Resistance to Change in Libraries: Application of Communication Theories

Sharon Gray Weiner

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Resistance to Change in Libraries: Application of Communication Theories

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Abstract: Libraries are affected by discontinuous change caused by the type and rapidity of technological innovations. By examining the theories of structuration, diffusion of innovation, and contingency, change in libraries can be better understood, thus easing its adoption and assimilation. There is a need to reconceptualize libraries.

The fifth Law of Library Science according to Ranganathan is “The library is a growing organism.” Growth implies change, and academic libraries are faced not only with an unprecedented rate of change, but also very real challenges to their existence in contemporary society. Libraries have been static organizations until recent changes in technology occurred. “For almost their entire history, libraries have been unchallenged as the providers of convenient, comprehensive information which meets a whole range of needs for the public. Librarians have been the sole gatekeepers of this information.” Now, librarians must not only facilitate access, organization, storage, and retrieval of information, but they must also become change agents and assume a proactive role in the diffusion of technological innovations. However, libraries are usually not positioned to respond to rapid change. Visionary leadership, an elastic organization, and receptivity among the staff to a very different vision are required to respond to large-scale changes. Resistance to change is inevitable in organizations that are missing any of these elements.

Historically, libraries were inclined to focus more on preserving the past than on inventing the future. Although automation began to occur in libraries in the 1960s, holistic change only began to occur in the mid- to late 1980s. The primary objective of early automation was “to make existing, well-understood library operations and services, such as circulation, acquisitions, and the catalog, more efficient and effective by exploiting the new information technology, but, with the modest exception of the online
catalog when configured as a network-based information service, they have not fundamentally changed the services that libraries have offered to their user communities. The electronic environment should have a far greater impact than only to streamline functions such as cataloging or circulation. The impending changes will be rapid and disruptive and raise fundamental questions about research libraries. Libraries exist within a broader social, economic, legal, political, and organizational context. The entire context is changing in ways that no one fully comprehends or can predict. Libraries do not have as much control of what they do and what they are in this setting.

For years, the library studies literature has been permeated with pleas from seers in the field for librarians to change their conceptualization of libraries. Those in the profession need to think about ways of transforming the library into an effective institution that will continue to play an important role in society. Libraries can survive in a world characterized by relentless change by adding value for the customer. Librarians must recognize the need to evaluate their services critically in terms of how well they meet the needs of their users. Major changes in library operations are necessary for libraries to become user-focused to this extent. New technologies must be central in information services.

Changes in organizational structures in libraries have been incremental in the past because “it is normal to react to rapid change by fine-tuning the existing system.” The changes occurring now are discontinuous, which means that there has been a distinguishable break with past practice. These changes require the recognition that the former ways of doing things will not create and sustain successful organizations. Discontinuous change means that there is no previous experience, no model of the process, and no consensus about how change should be handled. It invalidates the rules and assumptions that determine an organization’s operating procedures. Technology is an important source of discontinuous change. Disintermediation is a concept that has arisen in relation to information technology and institutional change. It means the obsolescence of all institutions that function as intermediaries. Institutions are seen as encumbering and static, imposing an outdated order, and existing only to resist change and to postpone their own demise.

Libraries must establish strategies and select roles. Libraries that select comfortable, traditional, but increasingly marginal roles risk being becoming more marginalized and increasingly irrelevant to the central focus of information access and scholarly discourse. Libraries that select comfortable, traditional, but increasingly marginal roles risk being becoming more marginalized and increasingly irrelevant to the central focus of information access and scholarly discourse. Other libraries will continue to provide traditional functions but will broadly define their roles as access providers. They will obtain the technical resources needed to offer a coherent view of an incoherent universe of information and to add value through organization and consistency. These organizations may be unrecognizable as libraries in another decade when viewed
from traditional library frameworks and measures. In this paper, the theories of structuration, diffusion of innovation, and contingency are explored to explain the phenomenon of resistance to change, defined as radical transformation, that needs to occur in library organizations. Then, there are strategies that can mitigate resistance to change and optimize the innovativeness of staff members.

**Structuration Theory**

Anthony Giddens is considered the founder of structuration theory. The concept came into use in social theory in the mid-1970s. It relates to the search for a hidden order of structures and structuring processes that are foundational to a group system. Structuration is a series of ongoing activities and practices that make up, or “reproduce,” larger institutions. “Society” can be defined as a complex of recurrent practices that form institutions. Those practices are formed by the habits that individuals adopt. Structure exists when people act knowledgeably and in contexts that have particular consequences. Those consequences may be unforeseen or they may be predictable. But it is their regular happening; that is, their reproduction, which makes them structural and produces effects.

Structure can be viewed as something that constrains action or even determines it. It also enables and makes it possible to act. Power can constrain as well as be the means by which things can get done. A library organization can be rigid and inflexible or it can foster growth and innovation. Structuration consists of the processes by which systems are produced and reproduced through its members’ use of rules and resources. Structures are the medium of action because group members rely on structure to interact. Library staff behave in ways that are strongly influenced by the organization in which they work. Structures are also the outcome of action because rules and resources exist only because they are used in practice. Structuration theory emphasizes the dynamic interrelationship of system and structure in interactions. It focuses on group interaction processes. Structuration is influenced by the characteristics of the group and by its situation, such as the group’s tasks, group composition, historical precedents, structures appropriated from relevant institutions, and structures created by the group. It is influenced by the degree of insight that the members have into the structures they use and about the system as a whole. Differential distribution of resources, which creates power and status distinctions, can affect it. A library’s structure is influenced by its history, its staff, its external environment, and its budget.

Structures are populated by people whose lives are organized by them. If those people believe they have powers of structuration themselves, they can shape the social conditions of existence. The sources of tension in an organization are: interaction by individual members, each of whom have particular norms, decision rules, and communication networks; and the dialectic of stability and change in group structures. Routinization is a fundamental part of structuration theory that contributes to the reproduction of the social system. The object of most action is tension management. The library organization tends toward routinization. Action is taken when that routine is disrupted with the sole purpose of returning to normalcy.
Adoption of an innovation depends partially on attitudes toward the innovation such as level of respect and level of comfort, users’ concerns with performance, uncertainty reduction, and protecting group norms. These influence the coping tactics that affect interaction with the innovation. Users motivated by concern for uncertainty reduction use coping tactics aimed at acquiring information. Managers can provide sufficient training and details about the change to motivate these staff to accept it. Users motivated by high concern for performance use tactics that reduce the chance of a negative evaluation such as modifying the old system so the new is unnecessary or delaying performance evaluation. These employees can be encouraged to increase risk-taking. Managers should reward successful examples of innovation adoption. Users who are most concerned about the norms of the work group use tactics intended to preserve pre-innovation norms such as pressuring others to resist innovation. Such an employee may need to be removed from the work group for it to progress if employee counseling strategies are not effective.

Library staff have powers of structuration. They can resist and manipulate their structural constraints or innovate and transform the structure. They are agents who can shape conditions. The deliberate or unconscious decisions they make determine how the library is defined. A library with staff who choose to resist the changes in their environment will form an institution that maintains traditional activities but experiences ongoing tension as expectations and the necessity of change cause conflict. A library with staff who choose to accept change will form an organization that is closer to Ranganathan’s idea of the library as an organism characterized by ongoing adaptation and growth.

Diffusion of Innovation

According to Everett Rogers, the main proponent of the diffusion of innovation theory, innovations have five attributes: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. The elements of his model are: a typology of individuals from innovators to laggards as they adopt an innovation over time; the decision-making process by which innovations are adopted or rejected; and the criteria by which individuals evaluate innovations. The process of diffusion consists of acts of acceptance over a period of time of some particular innovation by an individual or group. Diffusion occurs by using available channels of communication in a social structure and is influenced by the cultural values of the individual or group. The degree of adoption of innovation is determined by the nature of the innovation, the personal characteristics of the individual, the cultural climate of the society, and social pressures exerted by the work
environment. Innovation is a dynamic, ongoing process in which actions and institutional structures are inextricably linked.23

Innovators tend to have a wide network of contacts, are technologically literate and adventurous, and are able to cope with uncertainty. Early adopters of innovation are well integrated into their local social system. They act as opinion leaders and role models who exert influence based on personal networks. Early majority and late majority adopt with less willingness. They are pressured or reassured by those who adopted before them. Laggards are traditionalists who are generally isolated, have few resources, and look to the past as their point of reference. Critical mass is a situation in which so many people have adopted the innovation that the others have no choice but to accept it.24 New technology may be widely acquired but only sparsely deployed. The “assimilation gap” is influenced by the increasing returns to adoption and the knowledge barriers that impede adoption. Two adopter groups for the same technology may have significantly different assimilation gaps. “The rate of arrival of benefits that prior adopters experience is an important determinant of whether that technology will reach critical mass.”25

Information technologies can be described as primarily methodological or tool-based. Tool-based technologies are more concrete; methodologies are primarily abstract and require substantial resources to learn how to use the innovation for adoption to be successful. Intangible innovations, such as new software development philosophies, are adopted more slowly than more concrete innovations, such as hardware-based ones. Previous studies of innovation transfer stressed the importance of top management championship as a precursor to the successful introduction of innovation. But champions from other organizational levels also have a role in diffusion. Top management determines the overall goal of organizational responsiveness to innovation. The lower organizational members then champion innovations in their own area of expertise. Informal networks tend to be used extensively to promote innovations. Innovations that require large capital commitments may have to be adopted through the strong influence of top management. Smaller scale innovations or those where a high degree of learning is necessary seem to favor a bottom-up adoption in which there is broad-based support for the innovation. A successful innovation process often results from extensive communication. The rate of adoption is affected positively when the organization provides training for its staff. Extensive use of formal communication mechanisms has a significant, positive impact on adoption.26

The rate of adoption of information technology is related to its perceived benefits, the potential adopter’s attitudes and beliefs, and the influence of the communication that the individual receives from the social environment about the innovation. Potential adopters have a richer set of behavioral beliefs than users. Potential adopter attitude is composed of trialability, perceived usefulness, result demonstrability, visibility, and ease of use. User attitude is composed of perceived usefulness and image. Social
pressures may be an effective mechanism to overcome initial inertia in adopting information technology.27

Innovations can be categorized as either radical; i.e., those which require extensive changes in practices, or incremental; that is, they can be implemented with minor changes. Radical innovations represent fundamental paradigm shifts. They can be categorized as either product (the innovation itself has value) or process (the innovation has value in providing a means to an end beyond itself). Adopters of a process innovation tend to look beyond the innovation to find value in adopting the technology. Diffusion patterns for innovations whose use is mandated differ from those whose use is voluntary. The adoption of an innovation makes an individual or organization more likely to adopt a related innovation. So libraries that have successfully introduced new services and technologies more easily adopt subsequent innovations.

More effort is required when implementing process innovation: more user training should be planned and more top management support is needed. Less effort is needed with product innovation. A radical innovation must be more carefully approached than an incremental innovation. Incentives for potential adopters should be part of the implementation plan. Technology clusters are related technologies that can easily be adopted together. They can be complementary, in which case one cannot be used to full benefit without adopting a complementary innovation. They can provide a similar function or share a common platform so that adopting one of the technologies makes adopting others easier.

Some reasons for resistance to technological innovation are:

- To protect one’s social status or an existing way of life;
- To avoid job elimination;
- A contradiction between the innovation and the employee’s social customs and habits;
- The inherent rigidity of large or bureaucratic organizations;
- Personality, habit, fear of change;
- The tendency of organized groups to force conformity;
- Reluctance to disturb the equilibrium.28

Changes in technology are innovations that have affected library organizations greatly. Diffusion of innovation theory is relevant in understanding how and to what extent individuals who work in libraries are willing to accept innovation. Librarians are involved with linking technology at one end and the user at the other. One of the factors that encourages success in adoption of innovation is a client orientation rather than a change agency orientation.29 Karahanna et al. posit that although librarians are involved in diffusion activities, it is unclear how readily they adopt innovation themselves.30 Marilyn Domas White states, “Libraries with greater...
financial and staff resources will be able to allocate more time and funding to developing a new service. Larger staffs may also translate into staff members with specialized responsibilities and knowledge or skills. Such specialization may encourage entrepreneurship in establishing services in areas of responsibility. Educating staff about the innovation, providing security to those who adopt innovation, and fostering an environment of ongoing change will be successful strategies in this context.

Contingency Theory

Contingency theory was developed in the 1960s as a reaction against classical management theory, which claimed that there was only one way that was the best way to be organized. Contingency theory meant that the most effective organizational structure would vary according to the situation of the organization. The structure that the organization needs to adopt to be effective is contingent or dependent upon a contingency factor or factors such as task uncertainty, size, strategy, and environment. In the past, the task of the organization was certain and predictable so centralization and formalization were appropriate. But now tasks are uncertain and unpredictable; therefore, decentralization and lack of formalization are required.

Contingency theory emphasizes environmental and technological change. It is concerned with decentralization and is a reflection of the dichotomies of modern organizations. It is biased towards an organic management structure that is flexible, constantly changing and refining tasks; deploying consultative procedures; based on dialogue; team-based; and uses a skills-based rather than hierarchical reward system. In the contingency approach, managers can be expected to modify their styles to reflect particular situations. Power can be drawn back to the center to resolve an impasse or handle a crisis, to move a temporarily blocked process forward, or to take decisions that project teams cannot or are not prepared to take themselves. Organizations that cope well with change reflect a high degree of differentiation between their component parts; that is, they allow different areas to operate on different principles. Paradoxically, they also have a high degree of integration. Libraries that have this organic type of structure should change readily in response to changes in their external environment. Leadership responses and resource conditions have an impact on organizational responses to changing environments and substantial consequences for performance and survival. Lower-order transactional leadership focuses on monetary rewards and coercion to maintain follower performance while higher-order transactional leadership relies on non-monetary rewards to motivate performance. Patrick Gibbons’ view is that transformational leaders can unite followers and change their goals and beliefs. They oppose the status quo, display a high degree of environmental sensitivity, and are able to portray vivid representations of a future vision. Influence and pressures for change flow both ways in the hierarchy. Organizational survival and success depend on the ability of leader-follower relations to resolve the problems of internal integration and external adaptation. The ability of the leader to identify and to initiate change is a critical contingency that affects success; it is likewise important that the rate of environmental change and the time available for organizational change are sufficient for change efforts. If not, the organization becomes overwhelmed with new and complex issues;
therefore, resources are rapidly dissipated. Perhaps this theory could be applied with the best effect when managing resistance to change in today’s academic libraries. To respond easily to the frequency and scale of changes, library organizations need to be dynamic and flexible and need to have staff who enjoy embracing new ideas. They must be highly skilled so that they have confidence in their ability to incorporate the changes. Organizations should encourage personal development and learning, should enable people to share responsibilities and workloads, should change priorities quickly, and should place the user first.

Practical Implications

The theories of structuration, diffusion of innovation, and contingency provide varied insights in understanding change in libraries. Structuration gives a context for why a library organization is the way it is. Diffusion of innovation prompts insights into the variable rates at which staff members adopt innovation. Contingency theory seems best suited to the academic library of today because of its allowance for a continually changing external environment.

The following practical implications for library managers to help their staff more readily accept change have been drawn from the theories themselves and verified by advice from several library directors who are acknowledged below:

- Provide a clear, detailed vision of the change;
- Be a model for expecting and incorporating change;
- Involve all stakeholders, including everyone in the library, in charting the future;
- Give people time to adjust. Repeatedly demonstrate your own commitment to the change;
- Divide a big change into manageable and familiar steps;
- Make standards and requirements clear. State exactly what is expected of people in the change. Inform them of the positive effects the change will have on their work;
- Offer positive reinforcement. Reward pioneers, innovators, those who bring others along, and the early successes;
- Allow expressions of nostalgia for the past, then create excitement about the future;
- Maintain a sense of humor;
- Continuously assess change and effect quality improvement.

Sharon Gray Weiner, M.L.S., AHIP is the director of Peabody Library at Vanderbilt University; she may be contacted via e-mail at: weiner@library.vanderbilt.edu.
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Notes
7. Ibid., 5–6.
23. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovation*. 


