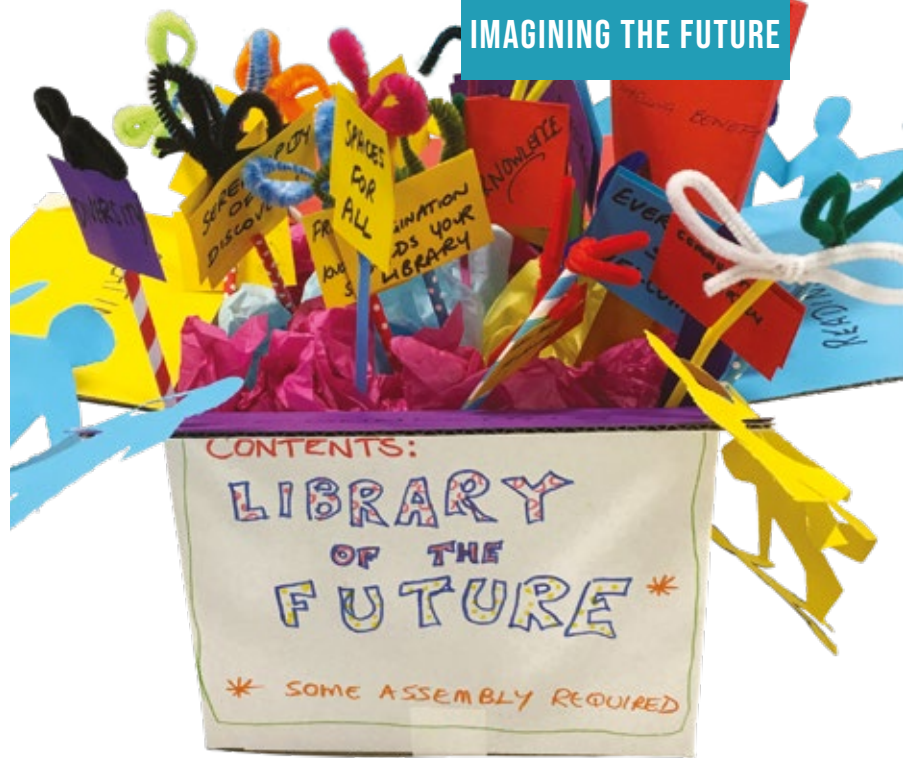


ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

Australia is a country of extremes. We are familiar with the uncertainties of natural disasters, droughts, floods, hail, cyclones and bushfires - yet there is always more that the future can teach us. **Matt Finch, Brendan Fitzgerald and Mylee Joseph** look at how scenario planning can help inform our decision-making process when setting strategic directions.



In 2020-2021 the global pandemic has highlighted many of the vulnerabilities in our society including digital exclusion, insecure work, social isolation, and inadequate support for cultural and linguistic diversity. COVID-19 also placed a heavy burden on remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with extended lockdowns and quarantine under the Biosecurity Act.

While existing strategic resources helped some libraries to frame their COVID-19 response – guided by existing bushfire, flood, or business continuity plans – services have also scrambled to develop new ones, as indicated in the report *NSW Public Libraries: the COVID-19 response* (bit.ly/3hU14Vn).

The uncertainties around COVID-19 remind our data-driven age that no-one can gather evidence from events that haven't happened yet. As the Bodleian Libraries' Frankie Wilson puts it, we may have to make evidence-informed rather than evidence-based decisions, because sometimes organisations must do things strategically which the evidence seems to tell them not to.

Fortunately, there are techniques to help libraries make decisions in times of uncertainty.

Scenario planning is a methodical way to devise plausible descriptions of the futures we may have to inhabit.

These aren't predictions or preferred futures, but visions which challenge our assumptions in order to enrich decision making.

A scenarios workshop at the State Library of New South Wales in 2019 highlighted upstream issues for Australian libraries including geopolitical tensions with China, changes to machinery of government, and even a future in which climate crises created the need for ongoing travel restrictions between states and territories. What seemed to stretch plausibility two years ago became all too credible within a matter of months. Even back in 2009, scenario planning had included a pandemic (bit.ly/3eC5DBO).


Libraries worldwide have also turned to fresh strategic planning methods in earnest. The new National and State Libraries Australasia strategy was informed by the Oxford Scenario Planning Approach; Reading Public Library in Pennsylvania generated scenarios to inform decisions around post-lockdown emergence.

Rather than focus solely on short-term operational questions, Reading Public Library's librarians looked ahead to 2040, recognising that they needed to explore how issues like digital inequity, political polarisation, and the lasting impacts of COVID-19 might play out over time. This work enabled the development of new strategic

directions, but also engaged library stakeholders in questions of what the future might hold, and how to act collectively in the present.

COVID-19 has taught us that tomorrow needn't look like today, and that we need to consider the futures we'll inhabit in order to make sound strategic decisions. That means asking tough but rewarding questions about where our current blindspots lie.

FURTHER READING

- Using scenarios to reimagine our strategic decisions (bit.ly/3xTKMRS)
- Scenario planning in public libraries: a discussion (bit.ly/3xYz0WC)
- Even in the worst-case scenario: exploring libraries' social role in crises real and imagined (bit.ly/3hPkcns). 

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