

# Future Libraries: Activities for Staying Relevant

FUTURIST THOMAS FREY PRESENTS 112 'FUTURE ACTIVITIES' TO HELP LIBRARIANS AND INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS RETHINK THEIR ABILITY TO STAY RELEVANT.

BY THOMAS FREY

As a futurist, my role continues to morph as the mood and temperament of business change. In many respects, a company's desire to hear interesting things about the future has been replaced by a sense of fear and anxiety over how to deal with the coming tidal wave of change. It's no different with libraries, as they wrestle with the fundamental question, "What exactly is the role of a library today, and what will it be 20-50 years from now?"

Over the past two decades, information has morphed and shifted into myriad different forms, going digital, verbal, and ever so fluid. With digital comes an exponential increase in the number of ways we can access, manipulate, search, parse, combine, manage, and store each of the growing number of elements in the knowledge universe.

Because there are very few "library haters" in the world, I view the word

*library* as a malleable term, able to work through a variety of transformations and still maintain a solid user base. As a result, libraries will have far more freedom to rethink activities and capabilities that happen inside their organization.

As we consider this list of possible activities, we should begin with the understanding that very few libraries, if any, will cater to all of them. My intent in creating this list is to help those working with libraries to think about the multidimensional nature of our unfolding digital world. Certainly these changes will affect far more aspects of life than just libraries, but as a society we expect libraries to be ahead of the curve, helping us understand what we should be paying attention to.

As we add technologies like chatbots, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence to our libraries, activities will begin to coalesce around the strengths of par-

ticular communities and their regional differences. And that's OK. In fact, every library will need to operate as a working laboratory, testing new equipment, activities, and approaches to our ever-expanding "infoverse" to see where users gravitate.

## Search Command Centers

At the heart of every library experience is an initial search—most people entering a library are searching for something. Over the coming years, search technology will become increasingly complicated, but at the same time, we will have far more capabilities to use in our search.

**Video search.** When it comes to video search, we still struggle with attributes like context, style, circumstances, and a variety of situational details. Examples of future video searches may include the following:



**THOMAS FREY** is senior futurist at the DaVinci Institute in Colorado and the author of *Epiphany Z: 8 Radical Visions Transforming Your Future*. He speaks regularly to Fortune 500 companies and leading government agencies and has been featured in thousands of articles for both national and international publications. He can be reached at [dr2tom@davinciinstitute.com](mailto:dr2tom@davinciinstitute.com).

1. Bring up every public video of Jane Doe (average person) between 1980 and 2005, when she was in Manchester, England.
2. What are the 20 most-watched videos of an audience laughing at someone who is dying from a fatal accident?
3. Show me the top 10 Twitch tournament videos of Korean players playing Destiny version 4.3.
4. What are the 12 common features of low-grossing movies produced by Paramount Pictures in 1978?

**Drone search.** It may seem unlikely today that libraries will have their own fleets of drones to deploy for physical search inquiries, but they will be able to tap into many other drone databases over the coming decades.

5. Using thermo scans, what houses in my city have the least amount of insulation in their attic?
6. Where is the hole in the fence that is allowing livestock to enter the Eagle Ridge Neighborhood and cause damage?
7. Which areas in my city are least likely to get flooded when the river overflows its banks?
8. Show me 360-degree views of the three major sculptures erected in my city last year.

**Demographic search.** The demographics of the world are changing, and we need better tools for monitoring those changes.

9. Show me a heatmap of the world, broken down by 1-square-mile regions, revealing highest to lowest birth rates.
10. What regions of the world are most like Winnipeg, Canada (pick any city) based on climate, age demographics, political views, education levels, scientific interests, personal health, etc.?
11. Who is the most knowledgeable person in the world on acidic soil types?

12. Show me a decade-by-decade breakdown of increasing average incomes in Africa since 1900.

**Complex searches.** Over time, search engines will deploy a combination of techniques for finding the answer to complex questions.

13. Show me an interactive map of the world, highlighting those regions currently at 10 degrees Celsius.
14. Which world leaders are currently in New York City?
15. Is there an interactive map that displays butterfly migrations in Panama?
16. What movie shows Harrison Ford wearing a blue sweater while chewing gum?
17. Why is this object (hold up an object) important?
18. How famous am I compared to other people in my community?
19. How have recipes for bread changed over the past 300 years?
20. Who else in the world has a disease like mine?

### Search Engines for the Physical World

Along with the proliferation of drones, sensors, and AI will come search engines capable of searching the physical world. And as we enter the age of quantum computing, far more search attributes will become quantifiable. This opens the door to our ability to search for objects based on these and other qualities:

21. Smells
22. Tastes
23. Harmonic vibrations
24. Reflectivity
25. Specific gravity
26. Chemical composition
27. Textures
28. Viscosity

**Fussy search features.** How do we search for things with similar qualities? Future searches may include options

to specify the following characteristics:

29. Looks like
30. Smells like
31. Feels like
32. Tastes like
33. Sounds like
34. Absorbs like
35. Echoes like
36. Coats like

**Spherical displays.** Spherical displays in the future will have the ability to provide an accurate perspective of planet Earth, as in the following examples:

37. Tracking pollution flows across the ocean in real time.
38. Monitoring major hurricanes from satellites and tracking new developments in their strength and direction on a minute-by-minute basis.
39. Booking a complex travel itinerary from a spherical perspective.
40. Showing how warm water currents have changed over the past two decades.

### Collaborative Makerspaces

Libraries are rapidly transitioning from places for passive visitors who consume information to spaces for active participants who would much rather produce it. This shift is changing our sources of information from “whats” to “whos.” Collaborative work areas may include the following:

41. A potter’s wheel and workshop for mixing mud and making pottery
42. A garden for growing vegetables using aquaponics
43. A video studio for both shooting and editing videos
44. A production area for both recording and editing a virtual reality experience
45. IoT workbenches (complete with an Internet of Things help desk)

46. Access to 3D scanners and printers capable of printing items from several hundred different materials
47. Laser cutters for etching/cutting wood, glass, metal, and ceramic
48. Jewelry making stations

**Creative spaces.** These types of spaces will come complete with all the tools, technologies, and supplies for creative people to get creative and do the following:

49. Produce art
50. Produce music
51. Produce games
52. Produce podcasts
53. Produce webcasts
54. Produce virtual reality (VR) experiences
55. Host IoT workshops
56. Create and print with 3D printers

**Live webcast studios.** While we no longer need a studio for conducting live webcasts, the age of the studio is far from over. They can be used for a multitude of purposes, including the following:

57. Book reviews
58. Game reviews
59. App reviews
60. Course reviews
61. Chatbot reviews
62. Tech reviews
63. “50 years ago today” reflections
64. Demonstrations of “how to” accomplish something

**3D printing.** As the process of additive manufacturing improves, it will begin to enter all of our lives in unusual ways:

65. 3D printer lending
66. 3D scanner lending
67. 3D printer workshops
68. 3D scanner workshops
69. 3D design competitions
70. 3D printer-scanner help desks

### Interests and Hobbies

Libraries are not just about books and information, they're also about ideas and interests.

**Flying drones.** In much the way that kids in the early 20th century wanted to learn how to fly, young people today are enamored of flying and driving drones. Libraries may tap into this passion by making the following opportunities available:

71. Drone lending
72. Flying drone flight simulators
73. DIY drone workshops
74. Drone competitions

**Video and non-video games.** Games are quickly becoming the cultural norm for most young people today. Libraries can cater to this age demographic by offering the following:

75. Game tournaments
76. Game lending
77. Game builder workshops
78. Game expert events

**Mixed reality (VR and AR).** Both virtual reality and augmented reality will become far more pervasive in the future. For libraries, this development suggests several opportunities:

79. VR and AR hardware lending
80. VR and AR software lending
81. VR and AR production studios
82. VR and AR search engines

### Tech, Tech, and More Tech

Technological advances will continue to reshape our world—everything from transportation to fashion to agriculture—in the years ahead. Libraries can become laboratories for some of these technologies.

**Robotics.** Robots with human-like features are set to explode, as are their overall capabilities and usefulness. Libraries will want to explore the following:

83. Robot lending
84. Robot rodeos

85. Robot workshops
86. Robot competitions

**Internet of Things.** As more of our devices join the connected world, we will see an increase in demand for the following:

87. IoT device lending
88. IoT prototyping workshops
89. IoT competitions
90. IoT expert speaker sessions

**Artificial intelligence.** Artificial intelligence already exists and already knows far more about you than any person alive today. Will future libraries offer these services?

91. Access to AI tools
92. AI workshops
93. AI competitions
94. Monitor and anticipate visitor usage

### Community Services

If you walked into your library or information center, what services would you like to find available to you?

**Equipment archiving.** Most people have information on disks, cartridges, stick drives, tapes, and other old storage formats, and many are looking for a place to convert it to a new medium that people today can access. Libraries can offer their services to do the following:

95. Read and print microfiche
96. Both read and convert 8”, 5.25”, and 3.5” disks to the cloud
97. Convert photos to video
98. Convert from VHS to DVD
99. Digitize and repair old photos and documents
100. Adapt old gaming consoles to play programs and games on cartridges, apps, stick drives, and CDs

**Mini-theaters.** It's important for groups to have a place to gather for activities such as the following:

101. Watching movies

- 102. Playing video games
- 103. Watching live events, such as concerts, sporting events, NASA landings, and so on
- 104. Watching YouTube, Facebook, Twitch, and more

**New facilities.** Most major libraries will be testing a host of new options to make their facilities relevant for next-generation users.

- 105. Mini-planetariums
- 106. Robotic storytelling centers
- 107. VR dating stations
- 108. Time capsule rooms
- 109. Drone lending programs
- 110. Pet lending programs
- 111. Expert events (meet the experts)
- 112. Community archives (let the community decide)

As a kid growing up, libraries were always magical places full of ideas and possibilities. Future libraries will have all that and more. They will be continually evolving over the coming decades, and the key to our understanding them lies in our ability to expand our perspective and reframe our thinking about their role and purpose.

The list above merely scratches the surface. Libraries can start with a formula, mission statement, policy plan, or lengthy surveys, but in the end, they will evolve, morph, and transform on their own, with or without any real planning. It'll be an exciting thing to watch, and even more exciting to be part of. **SLA**

