



## Library Participation Cultures

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### Abstract

This article examines some of the main points of recent library development, building on phenomena or concepts such as participation, democracy, web 2.0, library 2.0 and convergence cultures. We start with two cases closely related to activities at Blekinge Institute of Technology. The first case is about building a community for national and international cooperation about learning objects in the setting of a search guide. The other case is about a project aiming to bring our patrons into the discussion about the library and our future. Finally, we discuss the role of librarians in a world where knowledge processes go from a hierarchical, authoritative perspective to a participative, inclusive mindset.

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## Case 1: Participation in the searchguide community

### Background

For many years the Blekinge Institute of Technology library has offered education in informationseeking on campus and online and has developed web based tools for this which have received much attention<sup>1</sup>. The Quick Search Guide and the Search Guide are now used in all courses we offer at Blekinge Institute of Technology. The Quick Search Guide contains very basic information about searching and evaluation of sources. The Search Guide is both more extensive and deeper than The Quick Search Guide.

These two search guides are greatly appreciated, but the tools provided in the last year, i.e. Web 2.0, address questions we did not even think of asking a couple of years ago, such as “do students want to participate?”. The same goes for most search guides in Sweden and around the world. The tradition of creating learning material is fairly one-sided. We do not see the students as participants in a learning

<sup>1</sup> Utvärdering av Sökvägledning, Else Nygren  
[http://www.kb.se/bibsam/bidrag/projbidr/avslutade/2004/sokvagledn\\_rapport.pdf](http://www.kb.se/bibsam/bidrag/projbidr/avslutade/2004/sokvagledn_rapport.pdf)

situation in the degree we probably should.

In the same respect the tradition of creating learning material is an isolated act. Everyone creates their own material and develops it by themselves. As we see it, we have an obligation to do it together. Before, we could perhaps blame non existing technology. We cannot do that anymore. The tools are available and we have to make the best of it. Distance is not an obstade anymore.

<b>The Quick Search Guide<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>The Search Guide<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>Searchguide 2.0<sup>4</sup></b>
		

## The Searchguide Story

By conducting user studies we wanted to develop the Library's web based search guides and education so that it corresponded to user needs to an even greater extent. We wanted to investigate and develop the pedagogical methods that further understanding and contribute to a better learning situation. We wanted to develop the aspects of interactivity, communication and usability with the purpose of helping users achieve information literacy.

Based on the experiences from The Quick Search guide a new development project started: The Search Guide. It was based on a user friendly interface and is an extension of The Quick Search Guide. The Search Guide is flexible and need driven, and can accordingly be used in different ways:

As a search guide with shortcuts to practical search tips and deepened information. As a tutorial in information searching with learning objects. As a reference book in information seeking, with chapters about information literacy, search strategy, keywords, writers guide, bibliographic databases etc, to use in web based university courses and as a teaching tool

<sup>2</sup> <http://lilla-sok.bth.se/en/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://stora-sok.bth.se/en/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://searchguide.se/bth/>

for librarians and teachers.

When we launched this Search Guide (spring 2006) many libraries in Sweden and abroad wanted to have their own version of the guide and we were asked if we could sell it. The libraries wanted to adapt it to their (and their teachers /students) own demands even though the guide is free and open for everyone 24/7.

Meanwhile we looked into whether the “web 2.0-ideas” could influence the Search Guides. Web 2.0 (and Library 2.0) aims to create knowledge, enable discussions and build social networks. Participation is a central idea. Influenced by how Amazon.com let customers rate books we wanted to try that on the chapters in the Searchguide<sup>5</sup>:

★★★★☆ (1 comments)  
Was this section helpful?  
[Submit your comment here](#)

Clicking on submit... leads you to this form:

Did this section of The Search Guide help you?

Submit your comment here:

★	<input checked="" type="radio"/>
★★	<input type="radio"/>
★★★	<input type="radio"/>
★★★★	<input type="radio"/>
★★★★★	<input type="radio"/>

Commentary:

Your name / email:

Send

This was fun and interesting to try out but it wasn't very useful to us, since we only got ratings and very few comments. Even though the students actually rated the chapters it is the comments/feedback that is interesting and can lead to constant improvements. We were also a little shy and did not dare to publish the comments, and instead we got them via email. Maybe that could be a reason why so few left comments, they could not see what other persons had written.

<sup>5</sup> <http://stora-sok.bth.se/en>

But rather than rejecting the idea of commenting we wanted to develop it even further. Instead of only providing rating possibilities we wanted to open up for directly published comments and also to invite students to a dialogue about information retrieval. This dialogue can contain comments, discussions, reflections, visualizations, problem solving, tips etc. in a variety of media. It can be text but also images, pod casts, videos etc. We wanted the students to participate in the creation of the content.

Some wishes were crystallized in the development discussions:

- Communication - users participate in the learning community, creating personal content
- Open source - move the content in The Search Guide to a new open source platform
- Networking - librarians and teachers - stimulate cooperation, content sharing, competence, expertise, participation, responsibility, dialogue

Librarians have suggested cooperation for a long time and there has been a wish to develop a common search guide instead of everyone making their own local variants containing similar information. But since the need of local adaptation has been superior, this ambition often failed. By producing your own education material you can get the content you want and furthermore, increased subject knowledge.

Therefore, our idea was not to create a central search guide (wiki-model) – rather to build a platform with learning resources about information seeking from which every library could create their own local search guide. The librarians are invited to participate in a knowledge-creating community, free to contribute in the way and extent that suits them best. Many libraries can contribute with regard to their special competence. Another expected collaboration area is translations into different languages and programming of function modules. But the main thing is the communication possibilities and the knowledge this learning community or social network will create.

When we decided to switch from a system tailored by a consulting firm to an open source system, we were confronted by a fairly large set of choices. One important decision was the question of which open source system was to be the base to work on. Another important question was about the community the system was supposed to serve. In our view the community was in focus, but the choice of system was also crucial since its job is to underpin the community.

The most important aspect was interactivity and communication. One of the main points for switching software was the move from information publishing to communication, and that aspect had to set the stage for what kind of system we choose. Our choice was Wordpress, the largest weblog software in the world. It is a native communication system, and it meets all requirements we had.

Who will participate in the Searchguide community? Since this system is very flexible and the content, “learning objects”, are quite common in the world of learning, we do not want to restrict the participants to libraries. Teachers and other kind of learning professionals are more than welcome to participate. We strongly believe that a transdisciplinary community will be rewarding for the discussion as well as for the creativity in making learning objects.

We have shortly discussed the Searchguide community above, now we will say something about the local part of the Searchguide project.

Each participating organization will create their learning objects and upload them to the Searchguide community. This means every participant always starts in our common community. This is the learning objects bank. The learning objects bank will have a “Participation Licence” to avoid bankruptcy. After agreeing to the participation licence the participants are free to export whatever they like to the local search guide.

The Searchguide Community is where learning objects makers meet each other, and the local search guide is where they meet the end user, the student, the library patron etc. The local search guide might be based on Wordpress and the template we provide, but that is not a condition. All participating organizations can choose whatever software they like, as long as it is made in a Web 2.0 – spirit, which means communication instead of publishing. Users must be able to express themselves and participate through comments, evaluations, ranking, tagging, chat and the like. It is not a condition that all these interactive features are included in the local search guide, but it has to have an air of interaction and participation.

The participation license will be a document which shortly tells the story about the philosophy behind the Searchguide and what we mean with sharing, communication and interaction. But it is up to the conscience of the participants to act accordingly. It is important to maintain a community spirit without the participants starting to track each others actions. The community spirit we want to endorse is the one that develops through grown ups respecting each other and expect every action to have clean agenda – even if it is not transparent.

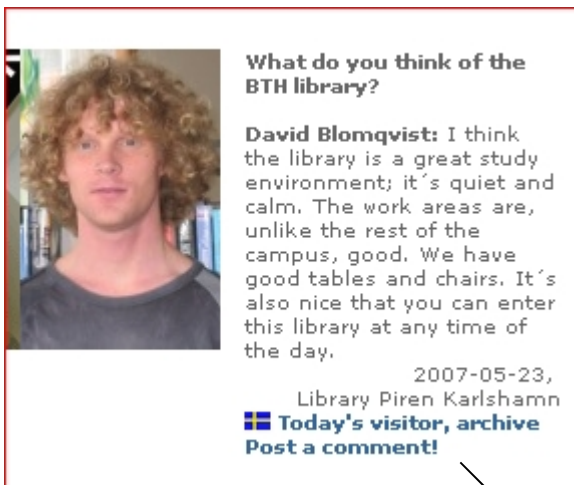
## **Case 2: Toward the participating patron**

Today’s visitor at BTH Library

The Library of Blekinge Institute of Technology is an academic library organized in three Libraries. In Karlskrona you find Library Gräsvik, in Ronneby Library Infocenter and in Karlshamn Library Piren.

We think it is very important to have an ongoing conversation with the library users (students, researchers and staff) since we want the library to be relevant. In March 2007 we wanted to visualize the users and their thoughts about the library so we decided to present the “today’s visitor” on a prominent place at the library start


page. We present them with a photo, their name and their thoughts. If anyone (staff or users) wants to comment it is possible by following a link (comments). This link leads to another webpage (a blog) with an archive of all the “today’s visitors” thoughts and also all comments.



**What do you think of the BTH library?**

**David Blomqvist:** I think the library is a great study environment; it's quiet and calm. The work areas are, unlike the rest of the campus, good. We have good tables and chairs. It's also nice that you can enter this library at any time of the day.

2007-05-23,  
Library Piren Karlshamn

 **Today's visitor, archive**  
**Post a comment!**

[www.bth.se/bib](http://www.bth.se/bib)



**David Blomqvist**

May 25th, 2007 at 11:25 am (plugga, miljö, lokaler, Piren, ljudnivå, dygnet runt, lugnt, bekvämt, bibliotek, access, furniture, tillgänglighet, 24/7, peaceful, möbler, comfortable, study)

 Jag tycker man får bra arbetsro i biblioteket; det är tyst och lugnt. Arbetsytorna är bra, till skillnad från i resten av skolan, med bra bord och stolar. Att man kan komma in här närhelst på dygnet man vill, är inte heller fel.

 I think the library is a great study environment; it's quiet and calm. The work areas are, unlike the rest of the campus, good. We have good tables and chairs. It's also nice that you can enter this library at any time of the day.

Comments

[bibbesokare.wordpress.com](http://bibbesokare.wordpress.com)

Why are we doing this?

Partly because we want to present our patrons to make them feel important and involved. That we are really (for real) interested in what they have to say. Presenting a “real person” on the start page of the library web site who shares his thoughts about the library shows that the library wants to communicate. We have noticed that the patrons have been very proud to be on the library web page and have tipped off others to visit the library web page. Other students have found it more exciting to return to the web page because they want to see if they know today’s visitor and read that person’s opinions.

When the flow of visitors for the web page increases with frequently returning persons, of course this enables the library to point to other things on the web page. The possibility for a living dialogue increases markedly. We think it is important to emphasize communication, dialogue and meetings. We do not think of the library as an information centre, but rather see it as a communication centre. When we visualize the future, participation is one of the most important ideas for the library. You are involved in a collective multifaceted conversation which takes place between participants, librarians and media on campus and virtually. Patrons become users who become participants.

The Internet, and also lately a great number of web 2.0 services have increased the possibilities for people to participate actively online. The Internet is not just a place where you search for information, but also a place where you create content. You expect the possibility to create your own place on the web and to be allowed to leave traces behind. Many create themselves (their brand) on the web. It is taken for granted that you should be able to communicate your experiences to others. If you read a book you might want to comment on it, tip other people off, chat about it, make a film about it, or create a parody. Saying what you think, making your voice heard, being part of a context.

Another important reason is to highlight the users' many different thoughts and needs. Sometimes we librarians carelessly speak of users as a homogenous group who always think alike. Of course this varies between people and over a period of time. One day you want the library to be quiet because you are studying for an exam, but the next day you want to celebrate a successful exam and need to meet other people. One minute you want privacy and time for reflection and the next you wish for nothing more than to share your thoughts with someone, on campus or virtually. One day you want to listen to a book while running, and the next day you are working at the computer and prefer an e-book.

That students get to take part of each others thoughts about the library is naturally a reason too. There might be things you have not discovered yourself that you get tips about and you learn about other people's needs. To illustrate different library functions through other mediators than the librarians can be effective. You might pay more attention when your friends give you a tip than at a traditional library tour or when reading a library leaflet.

Presently it is the staff that asks randomly chosen visitors to briefly describe what they think of the BTH library. We also take pictures of them and tell them that we are going to post it on the web site in a few days. We make notes about their opinions and translate to Swedish or English depending on the students' nationality. We have a bilingual web site. Because we think it is important to get a collected picture of everyone's thoughts we have created a blog where we publish the interviews continually.

## Tag Cloud

access articles  
artiklar böcker  
bekvämt bibliotek  
books comfortable  
computers course  
literature Gräsvik help  
hjälp  
Infocenter  
kurslitteratur litteratur  
ljudnivå lokaler lugnt  
möjligheter miljö  
opportunities peaceful  
personal Piren  
plugga staff study  
tillgänglighet  
utrustning

There we (librarians) also add tags (keywords) in Swedish and English for every post. Eventually the tags form a tag cloud<sup>6</sup> which looks like this presently and which describes briefly what has been discussed so far in the interviews (tags with larger typsnitt indicates more people have discussed this). Infocenter, Gräsvik and Piren are the names of the libraries.

What has today's visitor thought so far?

Many think that the library works well and appreciate the calm, beautiful study environment, the helpful staff and the accessibility. Among the suggestions for changes that have come are more copies of course literature, a ball pit to relax in, a microwave oven and more lavatories. Consequently it is a mix of common requests (course literature) and special (ball pit).

Is it important for credibility to meet all requests and fulfill all wishes? No, we do not think so, whereas it is important to listen to requests and to discuss them. Regarding course literature there is a media policy which says that we give priority to having a wide array of media before having many copies of the same title, and regarding the ball pit it is about a wish to relax. We can probably satisfy this request by further conversations. It is exciting to take a closer look at more special requests that emerge and try to make something of them. Perhaps libraries should not just look at one-size-fits-all solutions, but more seriously listen to "the groups in the long tail"<sup>7</sup>, i.e. groups with special interests.

On the blog anyone can comment freely on what is said or convey own thoughts. The comments that have come so far are of a social nature. You want to sent messages (and flirt) with each other:

*3 Comments*

*Johny said,*

*May 11, 2007 at 2:15 pm*

*Why do you dwell in Ronneby library when you should light up our days here at library Gräsvik?*

*Erika said,*

*May 14, 2007 at 7:54 pm*

*I go to BTH in Ronneby so that' s why I am there.*

*Johny said,*

*May 16, 2007 at 9:38 am*

*Yes, unfortunately it it so... But you must understand that we would like to see more of you in Karlskrona. Few could compete with the beautiful scenery of Gräsvik like you. 😊<sup>8</sup>*

<sup>6</sup> <http://bibbesokare.wordpress.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://bibbesokare.wordpress.com/>



We do not want to limit this to just concern traditional library issues. Participation is also about seeing others, to be visible yourself, and to be part of a context. It also points out that the library is a social arena and not just a book hall. A library can be a learning community where both people and media participate. In the following comment a student says thank you to another student for helping him:

*1 Comment*

*Tapaman Chowhury said,*

*May 25, 2007 at 7:20 am*

*Thank you for helping me the other day. You are such a nice and gentle boy. Good luck with your education.<sup>9</sup>*

It is important to try to "illustrate" the invisible functions (a meeting place, a place for learning) in the library so that it is completely evident that the library is more than just books and book shelves where you pick up course literature. That the library should change from information storage to learning community where meetings are vital. To make it clear that libraries are meeting places both virtually and in the actual building at the same time. A space designed for participation and networking.

The next step is to visualize the activities that take place in the virtual library: Those who read articles, make presentations, have e-meetings, chat, comment on something in the Searchguide, read a review, download a pod-cast etc. How do you illustrate the invisible movement, how do you show that they are part of a context?

### **A theoretical perspective: Librarians and the participative knowledge process**

Participation cultures are becoming more and more common. They are both intertwined with and in opposition to hierarchical cultures, which of course have ruled the world for thousands of years. Participation cultures are flourishing on the Internet and they are beginning to be a force to count with in every aspect of society. In library discourse, the mindset behind participation cultures is commonly called library 2.0.

The library is generally an organization with a tradition of hierarchical thinking, as most organizations. The library collection contains documents created by authorities with the purpose of enlightening people. The library collection is the base of a very valuable democratic process. This concerns books, cd:s and other physical, traditional media. Many librarians and patrons view this as the main purpose of the library, at least at an unreflecting level. Librarians are some kind of authoritative mediators and the library could be viewed as a gigantic switchboard, which operates producers and consumers of information. This is one of the traditional views of the library.

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<sup>9</sup> <http://bibbesokare.wordpress.com/>

Few libraries work only in this way today. The librarian is not only a mediator between producers and consumers of discursive information, but sometimes works as a mentor for the student, especially in university libraries. An information mentor is a senior person with experience in navigating the information spaces needed for the patron to complete his or her task. The information mentor is preferably a librarian and the room for navigation is the area we call library. This gives the librarian a completely changed role. In the traditional role of a mediator, the librarian is the tutor with strong authoritative knowledge as a solid base. The librarian also has a predefined methodology to teach, a methodology created from more than two thousand years of a paper based world of information.

The librarian as a mentor is not an authority in the same sense. A meeting between the librarian as a mentor and a patron is not a one way flow of knowledge. Here, the knowledge is created in the dialogue. The dialogue is the center and the point of interest in the meeting. Texts about mentorship and coaching often refer to Plato and discuss Socrates' method of finding the knowledge already residing in his pupils. If we sidestep the fact that Socrates was rather rude and that the truths he tried to get his pupils to find in themselves had a metaphysical origin, then we can learn a lot from his way of dealing with knowledge processes. You could say that Socrates worked like an intelligent sounding board. Every time the question is sent back to the pupil/patron, the net of knowledge is becoming more and more complex. Thus you can say that knowledge is born in the conversational process and not transferred from a knowledgeable person to an ignorant. This knowledge process is sometimes called dialectic. A suitable name in the 21 century would be participative. Both parts are actors in the knowledge process and the more participative the process is, the better is the resulting knowledge, and thus the quality of the knowledge created. Dialectic, participative knowledge processes have always been a part of the library. But these latest years of the very short digital age, the participative knowledge processes have floated more and more towards the foreground, and hierarchical knowledge processes have been pushed to the background. This process is a big part of what we today call library 2.0. If all this works well, patrons will participate and act as mentors for each other.

In detail, participative learning processes are not new. Library scholars and others have written about it even before the Internet age<sup>10</sup>. You could even draw a line several hundred years back in time to when enlightenment thinkers as Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu raised up against the scholastic tradition from the middle ages and urged people to think for themselves instead of getting their knowledge directly from the authority of the church. The enlightenment thinkers saw themselves as living in "a world of letters", a wide net of discussions, ultimately leading to social change. It is not too far fetched, perhaps, to view the enlightenment as an analogue prerequisite to web 2.0 - at least when it comes to the feeling of freedom and participation in intellectual processes.

The digital paradigm shift called web 2.0 has given us a peak into how knowledge

<sup>10</sup> Limberg, Louise (2001). Att söka information för att lära: en studie av samspel mellan informationssökning och lärande (english, our translation: Learning by Searching: a study of the interplay between information seeking and learning)

processes probably or possibly will work in the future - beginning from now! - that is, as participative processes. To illuminate the difference between hierarchical and participative knowledge processes, we will speculate over how the so called "Sokal Affair" would be handled in a time where participative knowledge processes, like web 2.0, had made an impact in the academic world.

The background to "the Sokal Affair" was disbelief against Science with a large S. This disbelief goes back to the 60s and is usually called post modernism or post structuralism. 1996 Alan Sokal, a professor of physics, sent an article to the journal *Social Text*. *Social Text* is a journal in the topic Cultural Studies and is generally viewed as postmodernist. The article was accepted, but it was a hoax. It was an article constructed to fool the editors to think this was a physics professor with the same view of knowledge processes as the editors had. When the article had been printed, Alan Sokal published another article in another journal, releasing the information that his article in *Social Text* was nonsense. His main objective was obviously to show that authoritative, hierarchical and justified knowledge was not possible in the settings of postmodern cultures in the end of the 20th century.

Now, let us play with the thought that the journal in the example above was structured as a web 2.0-system<sup>11</sup>. The situation had been completely different. Knowledge creation in participation cultures is a different process than knowledge creation in hierarchical cultures. Alan Sokal would not have been viewed as the one who had to pass the test of the editors expert eyes. His article would have been public immediately, perhaps after an initial process where the editors decided if the article subject matter corresponded to the subject matter of the journal. The review of the article would then be a collaborative task of the community reading and commenting (and thus participating in) the journal. In a web 2.0 community, everyone is a part of the discussion. There is no predefined hierarchy.

The real difference between hierarchical and participative knowledge in this example is about responsibility. In the traditional hierarchical knowledge process, it is always the expert who is responsible and thus regarded a fool if he or she fails to justify the knowledge (in philosophy, truth is generally considered to be justified knowledge). In a web 2.0 system, justification of knowledge is distributed among the participants. If the journal mentioned had been based on well functioning web 2.0 knowledge processes, the one to look silly had been Alan Sokal himself. Let us take an example, which is perhaps even closer to the domains of the library. This example is closely related to the reasoning about the Sokal Affair. It deals with the difference between the Encyclopaedia Britannica and Wikipedia. EB represents the traditional, hierarchical knowledge paradigm. Wikipedia represents a view of knowledge originating from the mindset of web 2.0, participative knowledge processes. Wikipedia is sometimes said to be built on radical trust. That is true in a technical sense. But it is not really true in an epistemological sense. Suppose Alan Sokal's article had been published in EB. Then the EB editorial had been responsible and possible ridiculed. But suppose it was published as an article in Wikipedia. What had happened then?

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<sup>11</sup> There are a "few" of these journals around, for example *International Journal of Feminist Technoscience* (<http://feministtechnoscience.se>)

Readers would most certainly have reacted by raising questions in the discussion area of the article. This process would probably have led to a distinct note on the article itself with a text like "this article is questionable... etc". However, some readers without enough knowledge to be suspicious about the text might use it before any of the well informed readers had time to react and raise a suspicion. Who is to blame then? Who is the silly part if a school kid is using parts of the article in a paper? Of course, since this is a participative knowledge process, the person using the information is responsible for how it is used. But how can we expect "ignorant" readers to be able to deal with these kinds of situations?

An information literate reader would of course be more suspicious. She or he would probably not trust the information as it was, understanding the responsibility of the situation. She or he would probably have taken the information, but researched further for other information to support it. And if no information to support the statement was found, she or he would probably have presented it in a way that reflected the responsibility back to the author. However, there is no guarantee that the situation would be dealt with properly even for an information literate person. On the other hand, not even the strongest peer review system would be completely fail safe in this regard.

And now we are reaching the obvious point of this discussion. What is the librarian's role in this world of changing knowledge processes? Librarians have a fundamental role in the 2.0 society. Librarians' participation in the process of knowledge creation might be the very thing that makes it all work. Librarians might have to train students (in a wide sense) to be more aware, sceptic but still more sure of themselves in the knowledge process. Another way to put it: librarians might be the difference between the success or failure of the 2.0 knowledge process. Librarians are trained to think in a language natural to the web 2.0 knowledge process. Having said this, we are also conservative and not so eager to break out of the form given to us by tradition. But if we as a group can recognize the nature of the 2.0 world, we will definitely see our crucial place in it.

## **Summary**

To sum up, we want to point to the theoretical/philosophical agendas of both projects described above. First, we want to participate in the open source, open access, open discussion movements. We think this is an important step for the whole community of librarians and learning professionals. Secondly, we want to collaborate around learning objects. Third, we also want to raise awareness and knowledge about lightweight, open source, web 2.0 systems. Fourth, in the process we hope to be able to communicate participation strategies which makes us wiser and better equipped for the future. Fifth, let patrons participate in the creation of content and planning for the future. And sixth, communicate library interaction strategies. A large part of the participating organizations in the Searchguide will probably be libraries. Finally, we wish to raise more fundamental questions about knowledge processes and the librarian's role in this time of drastic socio-technical

change.