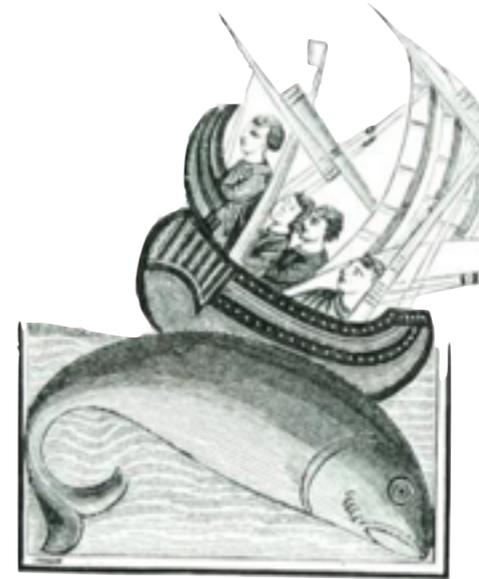


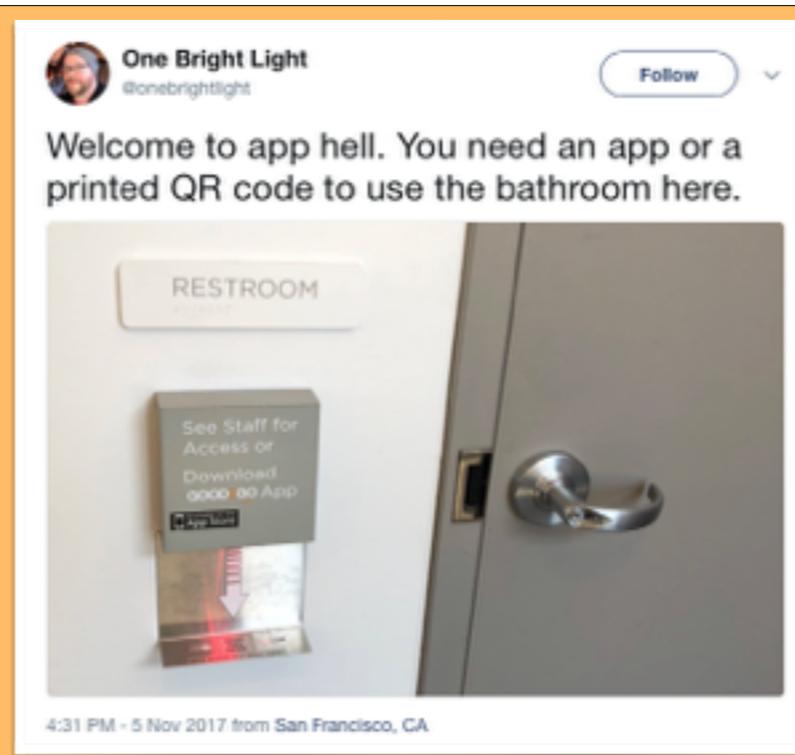
# Disrupting Tradition?

the good, bad & ugly  
about (library) innovation

*[librarian.net/talks/nyla17](http://librarian.net/talks/nyla17)*

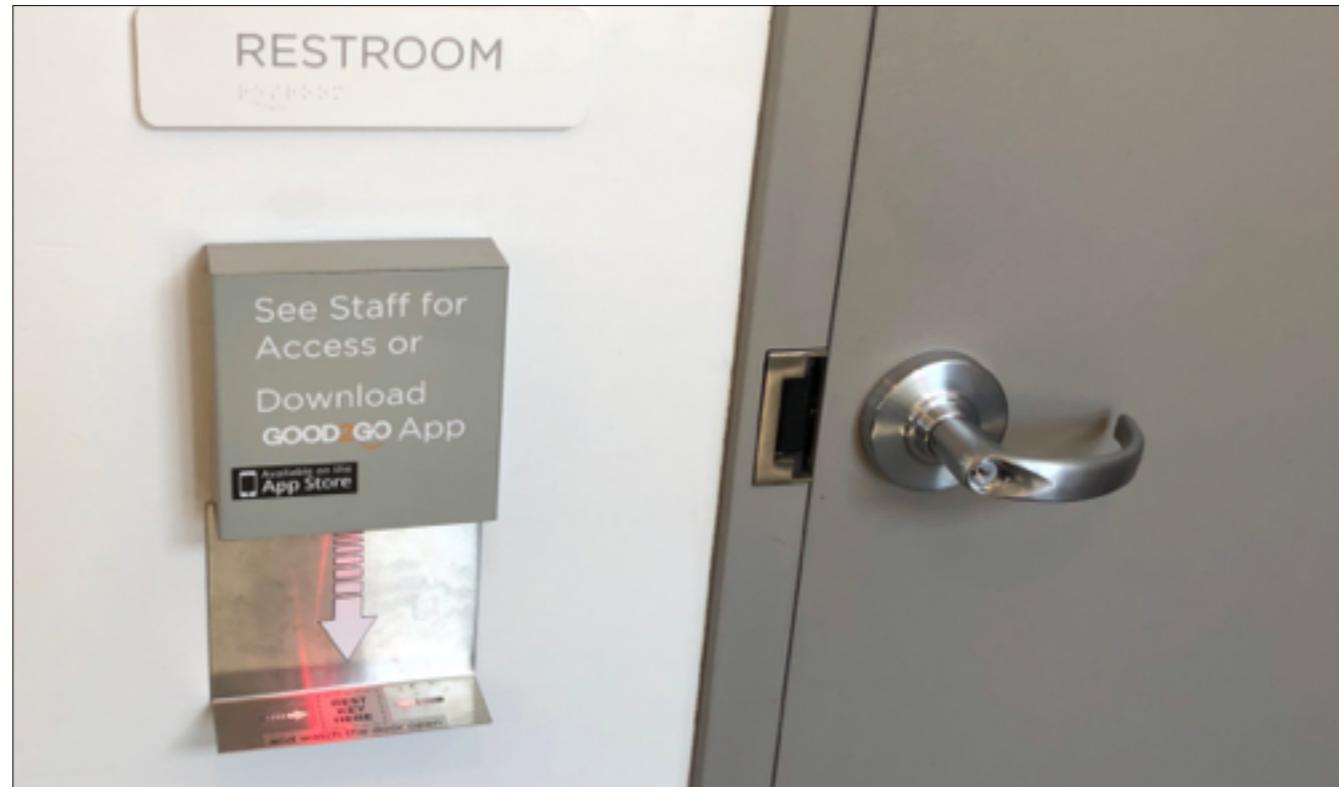


Thanks for having me. Hey there -- I live in a small town in Vermont where very little ever changes. I live there because I really like the pace of most things. However, I work in tech where very little stays the same. One of my main jobs is teaching people in the first place (Vermont) about the culture 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.

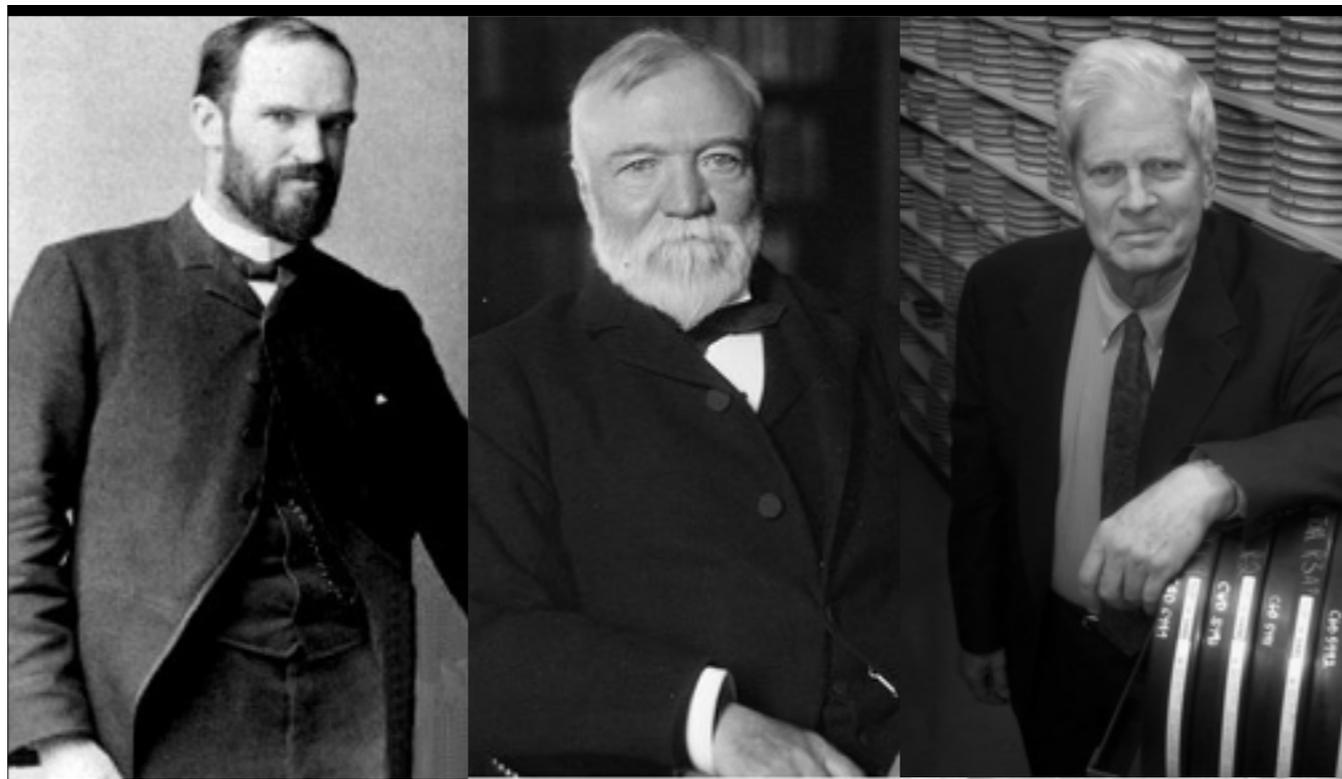


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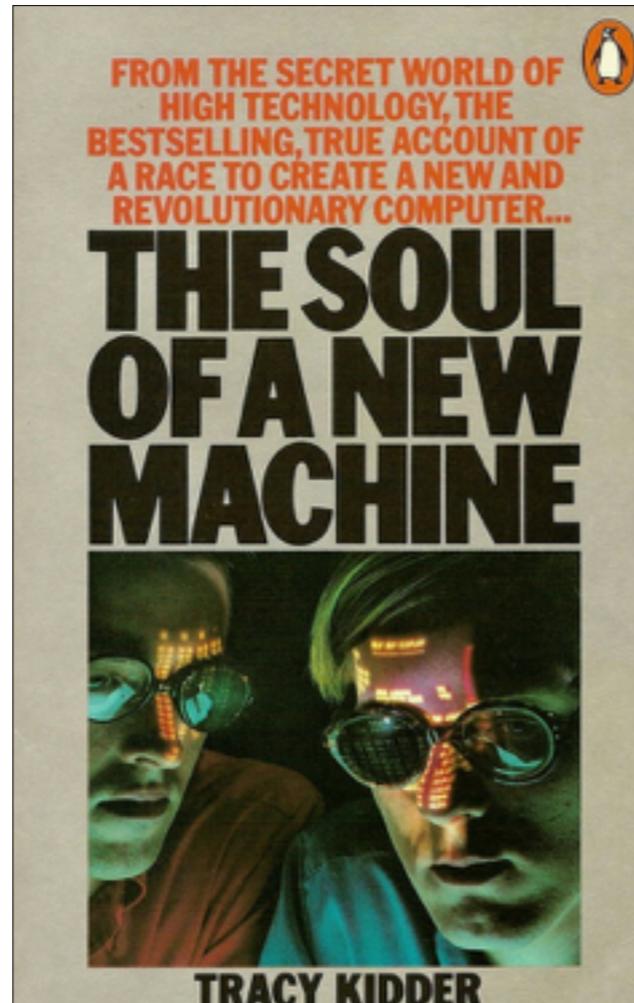
As a counter example, this is how one New York library deals with the same thing. Innovative in its own way, no?



## 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.

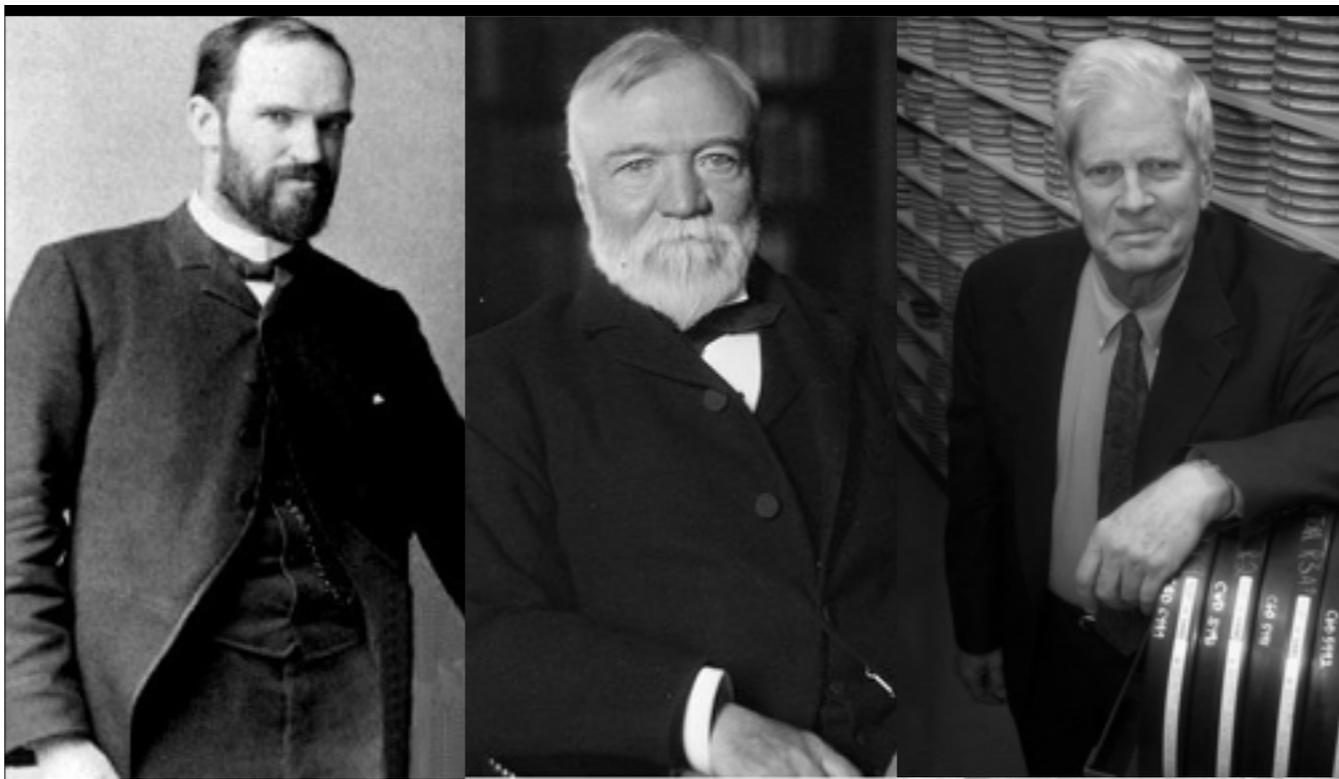
So look... everyone always, since I went to library school in the nineties, has talked about how it's an exciting time to be a librarian, what with computers and all.



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. Even though librarianship is arguably better for their participation in it.



## **Feel the excitement!**

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: 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*

So let's talk about disruption specifically and then we'll talk about libraries. So let's look at this 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?

## technique: get the data



[This 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. To be honest most of them are some variety of "use your research and communication skills to call bullshit on hype" but I'll get a little more specific as we go on.

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 complicated 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!**



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?



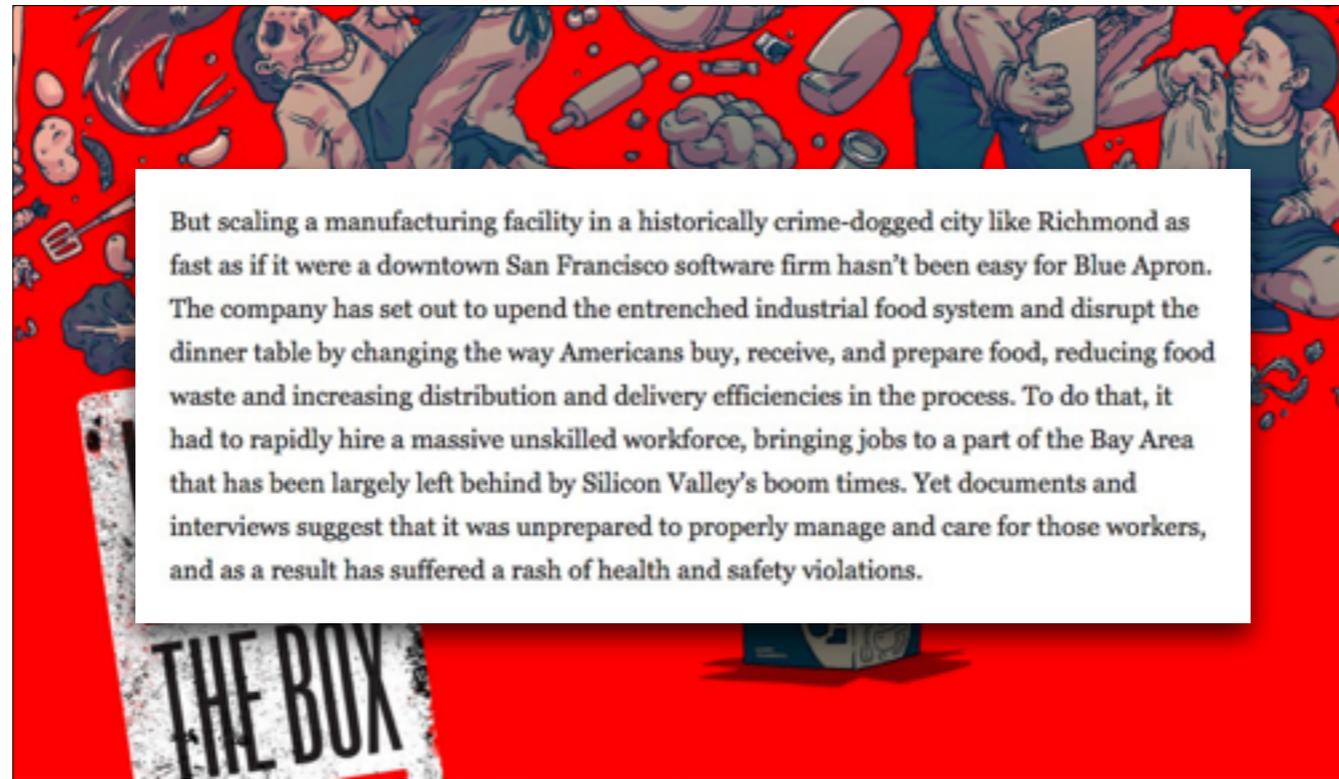
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## See also...

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.

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## technique: evaluate



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.



**technique:**  
**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

“

---

*comforts the  
comfortable &  
afflicts the afflicted.*

”

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

## technique: tell the truth



And 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.**

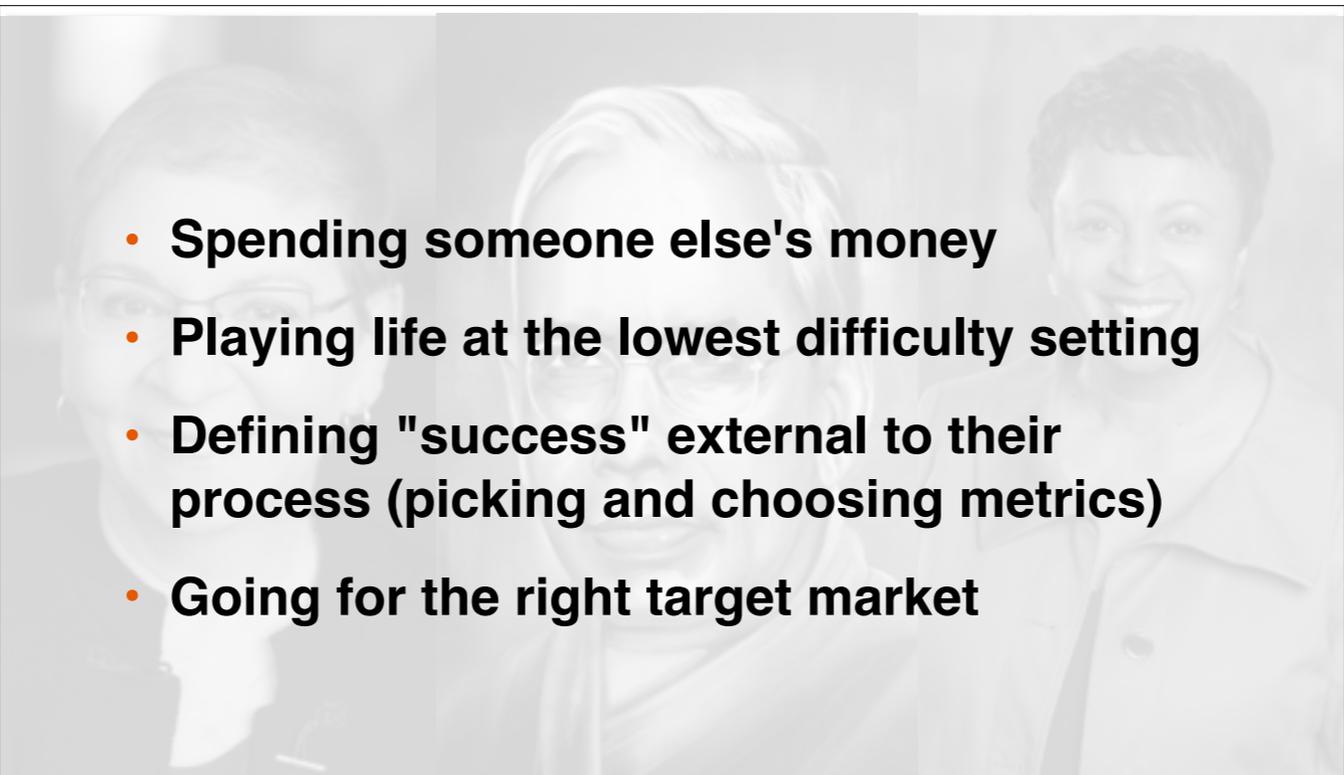
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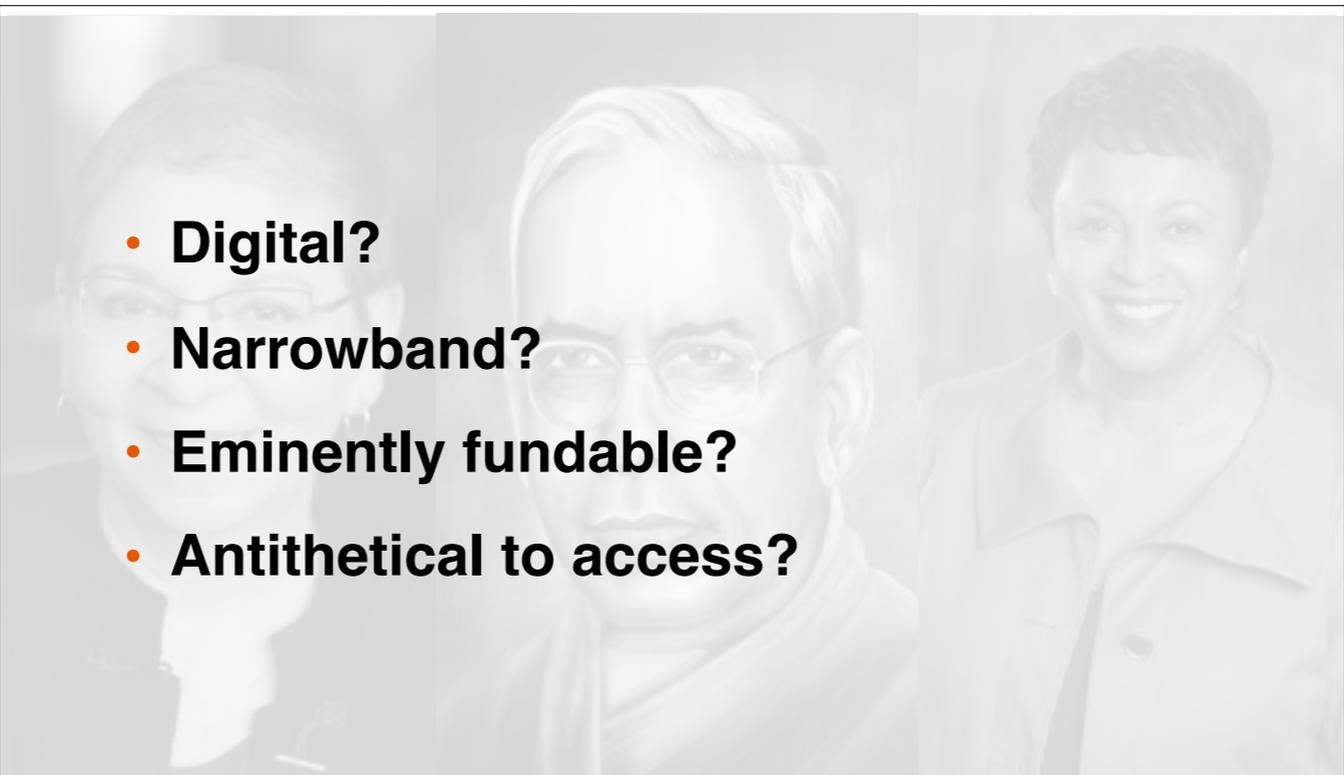
*- The Innovator's Dilemma by Clayton M. Christensen*

So let's look at the key part of the narrative of 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**

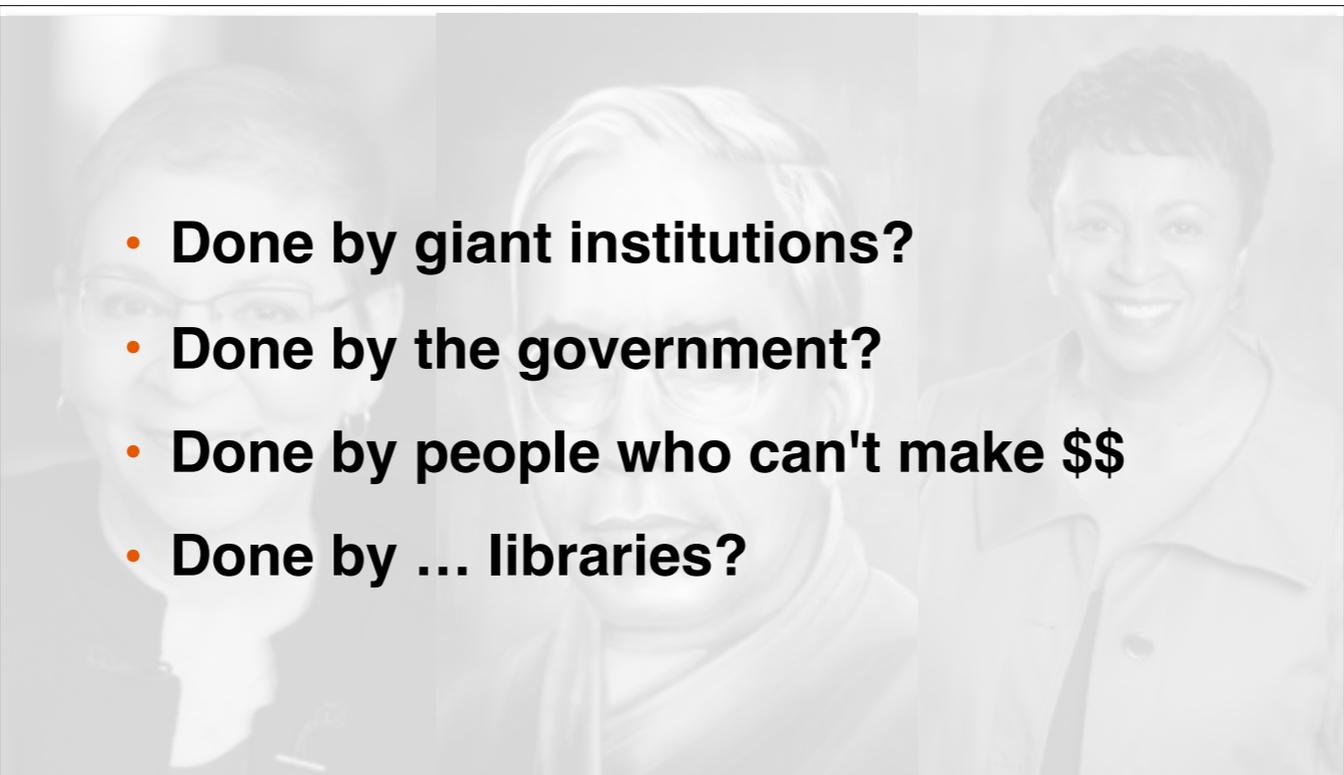
## **(tech) Innovation**

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

- 
- **Digital?**
  - **Narrowband?**
  - **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?

**technique:**

our continued value(s)



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.

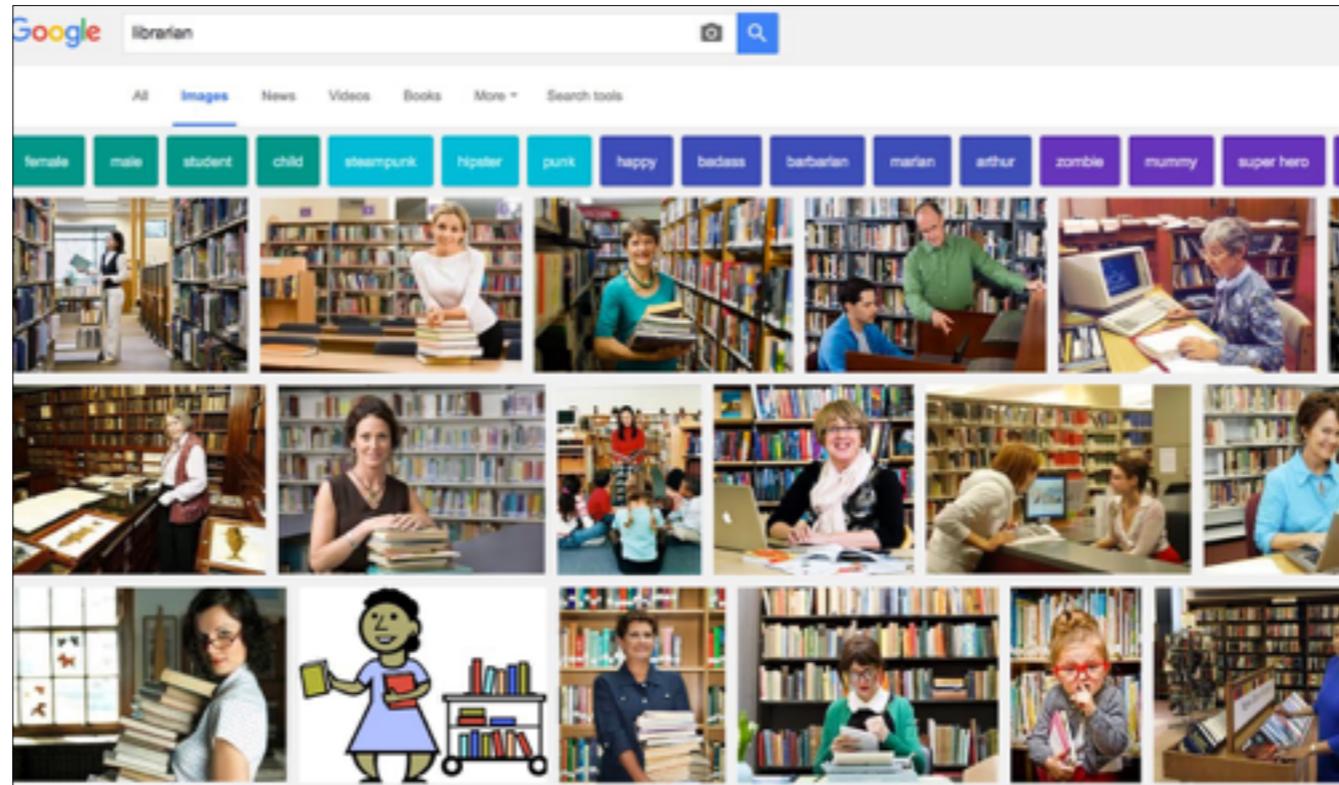
“

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

”

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

There's another parallel discussion about high tech disruption that talks about what it is that is getting shaken up 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 resist 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.

(open library and their reference "really good search engine")



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

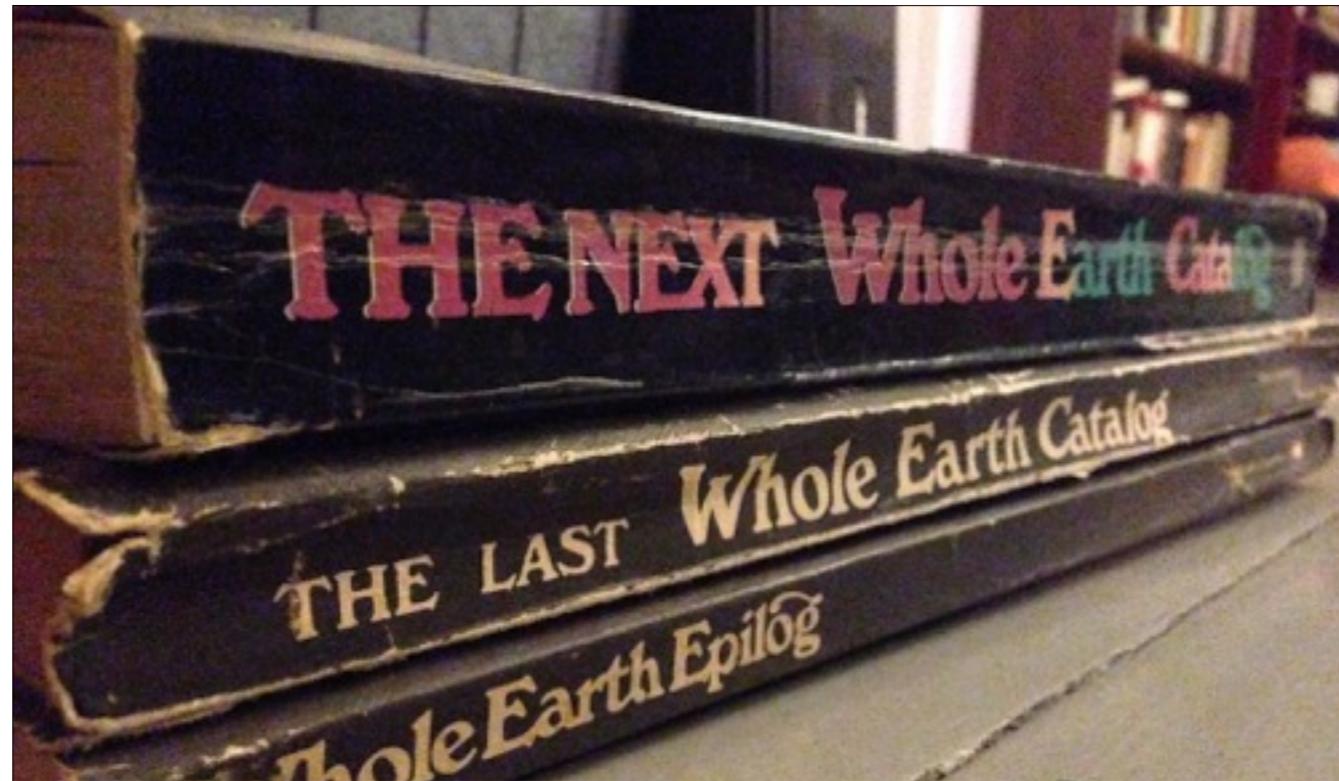
This is the Millicent Library in Fair Haven MA. Let's talk about the people doing the work, the reference work, the cataloging, the electronic resources management. At the library we're there to help people with their information needs which more and more is about directing people to resources to solve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

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.



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

More storytime. When I was a kid we had these in the house. Any other back-to-the-landers in the audience? I grew up in a DIY culture where people shared books like this to help people solve their own problems. Now we google error messages and use twitter backchannels to help people manage digital paths to those same ends.

**technique:**  
**be the conduit**



Offering the access, the free access, the ... accessible access is what differentiates what we do from nearly everyone else.



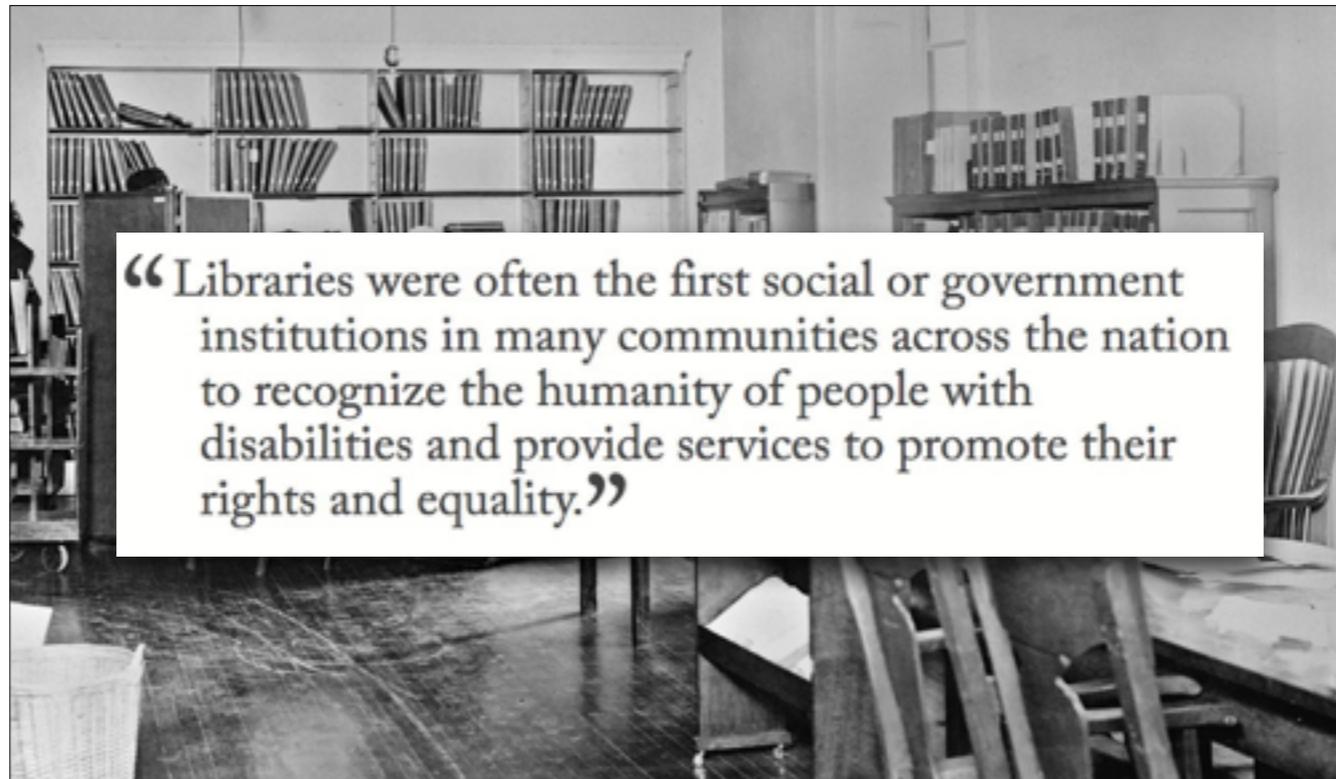
## Two meanings of free to all

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)



## **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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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?

**transforming ≠ disrupting**

Every time people talk to me about the library losing relevance (a discussion I had at the Internet Archive even as they're trying to build a giant library) 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 actually sort of easy if part of what you disrupt is the need to serve everyone.

**technique:**

use your powers for good

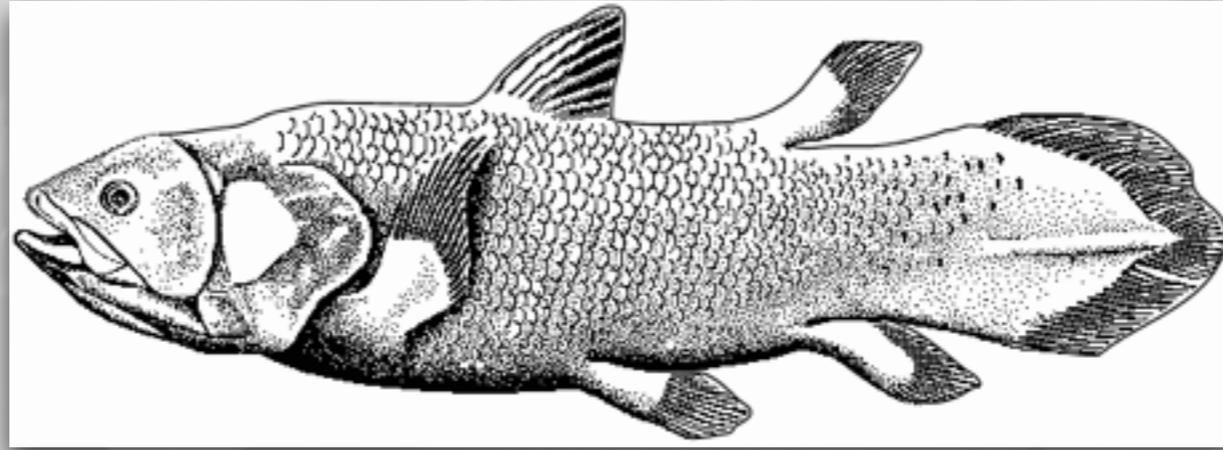


We're actually a formidable institution, but we've spent so much time being the pass-through entity for all this knowledge that people (and maybe even ourselves) have forgotten many of our awesome capabilities.



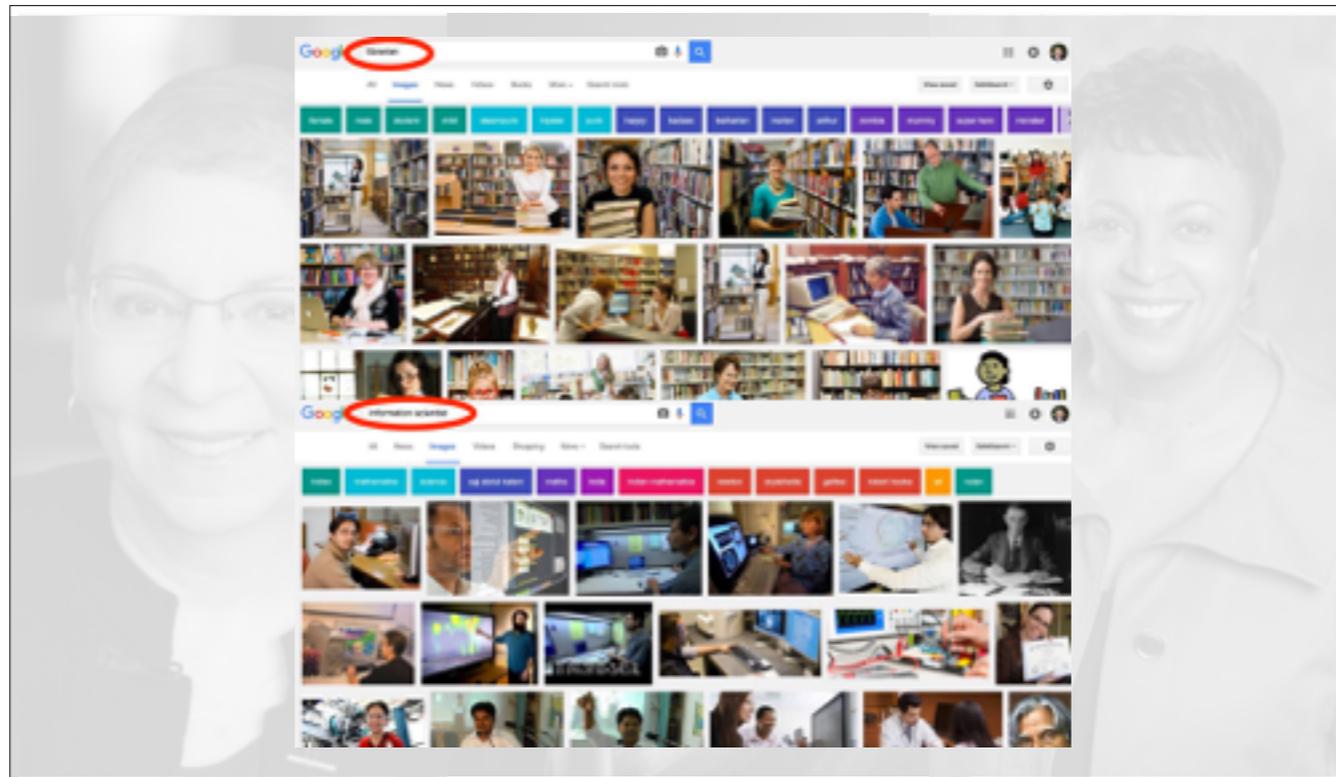
## **Libraries as market.**

So let's look back 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 it's unclear why we don't capitalize on that more soundly.



## **Libraries as disruptor.**

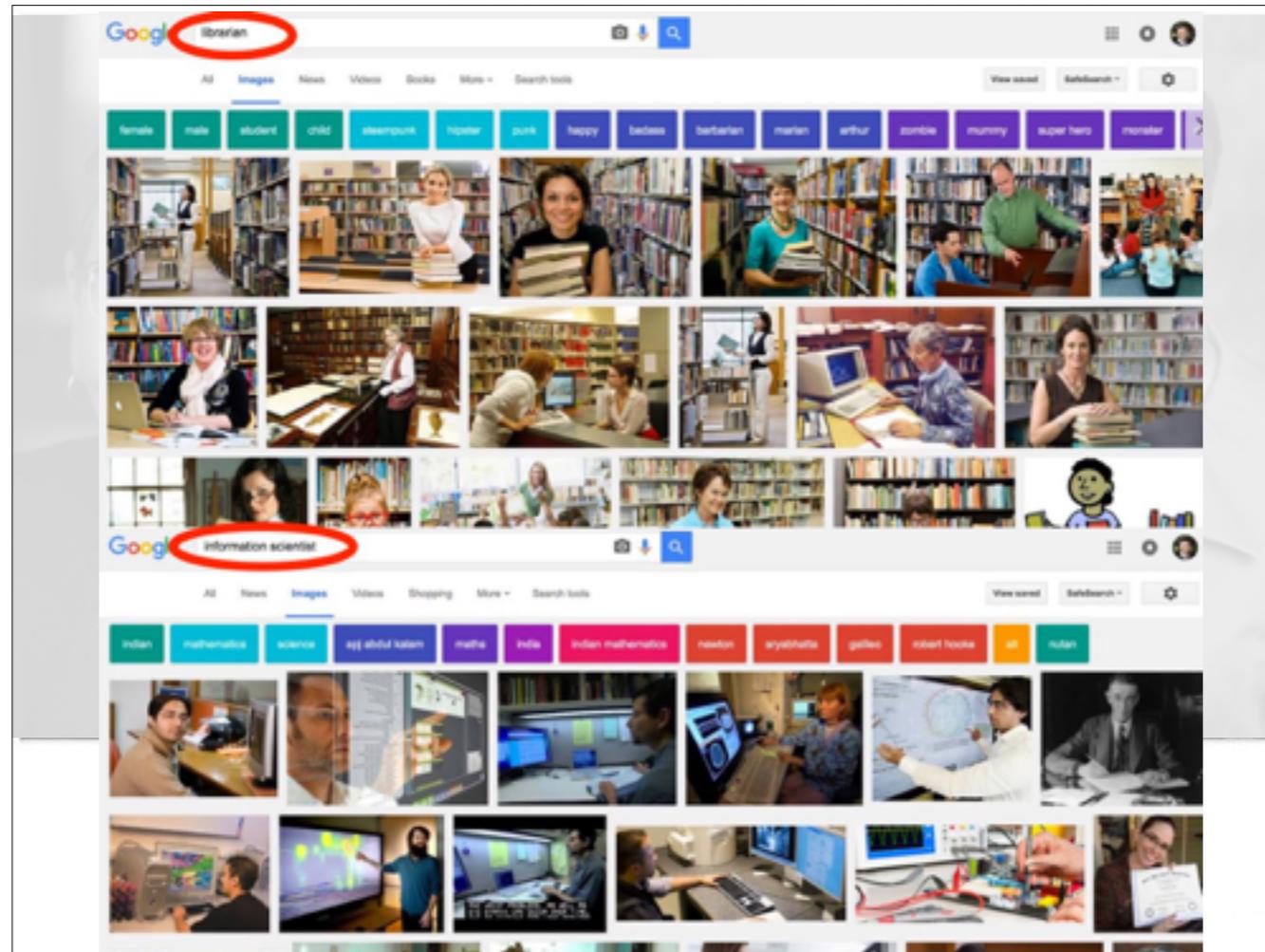
Honestly, we should have been extinct a long time ago if the free market were the only thing that determined which things survived. Libraries are actually the social disruptor that pulls people away from the brink of free market capitalism and selfish anti-community choices. (not like the coelocanth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



# Disrupt 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.



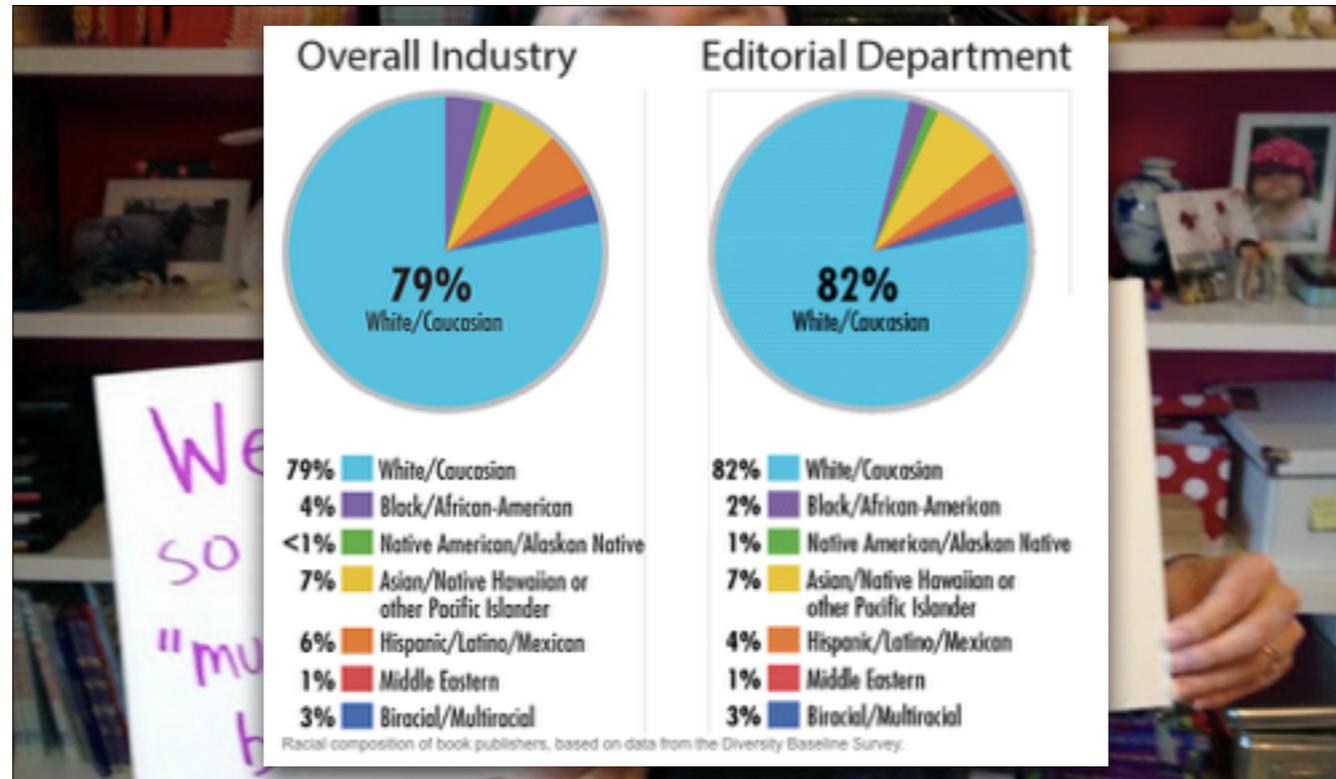
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## **Disrupt racism.**

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



# Disrupt 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>

**Disrupt racism & do 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.

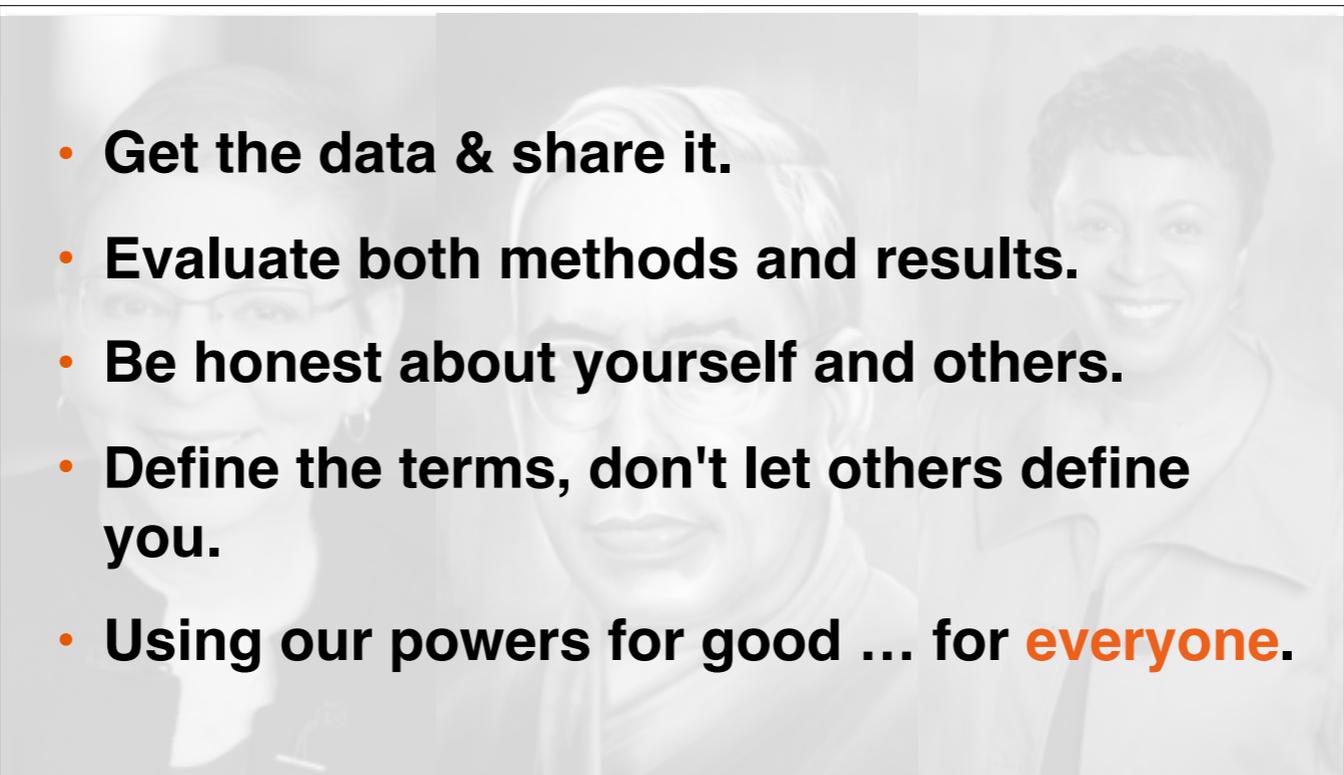
**Open Library is yours**  
to borrow, read & explore.

**Books to Read** The World's classic literature at your fingertips. Over [1,000,000 free ebook titles](#) available.

**Books to Borrow** Here's a sample of recently returned books from the [ebook lending library](#).

# Disrupt bad models.

I've given Open Library some flack but I also need to give them some props for pushing the envelope on new and even "edgy" ways to lend ebooks without always waiting for explicit permission to do so. There are lessons there.

- 
- **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*

emphasis mine



**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.

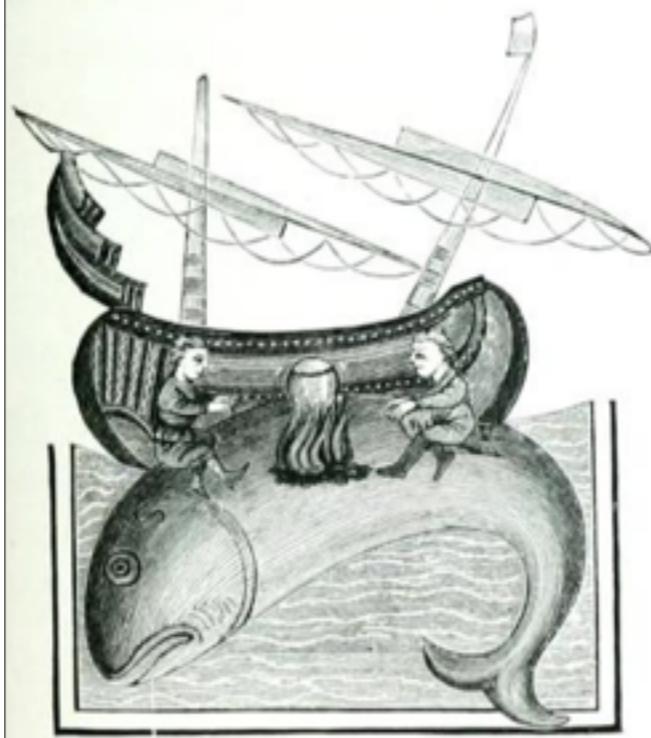


Even if we call it something else.



# Bathroom Innovation, Library Style.

Even if we call it something else.



thank  
you

*<[librarian.net/talks/nyla17](http://librarian.net/talks/nyla17)>*