

Transformations: The Public Library in America

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at several areas in which American public libraries are beginning to transform themselves. These include: (1) their mission and roles in the community; (2) the provision of Internet access; (3) remote user access; (4) customer-driven services; and (5) the changing roles and functions of librarians. It also examines some of the other controversial issues that are confronting public libraries as they implement technological change.

초 록

공공도서관이 스스로 변화되기 시작한 몇 가지 분야는 (1) 사명과 역할 (2) 인터넷 접근과 디지털 분배 (3) 원거리 이용자 접근 (4) 이용자 중심의 서비스 (5) 사서의 변화된 역할등이다. 시민들이 정보에 접근할 수 있도록 하는 도서관의 전통적인 역할은 출현하는 기술과 조화를 이루면서 지속되어야 하고, 세계적인 규모의 정보 네트워크에 공공도서관을 통하여 접근하고 사용할 수 있도록 허용하는 안전한 망으로서 봉사하는 것이 공공도서관의 역할로 그려진다. 지역사회 분석방법을 통한 원거리 이용자 접근과, 이용자 요구 평가를 통한 이용자 중심의 서비스가 이루어져야 하며, 웹마스터로서의 도서관 사서는 새로운 기술과 지식을 배우고 변화를 수용하는 자세를 가져야 한다.

Key words: U. S. public libraries; technology; Internet; organizational change

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Introduction

There are over 16,000 public library outlets in the United States, serving a population of 264 million, that are open to the general public and are funded primarily through local taxes. They are found in small towns and villages, in large cities and metropolitan areas. They have been part of the country's societal landscape since the mid-1800s.

The public library began as an innovative concept, aimed at meeting the needs of a society that was rapidly moving from an agrarian economic base to an industrialized economy. The primary purpose of the public library was the self-education of the local community. It was to be the vehicle through which people could improve themselves and thus contribute to the betterment of society at large. Through the provision of free reading material, the public library sought to provide uplift and enlightenment to the general public, and in so doing, to foster the educated, informed citizenry necessary to sustain a democratic society.

Although public libraries began as an innovative concept, over the subsequent decades of their development they tended to become less innovative and more cautious and reactionary. When changes were implemented they were aimed at expanding the number of users in order to encourage increased tax support. As a result, the library's initial educational mission was broadened rather quickly to include recreation, information and cultural purposes. Services and programs were added that were supposed to appeal to more and more people. These early evolutionary changes that occurred in public libraries were largely unplanned. The transformation of their mission and goals was brought about, not by design, but by reactionary attempts to reach more people. The result was a sort of aimless drift toward the addition of more and more services, with a growing uncertainty as to what the library's fundamental reason for being actually was.

Until the closing decades of the twentieth century, many of the transformations in public library services and programs tended to reflect non-controversial or incremental change, with perhaps slight improvements in performance. These changes often turned out to be extensions of traditional programs that generally did not result in substantive changes in the library's role in society.

As a result, American public libraries have been characterized as well-established, bureaucratic institutions whose managers tend to be reactive rather than

proactive, and are unwilling or unable to take the risks generally associated with vision and innovation?two attributes that are seen as becoming increasingly more important to the long-term health and survival of organizations. There is a persistent assumption by some in the broader library and information profession that public libraries are so entrenched in their nineteenth century origins and twentieth century traditions that they will not be able to survive very far into the twenty-first century.

This pessimistic view of the future of public libraries fails to take into account that public librarians have been sustained throughout their long history by a strong instinct for their institution's survival. They have developed a keen respect for the wishes of the library's local constituents. They work hard at maintaining the satisfaction of their regular users and at developing the good will of the public at large and of local civic and political leaders.

Obviously, technological changes taking place today are rapid and profound, propelling society away from its industrial base toward an information and service economy. Societal change is once again requiring public librarians to become risk-takers and innovators. And many are doing so. An inevitable transformation process has begun and new societal roles for public libraries are emerging along with the emergence of newer technologies.

This article looks at several areas in which public libraries have begun to transform themselves: (1) mission and roles (2) Internet access and the digital divide (3) remote user access (4) customer-driven services and (5) the changing role of the librarian. It also examines some of the issues and constraints currently associated with the library's technological future.

Mission and Roles of Public Libraries

Traditionally, public libraries have considered their mission to encompass four broad areas: education, information, recreation, and culture. Among the roles that public libraries have established in order to fulfill their mission are:

- formal education support center
- independent learning center

- children's door to learning
- research center
- community information center
- reference library
- popular materials library
- community activities center

Each of these roles is dependent on the library as a physical place. Each is designed to serve the local community. However, with the advent of the Internet into public libraries, a transformation in mission and roles appears to have begun. As McClure and others have noted,

The collection of information to which a library user had ready access less than a decade ago was limited to what was contained within the library's four walls. Today, physical location no longer determines access to knowledge or access to services. Physical location no longer limits what a citizen can buy or sell, listen to or watch, or with whom one communicates. Knowledge is no longer principally conveyed using text. The introduction of the Internet made this possible(McClure, Ryan, and Bertot, 2002, p. 41).

A growing number of public libraries are now offering electronic information services to the general public. These include:

- CD-ROM databases
- remote database searching
- microcomputers
- microcomputer software
- online public access catalogs
- dial-up access to online catalogs

Despite a series of significant changes, some of the traditional roles of public libraries may remain with us into the future. For example, there are those who contend that the library is still a physical place and even in a virtual world it should continue to

serve in the role of a meeting place and community information center (Besser 1996). With the stress on lifelong learning, perhaps the traditional focus on the library as a place for self-education and personal development is worth retaining, at least in the near term. Educational and literacy programs are likely to continue to appeal to the public and continue to be funded for some years yet.

A significant purpose of the public library has long been its mission to serve the underserved. This has come to be referred to as serving as an on-ramp to the information superhighway for those without the resources or the skills to access it on their own. This role may also include providing adaptive technologies that will transform digital information into alternative formats for people whose vision is impaired or who cannot understand the printed word (Besser 1996).

Finally, the library's traditional role of guaranteeing public access to information should remain compatible with emerging technologies. This role means more than simply providing access to the library's users. In a digital environment, where an increasing number of people get information from sources other than libraries, this means that librarians must fight for basic library principles (such as equal access and fair use) in environments outside library walls. When technological developments and legislation threaten to weaken these principles, librarians need to join with other public interest and advocacy groups to see that long-held principles are retained.

Internet Access and the Digital Divide

In 1994, only one in ten American library systems provided Internet access. In 2000, 95% of all U.S. library locations provided this service (National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, 2000). Much of this increase in Internet access through public libraries is at least partially the result of Federal programs such as the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) and the E-rate (or Universal Service Program), both of which provide grants to State Library Agencies that in turn provide technology-related funding to local libraries.

LSTA funds the use of technology for information sharing among libraries and for making library resources more accessible to underserved urban and rural

communities and to low-income residents and others who have difficulty using a library. LSTA grants have been used to automate materials selection and acquisitions, library catalogs, and circulation. These automation activities have served to advance resource sharing and interlibrary cooperation efforts. Also, many state libraries are using LSTA funding to acquire licenses for statewide use of online resources and full-text databases. As a result, small libraries, through their statewide online information networks, are able to offer their users access to many reference sources and periodicals that would not otherwise be possible.

The E-rate is a means by which the Federal government provides discounts to reimburse schools and libraries for expenditures involved in connecting to and using the Internet. Discounts for telecommunications services range from 20% to 90%, depending on economic need and location. Without E-rate grants, many libraries, especially smaller ones, would not be able to connect to the Internet or support the variety of computer applications for their communities that they now do.

Another major partner in fostering the spread of computer applications and Internet access among individual public libraries has been the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Grants from the Gates Foundation have allowed libraries in low income areas to initiate, expand, or maintain public access to computers and the Internet.

A recent study of Internet-related funding concluded that "1998-2000 was a unique time period for public library information technology infrastructure development because of the E-rate, LSTA, and the Gates Foundation awards: E-rate promoted infrastructure and telecommunications, LSTA promoted program development, and Gates provided necessary hardware and software" (McClure, Ryan, and Bertot, 2000, 2).

In an increasing number of public libraries the Internet is being incorporated into the library's mission and roles. Smaller as well as larger ones are becoming, or have the potential of becoming, the following:

- electronic information centers
- providers of patron information technology education and training
- centers of electronic lifelong education
- providers of access to governmental electronic information and services
- providers of access to citizens who would otherwise be without access
- partners in developing and maintaining community information networks

- providers of value-added information technology services (McClure, Bertot, and Beachboard, 1995).

Public librarians never quite succeeded at making their institutions into a “total community resource.” According to Marcum (1996), today’s public libraries, operating within the global networked environment, have the potential to be a community resource center, with the term “community” being defined in a very different way. Among their roles might be that of (1) creating, maintaining, and organizing electronic community information, (2) providing public access interactive video conferencing for the public to conduct a range of activities including electronic commerce and interaction with state, local, and Federal government, or (3) promote collaboration among schools, local governments, and other community groups to use the Internet.

Public libraries are seen as the ideal institutions to bridge the “digital divide,” or the gap that exists between the information “haves” and “have nots.” The idea of the public library serving as a safety net, allowing access and use of the global information network to those who cannot otherwise connect is a role that is often envisioned:

Librarians and educators would serve as electronic intermediaries, navigators, and instructors ? being actively involved in assisting people (to) best use the network. Parents, students, adult learners, educators and others could work interactively and inter-dependently on projects and activities that we can only begin to imagine now. The library, as a non-partisan and publicly-supported institution, with strong local community ties, is well-suited to serve in this role. A major role for public libraries, however, and the larger education community in the networked society, is to reduce socio-economic gaps in being able to tap the full potential of the network and provide equal opportunity to networked services and resources that are available to the public (Bertot and McClure 1998, 40).

Remote User Access

Perhaps one of the main transformations brought about by the Internet is the ability

of public libraries to offer remote access to their resources and services. More and more libraries are creating World Wide Web pages through which local users have access to their online catalogs and other services. In addition, access by anyone, anywhere in the world, is also possible. Reference service through e-mail is sometimes offered to remote users who are invited to "ask a librarian." In other instances libraries are offering virtual reference service through "real time" interaction between the user and the librarian over the web. Some public libraries are becoming developers of databases that are not available anywhere else. Examples of these include:

community-based information and referral files listing government services, social services, and human services

- query files of questions frequently asked by the public, with answers
- genealogy files for specific local geographic areas
- local newspaper indexes
- codes of state and local laws and regulations
- programming information and ideas for public performance
- annotated reading lists
- tour and day-trip itineraries for local historical sites(Isenstein 1992).

The multimedia environment of the Internet promotes the creation of virtual libraries through which remote users may tour the library or view special exhibits. As more public libraries' special collections become digitized, access to photograph, slide or other unique collections are becoming possible without traveling to individual libraries. Public libraries with a web presence are acquiring a higher profile that extends beyond their local communities.

Customer-Driven Services

Technological changes mean that public libraries of all sizes are now better able to serve the needs of their communities. But they first need to know what those needs are. There is so much information available that it can be overwhelming for

both the user and the librarian. As a result there is a definite need for customizing the services and information that public libraries provide to their users. Because many public libraries serve communities made up of ethnically diverse groups, it is often difficult for the library to understand the variety of needs that exists. One way many public libraries are addressing this problem is by using community analysis as a tool to gather information. This is a systematic approach, based on the collection of data about many characteristics of the community and its demographics.

Because the results are based on a formal study of the community, rather than intuitive feelings by the library staff, support is provided for any changes that the library decides to make. A community analysis (sometimes called a community needs assessment) is an essential element in a public library's strategic planning process.

The purpose of a community analysis is to assess the needs of a community and compare them with the services of the library in order to identify gaps in service and assist the library in making decisions about how best to satisfy the information and other library needs of the community. Implementing innovations and new programs or services, whether or not they are technology based can be an expensive proposition. It often requires that the library eliminate or cut back on an existing service by reallocating resources to the cost of a new service. The decisions regarding which services the library will continue, eliminate, or add should be made on the basis of the best available information. A user needs assessment can provide the necessary information.

A needs analysis is also an important part of the marketing strategies in which many public libraries are engaging. The idea is to identify customer needs, develop programs or services in response to those needs, and promote the services among those groups who have expressed a need for them.

Marketing is also related to developing and projecting a favorable image of the library not only to library users but also to those who hold the purse strings. The publications produced by the library and its web page or other online presence should be consistent in style and quality so that the term "library" and the name of the specific library connote a positive image in the minds of the library's customers.

The concept of customer-driven services has become an essential element for those

public libraries attempting to implement emerging technologies or develop innovative uses of the Internet. For such implementations to be successful, their users must perceive a need for the service as well as be aware that the library is offering the service.

Public librarians are giving attention to tools such as user needs analysis, marketing and strategic planning to aid their thinking and decision-making as they envision future directions for their institutions. This customer-driven focus represents a transformation from an earlier emphasis on providing services around what the librarians thought the users needed.

Changing Role of the Librarian

Along with the changes in libraries as institutions have come changes in the roles of librarians. With the proliferation of networked digital information, the librarian's role is shifting from caretaker of a physical collection to someone who identifies resources in collections housed elsewhere. Public librarians are beginning to spend much of their time creating web-based links to resources on the Internet.

This sort of activity is likely to continue to increase. The trend may be toward less in-person mediation by library staff as patrons access information directly. But there is also the implication that more of a behind-the-scenes mediator role will be occurring as librarians select and recommend specific web resources. This also means that library staff may have a greater role as instructors and troubleshooters(Besser, 1996).

The shift in focus from acquisitions to access has implications for other parts of the library's operations. For example, this shift may require a significant investment in equipment and training or the development of an infrastructure to support document delivery. And the process of selection can become even more time-consuming for a library that is pointing users to remote materials than for the library that is purchasing its own materials(web links have to be constantly maintained and reliability of information sources is difficult to ascertain)(Besser, 1996).

Despite claims of usability and user friendliness, it is becoming more and more

complex for the public to find, evaluate, and utilize information. Librarians are needed more than ever to teach the information literacy skills that have now become essential. Even people who are proficient at using information are overwhelmed by the amount that is available and the difficulty of sorting through it. Nancy Kranich has observed that:

To function successfully, citizens must be able to identify, evaluate, and apply information and communicate it efficiently and effectively. Over the coming years, librarians will work closely with their communities to identify information needs and develop self-sufficient, self-directed, lifelong learners who can utilize information strategically. With the dawning of the digital age, librarians must build information smart communities so that all Americans can flourish in the workplace as well as carry out the day-to-day activities of citizens (Kranich, 2001).

In discussing demands that library employers place on the staff, Richard Rubin (2000) suggests that employer expectations extend not only to the acquiring and implementing of new skills and knowledge, but also to the employee's willingness to learn new skills and adapt to changes without resistance. "Sometimes it seems that what employers want is not a person with new knowledge, but a new kind of person—the new librarian who operates comfortably and naturally in a technology-rich environment" (Rubin, 2000, 40).

It is probably worth noting that even small public libraries are finding it necessary to invest in a webmaster. In some instances, high school students are being recruited to help develop the library's web pages.

Issues and Constraints

There are a number of controversial issues related to Internet access with which public libraries are currently struggling. For example, how will we keep *children safe from pornography on the web or from predators lurking in chat rooms?* Long before computers or the Internet, public libraries were faced with the dilemma

of providing unrestricted access by adults, while at the same time protecting children from unsuitable materials. The answer provided by the American Library Association was that it was not the responsibility of the librarian to monitor the reading and viewing of children, but it was up to individual parents to supervise their own children's access to materials. This response has never entirely satisfied many of the communities that public libraries serve. Nor does it satisfy concerns that the public has about juvenile access to the Internet.

Public libraries use several methods to oversee Internet use:

- filtering software
- acceptable use policies
- internet rating systems

Although the Federal government is consistent in its attempts to force public libraries to employ filtering software, many libraries are resistant to the idea. There are two major objections: (1) filtering software tends to be unreliable ? it blocks sites that it should not block and it permits access to sites that should be blocked; and (2) the producers of the software make the decisions about which sites to block ? this to some librarians means that they would be abdicating their responsibility for selecting appropriate materials and turning that function over to producers and vendors instead.

A similar issue concerns "acceptable use" policies that public libraries are urged to develop. Acceptable use relates to certain types of web content that should not be viewed while using the library's computers. Some of these include:

- nudity and sex acts
- violence and profanity
- militant, racist, extremist, and intolerant groups
- illegal gambling
- fraudulent business ventures(Bocher 2001).

Acceptable use policies generally have two basic elements: (1) the library is not responsible for Internet content, its authenticity, or accuracy; and (2) parents are responsible for their child's access and use. Public libraries are usually advised to have their acceptable use policies approved by their board of trustees and reviewed by the library's legal counsel.

The Platform for Internet Content Selection(PICS) is a standard for Internet rating that describes levels of sex, nudity, violence, profanity and intolerance. Over 400,000 sites have PICS ratings by the Recreational Software Advisory Council on the Internet(RSACi). Most sexually explicit and "adult" sites strongly support PICS (Bocher 2001).

The Library Technology Consultant for the state of Wisconsin maintains a very useful web site that summarizes a number of concerns that public librarians have about Internet access. These concerns and issues include:

- intellectual freedom and first amendment issues
- access to inappropriate/questionable information resources
- copyright, responsible use, and the "free vs. fee" issue
- authenticity and accuracy of information
- privacy issues
- role of the government vs. the private sector
- the impact of the federal E-rate on Internet access
- controlling information overload via better organization, search engines and filter tools
- the broader social and cultural impact of living in cyberspace(Bocher, 2001)

This article has only briefly touched on a few of the issues and concerns of public librarians as they contemplate the future of the institution. Few librarians were able ten years ago to foresee the incredible impact that the Internet would have on their libraries. There are emerging technologies out there now that will undoubtedly have profound effects as well. In that regard, it should be noted that the transformation of the public library is an ongoing phenomenon, tied not only to changing technologies, but also to changes in American society.

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