better and faster. Utilizing AI tools where they can offer the most benefit will be essential going forward. (The sidebar below lists some good starting points.)

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Shaping the Narrative on AI in Libraries

Changes brought about by AI can prompt us to reframe what the library offers to patrons and staff. What if AI could eliminate our most tedious tasks while freeing us to be more innovative, meet larger societal needs, and initiate deeper connections within communities? What if AI could make 4-day work weeks or hybrid work schedules the norm? By envisioning future goals, we can utilize AI to help get there.

Rather than wait to see which functions become automated, library leaders can guide the narrative by making it known to stakeholders which innovations can be achieved with human ingenuity and manpower that are freed by automating other tasks. Examples include expanding literacy outreach to underserved communities and meeting increasing demand for one-on-one tech help. The demise of libraries and library jobs was predicted around the growth of personal computers, internet search engines, ebooks, and now AI. While all of those developments changed the way libraries operate (often by expanding services), libraries and librarians are still very much present and ingrained in society. In fact, the more complex the tech landscape becomes, the more people need librarians to help learn new tools and navigate options.

About This Column

I've long admired Jessamyn West, who authored the column Practical Technology for 15 years. It is an honor to follow her column with this one, BiblioTech, which will continue to focus on the user end of library technology. One thing I'm keenly aware of after working with the public for 2 decades is the extent to which human behavior is inextricable from the usefulness of technology. Technology doesn't stand alone. It depends on humans to create, maintain, interpret, and use it properly. As library frontliners know, most customer frustrations stem from human error, misunderstandings, and anxiety around the use of technology rather than system malfunctions. Technology interfaces that aren't user-friendly compound problems and contribute to tech anxiety. It behooves us to keep up with trends but also to understand our patrons at least as well as we understand the technology available to them.

As I was pondering a title for this column, I asked my human friends as well as ChatGPT for ideas. ChatGPT suggestions were not bad. They included Next Chapter Tech and Byte by Byte: Tech Trends in Libraries. A human friend suggested BiblioTech, which I found much more appealing

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AI TIPS AND TOOLS

Try out various AI chatbots, research aids, and instructional design tools via Generative AI Tools: A Petting Zoo, compiled by Joyce Valenza (docs.google.com/document/d/1sSdF-gr55QXBsBbMwYzNNJrm jWXtp_Q6rUUTk5fRhxw/edit).

Find help for developing policies and procedures around AI and investigating copyright issues, and link to free online classes in "A Resource List on AI in the Library," by Nick Tanzi (the-digital-librarian.com/2023/07/24/a-resource-list-on-ai-in-the-library).

A.I. For Anyone offers free resources for learning AI fundamentals, including a podcast, a newsletter, virtual workshops, and a toolkit for teaching others (aiforanyone.org).

WARM HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS ARE SOMETHING AI CAN'T REPLACE.

for succinctness and nuance. (Thanks, Marc Feldman.) Although ChatGPT can generate copious combinations of keywords, humans understand each other on another level.

My general philosophy around tech is that we can't go backward, so we may as well embrace change with as much wisdom as possible. This means harnessing the possibilities of new technology while also foreseeing challenges and pre-empting problems where feasible. Students aren't going to stay away from ChatGPT because we bar it from classrooms. They need to learn how to evaluate its output and apply critical-thinking skills to its use. And let's be honest: Teachers are already using it for lesson plans and cover letters. Sticking with old ways isn't a long-term solution. However, we can be cognizant about which aspects of prior technologies were appealing—such as convenience, versatility, or affordability—and strive to carry those forward.

I will be the first to admit that I'm no tech wizard extraordinaire. Rather, I represent a lot of librarians who are always in the process of learning and growing, often excited about new tools and possibilities, while sometimes apprehensive about whether we're doing it right. I think that humility makes us more understanding of what our customers go through. I've been writing about library technology for many years, including academic research for *Public Library Quarterly*, features for *Computers in Libraries*, and a column in *Public Libraries*. The research I do for articles always expands my horizons and makes me want to share what I learn with others. Feel free to reach out with ideas for future columns. ■

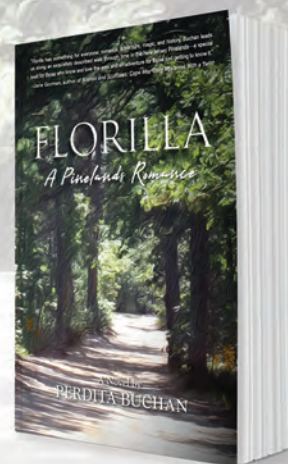**Suzanne S. LaPierre** (summerslapierre@gmail.com) is a Virginiana Specialist Librarian for Fairfax County Public Library in Virginia and co-author of the book *Desegregation in Northern Virginia Libraries* (The History Press 2023). LaPierre has worked in public library information services for more than 17 years, with prior experience in academic libraries, archives, museums, galleries, and special collections. The opinions expressed are her own.