

## The Innovation Delusion: How Our Obsession with the New Has Disrupted the Work That Matters Most

By Lee Vinsel and Andrew L. Russell. New York: Currency, 2020.

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The word “innovation” has been woven into the way we talk about nearly all kinds of organizations. The discourse of innovation is now part of the language of public and private institutions, archives included. It is not uncommon to see the term prominently identified at the front of an archives’ or library’s strategic plan. As a recipient of the Society of American Archivists’ (SAA) Archival Innovator Award, this fact is both part of my own professional biography and part of the story SAA presents about work in the archives profession. It is, at this point, largely taken for granted that, in response to the dramatic changes that digital technology brings for society, the only way forward for both private and public sector institutions involves seeking and embracing dramatic and disruptive forms of change.

In *The Innovation Delusion: How Our Obsession with the New Has Disrupted the Work that Matters Most*, historians of technology Lee Vinsel and Andrew L. Russell challenge assumptions and ideologies embedded in what they call “innovation-speak.” Vinsel and Russell draw out how this way of talking and thinking (“fail faster,” “creative destruction,” “disruptive innovation,” etc.) was imported largely uninterrogated from Silicon Valley and is now widely embedded in how we envision the future of social and cultural institutions. In challenging facile notions of innovation, they argue for the importance of centering maintenance and care as ways to envision and plan for the future. While the book is not specifically about archives and archival institutions, its focus and message are broadly relevant to work in archival theory that is beginning to center maintenance and care. Notably, Vinsel and Russell have been directly engaging with a wide range of archives and library professionals through their work on the Maintainers, “a global research network interested in the concepts of maintenance, infrastructure, repair, and the myriad forms of labor and expertise that sustain our human-built world.”<sup>1</sup> The book is a valuable resource for contextualizing and understanding the history and rhetoric around innovation and its effects on cultural memory institutions like archives.

On the surface, it seems odd to be against innovation. What is not to like about developing creative, bold, and pathbreaking advances in a given field? While the title of the book targets innovation broadly, from the start, Vinsel and Russell make clear that it is not innovation itself that they are critiquing.

Instead, it is a more specific form of ideology they identify as “innovation-speak.” In their words, “Unlike actual innovation, which is tangible, measurable and much less common, innovation-speak is a sales pitch about a future that doesn’t yet exist.” They go on to explain that “Innovation-speak is fundamentally dishonest. While it is often cast in terms of optimism, talking about opportunity and creativity and a boundless future, it is in fact the rhetoric of fear. It plays with our worry that we will be left behind” (p. 11).

The book opens by dissecting the ideology of innovation-speak, its roots in both management consulting and Silicon Valley discourses, and the way that this has infected most approaches to thinking about strategic planning and even our basic cultural values about what work is meaningful and good. In the second part of the book, Vinsel and Russell focus on a range of problems that come from a push for and insistence on growth at all costs across sectors. In this context, they document and diagnose how, across a wide range of fields, the ideology of innovation promulgates a caste system between “innovators” and “maintainers.” Drawing on sociological research, they note that even in the imagined children’s book world of *The Busy World of Richard Scarry*, the mayor is a lion and the pigs are sanitation workers. From an early age, children are taught the distinction between the kinds of work that leaders do and the kinds of work that maintainers do through these types of narratives. Significantly, the authors underscore that caste distinctions between maintenance and innovation do not only emerge between individual sectors of work, they also happen within most fields and disciplines. As a powerful example, they note that most work in computer science and engineering is not innovating new products and services. Most IT professionals work on maintaining old software systems and the often-neglected infrastructure they run on. But it is also the case that, in many sectors, the people who get paid the most and also get the most resources for their work are those focused on inventing and developing new tools and systems, not the engineers tasked with maintaining the wide range of systems we all depend on.

The authors demonstrate how the problems of innovation-hype relate directly to the lived reality of many working in archival organizations and institutions. At one point, they offer an amalgam of tales taken from ongoing discussions with librarians and archivists. In this vignette, “the associate dean of libraries was talking about ‘innovation’ again, tossing around terms like ‘digital humanities,’ ‘digital transformation,’ and ‘virtual reality.’” In this context, “staff had grown numb to these speeches,” and they “eventually realized that *performing* being innovative was the way to reach their boss.” All the while, “the work of keeping the library going and providing services was often ignored” (p. 111). In this tale, innovation-speak is part of a social structure in which many organizational leaders work to scrape together a range of stories to tell at conferences about the fun and new kinds of projects they have generated.

After diagnosing the problem of innovation-speak in organizations, Vinsel and Russell present a third section of the book focused on what they see as necessary to develop and promote a “maintenance mindset” in organizations and society. To this end, they explore a wide range of research and writing on maintenance and reliability from engineering and real estate management. Drawing from this literature, they argue that 1) maintenance sustains success, 2) maintenance depends on culture and management, and 3) maintenance requires constant care. Those interested in advancing work around maintenance and care in archival practice will do well to consider the lessons the authors have distilled from reviewing this maintenance and reliability literature and their work on contexts like public works projects such as water and sewer systems. A key part of this section includes a diagnosis of the way that even when core funding is provided for infrastructure, it often makes possible only the implementation of bigger, better, and more costly to maintain infrastructure instead of supporting existing infrastructure or making it more sustainable.

In short, I highly recommend *The Innovation Delusion*. Anyone invested in thinking about the future of memory institutions will benefit from thinking through the tensions Vinsel and Russell diagnose between innovation, maintenance, and care. This accessible and engaging book broadly covers issues around innovation and provides a broader context from which archivists can continue to advance and develop a vision for the future of archives that is more sustainable, maintainable, and caring. For those working in archives, I would also strongly encourage engaging with Hillel Arnold’s explorations of “Critical Work: Archivists as Maintainers,” and Devon Olson et al.’s “Information Maintenance as a Practice of Care: An Invitation to Reflect and Share.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, what are we to do with the term “innovation” in our profession? What am I to make of my own identification by SAA as an “archival innovator”? How do we reconcile the fact that we must simultaneously operate in a world pervaded by innovation-speak discourse and in which we face a wide range of daunting challenges (everything from climate change, to precarious labor and income inequality, to entrenched white supremacy) that unquestionably require novel and creative ideas? The book ends with a call to move from conversation to action. Vinsel and Russell assert that they “do not believe that our society lacks the financial resources or technical expertise to become better maintained and more caring” and that they have “seen firsthand the creativity that happens when people push past these common narratives and envision a different way of maintaining our world” (p. 219). In this context, they invite a broader community to engage in the ongoing discussions around maintenance and care that the Maintainers group supports.

Seemingly paradoxically, this ends up itself being a call to action for effectively a different notion of innovation. That is, the conclusion is not so much

about lionizing anything about the status quo of how maintainers maintain things and decrying the way innovators innovate. I read this as a call to action to shift the focus of our innovation from an ideology of hype for novelty and boundless growth to a deep engagement with the need to develop genuinely creative and situated advances to make the work of all kinds of public and private institutions, archives included, more caring, maintainable, and sustainable. This is a call to genuinely “think differently” and not just to buy some other product that purports to come with that as its slogan. In my own practice working on digital library and archives issues, I think the answer here requires us to work within our organizations to define shared values where notions like ingenuity and learning can sit in tension and dialogue with values like care and sustainability.<sup>3</sup> We do, in fact, need genuinely different and creative ideas for solutions. It is just not going to be an app that saves us.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “About,” The Maintainers, <https://themaintainers.org/about>, captured at <https://perma.cc/HZX4-MQ6R>.

<sup>2</sup> Hillel Arnold, “Critical Work: Archivists as Maintainers,” August 2, 2016, <https://hillelarnold.com/blog/2016/08/critical-work>, captured at <https://perma.cc/5FW3-JP5N>; and Devon Olson et al., “Information Maintenance as a Practice of Care,” June 17, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3251131>.

<sup>3</sup> Aly DesRochers, “Defining Shared Values in Our Growing Digital Content Management Section,” *The Signal* (blog), February 19, 2019, [blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2019/02/defining-shared-values-in-our-growing-digital-content-management-section](https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2019/02/defining-shared-values-in-our-growing-digital-content-management-section), captured at <https://perma.cc/LKP8-7BD3>.