

## Against the Grain

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# Squirreling Away: Managing Information Resources & Libraries – Not If, But When: Inevitability and Change Management

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# Squirreling Away: Managing Information Resources & Libraries — Not If, But When: Inevitability and Change Management

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I have long thought about change management in libraries, especially after I navigated my own operation from a traditional library a few years ago to one that is virtually virtual (I think I like that phrase). We have 20 books — reference books that we need. We used to have 150,000 volumes. You probably do not want to hear me talk about it again. But what I do feel that I want to talk about is how we got there. If there is one primary job that an academic library director has, it is managing and navigating change as our libraries evolve. I have broken down change management into six key terms that I will be exploring: inevitability, rapidity, flexibility, hospitality, accountability, and empathy — especially in the context of institutional culture and identity. Through these six terms, we can explore how to best manage your operation in even less than optimal conditions.

For this column, I am going to write about inevitability of change and what it all means. But first, two diversions.

## Our Most Famous Sciuridae

Last weekend, we celebrated one of our most time honored traditions involving a member of the squirrel family and the weather. That's right, you guessed it. Groundhog's Day. A very strange annual occurrence when the attention of everyone in the States seems to look towards Western Pennsylvania for a prediction on the rest of the winter. Are we in store for an early Spring, or will Winter linger on and on and on? This seems to be a popular tradition celebrated by the two countries of North America who feel that a wall between them would just be stupid: United States and Canada. The tradition comes from the Pennsylvania Dutch community who surmise that if a groundhog "...sees its shadow due to clear weather, it will retreat to its den and winter will persist for six more weeks, and if it does not see its shadow because of cloudiness, spring will arrive early."<sup>1</sup>

To be honest, I am not sure if the groundhog in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania (the most famous of all the groundhogs) saw his shadow or not. For that matter, I am not even sure that Punxsutawney Phil is a male or female groundhog, but I am sure of a few things related to this event. First, groundhogs are part of the squirrel family (or Sciuridae if we are being technical). So in that regard, I am going to give its abilities to



forecast the weather a bit more credence given my admiration of all members of the Sciuridae family. Second, on the other hand, the work that the groundhog does can be done by just about any other animal — or a stick. I think squirrels would do a fine job, as evidenced by the picture with this column. All you have to do is cast a shadow. Actually, you can just look up and see if the sun is out. Done. And third, we are not using Groundhog Day as a way to see IF change is coming, but WHEN.

This is the part that actually ties to the theme of this column, dealing with change. Or more directly, managing change when it arrives. The groundhog is not telling you the direction or the likelihood of change, but really just talking about the speed with which it is coming. I do not believe that indicating that Spring is not coming is part of the superstition. The only question might be how long do I need to keep my sweaters out.

## A Visit to Bay City

In thinking about change, I am also drawn to two memories that I have from my visit to Bay City, Michigan. Back in 2015, I attended the **Michigan Library Association's Academic Libraries Conference** in Bay City, Michigan. Bay City is considered part of Michigan's Tri-cities area with Saginaw and Midland and is located around two hours northwest of Detroit near the Thumb. (Have someone from Michigan explain that to you someday). I had never been to Bay City before and relished the opportunity to visit. I had some time to walk around and what struck me was how many older buildings are still standing there. Center Avenue is adorned with beautiful older buildings that take you back to when the city had a booming economy back in the 19th Century. Walking in downtown near the river gave the impression of a city that looks more similar the way it did 100 years ago than many other cities. For a history geek, this seemed like a perfect place to talk and take pictures.



I even had a opportunity while I was there to see someone sculling on the

Saginaw River. The lone rower on that still morning — May 28th, 2015 — provided the perfect setting for a great picture. You could see the amazing reflection of the boat, oars and the sculler in the perfectly still water. That picture remains one of my

favorites and it does a good job in illustrating change management as we would like to see. The sculler is moving over open water with the only ripples coming from her own actions. The still water does nothing but reflect her effort and there are no obstacles in her way. There seemed to be very few external factors at play in that photo.

While the conference was excellent, two things stick with me. First, the city itself seems to be stuck in the 19th Century. While that can be quaint and wonderful to look at, it also struck me that it was not right. There are few other vibrant cities in Michigan that look like they did 100 years ago. It was almost as if progress and change was avoided by all costs. I started thinking about how many cities have lost many of their older buildings to newer ones. A reason for this might be the desire to have newer or larger buildings in the downtown area. This could be driven by many things, but typically it seems that it is driven by the result of a community growing. And that might be the case in Bay City, where the population has been steadily falling since the 1960s. You can see that with empty storefronts and buildings that are not utilized to their fullest. While you might be love the fact that it looks like you are walking back in history, it could reflect stagnation and an economy that is not poised for growth. So in this regard, while we have not been asked to change might be seen as a plus, the reality is that with a shrinking population and vacant real estate, your proposals might not be all that great.

Second, we like to think of change like a sculler operating on the waters on a beautiful still morning. This is not realistic. We do not function in a vacuum and are often responding to the other stimuli and factors. Especially in libraries, we are forced to manage through change that is being thrust upon us. There might be a variety of factors here, but we are rarely in control of our own destiny. There are practically no academic libraries I know of where the administration has not moved into their space a new office or group. We do not

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always create the need for change in libraries, but we are burdened with the need to own the results that we are forced to produce. As I have been told repeatedly, we only own our reactions, not our situations.

### Changes in Libraries

When we think about change in libraries, we think of it as a 21st Century problem. We ponder about the current parameters and how every year, libraries are being asked to do more with less space and less resources. But this is most certainly not a recent occurrence, but something that has been fairly steady for libraries over the past 50 years. If we think about change in libraries, it spans all the way to the 1960s and the early days of OCLC. Think about how the profession responded to changes such as copy cataloging; local online catalogs & shared systems; expanded access (TOC, more subject headings); shared catalogs (MeLCat, etc.); discovery layers; digital repositories; coffee and food in the library just to name a few. Think about how many people in your library are checking in print serials vs. where they were years ago.

There has been a very steady change in libraries, but in many regards, we have been controlling the pace of the change (I will talk about this more next issue). That is a great luxury when it comes to managing change. When you can slow down the amount of change that you need to digest at one time, it can generally go smoothly. But regardless of where the change is coming from, it is coming and it is likely closer than it might appear.

The inevitability of change is something that all librarians and library administrators can see. What we cannot figure out is the timing or the scope. If a library administrator sees his or her shadow on February 2nd, does the library have six more years of a print collection? Or twelve years? Or two years? No one really knows. But change is coming to libraries everywhere. I am not suggesting that your library will go virtually virtual within the next few years, but there will come a time when your administrators will question why we are using space to manage a print collection that is used

sparingly. And when that happens, you might see a bold change or an incremental one. We have all seen incremental changes — moving collections for an office to relocate to the library space. We have all had to make adjustments for administrators who have big plans that do not involve a browseable collection of print titles. This is the change that is coming — but for most of us, it will be 15-20 years in the future. So we can be sure it is happening, but are just not sure if it will take place during our tenure as a librarian.

### Difficult Modulations of Life

Recently, I saw the great documentary about **Fred Rogers** by **Morgan Neville**, *Won't You Be My Neighbor* (2018). Like many people my age, **Mr. Rogers** was a very important part of my childhood. The opening of the movie featured a conversation with **Fred Rogers** that was captured by **Barry Paris** of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*:

In the intimate opening of this riveting documentary, **Fred Rogers** (circa 1967) is ruminating about musical modulation: Moving from the key of C to F is easy, but going from F to F sharp is more complicated, he says. That strikes a chord, in his mind as well as his piano: “We’d like to help children through some of the difficult modulations of life.”<sup>22</sup>

This phrase struck me so profoundly — “the difficult modulations of life.” **Fred Rogers** treated children respectfully and never shied away from controversy and horrible things that children might have questions about. While a pie in the face on another children’s program might generate a chuckle, it does not help any child understand growing up and the changes that are happening within and around them. The “difficult modulations of life” do not stop when you graduate school, but they continue throughout your days in every aspect you care about.

In so many ways, dealing with the difficult modulations of life is something that is at the core of change management, especially in the context of libraries. And while I am no means saying that librarians need to be treated like children, instead I am drawn to this phrase because it addresses the inevitability and difficulty of change. We are all challenged by change in our life. Many small changes

represent a ripple of a wave that is soon past. But some changes are very disruptive and can cause real problems for people. What if you lose a family member, have a relationship go sour, or lose a job? What if your job in a library becomes something that is no longer needed, like checking in serials or processing print volumes? In exploring change management, the role of the director is to help the staff through these difficult modulations so they can serve the library and the community. The inevitability of change in organizations, especially libraries, should be the central thought of the director or dean. You cannot be surprised by the timeline, nor can you ignore the needs of your community or take care of your staff. But whether you saw your shadow or not, change is coming and you need to be ready.

In thinking through these six terms, I hope to be able to showcase the aspects associated with change and how to create an environment that deals with change when it comes to the library or the organization. It is coming, that is for sure. If it is not coming, you might have bigger problems at your institution. 🍄

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#### Endnotes

1. For more than you ever wanted to know about Groundhog Day, visit the Wikipedia entry: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groundhog\\_Day](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groundhog_Day).
2. “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” offers an intimate portrait of **Mister Rogers**, the legendary advocate for kids and kindness, <https://www.post-gazette.com/ae/movies/2018/06/05/Won-t-You-Be-My-Neighbor-movie-review-Fred-Rogers-Mister-Rogers-Neighborhood/stories/201806050193>, visited February 10, 2019.

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familiarity with archival materials types promotes better planning and collection assessment to customize general workflows as needed.

Iteration plays a key role in constantly improving digitization workflows and achieving products of the highest quality. It also reduces the time for completion and optimizes the team size to conclude the project. It includes testing new methods, trying new strategies on various types of materials, learning from past mistakes, and documenting best practices.

No process will ever be perfectly streamlined as we all know there is no “one size fits all.” As digital librarians, we strive for efficiency and boosted productivity, yet there are so many variables that bring

challenges and clog the pipeline. Collection materials differ in size and format, technologies bring challenges, and some archival materials have more issues and require more attention than others. The team factor plays an important role as well — staff training, staff turnover, and equipment scheduling to maximize efficiency.

Although for some projects we have achieved a high rate of productivity and speed, we need to remain flexible and remember that the same approach may not perform so well on another project even after careful tailoring. We aim to be efficient and productive but we should always remain open to the unexpected and embrace every challenge as a learning opportunity; it will enhance our future performance and will equip us with more troubleshooting tools and problem-resolution techniques.

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