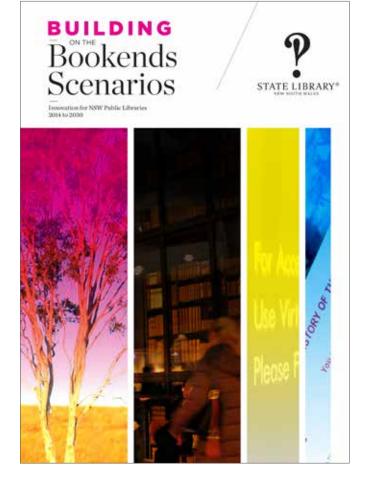# A BRIGHT FUTURE

The 'Bookends Scenarios' was a research paper published in 2009 that envisaged how libraries might evolve over the next two decades and how their role in society would change accordingly. EMMA STEPHENS reports on the State Library of NSW's continued research.

With its follow-up report, 'Building on the Bookends Scenarios', the State Library of New South Wales continues its research into predicting and suggesting innovation for public libraries for the period 2014–2030. A lot has been learned from the last five years of growth in the fields of technology, culture, economics, politics and society, and from attempts to predict the role of libraries of the future. In the preface to the updated paper, State Librarian and Chief Executive Dr Alex Byrne describes the 'Building on the Bookends Scenario' as 'a starting point for conversations about the future and sustainability of the NSW public library network'.

This research considers four hypothetical realms of the future that were imagined in the original 'Bookends Scenarios': Silent Spring, How Buildings Learn, The Neuromancer and Fahrenheit 451 were all proposed futures that were envisaged along with a set of Early Warning Indicators (EWIs) in order to estimate and anticipate imminent changes to how society operates and how library system would adapt to these changes. For example, will technology continue to link society together and improve communication? Or will technology be our undoing? Each of these EWIs was monitored by participants in the 2014 'Building on the Bookends Scenarios' and ranked from 1 to 5 (lowest to highest probability of occurring). The results of these rankings were used to consider which of the hypothetical would be most likely to occur.

The How Buildings Learn future, in which technology creates a highly globalised and connected community, was ranked the most probable. This is an optimistic future because although the use of physical books declines, online library content is in high demand. Libraries have evolved into hubs of interactivity and meeting places for both social and business ventures and include amenities such as cafés, shops and theatres. Less optimistic futures, however, were not far behind. The Neuromancer future pictures a world in chaos, where information is regulated by big corporations, making public libraries one of the only sources of affordable, reliable information. The Fahrenheit 451 scenario predicts a future where physical content no longer exists, online information is in high demand and public libraries struggle to survive.

Both of these bleaker futures, according to EWIs, have a 50% chance of occurring based on the 2014 research.

The report also identifies the most crucial uncertainties that will affect the future of library services. The fields of technology, culture, economics, politics, society and nature that were considered in the original 2009 paper have already changed dramatically. The most important factors within these fields were identified by an impax scale (IM). The internet, popular culture, library funding, social media, an ageing population and energy costs indicated the highest unpredictability since 2009. Each of these has a great influence on the role and resources of libraries and their ability to fulfil their responsibilities to the community.

The 'Building on the Bookend Scenarios' summarised seven strategic areas that are essential to the ongoing success of libraries: resources; community engagement; professional development; resourcing; branding and identity; leadership and influence; and governance and regulation.

Overall, the findings of the 'Building on the Bookends Scenarios' indicate that libraries will continue to play an essential role in their communities, whatever the future holds – whether they will be the place to access the latest technology or a place to find refuge and respite from technological overload. Or both. Libraries will continue to respond to their external environments and adapt their buildings, collections, services and programs in order to stay relevant and sustainable.