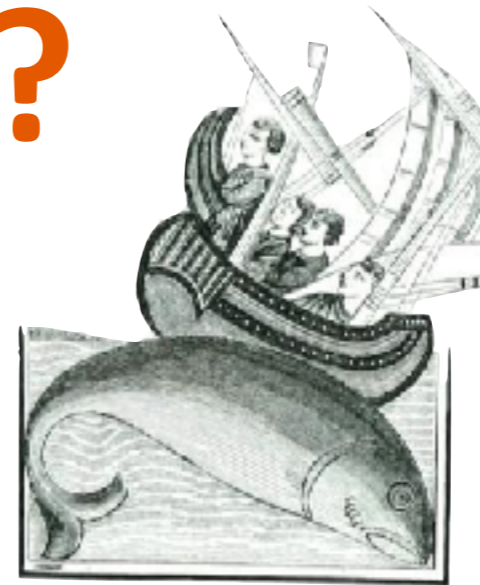


# Disrupting Tradition?

the good, bad & ugly  
about (library) innovation

*librarian.net/talks/scrlc*



Thanks for having me. This is a variant of a talk I did at the NY Library Association in 2017. Hey there -- I live in a small town in Vermont where very little ever changes. I live there because I really like the pace of most things. However, I work in tech where very little stays the same. One of my main jobs is teaching people in the first place (Vermont) about the culture of the second place (tech). A lot of translation needs to happen. These two words-- disruption, innovation--get tossed around a lot. Sometimes in ways that are negative towards libraries (as in "You don't do this"). I have complicated feelings about that. And some approaches that I think are useful. Let's talk. (notes and slides online at this URL)



**"Not *exactly* AirBnB for bathrooms..."**

So hey sometimes a gift just falls in your lap. A great example of a "disruptive" technology that both got a lot of funding (7 mil!) and is a terrible idea. That purports to solve a problem but actually just pushes problems downstream. That technologizes something which mostly works okay except for people trying to make money.

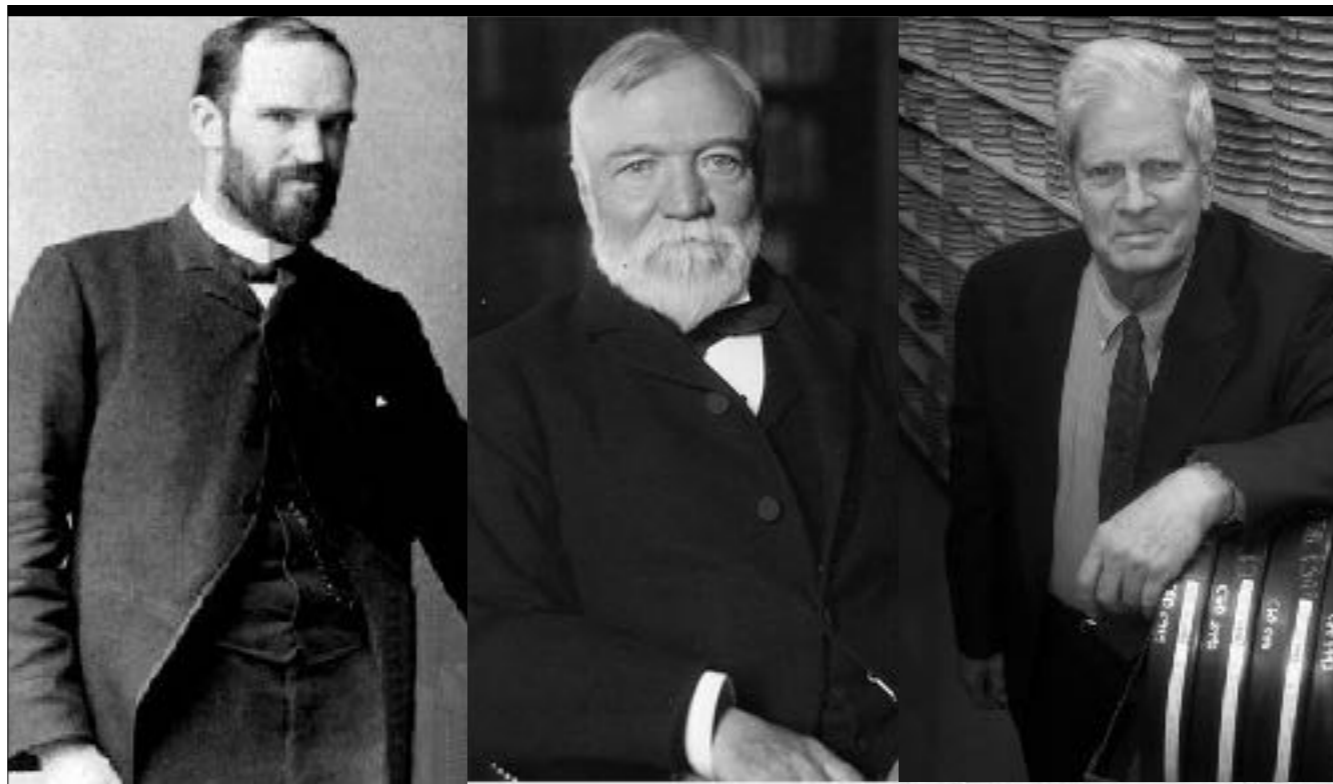


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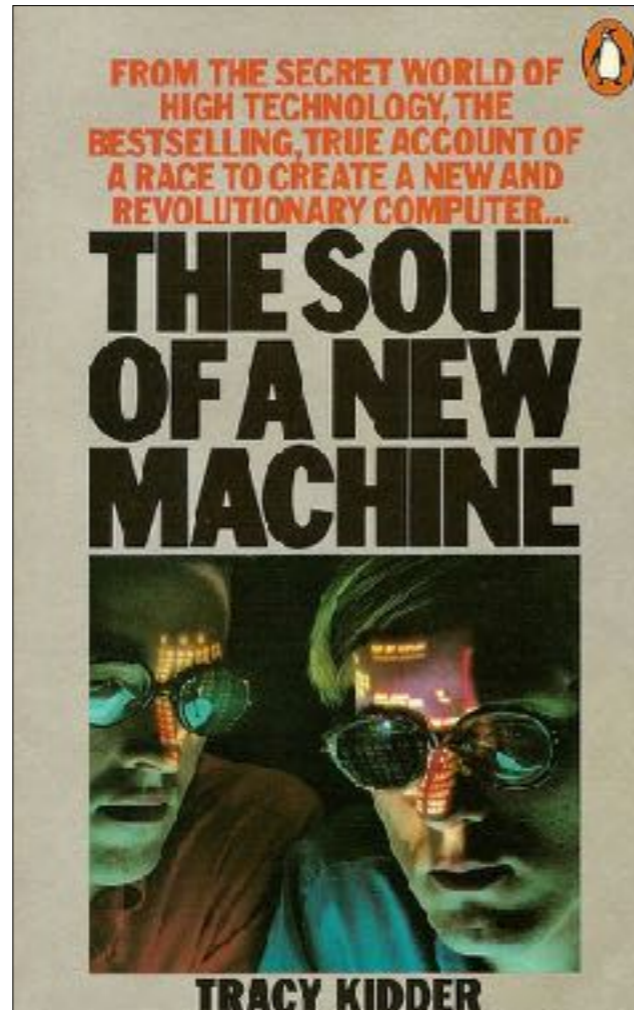
As a counter example, this is how one New York library deals with the same thing. Innovative in its own way, no?



## Feel the excitement?

These white guys were all disruptors, sort of: we got a classification system, we got buildings, we got the biggest library in the world which was fancy and which rich people wanted to hang out in which was sort of unusual in the library world. Except Monday was Martin Luther King Day and I spent the day learning about how Carnegie could have withheld his library money from whites-only libraries... and did not. He did fund black or "colored libraries" however. Weak sauce. As I talk about how to use, how WE use our power, remember Carnegie. Dewey hired women because they were cheaper. He quit NYLA rather than allow Jews into his club. When you think about the hills you want to die on, think of Dewey. And Billington... he probably stayed at his job too long, and communicated with his office via fax when he worked from home. When you think about the difference between being wary of innovating and refusing to change, think of Billington.

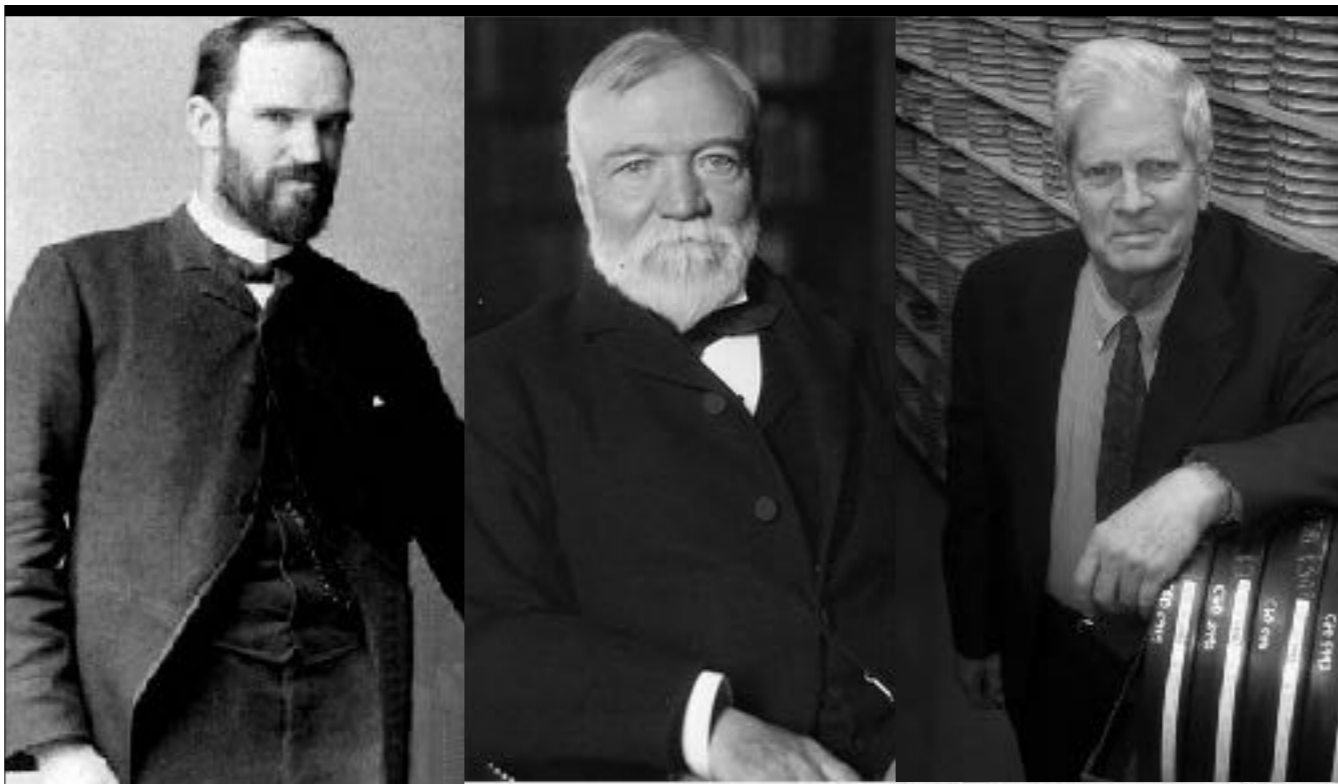
So look... everyone always, since I went to library school in the nineties, has talked about how it's an exciting time to be a librarian, what with computers and all.



page 279!

But realistically, computers have been a part of my life basically since I was born. In both good and bad ways. I'm a second generation technologist. I am in this award-winning book about computers (as an eleven year old). I grew up thinking that computers were 1. normal and 2. basically video games.

Both of those perspectives have helped me in my work. My response to "what with computers..." is that it's always an exciting time to be a librarian, what with HUMAN BEINGS AND ALL. Because honestly a lot of what passes for disruptive and innovative is just another way to say "Works at scale" (something computers are good at) and "makes money for investors" (something some people are good at) but not "Works for everyone" (something libraries are good at) and only sometimes "actually improves things for everyone" (a head scratcher even for the very best people. We're looking at the last two and scoffing, a bit, at the first.



## Feeling it yet?

So, exciting times, I look at these guys and I don't feel it. There's too much bad juju there, exclusivity. Even though librarianship is arguably better for their participation in it. We can move forward more mindfully and more intentionally.



## Feel the excitement!

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: Nancy Pearl who encourages us to have a longing, a lust, for reading; The late SR Ranganathan whose five laws of library science continue to inform a lot of our work (more in a moment); and Dr Carla Hayden the BADASS LIBRARIAN OF CONGRESS who is just so great. So, let's back up.



“

*An innovation that creates a new market by providing a different set of values, which ultimately (and unexpectedly) overtakes an existing **market**.*

”

*- The Innovator's Dilemma by Clayton M. Christensen*

I'm going to talk about disruption specifically and then we'll talk about libraries. So let's look at this quotation closely and notice a thing. The language of disruption talks about values but is really sort of about the market. The unexpected part is also interesting since the world is full of failed startups who did not manage to disrupt effectively. No one talks about disruption attempts, really.



An accessible example of this is postal mail. How many people here have sent a letter (not a bill, not a birthday card) in the past month? Just curious. I find that one of the great things about the post office nowadays is how happy they seem to be to see a person (just barely) under 50 in there. I spend a lot of time in the post office.



When email became a thing, postal mail delivery declined. 213 billion mails in 2006. 154 billion in 2015. More data at the links. Packages are up, mail is down, advertising mail is down if you can believe it. The mail got disrupted by something that outcompeted it, right?



[The background image here is is Libertyville librarian Diana Trinkleback teaching kids how to fingerweave.] These interlude slides are highlighting librarian techniques for dealing with all of these "just so stories" you hear on the internet... using real librarian skills.

Here is the first one and I'm surprised more people don't do it. It's called "get the data" So the facts I told you are all accurate, but here are some more facts.

“

*...the story surrounding E-COM provides a useful reminder of the role often played by **politics** in directing the trajectory of new technologies.*

”

*- The Premature Death of Electronic Mail by Ryan Ellis*

But let's remember, if we ever knew, that the post office tried to get into the email game back in ....the late 1970s and was regulated (by private telecomm lobbying hassling the government, full story in the links) completely out of the game. So every time someone says that the USPS "can't compete" let's just remember that the playing field is far from level. So while we're talking about the unlevel playing field let's talk about everyone's favorite disruptor and look behind the curtain a little bit.



When people think of disruption, they think of Uber. "Taxis are gross and expensive" people say "We need something different!" Enter Uber. Incidentally in rural VT where I live, the very idea of Uber is hilarious. Pay a stranger to drive you somewhere? Why don't you just ask your neighbor? Don't you have any friends? In 2015 Uber started getting sued because their cars weren't accessible. Uber put out a lot of shiny press releases about their "partner drivers" receiving training and rolled out Uber WAV (wheelchair accessible) and Uber ASSIST (trained drivers, who did costly training but received no higher fares) but realistically while these services were available (in limited cities) there weren't a lot of them. So this is a trend you see a lot: a PR response to an issue without maybe a response to the response.



## **Ur-disruptor**

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"UberX has been a game changer for millions of people moving all around the world, and I'm thrilled to see Uber applying the same creative ingenuity to provide more consumer choices and opportunities for Houstonians with accessibility needs. UberWAV will empower people requiring wheelchair accessible vehicles to get a ride when they need one by simply pressing a button."

-Tony Coelho, Co-author of the Americans with Disabilities Act

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## Sales in cities Uber lost the most market share from #deleteUber

Percentage change in sales from December 2016 to September 2017



**not great for everyone!**

But it turns out Uber is also affected by market forces.



Incidentally, any problem with accessibility that Uber could solve technologically? They did that. So I don't mean to be a total jerk about this. Users with visual disabilities and users OR drivers with hearing disabilities all have access to the full Uber experience. Which does beg the question: is innovation and innovative disruption just about technology?



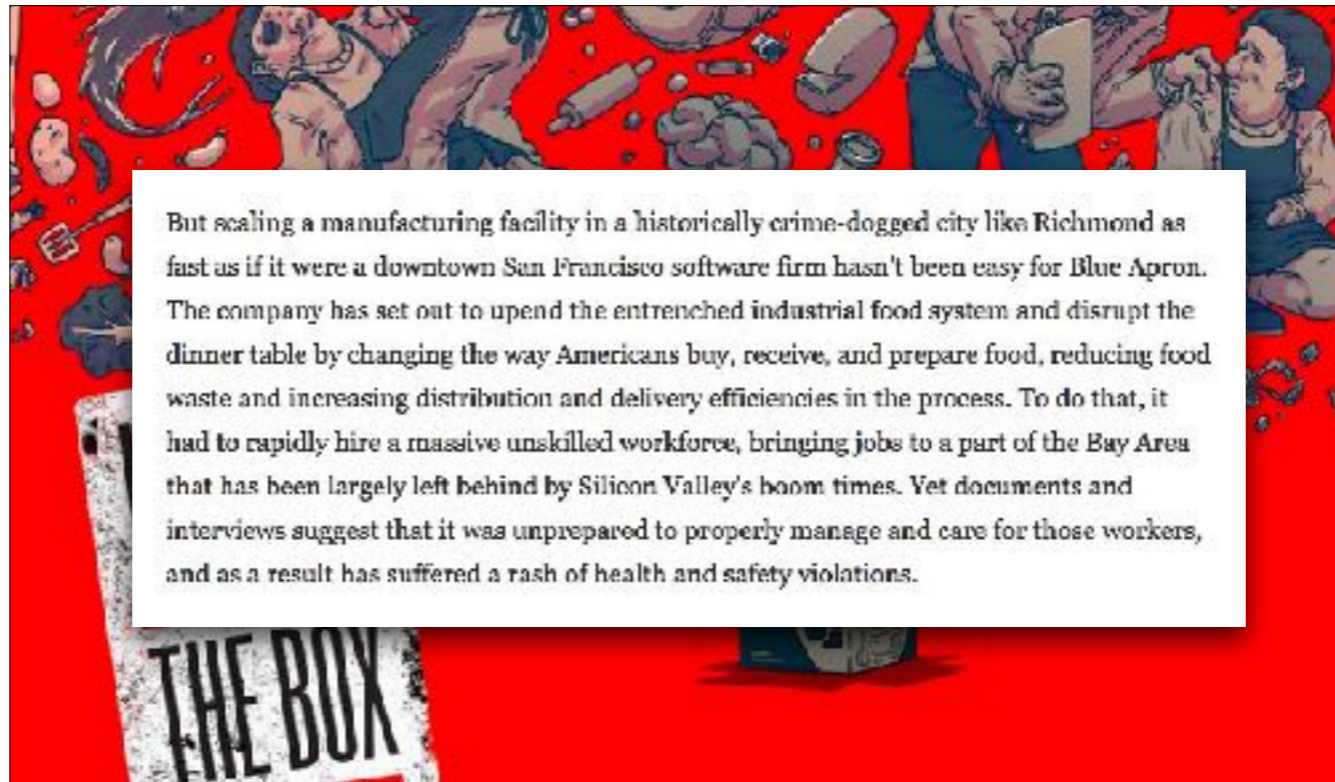
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## See also...

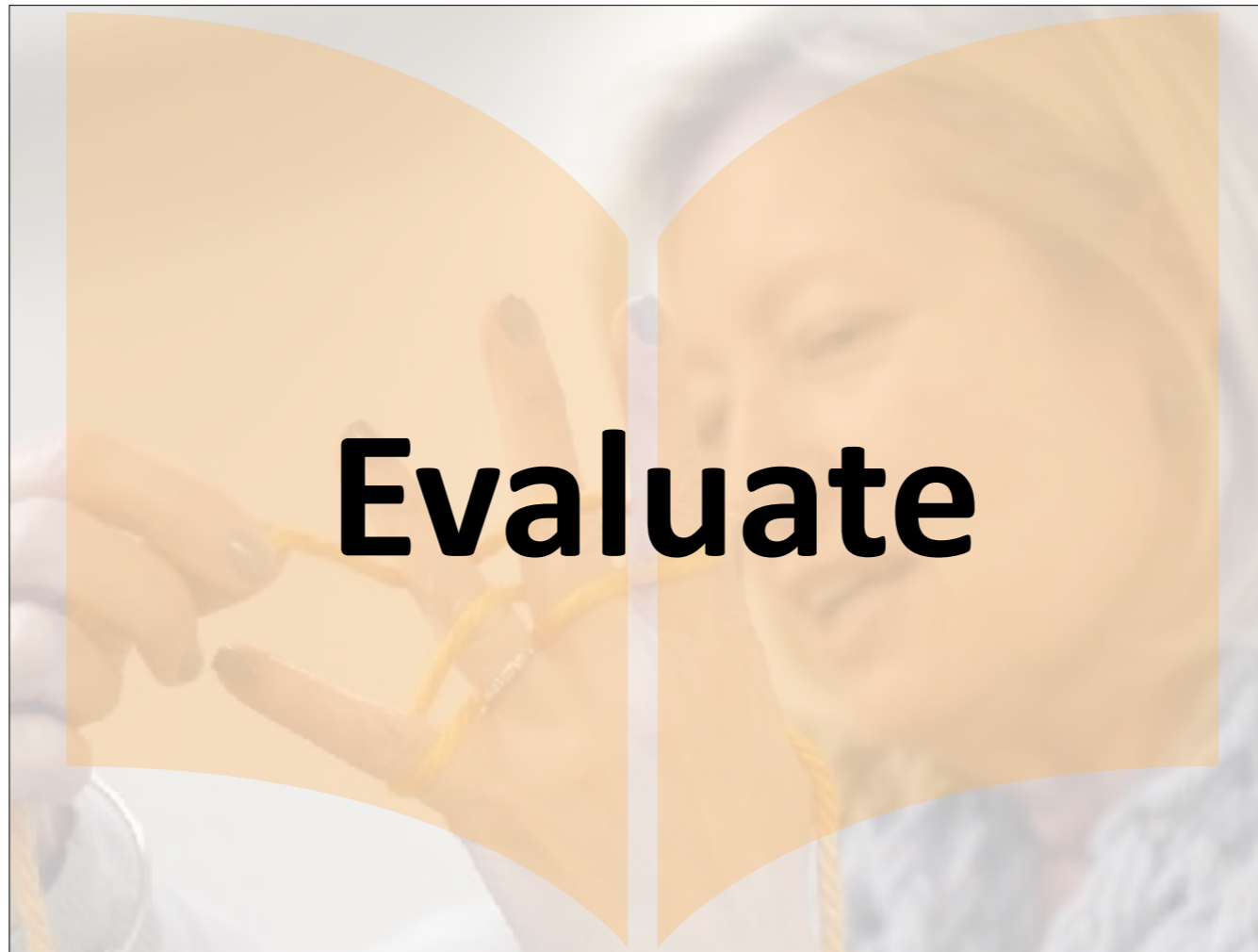
Blue Apron, another one of those "Oh man cooking is hard, I'd rather pay someone else to measure soy sauce for me" places. Fresh healthy food delivered to your door in pre-measured portions, fast. It's a good model and has some up-front benefits like reducing food waste, getting more people to eat healthier, etc. Unfortunately it's not that great a place to work. This is not surprising and I don't think it's, say, more awful than other places, but with companies who spend a lot of marketing money (and I mean a LOT) telling you how good for the world they are, they should walk the talk.



But scaling a manufacturing facility in a historically crime-dogged city like Richmond as fast as if it were a downtown San Francisco software firm hasn't been easy for Blue Apron. The company has set out to upend the entrenched industrial food system and disrupt the dinner table by changing the way Americans buy, receive, and prepare food, reducing food waste and increasing distribution and delivery efficiencies in the process. To do that, it had to rapidly hire a massive unskilled workforce, bringing jobs to a part of the Bay Area that has been largely left behind by Silicon Valley's boom times. Yet documents and interviews suggest that it was unprepared to properly manage and care for those workers, and as a result has suffered a rash of health and safety violations.

## See also...

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Librarian skill again. I don't know how many of you may have gone to library school around when I did but ISAR systems were big. Information storage and retrieval. It's really a large amount of what we do. Take in info, classify and categorize it for rapid retrieval, get it back for users. Gloat and bask in our glory... except instead of that part we really go back and EVALUATE our own systems. Does it do what it's saying it's doing? ACCORDING TO WHO? Uber mostly is and sort of isn't. Blue Apron is the same. The reason Gmail doesn't have a large print version is that the median age of a Google employee is 29. Facebook 29. Those tiny triangles you have to click to reveal your privacy settings? Designed by someone under 30.





# Evaluate

Evaluation usually means asking the *users*  
"How are we doing?"

Disruptors ask their *funders*

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“

\_\_\_\_\_ comforts  
the afflicted & afflicts  
the comfortable.

”

- Finley Peter Dunne's Mr Dooley

So this is a thing oft said of newspapers, though the original intent (check the links) was a little more tongue in cheek, but this idea of "punching up" in today's socially aware world has resonance. As an institution which aims to have everyone belong, the idea of afflicting the comfortable isn't really one we can always work with, even though there's social appeal.



“

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”

A lot of the argument about early disruption, particularly digital disruption, is more about using the language of social awareness (Blue Apron claims to be reducing food waste over traditional packaged food options) to actually make the lives of the top 1% 15% 25% marginally easier while not doing that much for... anyone else.

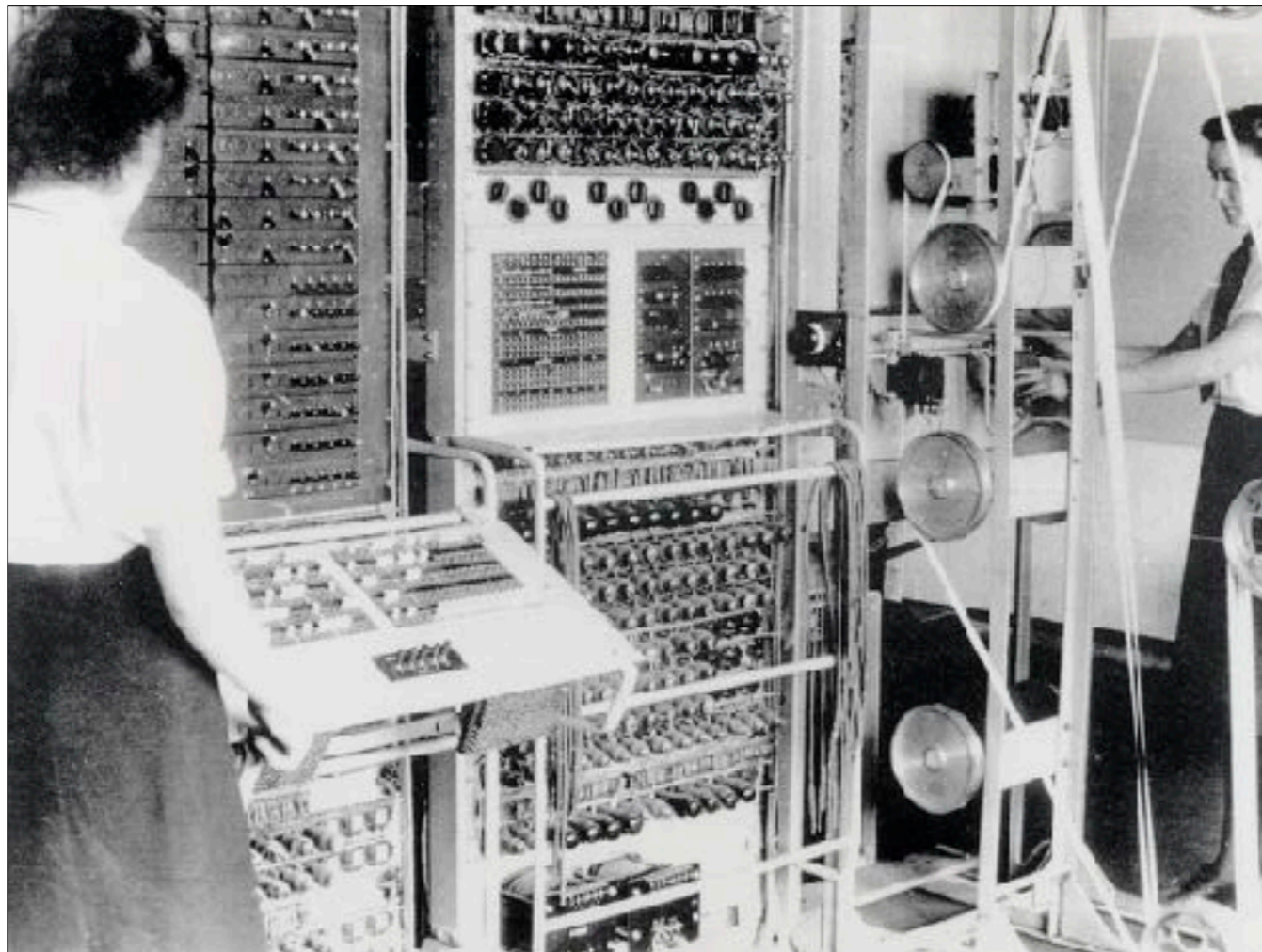
“

*Economies of scale can quickly become economies of hassle or harassment.*

”

*- Jessamyn West*

The same things that make digital disruption the new westward expansion (aka land grab) are the things that cause them to exacerbate the digital divide. If you have one bad phone support person at your company, people can roll the dice whether they talk to that person. If you have a bad website, even if it's mostly great, that affects every user of your site. This is a library strength and we need to more accurately spell it out as such.



And there's a valid question about "how much is too much?" and not knowing if you're keeping up, getting ahead or (relatively speaking) standing still. This is tougher in smaller community libraries (like mine) when the library may be the tech leader in a community but then seen as "behind the times" in the larger world of tech. And questioning is normal. Sitting with that uncertainty is normal. This is partly what professional development is good for. And partly what seeking the counsel of those you trust is good for. And then... and this is hard... leaving it alone if you think you're doing good enough.

A person is holding a large, light orange fan. The fan is open and has the words "Tell the Truth" written on it in a large, bold, black font. The person's hands are visible, holding the edges of the fan. The background is slightly blurred, showing the person's face and some clothing.

# Tell the Truth

Because it's worth continuing to state this not like in a jerkish way but in a true way. In an honest way. The hardest to serve have always been the hardest to serve. Comforting the comfortable is an easy problem to solve, comforting the afflicted is not. [Anecdote about OpenLibrary and a library built by engineers]. Every time people talk to me about the library losing relevance, I point to the Libraries Transform Campaign, the statistics about how library use is actually UP not down (take THAT post office!) and how **disruption is sort of easy if part of what you disrupt is the need to serve everyone.**

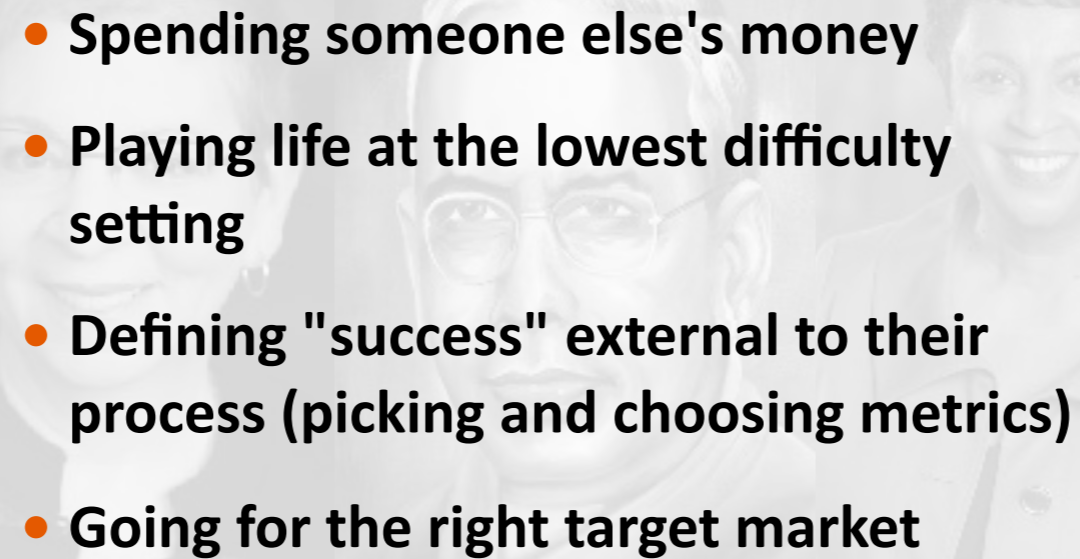
“

*An **innovation** that creates a new **market** by providing a different set of values, which ultimately (and unexpectedly) overtakes an existing **market**.*

”

*- The Innovator's Dilemma by Clayton M. Christensen*

So let's look at the key part of the narrative of innovative disruption which involves **MARKETS** and, honestly, jockeying for control of them.

- 
- **Spending someone else's money**
  - **Playing life at the lowest difficulty setting**
  - **Defining "success" external to their process (picking and choosing metrics)**
  - **Going for the right target market**

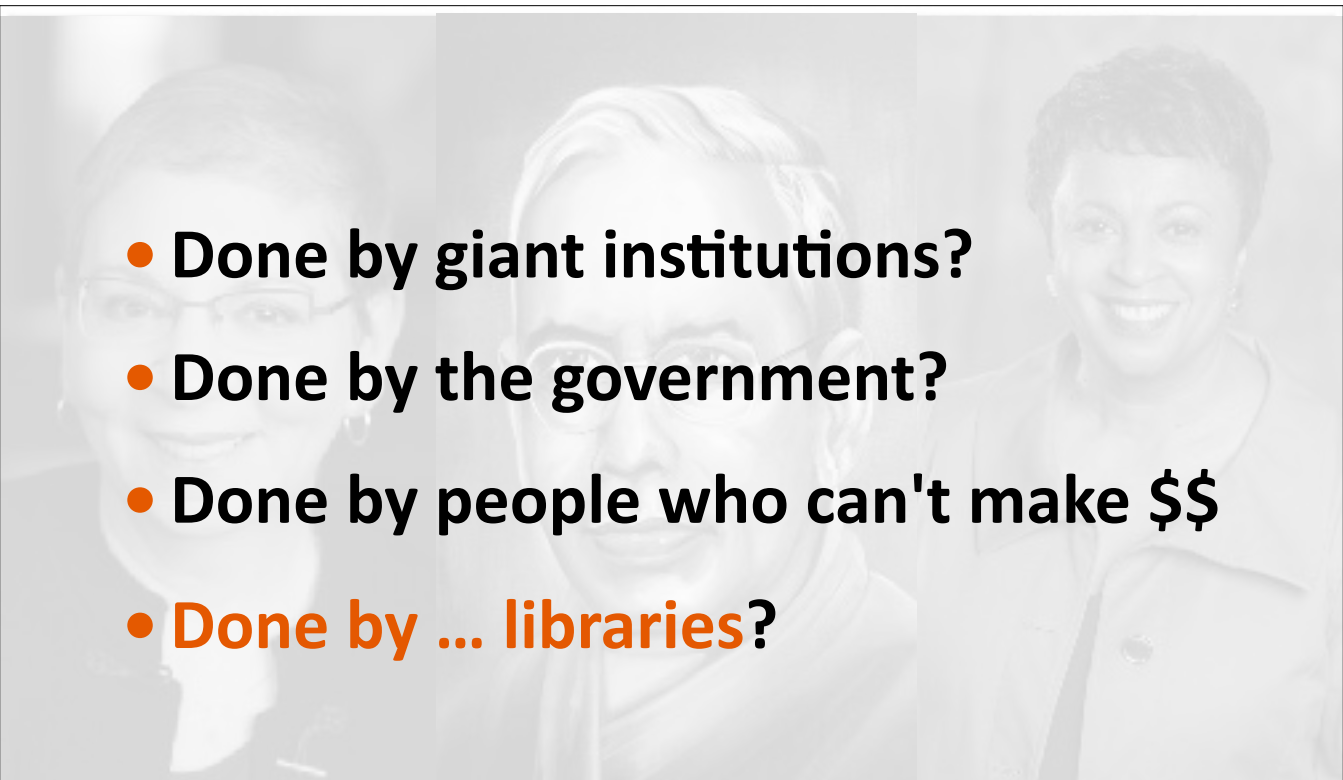
**(tech) Innovation is...?**

So a few bullet pointed slides (sorry) about innovation in this context. I would make the argument that all innovation is, is doing the usual "build a better mousetrap" routine but with a higher risk tolerance. And why do people have a high risk tolerance exactly? A few reasons

- 
- **Inherently digital?**
  - **Eminently fundable?**
  - **Antithetical to access?**

**Innovation is...?**

But let's look at what else innovation is, or might be (and we can talk more afterwards about any of this specifically)

- 
- Done by giant institutions?
  - Done by the government?
  - Done by people who can't make \$\$
  - Done by ... libraries?

**Innovation is not...?**

So when you don't have market forces, or not in the same way, what's your incentive to innovate? And do you have any incentive to disrupt? To me this is the question: where do libraries fit into this? Is innovation something that is DONE TO US?





# Return to Our Values

Part of the issue is that we don't call what we do "innovation" despite the fact that it's doing some of the same things. And I think this is the crux of a lot of this. Redefining the innovation space. Educating others about the true costs and shape of innovation.

“

*What is being  
disrupted? ... the  
**support network of**  
high technology.*

”

*- High Technology and Barriers to Innovation by Milan Zeleny*

A parallel discussion about high tech disruption talks about what it is that is getting shaken up or disrupted. Like sure, the bottom dropped out of the cassette market when CDs came in, but it also dropped out of the plastic cassette housing market and the magnetic tape market and the cassette holder market and the other "supporting" markets for the major industry. THOSE are the industries that are affected by disruption almost more than the primary industry which can, sometimes, pivot.



## knowledge support network

So the support networks for a lot of these information systems, for these apps and for the entire field of high tech disruption... is human. It's not Demco selling card pockets, Demco can pivot and buy Boopsie. The TECH SUPPORT NETWORK IS HUMAN. While people are being shuffled from phone calls and emails to apps, libraries are filling in many of the gaps. And we should be taking more credit for doing that.



## **Now about the library...**

So let's talk about the people doing the work—This is the Millicent Library in Fair Haven MA—the reference work, the cataloging, the electronic resources management. At the library we're there to help people with their information needs which more and more is about directing people to resources to solve their own problems.

And as information has expanded to include more and more "stuff" we're often assisting with more than just access to stored information.





**It's not about the bots.**

I can't help but hear people talking about Maker Spaces when they talk about library innovation. And sure, those are a thing. Many libraries got grants for them. Some libraries had working plans of what they wanted to do, and supportive communities. The thing about maker spaces, like other library innovations that got a lot of attention for a while and then didn't, is not about the technology (unlike the business world) it's about shared access to tools.

Makerbots help people solve problems which is why they're in the libraries. Libraries evolve which is why



## **(free) access to tools**

Speaking of access to tools. When I was a kid we had these in the house. I grew up in a DIY culture where people shared books like this to help people solve their own problems. Fix your own septic, make your own beef jerky, sew your own clothes. I turned out okay. I turned out like this. Now we google error messages and use twitter backchannels to help people manage digital paths to those exact same ends.



The replacement for those books, for that access to tools, isn't newer books, it's not even the internet. It's us. Offering the access, the free access, the ... accessible access is what differentiates what we do from nearly everyone else. It's the true and lasting innovation. And we can do it with the resources we already have, sort of. Let me explain.



## Two meanings of free to all

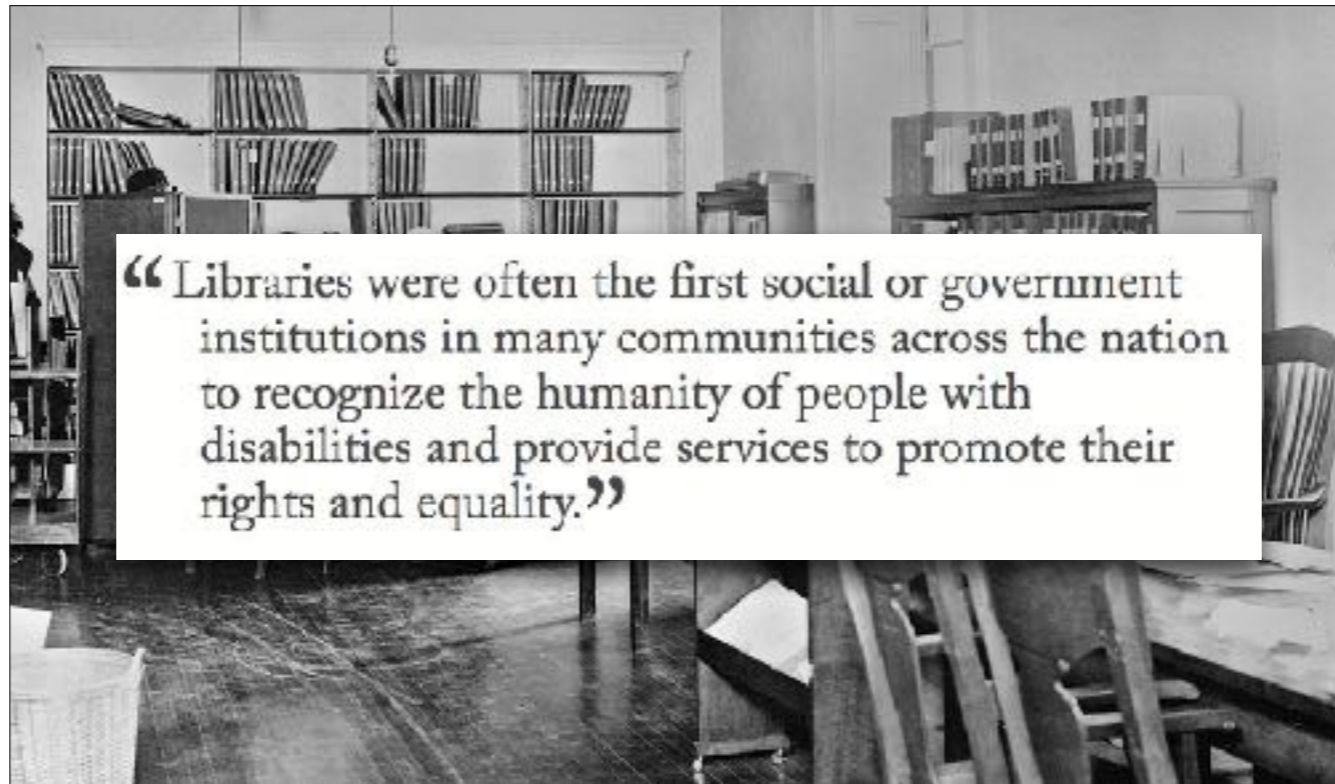
And let's move at libraries for a second. This is Boston Public, I hope you all appreciate and enjoy this inscription over the fancy front door FREE TO ALL. This means a few things. Literally it meant this is a library you don't have to pay for which was in opposition to subscription libraries of the time (1854 for BPL proper, 1895 for this building). Innovative. Reducing barriers is innovative. Lowering or removing fines. Free movies. Lending lawnmowers or drills.





## **The 1890s were exciting times**

The Library of Congress opened its reading room for the blind in 1897. The ADA didn't make this a legal requirement until 26 years ago. All libraries serve everyone. That seems sort of ... normal until you realize how difficult it is to serve everyone. Because, honestly, it's easy to serve most of us. We have normative goals and normative heights and normative expectations and are (many of us) neurotypical. But even if we're not, the library is for us. Even special libraries and academic libraries have subpopulations but in general, they serve their whole service population and if there is someone who can't get service, it's the library's problem, not the users. The user isn't broken.



“Libraries were often the first social or government institutions in many communities across the nation to recognize the humanity of people with disabilities and provide services to promote their rights and equality.”

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A person is holding a large, orange, curved sign that reads "Use Your Powers for Good". The sign is held in front of a person whose face is partially visible in the background. The person is wearing a white shirt and has their hands raised, holding the sign. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in white shirts.

# Use Your Powers for Good

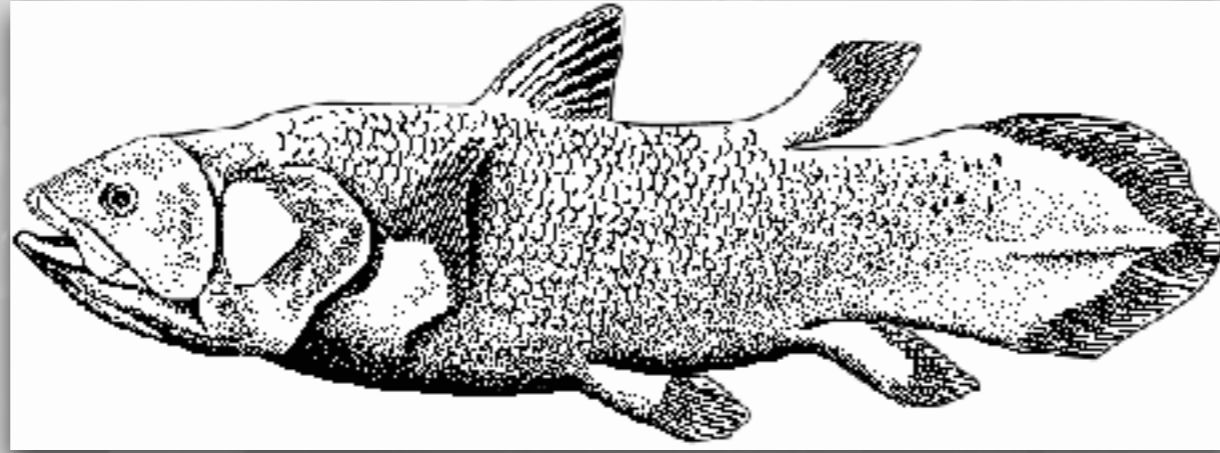
We're actually a formidable institution, but we've spent so much time being the pass-through entity for all this knowledge that people (and maybe even ourselves) have forgotten many of our awesome capabilities.



## Libraries as market.

Returning to that market thing. We buy a lot of things. As a combined institution we buy more books than any other institutions. You know how everyone holds up the VA as a model of how to do healthcare right? Buying healthcare in bulk, economies of actual scale to help everyone? Our combined buying power gives us a lot more power in the actual marketplace, not of ideas but of digital content. And one of the reasons we can do that is because we don't have to hustle to turn a profit. It's part of the social contract we have with society. We do our thing because an informed educated population has social value.

And it's unclear why we don't capitalize on that more soundly.



## **Libraries as disruptor.**

We should have been extinct a long time ago if the free market were the only thing that determined which things survived. Libraries are actually the social disruptor that pulls people away from the brink of free market capitalism and selfish anti-community choices. (not like the coelacanth is the most community minded of fish, but it has been around since the paleozoic era, its longevity is more because it tastes terrible)





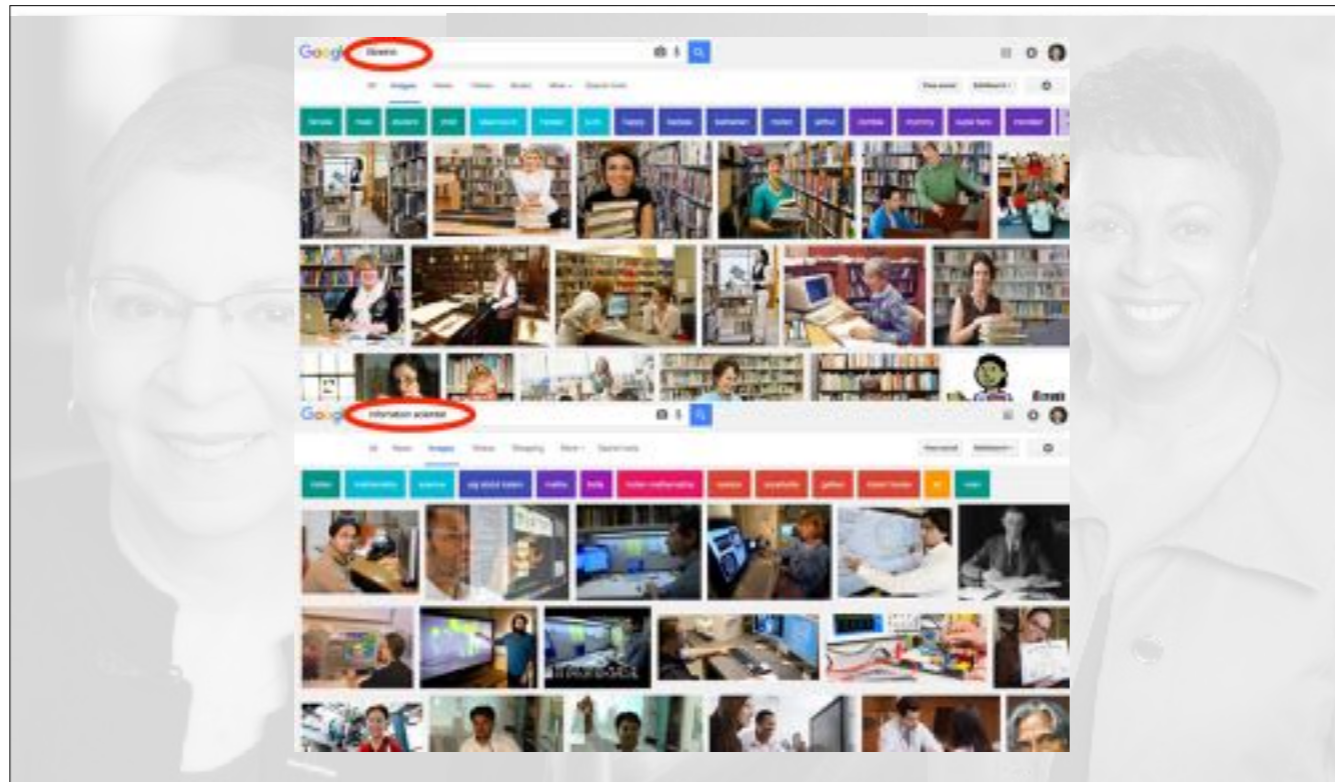
## **Not borrowing trouble.**

I think it's worth understanding that in 2018 everyone feels pressure to be "more like a start up" because as we get more of our media from online spaces and tech startups dominate those spaces it feels like that is what everyone's doing. It's worth having a critical analysis of that social pressure the same way we look at things like bullying in teens, body image as represented via the media and just general fact-based approaches to media messages. The same way people have always dealt with celebrities, we're now managing and dealing with start-ups telling us how to live by building tools for us. But we have our own celebrities....



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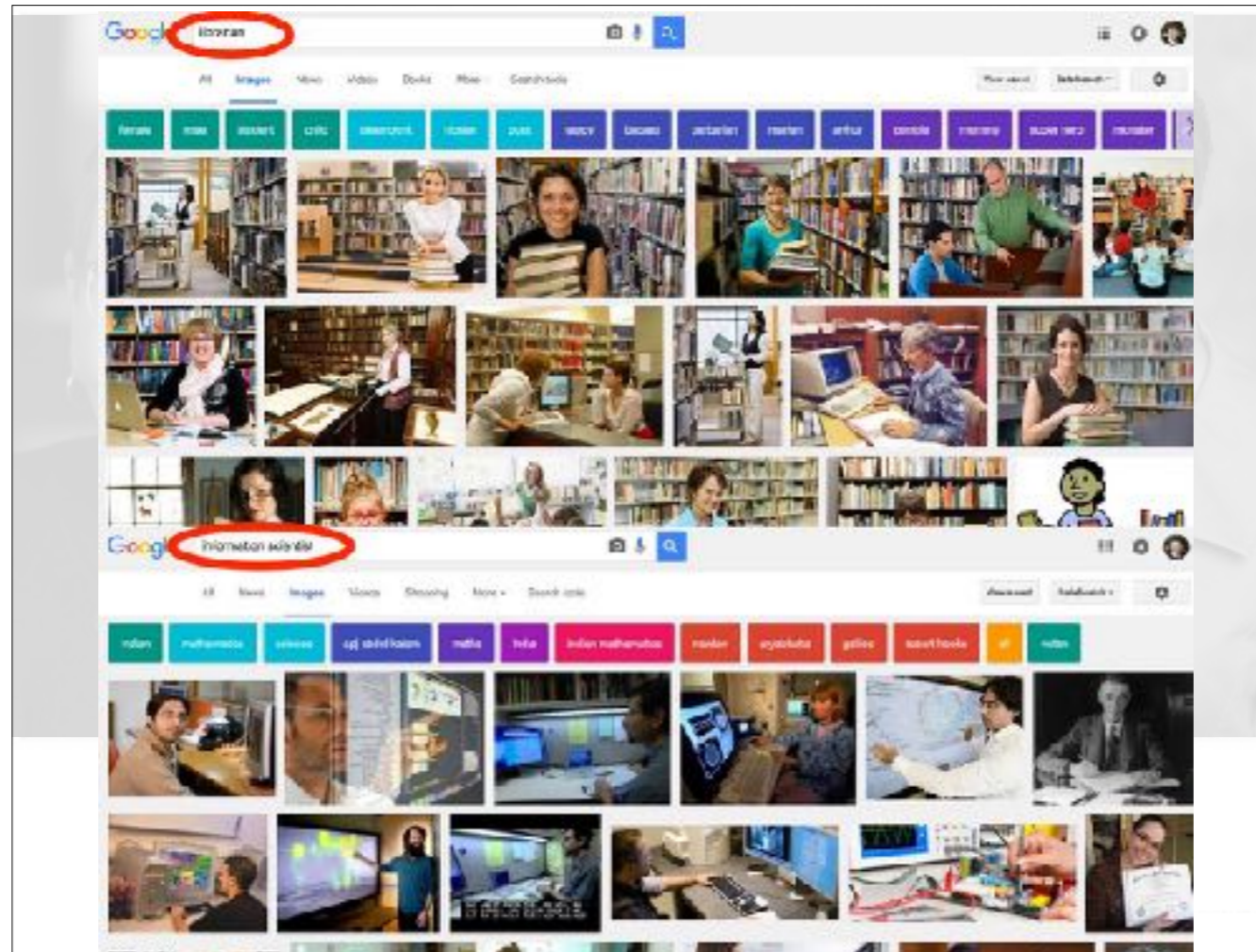


## Disrupting sexism.

But the things we choose to disrupt are society's tendency to diverge from anti-sharing anti-social sexism, homophobia and transphobia. Speaking of that librarian search result, check out that one contrasted with what you see when you search for information scientists. Hmmm.

Who is going to fix that? Not google.





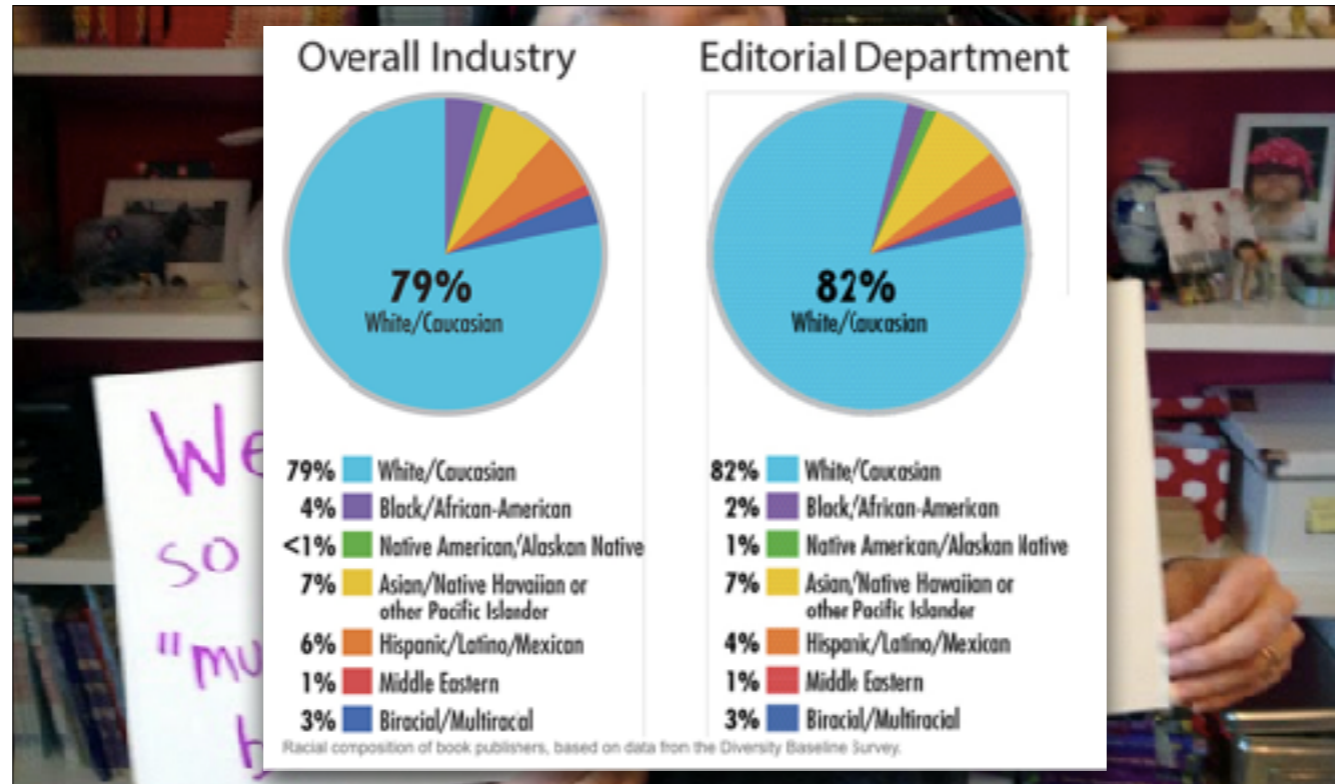
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## **Disrupting racism.**

We also do the work, looking at the publishing industry and using our purchasing power to demand better representations of people of color.



## Disrupting racism.

We also do the work, looking at the publishing industry and using our purchasing power to demand better representations of people of color.

August 30, 2017

***Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity: Members of the Association of Research Libraries***

***Employee Demographics and Director Perspectives***

*Roger C. Schonfeld, Liam Sweeney*

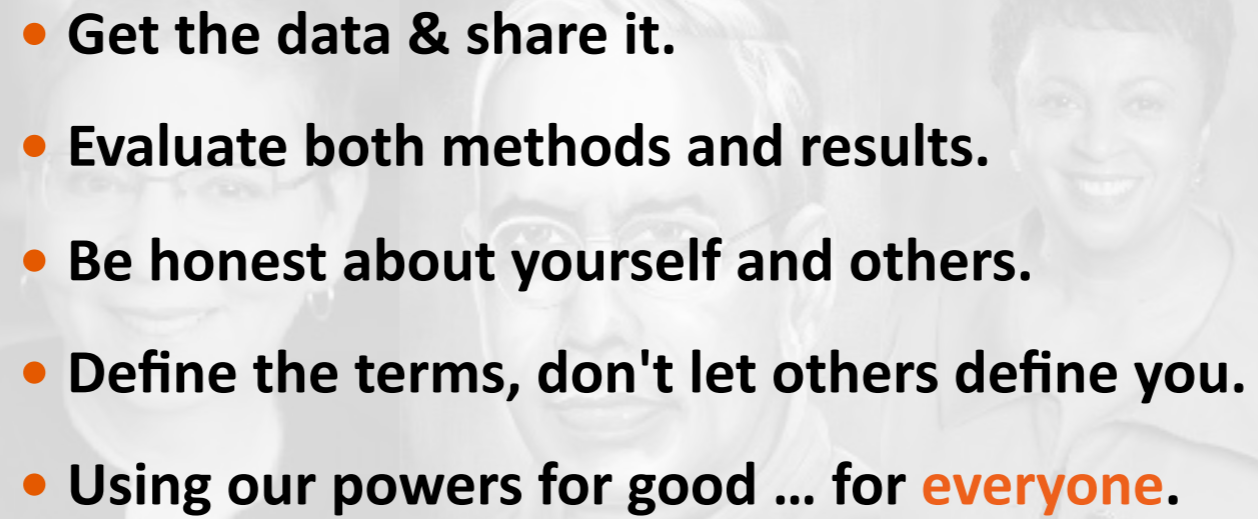
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.304524>

The library community considers diversity to be a core value.<sup>[1]</sup> But, the academic library sector has struggled with addressing equity, diversity, and inclusion. One key shortcoming has been in its efforts to ensure representative numbers of library employees of color.<sup>[2]</sup>

**Disrupting racism & doing better.**

And we're self critical, trying to address our own failings as a profession that is (significantly) less diverse than the community we serve. We know it's not just a one-and-done situation.



- 
- **Get the data & share it.**
  - **Evaluate both methods and results.**
  - **Be honest about yourself and others.**
  - **Define the terms, don't let others define you.**
  - **Using our powers for good ... for **everyone**.**

## **your librarian techniques**

So, to summarize, the things we've always done actually work within this narrative.

“

*An innovation that creates a new market by **providing a different set of values**, which ultimately (and unexpectedly) overtakes an existing market.*

”

*- The Innovator's Dilemma by Clayton M. Christensen*

So here's that quote again, only I've highlighted different words.



**We can disrupt disruption.**

Or honestly, redirect it so that the things that make our professional lives exciting are the opportunities to bring more people in with us and use the larger business and social forces so that everyone can benefit from economies of scale, VC funding, and shaking things up.

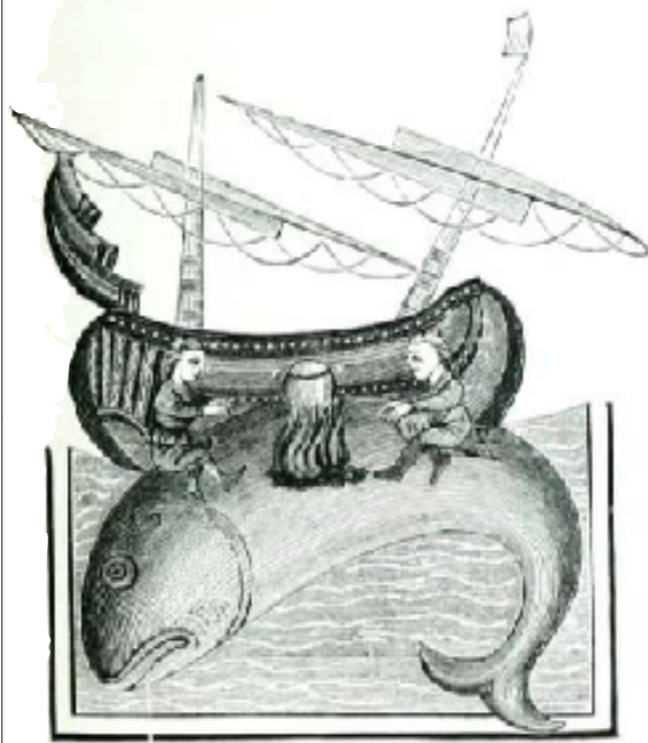


Even if we call it something else.





Even if we call it something else.



thank  
you

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