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Public libraries – challenges and opportunities for the future

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries were established by means of taxes and overseen by governing bodies to provide equitable, optional, access to books or physical artefacts free of charge for everyone. Their basic characteristics have not changed but the services and how they are provided has been reinvented many times since the 19th century. Today the challenges facing libraries are profound. Continued technological advances, increased competition, demographic transformations, and financial constraints are putting huge pressures on libraries to innovate and to re-examine the services they offer. This paper examines these and the opportunities for future public library provision.

Keywords: public libraries, future, challenges, opportunities, innovation

1. Introduction

I would like to express my thanks to Kiran Kaur Gurmit Singh and the conference organisers for inviting me to give the keynote address at ICOLIS 2014. It is a great privilege for me to be here. All libraries, but particularly public libraries, are facing dramatic change and new challenges in the 21st century, providing us with exciting opportunities to reshape services. The theme of this conference – Library: our Story, our Time, our Future – encapsulates the vision of how public libraries have evolved, shaped by their past, how we are responding to the needs and challenges today, and how we need to prepare for the future. This address looks at the time line for public libraries with particular emphasis on the challenges now faced by librarians, novel responses to these, and what the future may hold.

2. Our Story

Providing public access to books is not new. The Romans provided access to scrolls in the dry rooms to the users of baths and tried to promote and establish libraries throughout their territories. However, the concept of public libraries, as we know them today, was slow to develop. It was not until the development of the printing press, moveable type, paper and ink, and the establishment of the publishing industry that books could be produced in any sizable number. Prior to the 18th century, books were still very expensive to produce and, although there were libraries, many were not open to the general public and books could only be used for reference purposes as they were often chained to desks to prevent theft. After this time, libraries in the UK, Europe and the US, became increasingly more public and able to offer books to borrow (Predeek, 1947). Institutions, like the Mechanics' Institutes in the UK, opened their doors to the public through subscription or by membership. Also, it is around this time that booksellers and publishers, recognising the commercial opportunities, established the concept of circulating libraries and social centres. These provided the means to sell books and to lend both reference and fiction books for a charge. A subscription fee was charged to entice the continued use of the library and the other commercial activities that were often also provided. For example, the mid-19th century, England and Scotland had 274 and 266 such subscription libraries respectively (Raven, 2006).

During the 19th and 20th centuries, public libraries, offering free, open access to all citizens, grew rapidly in the West, largely as a response to the industrial revolution which caused great social and economic changes. In the UK, the Public Libraries Act of 1850, which allowed local councils to levy a

rate of one halfpenny in the pound on taxpayers in order to pay for a library building, its upkeep and staff salaries, was largely as a result of the elite recognising the need for working classes to be educated and for them to be lured away from public houses and drink (Murrion, 1988, Hayes and Morris, 2005).

The first public libraries were often founded by donations, or were bequeathed by the wealthy to towns, parishes, churches or schools or towns (Katz, 1995). Many philanthropists, such as Andrew Carnegie, John Passmore Edwards and Henry Tate, helped fund large numbers of public libraries in different countries. Between 1883 and 1929, for example, 1,689 Carnegie libraries were built in the United States, approximately half of all American public libraries at that time (Jones, 1997).

Similar expansion of public libraries took part in other countries. In Australia, for example, the first public reference library opened in Melbourne in 1856, and this was followed by the Free Public Library in Sydney in 1869 and the Brisbane Public Library in 1869. Increasing numbers of public libraries were built and by 1935 the *Free Library Movement*, established in New South Wales, advocated for free public libraries to be supported by local authorities (Remington, 1945).

3. Our Time

3.1 Public libraries today

Public libraries were established by means of taxes and overseen by governing bodies to provide equitable, optional, access to books or physical artefacts free of charge for everyone. Their basic characteristics have not changed but the services and how they are provided has been reinvented many times since the 19th century. Public libraries are no longer just about the circulation of books; their remit is much, much larger as the many definitions attest. The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, for example, states that “The library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups” while a recent report by the Arts Council England (2014) defines public libraries as “trusted spaces, free to enter and open to all [where]..people can explore and share reading, information, knowledge and culture”. Watson goes further, while public libraries still provide information or “content” he suggests that they should be regarded as “a showroom for culture and learning .. a place that celebrates creativity, encourages exploration and discovery, helps people to work productively, and provides community engagement and empowerment” (Watson, 2014).

The key roles and functions of public libraries today are listed in ALA Policy Brief No 4 (Levien, 2011) as:

- The collection of both physical and virtual material and all that this entails
- The circulation of its collections
- The borrowing of media from other libraries and organisations
- The cataloguing of physical materials and the creation of portals of virtual materials
- The provision of access to catalogs
- The provision of a reference service
- The offering of tailored reader advice
- The provision of computer access
- The provision of special services for children, teenagers, young adults and older adults
- The organisation and provision of exhibitions relevant to the local community
- The provision of quiet, safe reading and work rooms

- The provision of meeting rooms and the facility to convene meetings
- The facility to serve as a hub for communities.

A more detailed list of what librarians actually do is provided by “Voices for the library” (2010). However, any list belies the complexity involved in carrying out these roles and functions which are being made ever more difficult given the challenges currently facing public libraries.

3.2 Major challenges facing public libraries

Predicting all the challenges that might affect public libraries in 2050 is impossible but there are four major challenges that will clearly shape future library services: continued technological advances, increased competition, demographic transformations, and financial constraints (Levien, 2011).

3.2.1 Technological advances

There are huge changes in the way we consume, interact and communicate with information and the media, affecting both our literacy and reading habits. The sheer quantity, range and availability of almost instantaneous information, would be unimaginable to a person 50 years ago. There is vastly more information available directly to users, by-passing libraries, and this is rising exponentially as virtually all published today, and much of what has been published, will be in digital format. Much information is free although unverifiable making it difficult to evaluate the credibility of sources. Information is being used on a just-in-time basis, the internet serving as a ready reference source, any time anywhere. People can compare and select services they wish to use at the click of a button. User created content is growing and information is increasingly being linked and enhanced in novel ways. Information is becoming more social enabling stronger ties between information providers/sources and users. Social media sites, for example, continue to proliferate offering instantaneous user-to-user information. Approximately one in seven people in the world now use a social networking site at least one a month, a 14.2% increase from 2012. The world’s largest social networking site is Facebook with the US having 146.8 million users per month. The Netherlands has the highest percentage of social media users (63.5%) with Norway second (63.3%). Less-developed markets, such as India, Indonesia and Mexico are showing the highest growth in social media use (Gaudin, 2013).

New technologies with ever greater range of facilities continue to emerge which shape our society and the way we deal with information. The types of devices are numerous, expanding, evolving and increasingly more mobile. In the future storage will be faster, physically smaller, cheaper with ever greater capacity. Communication will reach unimaginable speeds, high-quality displays will be ubiquitous linking with entertainment, information and other communication systems, cloud services will continue to proliferate as will new search and organisation tools and social networks. Today’s search technology, for example, is almost entirely based on text search, but it is quite possible that, in the future, systems would include the ability to search for attributes such as “taste, smell, texture, reflectivity, opacity, mass, density, tone, speed and volume” (Frey, 2014). There is

also likely to be a decline in keyboard use, creating a more verbal society. Frey (2014) predicts that “computers will become more human-like with personalities, traits and other characteristics that will give us the sense of being in a room with other humans”. “Old” media will continue to have added functionality that takes advantage of the new technologies. In the last decade, for example, mobile phones have transformed themselves from simple one-to-one telephone devices to ones which now have facilities to send or receive both text messages and email, access the internet, make online transactions, play games, take and send pictures and videos, record and watch videos, play music, download apps, and so on. There is no reason to suggest that they have yet reached their full potential. Similarly, the ebooks of today are undergoing rapid development to include graphic, audio, video, social interactivity, web interconnectivity and many other multi-purpose functions. Systems are also becoming ever more multi-functional but whatever might happen in the future, it is clear that technology development will not stand still and that libraries will have to adapt to accommodate new system functionality as well as new competitors.

3.2.2 Increased competition

As more information becomes available electronically and systems become ever more user-friendly with personalised functionality, driven by the sophisticated use of artificial intelligence and social media networks, many users will choose to by-pass libraries. Competition is clearly already apparent in many areas such as books, e-books, audio books, videos, and other forms of multimedia (Levien, 2011). There are over three million e-books available from Amazon to instantly download over the internet onto Kindles, together with a large number of newspapers and magazines (Amazon, 2014). Further, readers have access to over 12 million hard copy books on Amazon that can be purchased quickly and easily before being delivered to a specified address. Complicated algorithms that analyse purchasing patterns enable the system to provide book and other media selection advice to readers. Amazon also enables readers to read and produce reviews of materials. Other suppliers offer similar services. Google Books (2014), for example, is scanning and making searchable collections of several major research libraries. Called the Google Books Library Project, the aim is “to make it easier for people to find relevant books – specifically, books they wouldn't find any other way such as those that are out of print – while carefully respecting authors' and publishers' copyrights...[the] goal is [also] to work with publishers and libraries to create a comprehensive, searchable, virtual card catalog of all books in all languages that helps users discover new books and publishers discover new readers”. Audio books are available from a number of suppliers, Audible.co.uk, and digitalaudiobooks.co.uk, for example, each has over 100,000 titles to choose from. Netflix enables users to “watch a millions of TV programmes and films anytime, anywhere” using a variety of different devices with a monthly subscription, currently £5.99 a month (Netflix, 2014), whereas Rhapsody and iTunes each provide downloadable access to a huge library of digital music and, in the case of iTunes, other media. While no public library can compete with the sizable online collections on offer from these types of vendors, libraries do have some advantages. For example, librarians can provide personable unbiased advice, help and support; loans and services are largely free;

collections are specifically selected for local communities; books and artefacts can be seen and sampled without first being purchased; and lastly, books are immediately available, unless on loan (Levien, 2011). Further, libraries are fighting back with their own e-book collections made available through aggregators, such as EBSCOhost, Credo, Bloomsbury, EBL (EBook Library), ebrary, NetLibrary, and Overdrive. Some publishers, such as Elsevier, Springer Science+ Business Media, Wiley and Cambridge University Press, also supply ebooks directly to libraries (CILIP, 2013).

3.2.3 Demographic and social trends

Population growth is continuing in almost all countries of the world (World Bank, 2014). The UK, for example, will have an estimated population of 70 million by 2027 (IPOS Mori, 2012), up from 64.1 million in 2013. Similar trends are found in the United States where the population is projected to rise from 309 million in 2010 to 438 million in 2050 with approximately 80% of this being attributable to the influx and the descendants of immigrants (Levien, 2011). As a result of migration many countries are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Net migration to the UK, for example, accounted for 62 per cent of population growth between 2001 and 2008 (IPOS Mori, 2012). In America, nearly one in five people are projected to be an immigrant in 2050, compared to one in eight in 2005 (Levien, 2011). Further, populations are aging. In the UK the fastest growth in the population is in the 65+ and 85+ age groups. It has been estimated that by 2031, 22 per cent of the population will be aged 65 or over and 5 per cent of the population will be aged 85 or over ((IPOS Mori, 2012). In America it is predicted that in 2050 over 25% of people will be aged over 65 compared to less than 18% in 2000 (Levien, 2011). How do libraries address these demographic changes which are likely to exacerbate social inequality and put increased demands on services?

In addition to demographic changes, there are differences in how people live. There is far greater reliance on technology for both work and free time. Longer working hours, accentuated by the expectation of 24/7 connectivity, means that people have less time for social activities unconnected with those online. Since there is an ever increasing range of social activities on offer, public libraries have to be creative if they are to compete.

3.2.4 Financial constraints

Public debt, as a result of low economic growth and market uncertainty, has given rise to public spending cuts globally which have affected public library provision. The UK, for example, has experienced year- on-year budget cuts, 4.4% in 2012/13 and around 5% in 2013/14 (CILIP, 2012). Many libraries are now forced to operate with the use of volunteers to prevent closure. During 2012/13 the number of volunteers in public libraries rose by a massive 44.5% (CILIP, 2012). Often, devolution of power to local municipals has also resulted in the number of public debates over how taxes should be spent and more variability in library service provision across countries. When faced

with a choice of whether to cut essential services such as those pertaining to health or public libraries, the latter usually suffers especially when statistics show that library visits are declining.

4. Our future

4.1 Addressing the major challenges

Many countries have been addressing the future of public libraries in light of the numerous challenges posed. The UK is no exception. In 2013, the Arts Council England published the outcomes of workshops aimed to elicit the views of stakeholders when envisioning the future of public libraries (Davey, 2013). It was concluded that the core purpose – *the provision of access to reading, information, and resources which support learning and knowledge for all* – will be as relevant in 10 years' time as it is today. However, Davey (2013) pointed out that the purpose will need to be discharged in very different ways. Instead of waiting for customers to visit libraries, librarians will need to be much more proactive, reaching out to engage communities and seeking those who would benefit from their expertise. In addition to providing face-to-face and virtual support for self-learning, self-teaching, and information literacy development, librarians would be expected to promote the use, access, sharing and the creation of online information.

To achieve this envision, Davey (2013) proposed four priorities for a 21st century public library service. The first is placing “the library as the hub of the community”. Libraries will need to provide more flexible physical spaces that are managed with their local communities and, where possible, co-located with health, leisure or art venues to enable skills exchanges, more out-reach and cost reduction. The challenge will be to think creatively about physical space management and how this can be effectively integrated with an interactive virtual presence. The second is making “the most of digital technology and creative media”. Libraries need to keep abreast of new technologies, actively promoting community connectivity and the teaching of new digital skills so that no-one is excluded. The challenge here will be to develop open ICT infrastructures that improve the virtual library experience and encourage innovation. The third is ensuring “that libraries are resilient and sustainable”. The key message here is that libraries need to find new ways of cutting costs, new sources of funding and new ways of working. Effective library promotion to all stakeholders is also essential to ensure its service value is fully recognised. To this end, libraries are being encouraged to actively encourage consumers to become involved in the design, delivery and management of their library services. They are also being encouraged to explore how they can be involved in the delivery of other services and conversely, how other services can be involved in the delivery of library services. The fourth is delivering “the right skills for those who work for libraries”. Librarians of the future will not only need to be savvy in the use of new technologies and the teaching of digital literacy, but also be entrepreneurial, flexible and innovative; have the ability to reach out , serve and

connect diverse communities and individuals; and be proactive in the formation of new partnerships. This is a tough order which must be partly addressed by the teaching at library schools.

In the USA the ALA's Policy Brief *Confronting the Future* (Levien, 2011) covers similar ground, but interestingly the report describes the challenges public libraries face being on four dimensions, each with a "continuum of choices lying between two extremes". The first is physical to virtual libraries. How much material do you physically hold in the library and how much do you make virtually available? What proportion of the libraries services, such as answering queries, finding and providing materials and so on should be made available through the internet? The second dimension is individual to community libraries. At one end of the spectrum is services aimed solely at individuals, serving their needs on one-to-one basis, at the other is services aimed specifically at communities focussing, for example, on the provision of workspace, enabling and enhancing community projects through creative use of new technologies, holding events, organising exhibitions, and creating and maintaining records. The third dimension is collection to creation libraries. The two extremes here are libraries which are purely providers of information in either virtual or physical form and where they become enablers or creation libraries whereby authors, editors, performers, individuals or groups are helped to create their own content using a variety of media for either worldwide or personal distribution. The fourth dimension is portal to archive libraries, which is concerned with how much of their collections are owned by libraries. In the extreme case, libraries become portals giving access to materials owned or hosted solely by other organisations. At the other end of the spectrum, they might only offer access to materials owned by them in either physical or virtual form. Deciding where on these dimensions libraries should aspire to will be different for different libraries, authorities and even countries. Like, the Arts Council England report (Davey, 2013) the ALA policy brief (Levien, 2011) discusses a number of cross-cutting themes such as library competencies, the need for collaboration and consolidation, digitisation, personalisation and social networking, the role of archiving and cataloguing, and the need to keep libraries free at point of access. The policy brief also suggests a seven-step strategy for envisioning the future of a library:

1. Establish its mission and goals by determining the needs of individuals and communities it serves
2. Consider external trends and forces that may affect the future of the service
3. Perform a critical assessment of its strengths and weaknesses relative to other potential providers
4. Formulate strategic imperatives based on 1, 2 and 3 above
5. Based on 4 examine alternative visions for its future and determine which are feasible
6. Decide where on the four dimensions it should aspire and how change can be achieved
7. Monitor and evaluate progress

Other futures projects and reviews have been undertaken by other countries. For example, Bookends in New South Wales (State Library, New South Wales, 2009), explored what their public library service might look like in 2030, and The Future of the Dutch Public Library exercise, carried out in 2008, made projections for 10 years ahead (Huysmans and Hillebrink, 2008).

4.2 Innovative examples shaping ideas for the future

It is encouraging that public libraries are already responding to the many challenges they face. There are many examples of innovation which can be used for inspiration, or even adopted or adapted by other libraries. However, it is important to recognise that innovation is only “fresh for a moment”, they have a shelf life, and that “there is no one-size fits all solutions” (Peachey, 2014). Many current day innovative practices are described in Envisioning the library of the future. Phase 1: a review of innovations in library services (IPOS, ud). The report, based on desk research, outlines innovation in the entire library service, innovation in individual parts of the service, innovation in funding and organisational models, libraries adopting distinctive local definitions of purpose, innovation in library systems, and examples of applying the concept of “public library” in new relevant ways. Examples are given of flagship libraries such as Canada Water Library, the Library of Birmingham and Delf Concept Library known as “DOK” in addition to smaller scale projects such as the Digital Bazaar, a monthly event in Lambeth Libraries where local volunteers provide help and advice in using new technologies. Other examples include the use of Fab Labs that provides the equipment for users to make things creatively, the use of Reading Gloves to enable electronic story-telling interaction, interactive exhibitions, digitisation projects, bibliotherapy groups, the creation of online book groups using Skype, creative writing and self-publishing groups, one-to-one clinics for local businesses, free interactive online legal services, the use of interactive games to draw new users, inter-lingual services, and innovative co-location and collaborative projects.

5 Conclusion

Public library services have come a long way from their first origins. The stereotypical image of a public library just there to lend books is long dead. To their credit, librarians have adapted and reinvented library services many times to meet the increasing changing needs of their cliental. However, today the changes and challenges confronting libraries are profound. Addressing the new technological, social and economic forces will need radical reinvention if libraries are to survive and thrive. Libraries of the future are likely to be focused on:

- being more community based in which local people are more involved in the design, development and running of its services

- reaching out and connecting local communities and individuals encouraging them to be more creative, innovative and entrepreneurial, particularly important here will be the use of social media
- having better outreach to disadvantaged groups
- creating more flexible physical and virtual 24/7 functionalities
- offering more digital resources to free up physical space for other functions
- having more seamless integration of new technologies at a faster, more innovative pace
- being more innovative in terms of income generation and the promotion of library value to funders and users
- having more highly trained, active, motivated staff who are well versed in the use of new technologies, digital literacies, life-long learning, and modern management techniques.

Particularly, important will be decisions on where in the following spectrums libraries decide to aspire to be: serving individuals or communities; providing physical or virtual services; providing collections or advocating creation of information; owning or providing access to materials held elsewhere.

This is our story, our time and our future. We do have challenging times ahead but there are huge, exciting opportunities to design and re-shape our public libraries to make them as relevant today as when they were first envisioned.

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