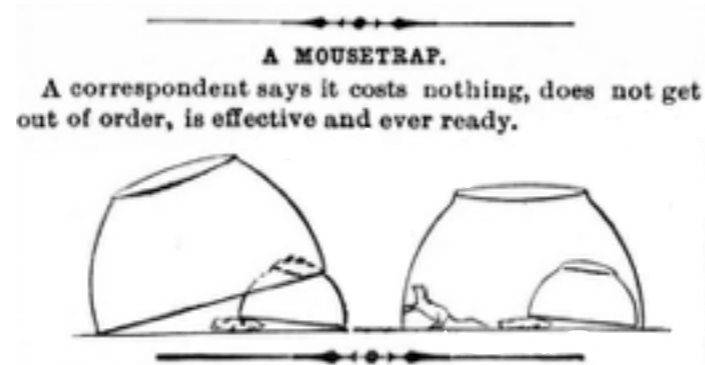


innovation vs. liberation



Hi I'm jessamyn west, I live in rural Vermont I'm so excited that you're here and looking forward to spending the next two days together and learning about what you're doing. You've done a lot of hard work to get here and you should be proud of that.

I want to provide some cautionary notes about innovating with and for libraries as you move forward thinking about your plans. I do a lot of things in the library world and most recently I was the digital librarian at Open Library, a project of the Internet Archive. I recently left that project, a good project with good people, for two very good reasons: no user testing at a place that called itself a library, and a conversation with the project manager who talked about replacing reference service with "a really good search box" It was and is a great place, but it was a bad place for me.

Now I am exaggerating somewhat, those aren't the only reasons I moved on, but five years from now, when I look back at my time as a digital librarian, those are the two things I'll remember. So I want to talk a little bit about what we're really trying to do for our users and some common ways those can go sideways, even for the most well-meaning of people. Ultimately I think what most of us want is for our users to be free, though we have varying ideas about what that means.



I'm not going to lie, I have some concerns about where things are going in the country this month that may be a little larger than "What is the deal with libraries?" But I think a lot of things come back to why people are even asking "What is the deal with libraries?"

- fake news issues – who helps people learn how to evaluate sources?
- civics lessons – who is funded for the people by the people and has a completely open governance process?
- inclusion and accessibility – who is FREE TO ALL? Legally? Always?

(click)

That said, we as librarians can be bad at being receptive to innovation. Maybe it's the terminology. Maybe it's because, in a profession that is sort of people-rich but cash-poor, when we see cash going to not keeping the lights on and people say they're helping, it can be a little cognitively dissonant. So what are we all doing about that?



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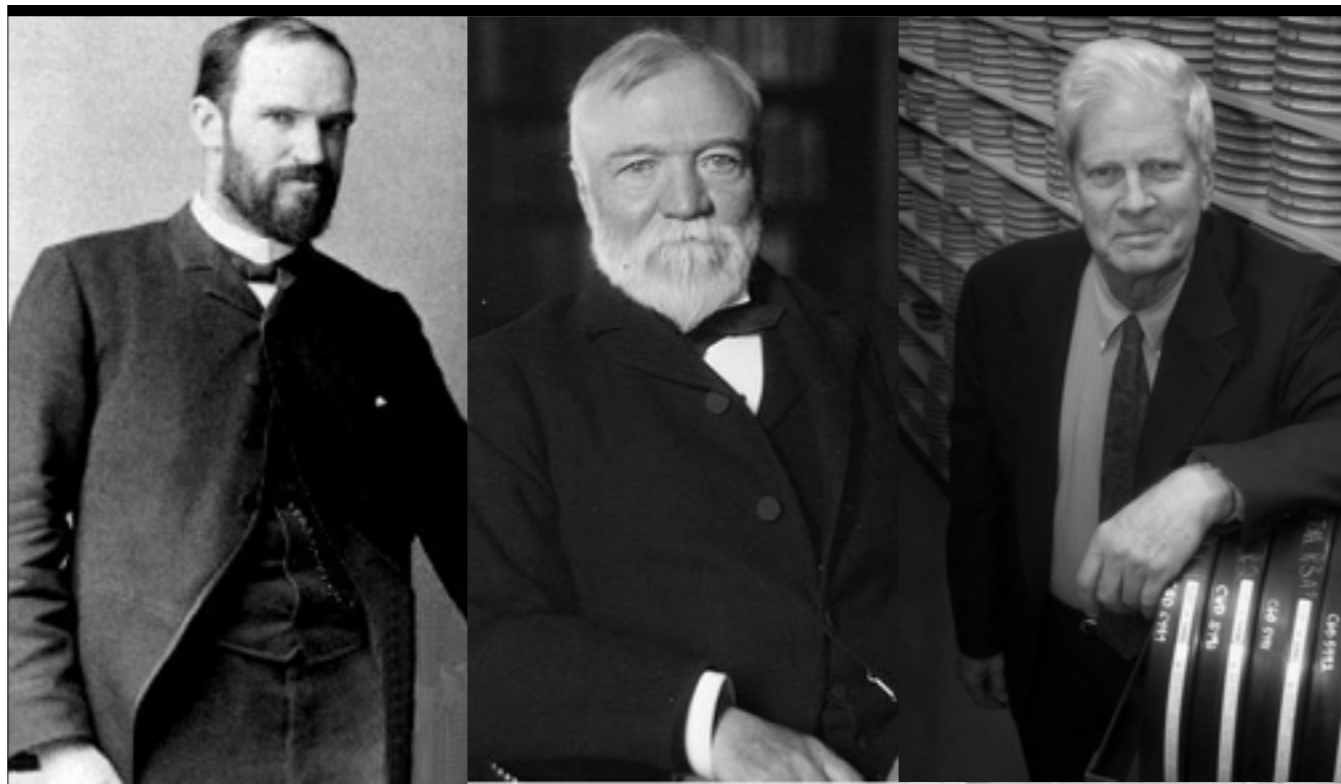
1. Talking about innovating



As you move forward trying to figure out how to make tools that make a real difference, that help people be free, there are a few things you're going to have to think hard on. The biggest one may be how to effect real change if what you are trying to do is help venerable institutions innovate.

Because almost by definition, this is its own challenge over and above whatever your particular project brings to the table.

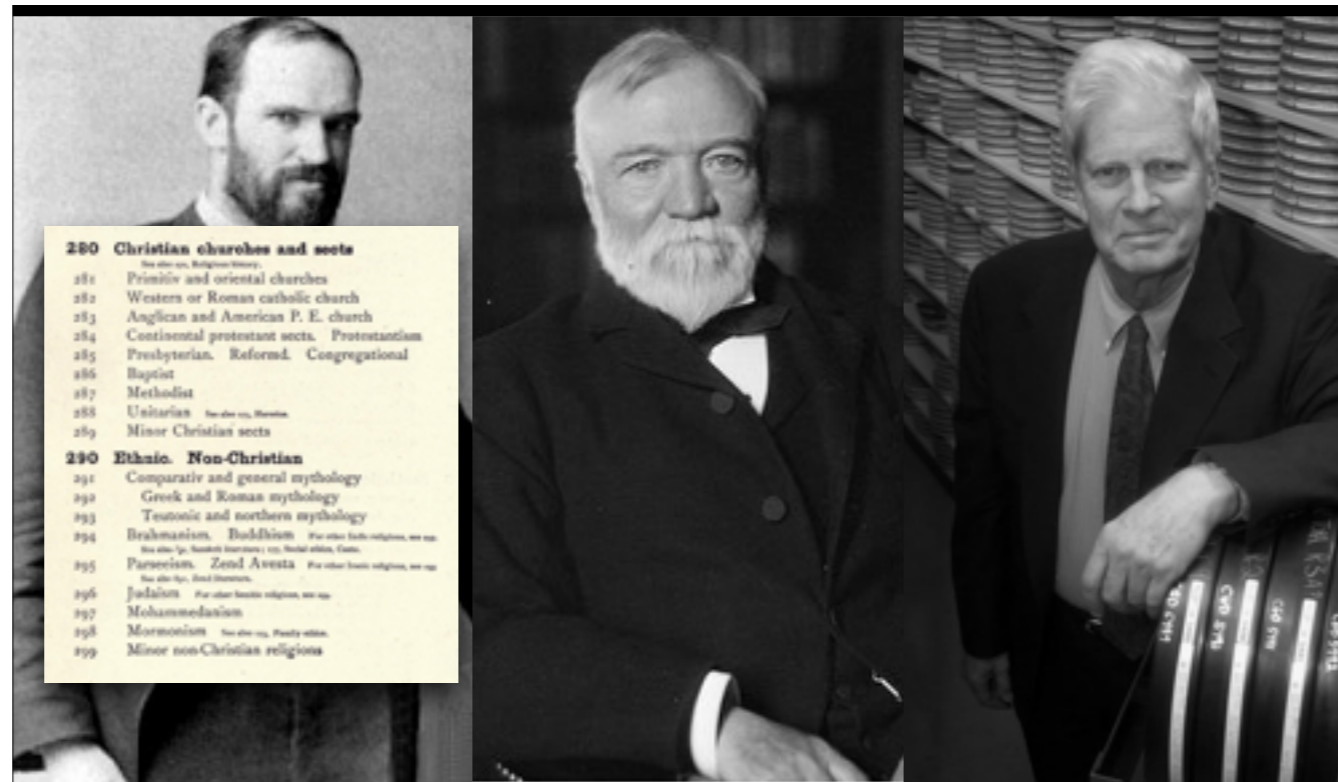
Making a website, or even an app, is easy compared to getting people to use it, to want to use it, to continue using it, or to make it part of who or what they are.



Command & control.

A bit of a look back at libraries. Libraries used to be a lot more autocratic. (click) Here's a classification system... for everything. (click) Here's a way to build a library ... that works for every community. (click) Here's the appropriate way to approach digital material ... that is one size fits all. This approach got us started but now we've got to move on.

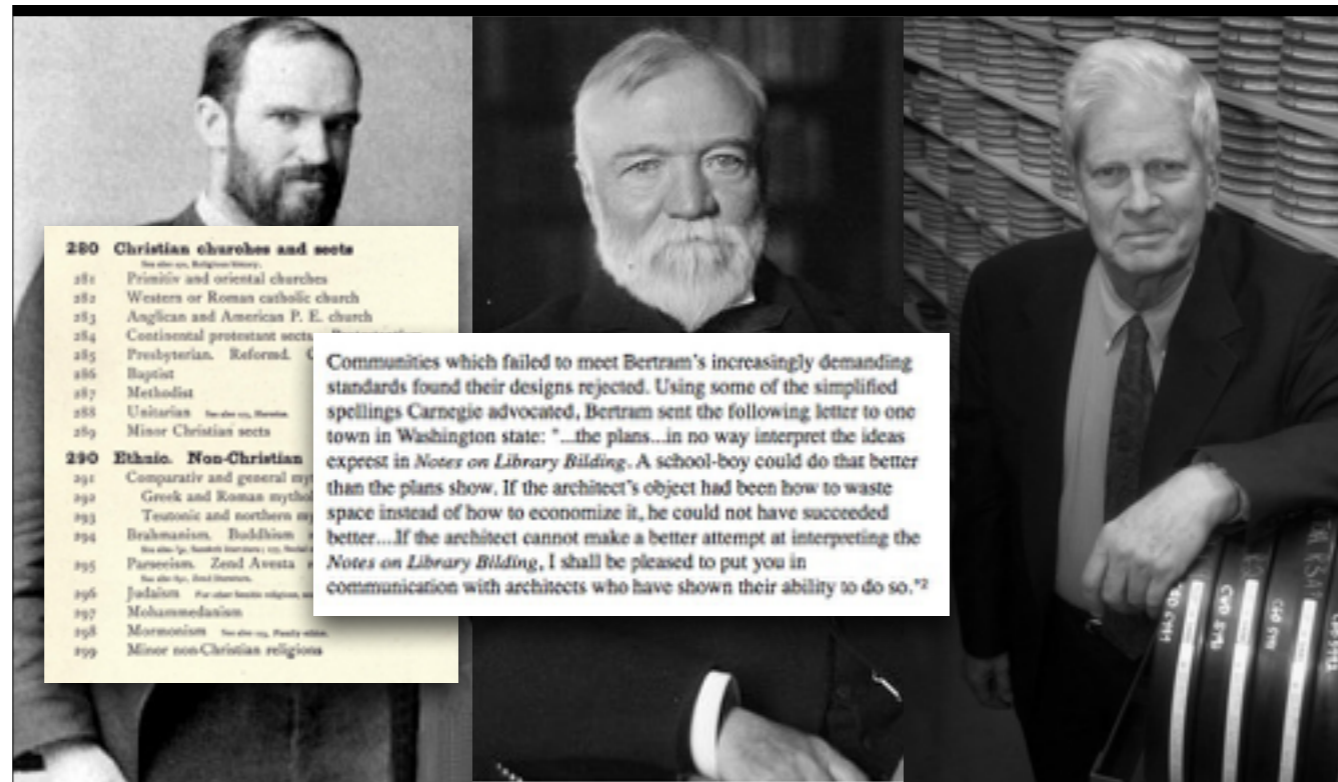
We should have moved on a while ago. Moving on is complicated.



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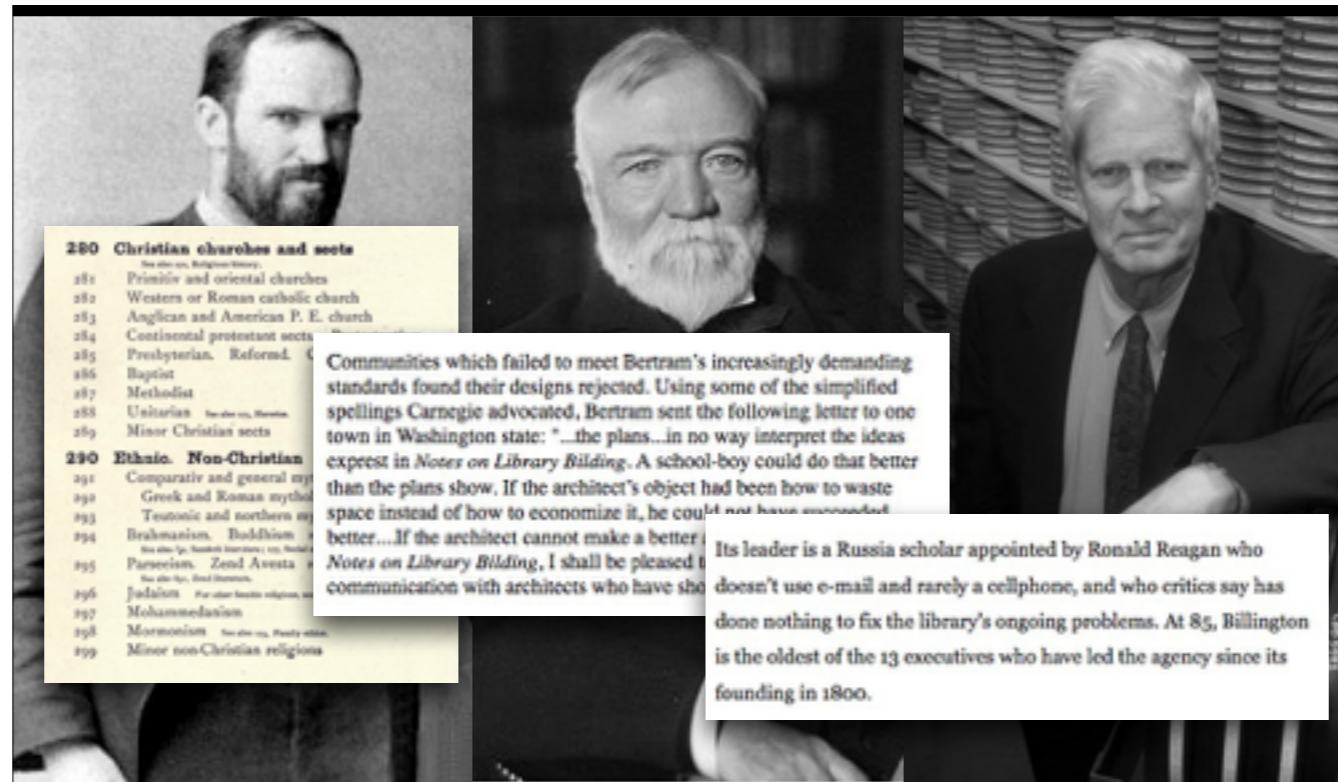
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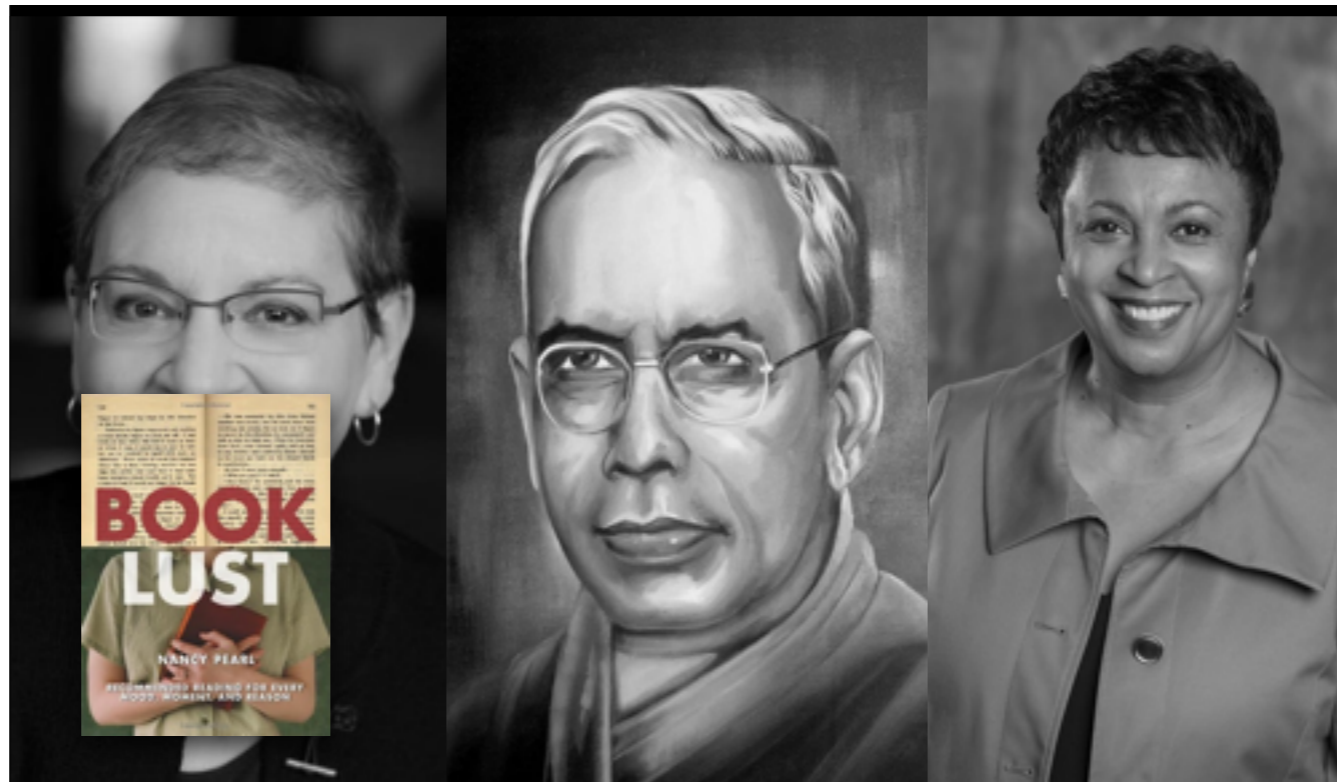
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The "new" innovators.

It's happening, it's just slow. But there really *are* some things I'm excited about in librarianship, both new and old. If you knew those guys you probably (hopefully?) know these people: (click) Nancy Pearl who encourages us to have a longing, a lust, for reading any and all kinds of books; (click) The late SR Ranganathan whose five laws of library science continue to inform a lot of the best work in librarianship; (click) and Dr Carla Hayden the BRAND NEW LIBRARIAN OF CONGRESS who is just so great. This is her putting an OPEN sign on Enoch Pratt Free Library during the riots in Baltimore after Freddy Grey's murder.

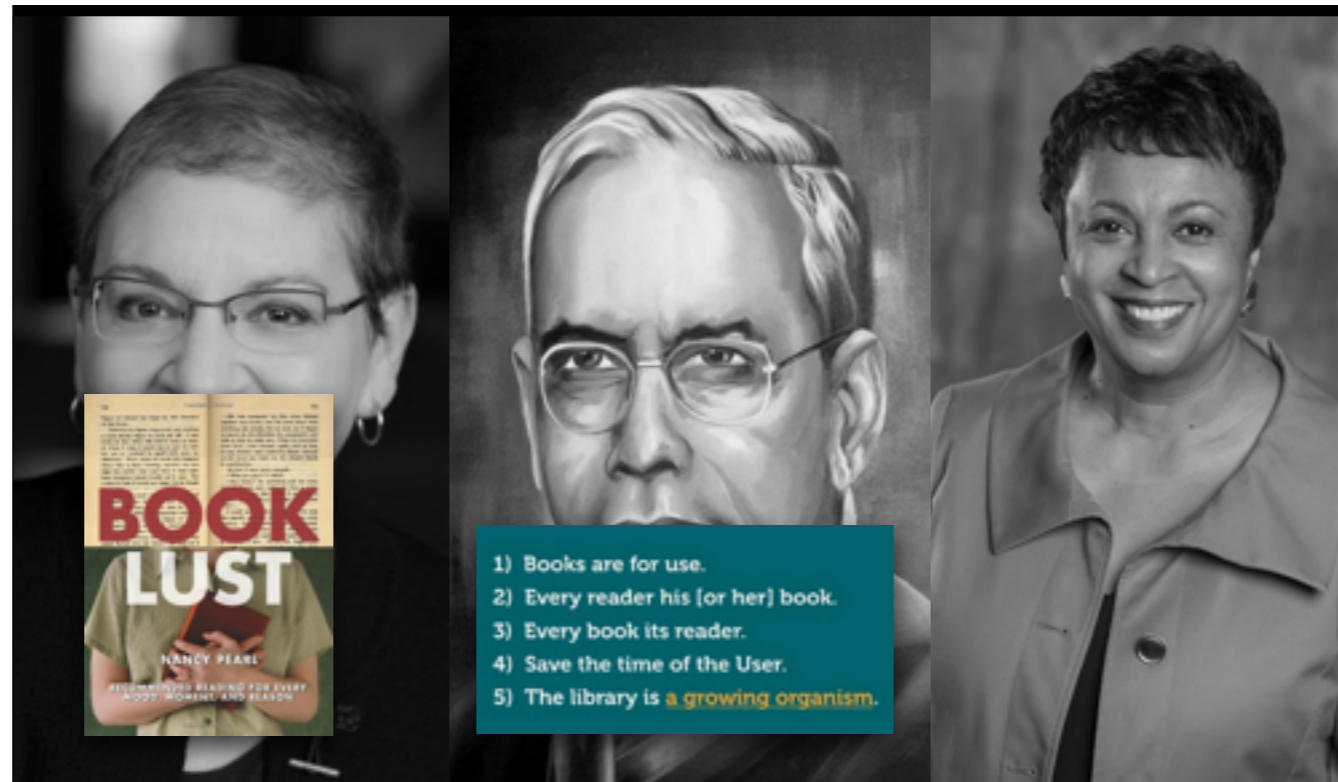
These folks were not so much technological innovators—none of them can code—as they were CULTURAL innovators. They realized the things that were special about libraries was not so much that they were organized and ubiquitous but that they were flexible and could expand to encompass everyone even as the world changed around them. That the library is the growing organism.



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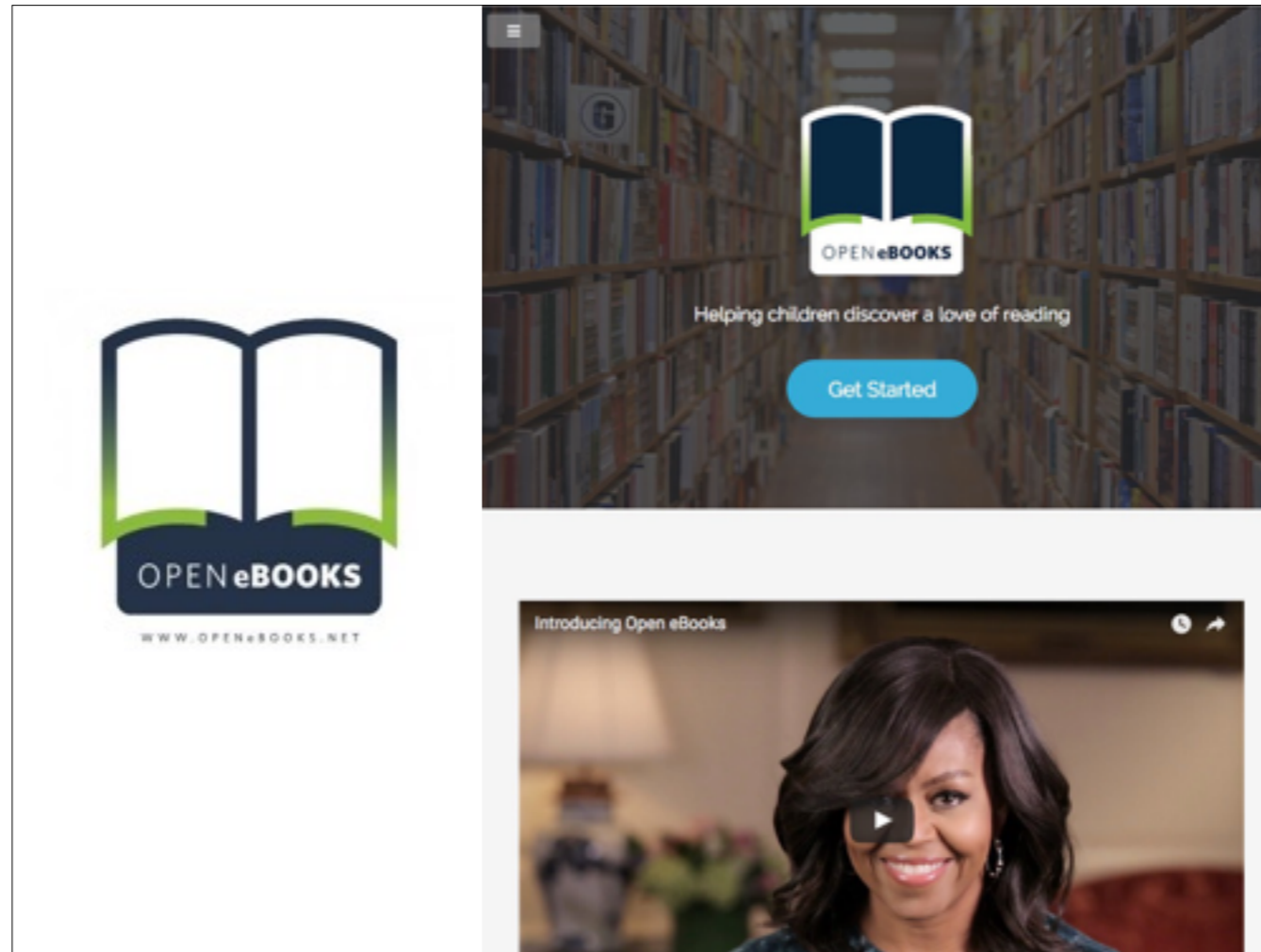
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So when you think about how to effect change, think about giving libraries tools that help them be more awesome at what they are doing. I've looked at your projects, a lot of you are doing just that. But I caution you to not get caught up in your own hype.

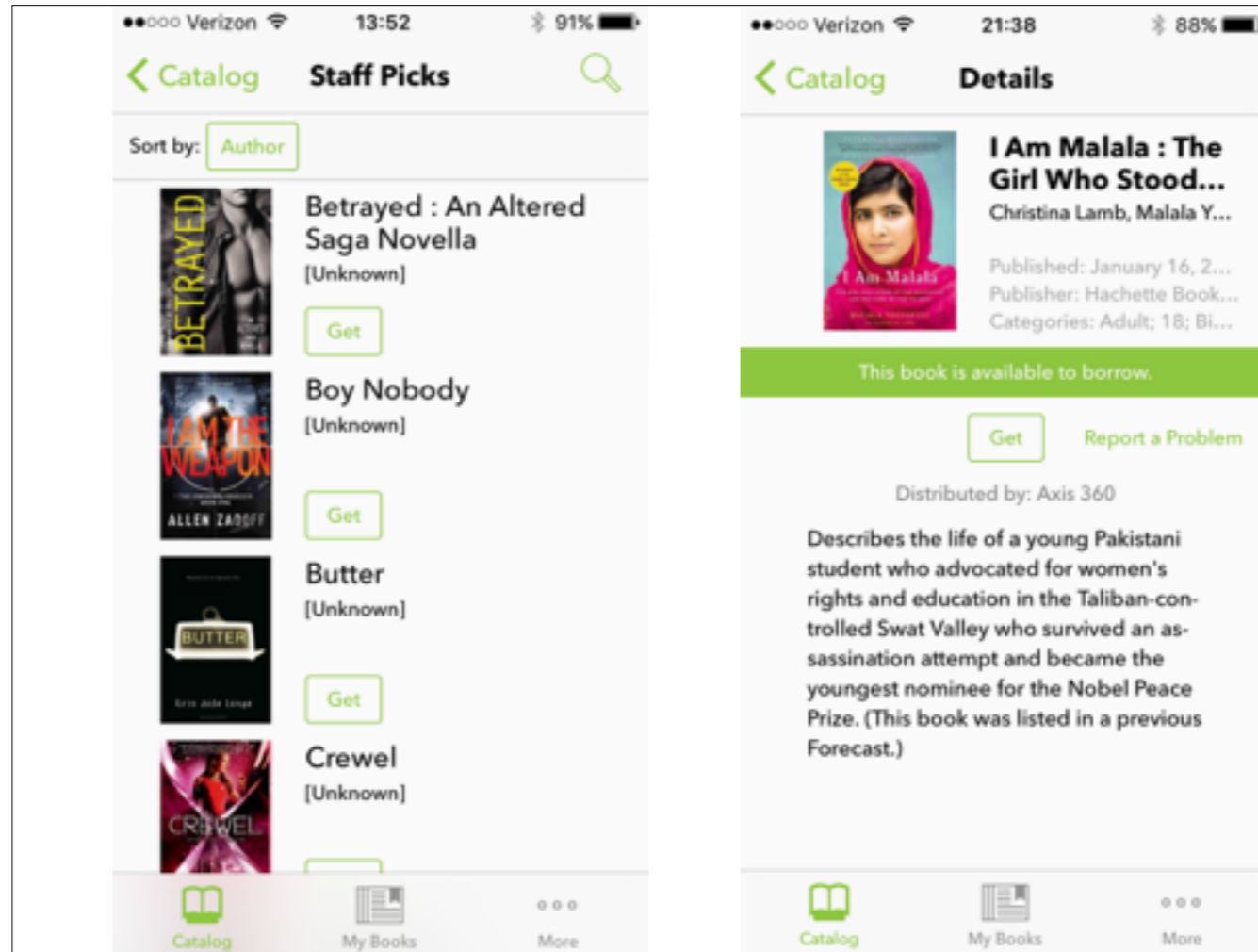
How many of you are familiar with the Open eBooks project? It launched with great fanfare and around five million dollars earlier this year. Free ebooks for kids in need. Videos from the First Lady and support from big organizations you've heard about and like, like DPLA. It was, by all accounts, a very cool project. I interacted with it a lot at first.

I actually live in a location with poverty levels that qualify so I jumped through the hoops of getting signed up and signed in to help kids in my community get ebooks.



And I realized that some of the stuff they had was great but ... not quite ready for prime time? This is a screenshot from the app. See how the publisher date and categories dribble off the page? That's all you get and it's not fixable. (click) Here's a list of books on their "Staff Picks" list. I sorted by author, they're all listed as Author Unknown. Which means it sorts alphabetical by title and nothing else.

Do they know that this is a bug (as opposed to just something that is yet another frustrating thing about technology)? I don't know. I reported the first one in March. It's still there. This is a tool for digitally divided kids. How many of them are submitting bug reports?



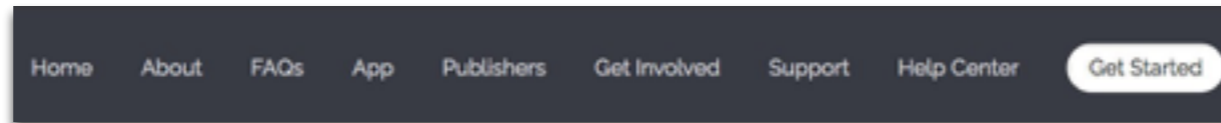
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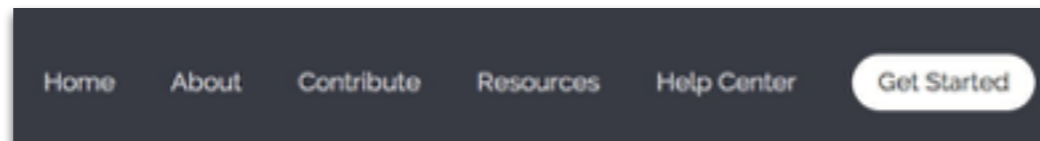
Press Releases

- [Open eBooks Opens World of Digital Reading to Children](#), 2/24/2016
- [Open eBooks Announces Compatibility with Clever](#), 9/13/2016

March 2016



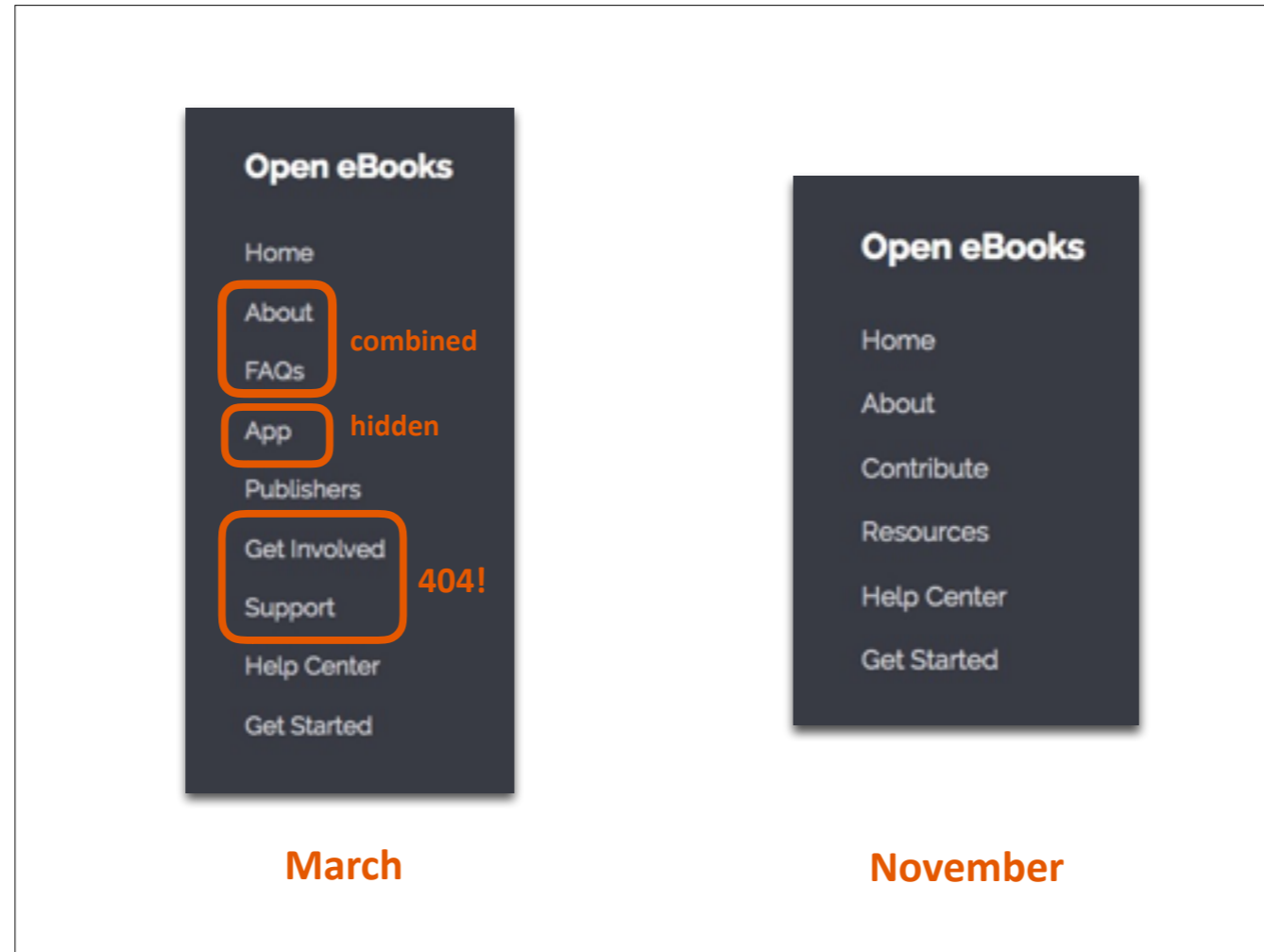
November 2016



In fact a lot of the project has been weirdly static since the big showy launch.

I went fishing for some "Hey they've gotten X books into Y kids' hands over six months" data to talk about it today but ... nothing. They have a press release section with exactly two items on it. One from the launch. One from when they made a deal with Clever (educational portal)

Thanks to the Internet Archive Wayback Machine I can do a little compare and contrast here looking at the nav bar because some things HAVE changed.



About/FAQ got combined (sensible), the App page is still there but hidden and, the other two 404. When your "get involved" page gets changed to a 404, you know you've got some issues with your content strategy.

One of the big things about this big project was that it was primarily a grant-funded initiative; the grant paid for the website but not for support staff.



At the same time, their social media strategy is killing it. Great Twitter, great Tumblr great Facebook (if a little rdeundant on all those channels). I have no idea why there is such a stark contrast with their various modes of communication.

“

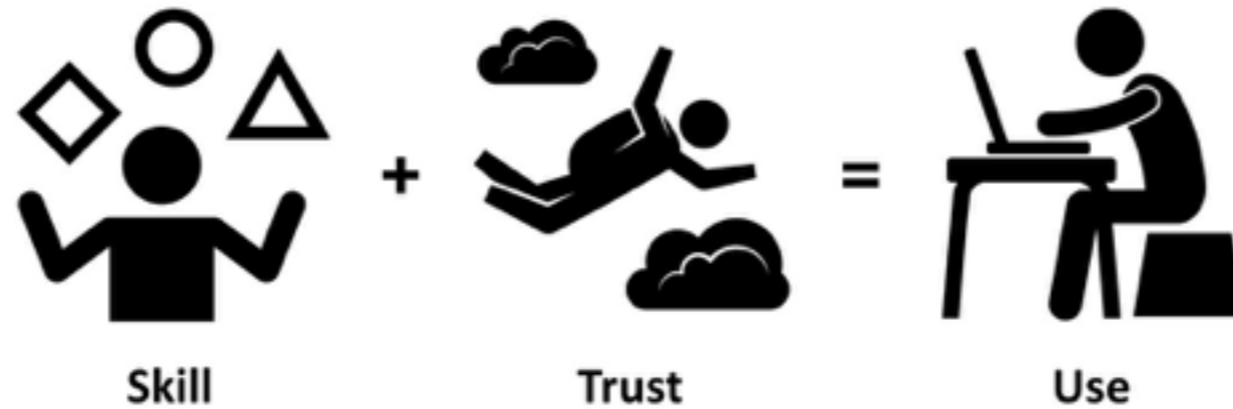
Are the things you are communicating matching the things you are doing? How much is hype; how much is reporting?

”

So when you promote and talk about your project, and I hope you do, think about the ****ongoing**** communications you'll be doing, your engagement strategy, and think about how your press releases will read in six months, in two years.

People talk about the short attention span of the internet, but librarians remember.

2. digital readiness & divide



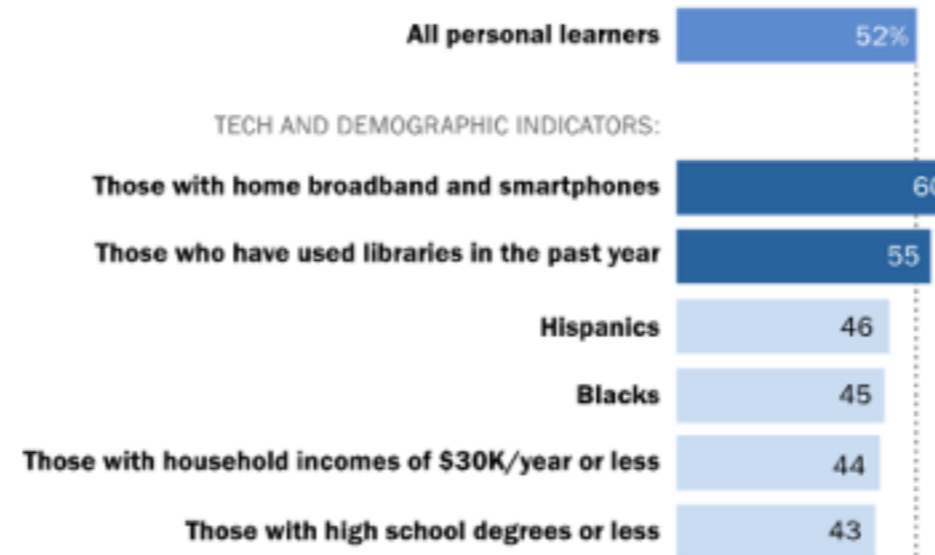
Speaking of hype, let's talk about the digital divide a little. This is really my hobby horse, if I have one. One of the things you see a lot if you have a Google alert for "digital divide" like I do is how often people have a killer app that will solve it. To which I say "Nice try. Let me know how that works in six months."

My mantra for this is "The hardest to serve are always the hardest to serve" and unless that's your actual mission, it rarely reaches the top of your priority list. Which is fine, not everyone has to serve the hardest to serve. But libraries do.

Libraries as readiness indicator

Library users and the highly wired are more likely to use the internet in personal learning

% of personal learners who use the internet for learning among ...



In many ways we've shifted from the language of the divide (some people have things and some don't... whether the things are computers or bandwidth or mouse skills) to the language of "digital readiness" which is more like "Given that more and more free and scalable learning opportunities are available in the online space, how do we make people ready to learn this way?"

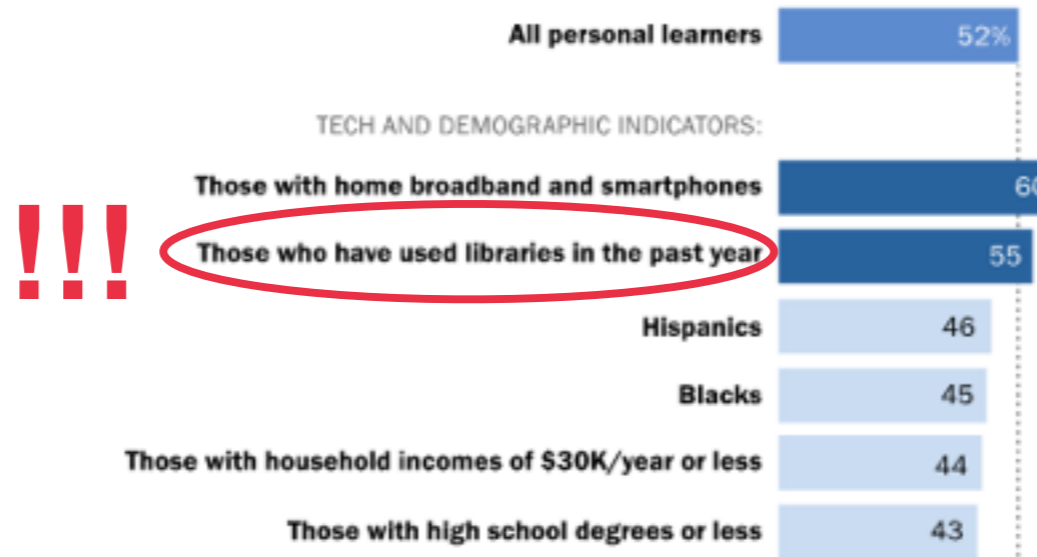
Pew did a big study talking about the moving parts of this issue and it's a combination, they found, of the raw tech skills PLUS the trust and discernment to be able to be comfortable in online spaces that made someone digitally ready. (click)

One other thing we know is that people who use the library are already more likely to be digitally ready. Cause/effect thing? Maybe.

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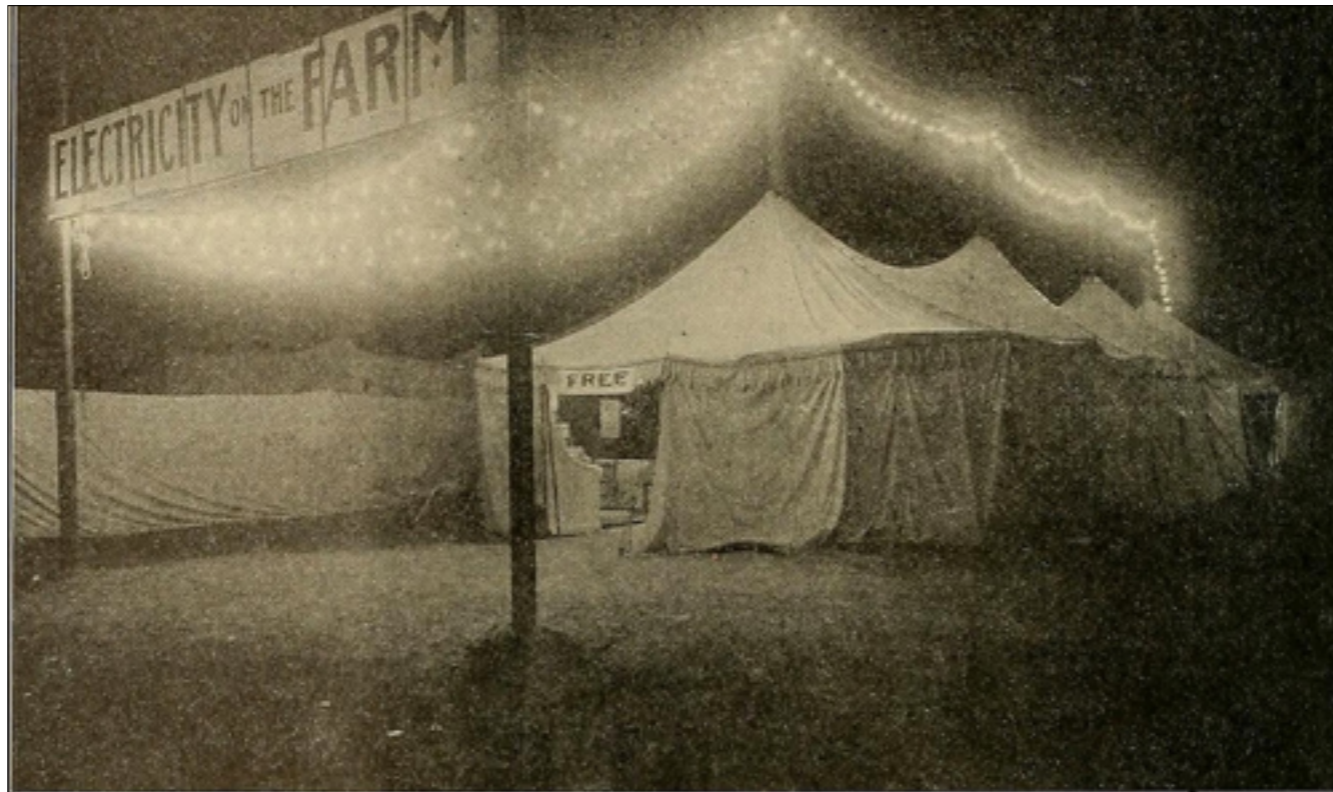
One other thing we know is that people who use the library are already more likely to be digitally ready. Cause/effect thing? Maybe.

15%

15% of American adults do not use the internet at all.
Additionally, 9% of adults use the internet but not at home.

Pew Research Center

So to the skills and the comfort thing. Let's start here. This is a true fact. And what's weird is I've been doing variants on this talk for a decade and the number which was a little over 20% used to move and it doesn't anymore. Those 15% are staying put.



If you build it...?

This is from from an Electricity magazine 1899, showing off a pavillion at a fair promoting electricity to farmers (The last town in VT that got electricity got it in ****1962**** fyi, after sputnik). People talk about the digital divide as if it was like rural electrification. You maybe have to have the government step in to do the last mile. But we also forget how much electricity got SOLD to people. How much of the easier part of rural electrification was about creating a demand.

The big difference with electricity though, is that you didn't need tech support, usually, to install a lightbulb, or even an electric stove. There was no software interface, it just worked. Or was broken.

Teaching to learn

- "What were you expecting would happen?"
- "Here's what you say to tech support."
- "I am going to Google the answer to that and send you a link."
- "Let's look for the tiny triangle that is hiding all of your settings"
- "I don't know but we can find out"

I spend a lot of time doing technology instruction with people in my town of 4500 people (biggest town in the county, many people come from smaller towns) and a lot of what I do is what I'd call technology life coaching.... getting people ready to go it alone solving their own tech problems. Getting people digitally ready to share in these online experiences means learning a new way to talk and a new way to think about technological interactions.

Language upgrades



Sucks

Things are merely suboptimal, for now.



Computer hates me

"The computer is a dumb calculator who does what other people have programmed it to do"



I am stupid

"You are not a bad person; this is a bad website"

And at the same time, I work on my language, and how I phrase things. A few examples. And this is not just with patrons this is with the public, with the media (who I speak to as often as possible even though this is not usually "the librarian way"). Helping people with "positive self talk" about technology helps their digital readiness. Just hearing that something is broke and THEY DIDN'T BREAK IT builds confidence. These messages should be built into what you are building.

Questions?
[Email us.](#)

info@openebooks.net

March

Questions?
[Contact us.](#)

openebooks.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/requests/new

November

Back to Open eBooks (and I am using them as an example but this could be Pearson, or Healthcare.gov or any number of large scale tech-to-public projects) one of the small silent changes they made to their site was changing their "Questions?" link from "Here's our email address" to "Submit a trouble ticket" How do you think that resonates with the digitally divided? And their users who are, by definition, the hardest to serve?

None of these things are to say that Open Ebooks is "wrong on the internet" or any other snarky internet-people rejoinder. Just to say that when you innovate in public, and for public libraries, you are answerable to the public who can SEE WHAT YOU DID THERE. Own it. Make it part of your thing. Don't just tell people you've updated your terms of service, show them how. Don't just show them how, ask them what they think?

“

*Save the time of the
reader/user.*

”

- S R Ranganathan

So the scalable thing you built, can, if built poorly, become a barrier, can actually inhibit the inclusion it was intended to support. Economies of scale can quickly become economies of hassle. Tools designed to be "self-sustaining" can filter out people who want or need to interact with a person, or who have an infrequently asked question.

“

*Are you helping people
be free? Do you teach
them skills, or only
your tools? Did you
leave them better than
you found them?*

”

So as you create things which are, at some level "scalable solutions" do a reality check about whether, in learning to use your systems and tools, you are actually helping your users gain skills (and confidence) to interact in the larger world of the internet, and the library, in a way that doesn't just sound good in press releases.

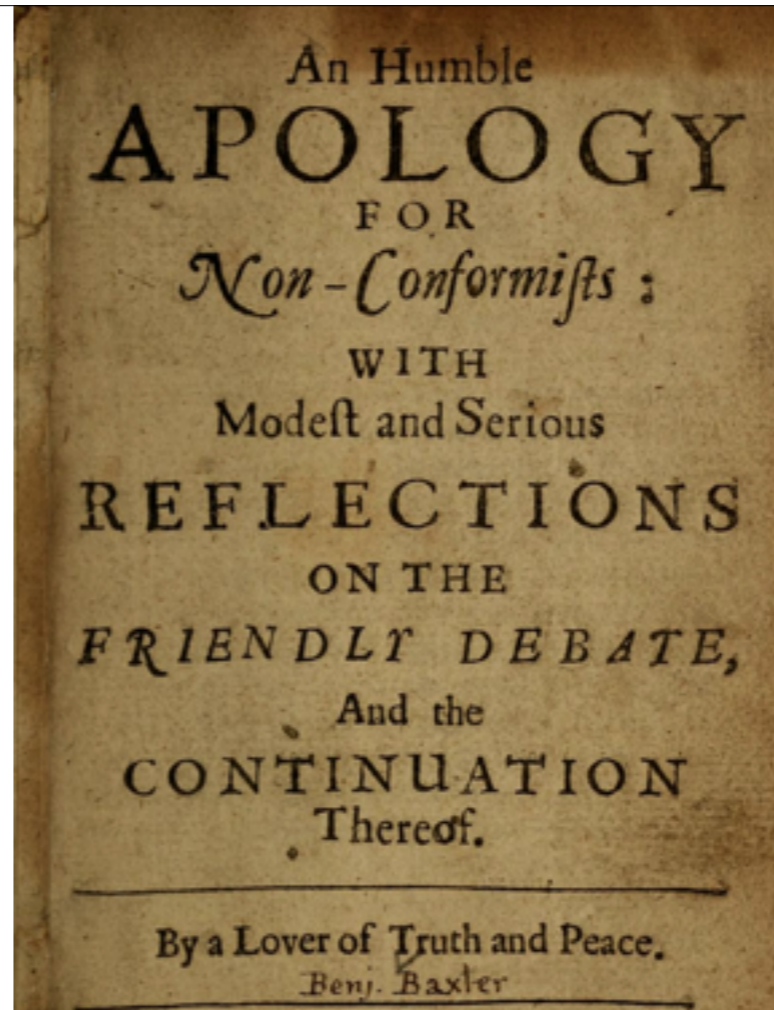
3. Suboptimal outcomes



So now we know what suboptimal is code for (sucks), but let's think about things that don't go your way, dwell on it a little. Sometimes things are outside of your control, sometimes a thing just didn't work out. Sometimes you have a problem you can't solve. All you have is the thing that works or doesn't, and the words you use to talk about that and the feelings of the people who want to be using the thing.

You're prototyping, there will be ideas that don't make it. I had a great anecdote about the post office's first crack at email back in the 70s but it didn't fit into this talk and I had to axe it. Kill your darlings. I get it.

**my
bad**



I have to admit, I'm a huge fan of apologizing and apologies. I know this can be sort of a gendered thing but #sorrynotsorry. I think there's a lot of strength of character in a person or an organization who can own up to mistakes or issues, make real changes, and then keep on going forward and show through their actions that they've gotten on the right track.

And it's a combination of things. Set expectations. Deliver on those expectations or, if not, adjust and move on. One of the things we know about libraries is you can't just go all "Twitter killed Vine" about it and say "Oh, welp, we're done now. Bye." so we've gotten good at politic explanations and living with our mistakes *and* our communities some of whom remember and some of whom do not.

What platforms are the Open eBooks app available on?

The app is currently available on iOS and Android. Subsequent versions will be optimized to support as many open platforms as possible. There will be a web-optimized version coming in 2016. Open eBooks uses the EPUB3 standard but will expand to include PDFs in early 2016.

March

What platforms are the Open eBooks app available on?

The app is currently available on iOS and Android. Subsequent versions will be optimized to support as many open platforms as possible. We are working on a desktop version to extend the application to more platforms, which will allow for web browser usage on other tablets, laptops, and desktops. We are working to ensure students will be able to access Open eBooks from many forms of technology. Please stay tuned for product developments.

November

Here is what I don't suggest, though it's popular in tech circles, the old "Changing the FAQ to pretend you never said anything" Now, to be fair, there are a few more weeks left in 2016... (man I do love the Internet Archive and the wayback machine)

I mean I get it, you thought you'd do a thing and then you couldn't. Enough so that you said so. It happens, we have all been there. There are better ways forward.

**Are the eBooks culturally diverse?
Are there titles available in
languages other than English?**

Open eBooks is strongly committed to creating a diverse collection for all ages. Despite wonderful efforts, only 10% of children's books contain multicultural content. According to a [study](#) from publisher Lee & Low, this number has remained consistent for the past two decades.

The Open eBooks [Curation Corps](#) is keenly focused on this issue, and we are continuing to grow the collection with diversity as a priority. Open eBooks contains a growing number of Spanish-language titles, and we plan to add more non-English languages.

And let's look a little bit into serving the hardest to serve. As I said, it's what we call in tech a "hard problem" (which is sort of the same as that adjective noun combo and sort of not). No shame in you not solving the digital divide. But if you're going to point out that you are aware of the issues, you should have a plan for dealing with those.

The #weneeddiversebooks campaign has been running since 2014. This FAQ entry has remained the same since March with one exception (click) they removed this line.

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“

[T]hey have no budget, and have had a bunch of issues.

”

I was actually curious about this. I know a lot of librarians. When I had questions about Open eBooks that weren't answered by their FAQ (and I didn't want to file a bug report for...?) I poked around til I found someone on the Curation Corps who would talk to me (off the record). She works with kids who use the app and had had to order 600 codes to make the app work for 600 students (that's what publishers wanted, integration with Clever is going to make this go so much better, for the people who use Clever). For her curation job, she's said...

- bad metadata for ebooks generally
- diverse books are a "priority" but there's pressure to include more books from big publishers and they only have so many parnters
- the partners themselves have have terrible platforms
- there's a clunky selection interface on the back end in the first place making it more cumbersome than it needs to be.



And most of the people promoting this project are, almost by definition, not using it.

One of the things that made me really useful working for Open Library is the fact that I actually used Open Library. This can be a challenge (using what you build) because you want to design it so it works for you personally but it also is a strength because when the thing doesn't work you WANT it to work, want to get it back working, you WANT to be eating your own dog food.

“

*Are we answerable to
the people we say we are
answerable to? Who
measures our success?*

”

You know how people say there are no stupid questions? I firmly believe that. But there are sometimes people asking the wrong questions. See that you are asking the right questions and talking to the people who use your tools about whether they work for them. Whether they feel that you kept the promises you made to them.

4. grandstanding wrap-up



In conclusion



Wrapping up I would just like to say that it's been a tough month and I, for one, have had it. I have been in a MOOD.

But one of the bright parts of this crappy set of weeks has been watching librarians (click) band together not just to phone bank and sign petitions but to help the people in their communities, to help EVERYONE especially in these uncertain times when people are thinking "Do I belong?" and "Is there going to be trouble?"

Libraries have been stepping up with messages of solidarity and belonging.



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*\$THING comforts the
afflicted & afflicts the
comfortable.*

”

- *Finley Peter Dunne's Mr Dooley*

this is a thing oft said of newspapers and the press, though the original intent was a little more tongue in cheek.

This idea of "punching up" in today's socially-aware world does have this statement making a certain amount of sense.

“

*\$TECH_THING comforts
the comfortable &
afflicts the afflicted.*

”

A lot of the language surrounding innovation, particularly digital innovation, can sound more like using the language of social awareness to actually make the lives of the top 1% 15% 25% marginally easier while not doing that much for ... anyone else. We can do better. You can all do better.



that library smell

My librarian friend on the Curation Corps was brought in specifically to lend librarian cred to the project. She said they got paid to do the first round of curation, and then they were invited to do a second round without getting paid at all.

Not that there weren't a lot of library and library-adjacent people working on it, but there's that library vibe. Which can sometimes sound like "hey we can do more work for free" but also the nitpicky attention to detail, the "let's work on it until we get it right," the community consultation and buy-in, the feedback loop which includes everyone: the users, the designers, the workers and the funders.

BECAUSE
5 OUT OF 5
DOCTORS
AGREE READING
ALoud
TO CHILDREN
SUPPORTS
BRAIN
DEVELOPMENT.

BECAUSE ADDING
MINECRAFT TO
CURRICULUM
MAY INSPIRE
MORE FUTURE
ENGINEERS THAN
MATHEMATICS
ALONE.

BECAUSE
LEARNING TO
READ
COMES BEFORE
READING TO
LEARN.

BECAUSE THERE
ARE MORE
THAN
14,400,000
SEARCH RESULTS
FOR THE 2016
PRESIDENTIAL
ELECTION

BECAUSE MORE
THAN A
QUARTER OF U.S.
HOUSEHOLDS
DON'T HAVE A
COMPUTER WITH
AN INTERNET
CONNECTION.

BECAUSE WHY
SHOULDN'T
YOU BE ABLE TO
BRING YOUR
GRANDE
CARMEL
SNICKERDOODLE
MACCHIATO?

that library purpose

because ultimately libraries are pretty singular institutions. For everyone, for a lot of purposes, to help people be more like ... themselves. We're just the facilitators, the toolmakers and the waypointers.

“

*The library comforts
the afflicted & comforts
the comfortable. It's for
EVERYONE.*

”

Because everyone deserves some damned comfort. Now go out there and build some great stuff. Help our users be free.



thank you

Welcome. And thank you.