Creating a Future for Public Libraries: Diverse Strategies for a Diverse Nation

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ABSTRACT

PUBLIC LIBRARIES CURRENTLY FACE a number of significant challenges and opportunities as they move into the digital future. The report *Buildings, Books, and Bytes: Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age* is a useful catalyst to continue the discussion concerning the role of public libraries in this global, networked, digital future. This article raises some concerns regarding the method used in the study, selected findings, and the lack of specific recommendations. Findings from other recent studies do offer some strategies and recommendations for making this transition effective. Moreover, global strategies for how public libraries, as a group, can effectively make this transition may miss the mark. At issue is how each library, individually, offers a vision, promotes that vision, responds to its community, and takes a leadership stance as to what its role should be in this electronic networked environment. Public libraries will need diverse strategies that depend on a range of factors to be successful.

INTRODUCTION

The release of the report *Buildings, Books, and Bytes: Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age* (Benton Foundation, 1996) has brought increased attention to issues related to the role of public libraries in the digital age. A number of issues and findings that resulted from the study are fueling debates concerning what public libraries are, should be, cannot be, or might become. Those interested in the societal role of public libraries certainly will appreciate the attention that will come to the public library

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community as a result of the study. The report, however, offers very few specific strategies, suggestions, or recommendations as to what public libraries need to do now given the varied public opinion and evolving professional view of public libraries in the developing digital environment.

A key finding of the report is that Americans continue to have a love affair with their libraries, but they have difficulty figuring out where libraries fit in the new digital world (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 7). But there are a number of warning bells, such as the view that it is possible to replace trained librarians with volunteers to serve cappuccino as well as perform more traditional library services (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 31).

These and other findings suggest that the public has distinctly different perceptions of the public library than do public librarians. A close read through the Benton Report can both stimulate and depress those who have wrestled with the general topic of public libraries and the digital age. Indeed, the issues, topics, and many of the findings are not new for many public librarians. The Benton Report may offer significant interest, however, to some trustees, citizens, and government officials who have not been engaged in this discussion. Thus, the image of public libraries and issues to address, as painted by the report, will affect different audiences in different ways as they interpret its content.

As academics and consultants who serve regularly in the trenches, we consider the report as a bit of an anomaly. We are certainly pleased that the Kellogg and Benton Foundations supported the project and brought increased visibility to issues related to public libraries in the digital age. But there are numerous issues related to the study, its development, its findings, and its use that may result more in muddying, than clearing, the waters of where public libraries fit in the digital age. The purpose of this article is to review the Benton Report with an eye toward clarifying key issues, offering some recommendations for public libraries as they enter the digital age, and drawing upon findings from some of our recent research related to the future of libraries in the digital age. Given less importance, but still important, is to examine the technical aspects of the report in terms of its development and method. Indeed, the findings from the report must be considered in light of the report's data collection and analysis processes.

Overall, the authors believe that, while there certainly is useful information in the report, not much of this is new to the public library community. For example, the finding that different librarians and different users have differing, and sometimes conflicting, views of what the public library should be in the digital age is well known (McClure et al., 1995a). Furthermore, the lack of clarity concerning the study's method and data collection techniques hinders the usefulness of the discussion and find-

ings. And by the end of the report the authors were left asking: "Given these findings, what needs to be done, if anything, to resolve the issues concerning public libraries in the digital era?"

THE TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE REPORT

When the Benton Foundation released its report, there was a big splash of media coverage, discussion on the network lists, and conversations among public librarians as to its findings. The report describes its findings as based on survey and other data-collection activities. Indeed, it promotes the credibility of its findings due to the empirical nature of the study. But a number of issues should be considered in the technical development of the report when interpreting the findings.

Purpose of the Report and Intended Audience

The Kellogg Foundation initiated the study to inform its Human Resources for Information Systems Management (HRISM) grantees "about where the public supports—or fails to support—libraries as they confront the digital world." Furthermore, the foundation wanted "to help its grantees develop a public message about American libraries that reflected both the library leaders' visions and the American people's expectations" (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 1). These grantees include a broad range of library types and organizations. Note that the purpose had to do with libraries and not "public" libraries. As such, the primary benefactors of the study were those organizations and individuals that received support from the Kellogg Foundation. One might wonder why, after supporting their various projects, the foundation then determined that they needed to be informed about these issues.

But the report took on a much larger purpose than only informing grantees. Ultimately, it was a very public document, and the audience certainly shifted from the grantees to the public at large. Who, specifically, the report targeted as the intended audience other than the grantees, however, is unclear. The presentation and style certainly suggest it was not intended for researchers, public librarians knowledgeable about the general topic, or governmental policymakers looking for solutions and recommendations. Perhaps it was intended for trustees and local community members? In short, the range of possible audiences for this report is extensive, and writing a report that targets all these audiences at one time is difficult at best and confusing at worst.

Also curious is the usefulness for the grantees to develop a public message about libraries (or public libraries as it turns out). The report does not divulge the identity of the grantees, although it does provide a list of organizations with which the grantees are associated. It is, therefore, difficult to determine the basis on which they do, or should, speak for the public library community. Without such information, readers of

the report are left to speculate as to the ability and/or credibility of its
grantees to make judgments or predictions for the role of public libraries
in the digital environment, as they provided much of the input to the
study.

Method and Data Collection

A problem throughout the Benton Report is that it indicates its find-
ings come from a research study but then fails to provide adequate infor-
mation about the method and data collection (Benton Report, 1996):
"This study compares library leaders' visions for the future with the public's
prescriptions for libraries, *derived from public opinion research that forms the
backbone of this study* [authors' emphasis]" (p. 3).

Some information about the method and data collection appear in
the Preface (Benton Foundation, 1996, pp. 1-2), some regarding tele-
phone interviews with grantees on page 12, some regarding the public
survey on page 24, a bit about the focus group of library users on pages
26-27, and an appendix of the survey on pages 42-46. There is, however,
no coherent overall discussion of the method and data collection tech-
niques. Space does not permit a detailed dissection of the report's re-
search methodology. The authors note, however, the following unre-
solved issues:

• *Grantees as public library leaders and knowledgeable about public libraries*
  (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 3). Much of the input that represents
  the library leader point-of-view is based on that received from the grant-
  ees. The reader does not know who that includes except that, to be a
  leader, one had to have received support from the Kellogg Founda-
  tion.
• *Grantees' visions of the future.* Although unclear in the report, grantees
  apparently submitted written vision statements for analysis. Questions
  remain as to whom grantees submitted these responses, the number of
  responses received, how these responses were analyzed, and how, spe-
  cifically, these responses were used as input to inform the study (Benton
  Report, 1996, p. 1).
• *Details on the public opinion survey.* As part of the study, the Kellogg Foun-
  dation arranged for Lake Research and the Tarrance Group to con-
  duct a telephone survey. Details concerning the development, meth-
  odology, and analysis of the phone survey are sketchy at best. The
  reader learns that the survey findings are based on 1,015 completed
  telephone interviews using a "stratified random-digit replicate sample
  and weighted...to ensure that the sample accurately reflects the total
  population 18 years and older" (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 24).
  There is, however, no discussion of the methodology, weighting crite-
  ria (e.g., why not weighting on household income?), generalizability,
  or types of statistical analysis performed.

- *Content, method, and analysis of telephone interviews with grantees* (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 12). The report provides no detail as to how many interviews occurred, the composition or demographic make-up of the interviewed grantees, the types of questions asked or topics discussed, or how the data were recorded and analyzed.

- *Focus group of library users.* This comprised eleven all-white participants who were residents of Montgomery County, Maryland, identified as library users, and all but one being a college graduate. The report cautions use of these findings and then goes on to ignore its own warnings by quoting the phrase resulting from the session that libraries are "behind the curve" throughout the report. Clearly, this group of participants is not representative of library users. For example, 1995 census data show that the median household income in the United States is $34,076 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). According to 1990 census data (the most current for county-level data), the median household income for Montgomery County was $54,089 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). Allowing for a 10 percent household income fluctuation between 1990 and 1995 would yield a medium income range of $48,681 to $59,497, well above the national median household income level. Furthermore, the group contradicted many of the findings from the public opinion survey. It is unclear as to how participants were selected, the specific topics that were covered during the focus group, or the means through which focus group responses were analyzed and summarized.

- *Quality of the data.* There is no mention of the steps the investigators took to ensure the collection of reliable and valid data during the focus groups, telephone interviews, or the analysis of the mission statements.

- *Lack of references and use of literature.* Especially frustrating for those trying to use the study's findings is the reference to other studies and previous work for which no bibliographic citation is provided. For example, a two-page table of findings from other surveys and sources presented in the report offers no references (Benton Foundation, 1996, pp. 28-29). Moreover, there are no references to other writings on the general topic of public libraries in the digital age, suggesting to readers that no one has dealt with these issues previously. Finally, there is no bibliography for additional reading.

In fairness to the Benton Foundation, when asked by one of the authors for detail on method and data collection, a representative provided some additional information and referred us to Lake Research and the Tarrance Group. Questions remain, however, as to the study's methodology and conclusions derived from that methodology. The average reader

may neither be aware of these concerns nor seek to resolve them and thus will take on faith the accuracy of the discussions and findings.

Need for Information on Method and Data Collection

The problems identified with the technical development of the Benton Report as described briefly in this section are serious concerns that, unfortunately, bring to question the usefulness and credibility of the report's findings and discussion. Minimally, the report needed an appendix that:

• provided readers an overview figure describing the components of the method;
• detailed the study methodology, data collection instrument development, and administration of the data collection instruments; and
• described the techniques used for data analysis.

That the report lacked content and an organization of information related to method and data collection is very curious. One would assume that those involved in the data collection activities—Lake Research and the Tarrance Group, study developers, and the Benton Foundation—are aware of these issues. All are respected researchers and/or research institutions that deal daily with issues related to ensuring credibility of their reports and products. It may be that the contributors to the report did take steps to deal with some of the issues identified in this section. Without such methodological information, it is difficult to assess and interpret the study's findings.

Despite the above research methods reservations, the reported findings of the Benton Report raise several issues worthy of discussion. The following section, therefore, centers on the findings of the report rather than on the technical aspects of the report.

DISCUSSION OF SELECTED ISSUES AND FINDINGS FROM THE REPORT

There is inadequate space to deal with all the various issues and findings raised in the Benton Report. Estabrook (1997) offers her view on some of these issues as do others in this special issue of *Library Trends*. Nonetheless, it is useful to highlight some of the issues and findings and offer comment and analysis on those especially interesting.

Lack of Agreement Among Participants

Although there were some areas where the "leaders" agreed, there seem to be many instances where they did not agree. The findings from the views of the leaders often begin with "some" thought, or "others" believed, or "several" pointed to such and such (Benton Foundation, 1996, pp. 14-15). In other instances, the grantees reported a point of view in their mission statements—e.g., enthusiastic—as serving as a safety net, and then in the telephone interviews had reservations about this role (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 12).

Overall, there is a wide divergence between the views reported by library users and those reported by library leaders. Estabrook (1997) characterizes these competing views as "polarized perceptions" (p. 46). In other instances, for example, focus group participants stated that bookstores were genuine competitors to libraries (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 30), but responses from the survey indicate "a significant correlation between heavy library use, frequent bookstore patronage, and home computer use" (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 21).

The Public Library and the Electronic Networked Environment

The Benton Report details numerous roles for public libraries in the electronic networked environment (pp. 8-10)—e.g., access points to the National Information Infrastructure (NII), creators and maintainers of digital collections, and community-based digital hubs. Moreover, the report indicates that libraries of all types will "electronically merge" (p. 9), and in some cases merge physically, to create expanded digital collections and library entities.

The Benton Report, however, noted a tension between both the provision of public library digital and print services and expanding library services beyond the boundaries of library walls. Participants could not agree on whether public libraries would:

- forego printed material for electronic;
- maintain strong print-based collections; or
- become "hybrids" (p. 9) with a presence in both print and electronic media.

Also, participants could not agree as to the extent to which public libraries should expand the availability of their network-based services beyond availability within library buildings—e.g., through remote access capabilities.

The public library cannot be all of the above. This is particularly true as focus group participants indicated that the public library of the future is "far from being a technology leader, [but] would function as an information archive" (p. 5). Public libraries are therefore caught in a dilemma. On the one hand, library leaders want to provide state-of-the-art digital services that make libraries central to their communities. On the other hand, patrons do not view public libraries as advanced technologically, nor are they willing to provide public libraries with increased financial resources to provide digital services. Whatever path a library decides to take, however, must incorporate the interests of the library and its community.

There is No Public

The Benton Report regularly refers to "the Public" (e.g., pp. 14, 17-18). We would argue that there is no general public but rather a collec-

tion of stakeholders and communities with different views and needs re-
garding the public library. Further, the particular demographic make-up
for one particular library is likely to be very different from that for an-
other library. This diversity in community make-up provides an impor-
tant context for a specific strategy for how one library moves successfully
to the digital setting. Thinking that there is a monolithic public from
which to base services is not productive.

Interestingly, the survey data from the Benton Report are most use-
ful when reported in terms of specific demographic characteristics rather
than findings about the public. Indeed, successful public library direc-
tors know that specific demographics about their community are more
important than nationwide data. The public library in a particular vil-
lage or town does not serve the public; it serves its specific community
however defined. Thus the views of selected Maryland library users have
an important story to tell for the libraries that comprise that particular
community and is probably much less a useful story for a rural town li-
brary in Missouri.

Policy Issues are Complex

The discussion of key public policy issues (Benton Foundation, 1996,
pp. 33-37) lists four topics that require attention: Universal Service and
Access, First Amendment Rights, Intellectual Property Rights and Copy-
right, and Funding. Although there are other equally important policy
issues, one might argue, as does the report, that these four certainly are
critical and require the attention of the library community and policy
makers. Again, the literature and debate regarding these four policy is-
sues is extensive. One only has to check the Web homepage of the Ameri-
can Library Association Washington Office for discussions about these
and other topics (see <http://www.ala.org/oitp/>).

The discussion of these issues in the Benton Report, however, is sim-
plistic and fails to provide adequate detail and information to assist those
who are uninformed about them (McClure, 1996). Furthermore, there
are no references to other writings, Web sites, or public advocacy groups
that readers could contact for additional information. Thus, if this sec-
tion of the report is intended as a primer on these policy issues, it is not.
If it is intended to demonstrate how these important policy issues affect
vision and mission of public libraries in the digital age, it does not.

The Impact of Public Library Digital Services on the Marketplace

The Benton Report discusses numerous public library-based elec-
tronic network service possibilities. All are couched in the publicness of
the library institution—that is, the public good aspect of public libraries
and the services that they provide their communities.

The more that public libraries engage in digital information services,
however, the more likely public libraries will compete with information

and network service providers. The authors argue that there are those services—e.g., access to e-mail accounts, dial-in capabilities—that some public libraries provide that compete directly with Internet service providers (ISPs). These relationships are not akin to the bookstore/library relationship referenced by some Benton Report participants and place public libraries in the digital marketplace. In this role, public libraries are not community institutions but rather providers of goods and services for marketplace consumption.

This issue is extremely complex and potentially detrimental to the public library institution. There is no clear understanding of when, exactly, the public library would enter the marketplace through digital services. For example, is a public library competing with ISPs and other for-profit entities when it:

- provides access to the Internet, either on-site or remotely?
- provides electronic services, e.g., e-mail accounts, databases (either library created or through site licensing), or research services?
- enhances (i.e., adds value) publicly available data and repackages it for public consumption?
- charges for any of the above?

Further complicating this issue is that: (1) public libraries, in general, provide electronic network services through the use of public funds, and (2) public library electronic network services are not regulated as are those provided by ISPs, Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs), Interexchange Carriers (e.g., AT&T, MCI, and Sprint), or cable companies.

It is perhaps useful to view this issue as a matrix (see Table 1). It is relatively clear that public libraries in the Low Technology Sophistication/Access Services quadrant are not in competition with for-profit organizations. Less clear, however, is the competition factor for public libraries that reside in the other quadrants. The authors realize the simplistic nature of the matrix presented in Table 1, particularly considering definitions of technology sophistication and access versus enhanced services. The matrix does, however, offer a beginning point for discussion of the role of public libraries in the electronic networked environment both within the public library profession and the communities in which public libraries reside.

TABLE 1. Public Library Marketplace Competition.

	Enhanced Services	Access Services
High Technology Sophistication		
Low Technology Sophistication		

The above discussion serves to highlight selected findings and issues within the Benton Report. The next section details findings from research conducted by the authors. These findings serve to inform the debate concerning the roles of public libraries in the electronic networked environment.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED FROM OUR RESEARCH

The notion that public libraries can service all the needs and/or desires of their service area is false. Research that the authors and others have conducted over the years indicates that public libraries do not service their entire population. Rather, they focus on providing services to their "patrons" (Bertot & McClure, 1996a; McClure et al., 1996, 1995a). Inherent within this subtle, but key, distinction is that no two public libraries will provide their patrons exactly the same services in precisely the same way. This is particularly true of public library-provided digital services.

There are, however, some issues that cut across public libraries in the electronic networked environment. These include, but are not limited to:

• Developing and planning for an adequate information technology (IT) infrastructure. The IT infrastructure a public library has determines the types of digital services it can provide. For example, a public library that connects to the Internet through its OPAC using text-based terminals cannot provide multimedia services to its patrons. Should a library wish to provide multimedia services, it will need to plan for the requirements of such services (e.g., facilities upgrades, procurement, wiring, workstation selection, etc.).
• Considering the decreasing life cycle of IT and increasing pace of change in the electronic networked environment, such planning is most successful if conducted in an evolutionary and incremental manner.
• Assuming that library patrons are only those that come to the library is a dangerous assumption. One of the many aspects of the digital environment is that it removes the constraints of geography and time. Through remote access and dial-in capabilities, library patrons can be virtual, and frequent, patrons. Public libraries need to redefine the notion of patron and find new ways to serve virtual patrons.
• Focusing services on the "have nots" is a problem. Unless a public library is in a large urban inner-city environment, the typical library patron is college educated and middle class.
• Promoting public libraries as a safety net does not appeal to the majority of public library patrons and communities. This does not negate the importance of public libraries as "safety nets." Rather, it implies

that the safety net role of public libraries is particular to certain librar-
ies in particular circumstances.

- Developing statewide networking initiatives is possible and necessary
  to equalize and provide access to a broad range of electronic networked
  services and technologies. Not every public library will be able to af-
  ford to connect to and provide electronic network-based services. State-
  wide networking initiatives, such as Maryland's Sailor project, can serve
  to create a level playing field by building a statewide IT infrastructure,
  enhancing the public library IT infrastructure, negotiating statewide
  database license agreements, and promoting content development.
- Developing ways to measure and evaluate electronic networked ser-
  vices is critical. The digital environment requires a rethinking of ways
  in which to measure and assess the use of library services. As network-
  based services become routine public library services, libraries will need
  to move from circulation counts to downloads, from patron counts to
  network traffic measures. Moreover, libraries will need to develop the
  techniques through which to assess these measures as a means to evalu-
  ate public library services.
- Assimilating electronic networked services into routine public library
  activities is necessary. It is not the case that public libraries must either
  provide traditional services (e.g., books) or digital services (e.g.,
  Internet). Public libraries can do both and need to determine the
  strengths, weaknesses, and most appropriate applications for both in
  their settings (Bertot & McClure, 1996a; Bertot et al., 1996; McClure,
  1996; McClure et al., 1995a, 1995b).

Embedded in each of these issues, however, is the tension between gener-
alizing to all public libraries and the exceptions at the individual public
library level.

As an example, the Maryland Sailor project has been a success pri-
marily due to the balance between statewide and local networking activi-
ties (Bertot & McClure, 1996a). The backbone building and mainte-
nance, selected databases, and key content development activities are state-
wide functions. Connected library systems (all twenty-four in Maryland)
are free and encouraged to develop local partnerships with a variety of
organizations (e.g., schools, local governments) to enhance Sailor's con-
tent and provide local information to patrons. Moreover, each library
system has the ability to go beyond core Sailor network services (some
library systems, for example, provide e-mail account services). Building
digital libraries is, therefore, an iterative and collaborative process that
allows for the incorporation of both aggregate and individual library in-
terests.

POSSIBLE STRATEGIES

To a great degree, the report left these writers with the sense that

there are many different views regarding the role of public libraries in the digital age. And, moreover, it would behoove the public library community to chart a better path and vision into this new digital age. Since at least the early 1990s, these authors (among others) have also suggested the importance of charting a vision to transition into the digital age.

Estabrook (1997) finds three major suggestions for strategies from the report: "Take advantage of changing demographics due to increased minority populations that tend to support enhanced library services; Increase collaboration between the public library and other community groups; and Librarians must increase their political knowledge and involvement" (pp. 47-48). Again, the authors would suggest that these are good but well-known suggestions that have been promoted to the public library community frequently over the years.

The strategies suggested in the Benton Report encourage the idea of a "Coordinated Collaborative Effort" (pp. 38-41). This vision sees public libraries as access for all, built around a unified and integrated resource hub. This would be a new life form, with other public information providers as partners, and would tackle the community's information needs and problems (p. 39). Again, this view of the public library has been promoted by a number of people over the years. While this view may be useful, we would offer the following specific recommendations for public libraries as they move into the digital age:

- Promote and sell a vision of the public library in the digital age. Each public library has the responsibility to engage in a process that results in a vision for that library in the digital age. That vision must be informed by the unique needs and strengths of its community. When the community asks, What is the role for our library in the digital age? there must be a clear, concise, and exciting vision in response. That vision, however, is likely to vary considerably from library to library. There is no universal vision statement that will work for all public libraries.

- Redeploy resources and re-engineer services. Public libraries must deal with the reality that there is unlikely to be a huge influx of additional resources to facilitate their transition into the digital age. Resources from existing traditional services will need to be redeployed to digital resources and services. Budget lines (as well as other lines) for print-based collection building may need to be reduced to obtain access to an extensive amount of electronic resources. Circulation, interlibrary loan, and reference services can be re-engineered to exploit the digital library.

- Determine the desired level of electronic networked services and build a library's infrastructure around that determination. The types and quantities of digital services a public library intends to provide will

define the technology and staffing infrastructure necessary to provide such services. For example, libraries that want to provide remote dial-in services for both Internet and library OPAC access will need to install additional telephone lines, modems, and routers. Moreover, if libraries do not currently provide dial-in services or do not have the staff expertise to engage in such services, libraries will need to consider hiring such staff, training existing staff, or outsourcing for the management of the dial-in services.

• Consider an electronic network strategy that incorporates statewide, regional, and local networking activities. It is not the case that each public library needs to create and manage its own digital services. There are appropriate and differing roles for state libraries, regional library systems, and public libraries in creating a networked and information infrastructure. For example, state libraries can facilitate the development of statewide backbones to connect all public libraries, provide technology grants to enhance in-library technology (e.g., multimedia workstations), and negotiate favorable statewide licenses for databases. Regional library consortia can do much the same but on a smaller scale. With state libraries and regional library consortia handling the technology and selected content issues, individual public libraries can concentrate on local information content, special collections development, and tailoring the available electronic networked services to their communities.

• Redefine and expand upon the library patron. Public libraries need to rethink who, exactly, is their user community. The electronic networked environment is such that a library patron can be anywhere in the community, state, country, or another country. A library patron is no longer defined, therefore, as that person that walks through the doors of the library. Given that most public libraries receive a majority of funding from their local communities, libraries will not necessarily want to serve patrons beyond their communities. Public libraries will, however, need to consider ways in which to provide access to digital resources to those individuals and/or institutions that will not enter the library building—e.g., schools, local governments, and residents with in-home computers.

• Measure and evaluate the impact of electronic networked services. Many of the difficulties public libraries face in justifying the provision of digital services is attributable to a lack of systematic and quantifiable collection of both network performance and impact data. There is a growing body of literature for the collection of such data (see Bertot & McClure, 1996a, 1996b; Newby & Bishop, 1996; McClure & Lopata, 1996; McClure, 1994), and libraries need to begin the process of incorporating such data collection activities into their more traditional collection processes (e.g., circulation counts). Without such data, pub-

lic libraries will have to rely on the limited power of anecdotal data to sway community leaders, patrons, and policy makers of the importance of library-provided digital services.

• Train, train, and train some more. Libraries cannot move into the digital age without knowledge of the key components that comprise that digital age. The experience of these writers is that too many public librarians are unfamiliar with basic networking and desktop technologies. Until the profession is computer and network literate, and can apply this literacy to the provision of services, development of a vision and transition to the digital will be difficult indeed.

These only comprise the beginning or first level of specific strategies that one can recommend for public libraries to be successful in the digital age. But, to a large degree, that success will be determined by the individual leadership, vision, and planning of the library director and staff.

DIVERSITY OF LIBRARY COMMUNITIES

One of the most interesting changes that will affect public libraries is defining their community. As public libraries establish their presence on the net, their *community* will include not only their local geographic community but also their virtual community of users. Already we see how the virtual public library is drawing new communities together. The notions of the public and the community as used in the Benton Report will need to be recast for service roles of public libraries in the digital age. Indeed, public library communities in the digital age are likely to only become more diverse.

In a famous quote attributed to Tip O'Neil, then U.S. Representative to Congress from Massachusetts, O'Neil quipped that "all politics are local." With apologies to Tip O'Neil, the authors would argue that "all public libraries are local." By this we mean that each library will have to develop specific strategies for what will work best in its particular setting and for its particular community—geographic and virtual. In short, national roles, national visions, etc., while possibly helpful, will not remove responsibility for public librarians to design their particular strategy to move to the digital age in "their" particular "community" setting.

In a recent special Fall 1996 issue of *Daedalus* titled "Books, Bricks & Bytes," a number of excellent papers discuss the future of public libraries and their transition to the digital age. Marcum (1996) notes that findings from case studies that the Council on Library Resources conducted (with Kellogg funding) showed: "In traveling to these libraries, the Council's staff realized that there is no single answer about how technology can be used by public libraries to serve their communities or to provide greater public access to information resources" (p. 94). Marcum further notes that the successful libraries looked to their communities for partnerships with local organizations and various individuals to help

set goals and objectives; that they had strong leaders with vision; resources (relatively speaking) to use digital technology; and community-centered strategies for making the transition.

The Benton Report found little agreement among librarians as to strategies for entering the digital age, and reports that "polarized perceptions" between librarians and the public are not surprising. Research that lacks input from a diverse set of participants often fails to identify solutions, as participants fall into a "Group Think" situation. More useful for many public librarians is a "Best Practices" approach as outlined in Fidelman (1997) for moving to and exploiting the Internet in a public library environment. He notes, however: "Finally, keep in mind that while you are not a pioneer, your own situation is unique. Each community and library has its own character, staff, base of preexisting facilities, and external context of existing and planned networks" (p. xi). Many public libraries will find the time spent on reading Fidelman's book more worthwhile, as it offers specific strategies for public libraries to enter and sustain their presence in the electronic networked environment.

In our work with a range of public libraries, we find that, not only are there multiple answers about how to use technology successfully, but also that one or two champions and leaders on the library staff can almost single handedly bring the library into the digital age successfully. Leaders do make a difference. The battles for successfully transitioning into the digital age will be won and lost by the degree to which individual library leaders develop strategies that offer a vision, that draw upon the community's strength and inputs, and that marshal resources to reach that vision. These strategies and visions will be diverse because public libraries live in very diverse communities with diverse people, diverse politics, diverse needs, and diverse dreams. Which vision and strategy a public library selects may be less important than having a vision and strategy.

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