

Public Library 2.0: Towards a New Mission for Public Libraries as a ‘Network of Community Knowledge’

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Abstract

Argues that currently there are no proper mechanisms for capturing, preserving and disseminating community knowledge, and proposes that public libraries in the digital age should take on a new role whereby they should act not only as a gateway to knowledge, but also as a platform facilitating the creation of, and access to, local community knowledge. Proposes a model for PL2.0 where public libraries can take on this new role to build a network of community knowledge.

Introduction

Public libraries all over the world, and particularly in the UK, are struggling to find a new, unique and vital source of value. Following the vision of people such as Andrew Carnegie, they started out in the nineteenth century as ‘street corner universities’. Now, however, Internet and web technologies provide distance learning at all levels and in all subjects to people in their homes and workplaces. Public library enquiry desk services have seen web search engines take over their role. Subsequently, public libraries moved into lending fiction books and later moved on to lend records, tapes, CDs and DVDs, and most recently they have begun to espouse reader development. However, competition from the private sector has become intense, with bookshops and media rental outlets becoming more customer-friendly, and with web-based postal delivery operations, and local charity shops and supermarkets, offering popular selections at low cost. In response, public libraries have generated an ever-increasing range of services, including mobile libraries, services for ethnic minorities, children and the elderly, homework clubs, e-government portals, cybercafés, newspapers and health advice, in an attempt to be all things to all people. As a result their public image lacks focus, spreading as it now does from the traditional Victorian knowledge storehouse to modern-looking ‘Idea Stores’ (would-be shops) and various versions in-between. Public libraries are now being attacked from all sides: they are accused of not lending enough books (Coates 2004) as well as offering new services which are not being used. This paper provides a new vision for a public library, parts of which have already been articulated in various forms. We propose that this new vision will give the public library a unique and vital community role, one that cannot be subverted by advances in technology or private sector competition.

PL2.0: What and Why?

ICT and Internet technologies have changed the nature of libraries in all sectors, and they have also changed the perception and expectations of the user community. While

digitisation has become one of the major activities of libraries over the past few years, with the appearance of many digital library services, the state of recent developments is far from ideal, as John Dolan (currently Head of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, which is responsible for managing public library development in England) argues in a recent interview in the *Guardian* newspaper, in which he states that much progress to date has been about "translating 19th century and 20th century services to a digital format, rather than creating new services". Now, he says, the challenge is to build library e-content into community-based, interactive resources:

‘The next opportunity is to create "a different library that is not a copy of the existing library; a parallel library of content, services and facilities that can only be delivered on the web or that are best delivered on the web." That, he says, is a "cultural change".’ (Alden 2006)

This type of radical change, creating new services by exploiting new web technologies, is currently a hot topic in librarianship, under the banner title of ‘Library 2.0’. Library 2.0 is all about rethinking library services in the light of re-evaluating user needs and the opportunities produced by new technologies. Which currently under-used or unexploited resource do public libraries possess, that, with the application of cutting-edge Internet/web technologies, could give them back a central role in the life of the local communities they serve? How can we realise John Dolan’s vision of a ‘cultural change’ in public library services?

Local community knowledge is extremely valuable for the local community, and local knowledge may be useful both for local and global consumption. Valuable information can be gathered about local expertise in areas such as handicrafts (for example, certain parts of Scotland are famous for their knitting); or the recollections of people who have been involved in certain incidents, such as a war or natural disaster; or interesting memories such as the visit of celebrities or politicians (eg the G8 summit at Gleneagles).

There are of course examples of ‘local’ directory services on the Internet, such as the chains of city sites run by Craigslist and Gumtree. However, these services are never ‘local’: they are aimed at large cities and their content is essentially commercial advertisements, not knowledge, tips or advice. Everyone, from individuals to national and international government bodies, is agreed on the value of the community. This is why we are proposing a new model for public libraries which re-focuses them on the vital task of managing the knowledge inherent in their local communities by forming a network of hubs for sharing and disseminating that knowledge.

PL2: The Principles

Looking for inspiration in the most fundamental statement of library and information concepts that we could find, we turned to Ranganathan’s famous five principles (Ranganathan, 1963) to underpin our proposal for Public Library 2.0:

1. Community knowledge is for use
2. Every user should have access to his or her community knowledge
3. All community knowledge should be made available to its users

4. Save the time of the user in creating and finding community knowledge
5. Community knowledge grows continually.

We will now examine each one of these principles to determine what it means for a new public library model.

Principle 1. Community knowledge is for use

The value of a community is the knowledge it possesses. People who leave a community will have memories, but those memories will lose value over time. People outside a community will be able to study it through resources visible to outsiders – such as local histories, local newspapers, maybe even web cams - but will lack an essential ‘groundedness’ in their knowledge of local geography, buildings, events, customs, social groupings, families and individuals.

Local knowledge comes in two forms. Much of it will be in the heads of local people. Some will be in a physical or digital form, most of which will be in personal ‘collections’ (e.g. an album of family photographs, a video of a school play, an MMS (Multimedia Messaging Service) picture of a wedding service). Public libraries will also have local collections, relating to the communities they serve, typically a mixture of formally published material - newspapers, local government records - and informal ones like newsletters, archival papers and donated items.

Little has been carried out in public libraries to digitise local resources. Most digitisation has been for resources of national and international importance. For example, the National Library of Scotland (NLS) on its Digital Library page (<http://www.nls.uk/digitallibrary/index.html>) provides a vital collection of digital resources on major figures and events in Scottish history and rare historical documents. There are a host of Scottish digitisation projects with web-accessible resources, for example the Glasgow Digital Library (<http://gdl.cdli.strath.ac.uk/>), Scottish Archive Network (<http://www.scan.org.uk/>), Scottish Poetry Library (<http://www.spl.org.uk/>) and more. The largest is SCRAM (<http://www.scran.ac.uk>) which offers access to the same digital resources as those available through the NLS but also incorporates resources from other major institutions like the National Museums of Scotland and from Scottish public libraries. A recent evaluation of a Scottish Executive initiative to fund SCRAM’s use in public libraries (Chowdhury, McMenemy and Poulter, 2006; McMenemy et al 2005; McMenemy and Poulter 2005) revealed, amongst other things, that public library users of all ages were keen on resources with which they could identify: on Scotland, on their specific locality and on their family origins. However, they wanted these resources as part of a free service which they could access from home if they wished.

Principle 2. Every user should have access to his or her community knowledge

Knowledge is for sharing; community knowledge becomes valuable only when it can be accessed and used by others, and facilitating the creation and wider use of this knowledge should be the new role of public libraries. If public library staff have a new role, so do people in the local community. The previous mission of the public

library saw local people as recipients of the content that was provided by and through the public library. We regard this passive role for local people as being outdated, primarily through changes in the capacities of personal devices; public library users can now be consumers as well as creators of knowledge.

Principle 3. All community knowledge should be made available to its users

While the second principle states that every user should have access to the community knowledge, thus highlighting the point that public library users are no longer only the consumers but are creators of information as well, the third principle emphasises that no community knowledge should be allowed to be wasted. Rather, public libraries should facilitate the creation of such knowledge so that it is recorded and preserved, and the knowledge that is now in the people's memory and in personal collections, as well as the wealth of experience and expertise of the local community, should not be allowed to be lost. Once such knowledge is created, proper mechanisms should exist to make it available to local as well as remote users, thus completing the knowledge cycle.

Principle 4. Save the time of the user in creating and finding community knowledge

We would agree with Beagrie (2005) that what he calls 'digital memory' is becoming increasingly important as the spread of portable, convenient digitisation devices (for sound, images and video) grows ever wider, with the result that proper provision for 'bottom-up digitisation' by individuals, as opposed to the top down variety from large organisations, is going to become ever more prevalent as time goes on.

Just like the paper records of past lives, the digital records of current lives are accumulating in an *ad hoc* manner but in a much greater quantity and variety. They completely miss formal publication channels and those items that do end up on the Internet/web suffer from its disorganisation as an uncontrolled and unmanaged repository. Internet-based tools have two disadvantages. While commercial sites thriving off user-uploaded ('bottom-up') content are massively popular, e.g. Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com/>) and Youtube (<http://www.youtube.com/>), and have vast amounts of content, they are by default 'global': searching for any locality, say a locality in Scotland, will produce only a handful of disparate resources. Second, these sites encourage people not only to contribute digital content but to 'label' it with terms for retrieval later. However this labelling (known as 'tagging' or 'folksonomies') is notoriously bad and lacking in any consistency.

Making local connections via the Internet is difficult. The popularity of sites such as Myspace and FriendsReunited comes from their ability to give their users a means of linking between themselves according to work locations, interests, clubs and hobbies. Yet, as global or national tools, they fail to cover localities in any detail. Finally, there is a need for moderation of content when discussion takes place. Potentially, public library staff are ideally placed to fill the role of advisors on local content creation, management and implementation of controlled description, as well as access schemes and the moderation of content and discussion. As discussed in the groundbreaking document published by the LIC, *New Library: The People's Network*:

There is a widely held view that librarians will play a significant role in helping users adapt to and embrace ICTs in their daily lives. A European perspective on this role is cited in the European Commission report 'Public Libraries and the Information Society' (Thorhaug *et al.*, 1997).

Library staff have already been involved in helping organise local content and in moderating local contacts. The IKnow Gateshead public library portal, run by John Dolan (<http://www.asaplive.com/Home/>) comes close in offering webmail, blogs and conferencing, a local history emphasis, a database of local societies and digitisation projects like Farne (for local music from the North East of England), but still does not quite push far enough into local digitisation. Another possible exemplar is Bradford's Communigate (<http://www.communigate.co.uk/brad/index.phtml>) which offers web portal-type services for its local community. There are examples of similar initiatives in Scotland: for example East Renfrewshire Public Libraries produced a local portal featuring many of these ideas (<http://www.barrhead-scotland.com>) and an award-winning Holocaust Memorial (<http://www.eastrenfrewshire.gov.uk/holocaust.htm>). A pioneering course in digitisation of local resources for students studying librarianship (Burton and McMenemy 2005) points the way forward in enabling library professionals to digitise resources successfully.

Principle 5. Local community knowledge grows continually

Community knowledge creation is a continual process. It is not a one-off activity, but rather a cumulative process so that, once started, the wealth of knowledge will increase – local community knowledge will be created and used by local people, re-read, re-interpreted and re-deployed – with the result that local knowledge will not only grow over time but will develop in multifaceted ways.

Because of the growth over time in the nature and types of local knowledge, the proposed new model of public libraries acting as local knowledge hubs must use existing standards and technology for digitisation as well as metadata for the management of, and access to, the digitised resources (Chowdhury and Chowdhury 2003). As well as forming a technical underpinning, a set of standards makes staff training easier. There should be no dichotomy between local, national and international standards for information storage and retrieval. We see the possibility of each public library using a standard system (yet to be developed) to enable each one to act as a local knowledge hub but also to allow its resources to be accessible by other local knowledge hubs and by any user on the Internet. It will be vital to obtain the support of national government agencies responsible for library standards (SLIC in Scotland, for example) to create a model system which embodies standards and which is interlinkable between instances of itself and the wider Internet.

PL2.0: Design Overview

A design overview of the PL2.0 is shown in Figure 1 where ‘public library 2.0’ is a network of community knowledge, which delivers these twin themes of access to, and a repository for, local content, along with connection ‘space’ for local people. The ‘library’ would be both a physical place in the local landscape and a busy portal in virtual space, offering local people access to local knowledge.

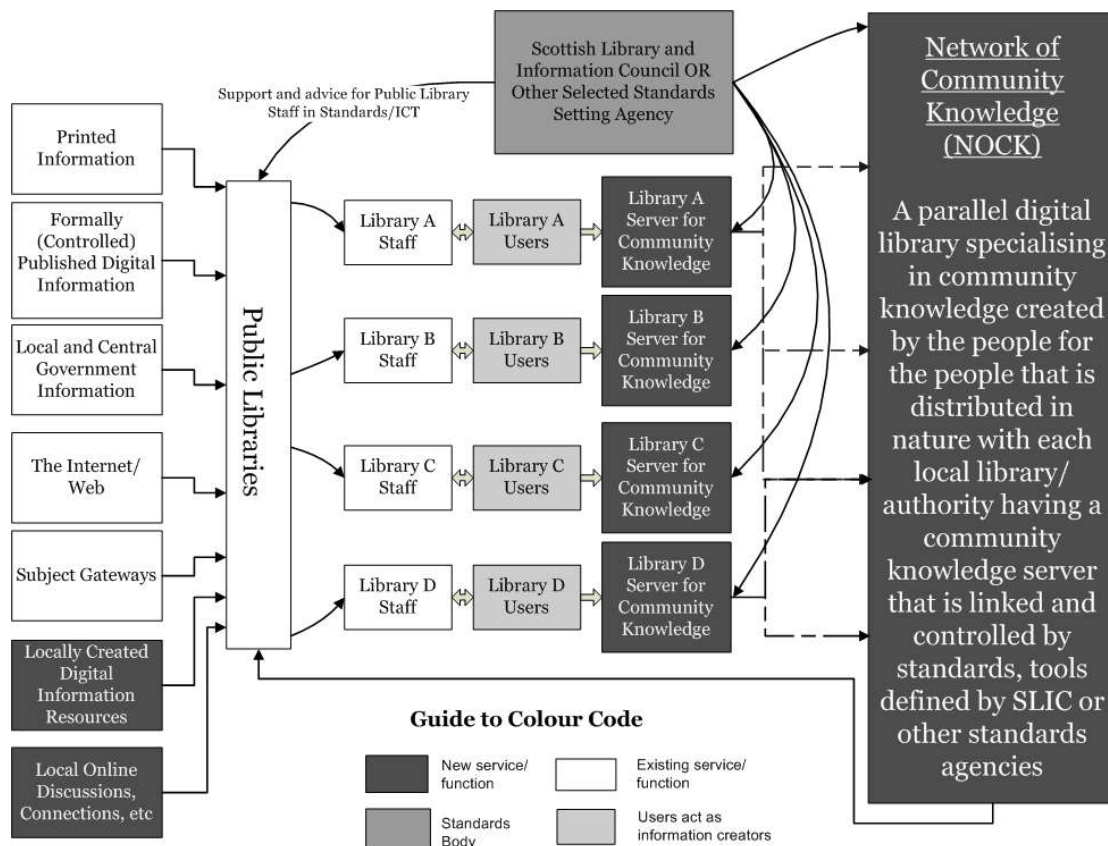


Figure 1. Design Overview of PL2.0

Conclusion

In conclusion, we are at one with Dolan in calling for a ‘cultural change’ in public library services, and propose that the new role of public libraries will be to move from solely providing access to knowledge to acting as a platform for the storage and dissemination of local community knowledge within the global context created by 21st century digital technologies. So far, public libraries have acted primarily as a mediator between knowledge creators (authors, publishers, websites, online information providers) and local people. We are now working on a specification for, and a trial implementation of, a common platform using open source technologies and standard metadata description and subject access schemes. A public library could use this common platform to enable their local community (with the help and guidance of library staff) to create both a local repository of digital resources and tools such as

personal pages, blogs and conferences to enable local people to share expertise and knowledge. It would be possible to integrate the common platform with traditional external sources of information, and the platform would also join seamlessly with examples in other public libraries, to form a globally unique and valuable resource.

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