The Future of the Public Library

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Introduction

“David concluded his session with a few photographs indicating the changed library situation. He captioned a black and white photo of a 1950s bookmobile with ‘This is not your library’ and showed photos of people with mobile devices, patrons using laptops in places clearly not a library (a coffee shop, a tree, and a meadow), with captions saying ‘This is your library.’” (King & Brown, 2009)

As the above quote is meant to indicate, libraries have already changed a great deal in the past few decades and will continue to change drastically in the upcoming decades in relation to the rapidly increasing effects that technology is having on library patrons.

This paper will explore the future of public libraries by examining some likely future directions public library service might take and how the public libraries have already changed and will continue to change in relation to the Internet and the influence of online information. These topics will be explored through both a literature review and through the examination of a current public librarian's response on a survey about the future of public libraries.

Literature Review

One thing that is important to note is that this current period of rapid change is not the first or the only time that the library has had to adjust to changing media and technology. Public libraries have been circulating materials other than books for decades now. Public libraries have adjusted the materials they have offered frequently in the past from offering player piano rolls to CDs. (Galbi, 2009) It seems that with the growing influence of the Internet and the materials it supplies some people feel that it is the end of libraries, or at least, public libraries. However, this is just not the case.
According to research done in 2007, there has been a decline in traditional circulation numbers for US public libraries. This decline seems to correlate to increased usage of digital media formats. In addition to this, the use of public libraries as a space does not seem to be in decline. So despite the declining numbers for traditional library circulation of print materials, the public libraries are still vital as both spaces and a means of accessing digital materials such as audio books. (Joint, 2008)

Along with this idea that libraries provide more than books is the “role of Internet access provider for the community is ingrained in the social perceptions of public libraries.” In many library communities, the public libraries are the only place where free internet access is available. However, this is only an issue in poorer communities where there is a digital divide. (Bertot, McClure & Jaeger, 2008) In areas where the patrons of public libraries can mostly access the internet from their own home, the Internet becomes the libraries’ competitor and not a resource. Many people do not feel the need to go to the library if they can just “Google” whatever information it is that they are seeking.

In an article by Carol Sheffer, the director of the Round Lake Public Library in New York, she addresses this issue of what is the need for an actual library when there is the internet, e-books, and all other sorts of information now available freely or cheaply:

What do you say when someone asks you that question? I polled a few friends to see how they responded. Each said that personal interaction was what made public libraries special and what made them vital to the communities they serve. Librarians:

- can help vet sources of information;
- recognize trusted websites and help users obtain the most accurate and timely data; and
• understand that not every answer appears on the first screen of results from an Internet search engine and that some organizations pay for prime placement. (2009)

Another issue with the increasing presence of technology in patrons’ lives is that not only do the libraries have to offer technological resources such as computers with internet access, but these computers should be up-to-date. It costs a lot of money for libraries to stay competitive with some patrons’ personal computers. (Bertot, McClure & Jaeger, 2008)

So while the patrons who have no internet access at all are aware of the libraries services because it is necessary for them to be if they want to use the internet, a large portion of people think that, because they have the internet, they don’t need the library. This is why it is so important for public libraries to utilize social networking sites and other technological tools that bring the library services to the patrons. This outreach is important, because outreach has the ability to turn non-users into users by making the services more convenient for everyone. (Pointon, 2009)

It seems that according to a study done in 2008, libraries have already begun to use social networking software successfully as a means of getting feedback from patrons. Although the technology can be used for so much more in the future, this is an excellent first step. Hopefully this first step will lead to more work with the social networking sites which can be used to help promote the libraries and its services. This task will be especially important in the future as it becomes more and more difficult for public libraries to be receive government funding. (Holt, 2009)

In my own personal work at a small nonprofit, one thing I’ve learned from our marketing people is that social networking sites, like FaceBook, seem like they are these large global
behemoths that would not necessarily mesh well with small local organizations. However, they are so useful to small and local organizations, because they are free, easy to use, and allow for cheap effective communication with many people at once. This idea seems to correlate closely with an article in 2006 which explores what a Public Library 2.0 should be like through the discussion of the Ranganathan’s famous five principles of public libraries from 1963. These are:

- Community knowledge is for use.
- Every user should have access to his or her community knowledge.
- All community knowledge should be made available to its users.
- Save the time of the user in creating and finding community knowledge.
- Community knowledge grows continually. (Chowdhury, Poulter & McMenemey)

When looking at the idea of social networking though these rough concepts, it is very easy to see how social networking would fit. These five concepts very much so seem to encourage community knowledge created for and created by the community members. However, this idea doesn’t always fit with what public librarians feel is both their role and the role of the public library in the community.

Some librarians still feel a desire to control the information created. Again I refer to the study done in 2008 by Rutherford:

This finding suggests that perhaps librarians’ desire to keep control of information is still widespread: one participant discussed the traditional librarian's status as controller and gatekeeper of information, saying that some staff were unwilling to change their role as the sole mediators of information content. To be fair, the issue of control and authority over information is a problem that extends beyond libraries. However, the researcher suggests that public libraries need to address
the broader issue of whether user-contributed content is desirable, and to what extent it should be encouraged. (Rutherford, 2008)

This seems to be a completely legitimate concern. While librarians want to encourage patronage in many ways, this quote points to a legitimate concern of allowing too much involvement from the patrons. If we return to the quote from Shaffer above about why public libraries are special, we can see the problem with too much public involvement in the production of materials. If the patrons are allowed too much freedom, there is a fear of a Wikipedia type situation where you have patrons accessing material that might or might not be accurate.

The other side of this is that librarians are busy and not always able to update information as often as wanted or necessary. Allowing patrons so much ability would lessen the workload of the librarians and increase the ability to provide patrons with information.

These contrasting points of view each have a valid point. Should a patron’s input be limited to library discussion forums, comments on blogs and questions on IM? Or should they actually be able to create their own content? Is it enough that patrons are able to supply better feedback to the professional librarians, the ‘gatekeepers’? It seems that from the conclusion of the Rutherford study that the concept of librarians as gatekeepers should remain with increasing feedback from patrons. However, this might very much change in the future.

Discussion of Survey Results

The librarian who filled out the survey for this paper is a Children’s Librarian at the Northeast Regional Library in Philadelphia. In the Free Library of Philadelphia system, there are 54 libraries. Of these 54, one is the Central Library and three are regional libraries. The Northeast Regional Library is next in size to the Central Library. It acts a branch library for the
area of central Northeast Philadelphia and the research library for the entire Northeast section of the city. This area of the city developed rapidly following World War II, and the Northeast Regional Library was built in response to this rapid growth. Ground was broken for this building in 1952. (Free Library of Philadelphia, 2010)

In the completed survey, the librarian indicated that the population served by this library was in the 100,000-249,999 range. However, when looking at the census statistics for the zip code in which this library is actually located the population was only listed as being 48,483. However when you look at the statistical information on the population on all the zip codes included in the Northeast section of Philadelphia, the population served by the library is actually 343,039. This number includes the populations for the following zip codes: 19111, 19114, 19115, 19152, 19149, 19124, 19134, 19137, 19135, 19136, 19154, and 19116. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000)

This library is intended to serve a large section of the city of Philadelphia (just over 20%) which has a total population of 1,517,550, but anyone in that the city of Philadelphia has access to this library. Philadelphia is a diverse city. 45% of the population is white, 43.2% of the population is black, .3% of the population is American Indian, 4.5% of the population is Asian, and the remainder is a mix other races and two or more races. Within this population only 24.4% of people 25 and older have achieved a bachelor’s degree, and 18.4% of the families live below poverty level. This percentage is twice as high as that of the entire country. So, this library is large and has to accommodate both middle class and those at or below the poverty level. This library has to serve the underserved. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000)

Of the technologies listed in the survey, the librarian who took it indicated that the Northeast Regional Library has a library website for both patrons and staff. Blogs are only used
internally at this library. Social networking sites, online image sharing, and YouTube are used both internally by the library staff at this library and externally by the patrons. (Cornwall, 2010)

The librarian had the following to say about what technologies were critical to meeting the needs of library patrons:

Social networking sites have worked wonders in keeping patrons up to date on the most current library information. It’s nice to use to share program ideas and information with other librarians, and as a children’s librarian, it’s a convenient way to keep in contact with teen patrons as well as young parents. Currently, the Free Library is focused on developing smart phone applications, so the near future will show what additional advancements in communication the library will put to use. (Cornwall, 2010)

This librarian confirms the importance of the social networking sites. However, she sees these sites mostly as a way of keeping the patrons informed and not as a way of garnering information from the patrons themselves. This is different than how the research in the literature review looked at the concept of social networking sites, but that does not mean this library cannot utilize the social networking websites as both a way of advertising events and program inexpensively and as a way of allowing patrons to offer feedback. In looking at the FaceBook page created for the Children’s Department at Northeast Regional, the page is fairly new and seems to have only come into existence in January. Therefore, patrons might just not be aware enough of this website to offer feedback yet.

In addition to the information about the social networking sites, it is interesting that she discusses the development of the smart phone applications. This is something that did not quite fit into literature review but that previously showed up in research for a different paper about
teens and technology. The trend in cell phones is moving more and more towards the smart phones. In previous research, it was discussed that because of this libraries need to be very mindful of how the websites were designed. In the very near future if not already, many patrons would be accessing the library websites from the smart phone devices, and the websites should be made compatible to this to encourage patrons to continue to visit the library websites.

When asked about barriers to implementing new technology, the librarian replied, “Developing applications and a more user-friendly web interface on the Free Library’s website is difficult if not impossible under our current financial constraints, but it is recognized as a future need. Short staffing cuts back on the time we can devote to keeping our FaceBook page up to date.” (Cornwall, 2010) This is obviously a problem that has been well-documented in Philadelphia news stories in the past year. The library has had its budget cut and lost staff. On most days there are at least a few unscheduled library closings due to staff shortages. This must greatly limit the time that the library staff has to devote to doing anything additional with technology. However, at this point in time, it is even more important for them to try to do this. This was briefly touched upon in the literature review.

It is even more important now to utilize these social networking sites for the inexpensive publicity it gives the library. This publicity is necessary to help reach new patrons and to help convince people of the importance of public libraries. While it is hard to find the time to do this kind of work, it could really help the library expand its public image and increase its funding. Although it is difficult to find the time to do this kind of work, it should be given some priority because of all the potential benefits.

When asked about how the library’s collection is likely to change in the next five years, this was the librarian’s response, “I think we will have more materials that are remotely
accessible, as well as a larger media collection. Our foreign language collections are also likely to shift language groups and expand. I think we will see a large influx of Arabic materials.”
(Cornwall, 2010)

The first part of this response is very much in line with the literature review. The library has adapted before, and it will continue to adapt to changing technologies. The collection will obviously begin to offer more items remotely and the media collection will become larger as more and more people request access to materials electronically and potentially from anywhere. This will help the library to become a more convenient source for patrons and will therefore increase usage even if that usage doesn’t actually involve entering the physical library building.

The second part of this response only indicates the need for the increased usage of the social networking websites and the encouragement of patrons to offer feedback on these sites. This will allow the patrons to request what languages they might like to have materials in. That way the librarians won’t have to wait for data from outdated surveys and studies. With the patrons more involved, the librarians will be able to act quicker to the changes in population and demographics. This might not always work when patrons do not speak English, but hopefully there would be enough people who speak both languages to indicate the shift. In addition to this, it is important to know how the population is changing so that both the collections and the programs can be adjusted accordingly.

Finally in response to a question about how the roles of public libraries will change in the future, she replies, “I think the library will become more involved in computer literacy instruction at all levels in the community. Rather than threatening our position, the digital age will make the library all the more necessary in helping our patrons to navigate their searches.”
(Cornwall, 2010) This is definitely in agreement with the idea in the literature review of
librarians retaining their role as gatekeepers. Librarians should be there in the future to guide patrons through both the use of new media and technologies and to guide patrons through the plethora of information available.

Conclusion

As was seen in both the literature review and the survey results, public libraries have changed very drastically in the past few years, but this is not something unusual. Libraries have always been changing and adjusting to fit the patrons’ needs, and they must continue to do so in order to remain effective in future years. In the survey, the librarian replied to a question about the potential changing nature of her job by saying, “It’s changed so dramatically in the year and a half I’ve worked here; I can’t help but think that will continue to be a trend.” (Cornwall, 2010) Librarians have been adjusting their jobs and the services they supply for decades, and they are doing the best they can to adjust quickly now to the changes caused by the constant influx of new technologies. Libraries will continue to change in order to meet new technological wants and needs of patrons. The only thing that hinders this is, not the desire to change, but the ability to change collections and services due to decreased funding and staff shortages.

Some of the ways in which libraries will change as indicated by both the literature review and the survey are through an increased presence on social networking sites, larger media collections as patrons move away from traditional books, making library materials available more readily from remote locations, allowing patrons to have more of a say in the running of the library itself (how extensive this becomes will depend).
References


http://libwww.freelibrary.org/branches/branch.cfm?loc=NER.


Appendix

Public Library Services Survey

Thank you for agreeing to take this survey about the future of public library services and about new technologies for library services. It should take you roughly 15-20 minutes to complete.

**General Library Information**

1. In what state (or country if outside of the U.S.) is your library located? (type in the box below)

   PA

2. How many people reside in your service population?

   - [ ] Less than 1,000
   - [ ] 1,000-2,499
   - [ ] 2,500-4,999
   - [ ] 5,000-9,999
   - [ ] 10,000-24,999
   - [ ] 25,000-49,999
   - [ ] 50,000-99,999
   - [x] 100,000-249,999
   - [ ] 250,000-499,999
   - [ ] 500,000+
   - [ ] Not sure/Don’t know
### Technology Training & Needs

3. Does your library use any of the following technologies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Yes, internally for staff</th>
<th>Yes, externally for patrons</th>
<th>No, not at all</th>
<th>Not sure/don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library website</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog(s)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wiki(s)</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking (e.g. Facebook, MySpace)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Online image sharing (e.g. Flickr)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSS feeds</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social bookmarking (e.g. Delicious, Furl)</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>LibraryThing</td>
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<td>Other (please specify):</td>
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<td>Other (please specify):</td>
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4. What technologies do you feel are most critical to meeting your patrons’ needs online (including, but not limited to, those listed above)?

Social networking sites have worked wonders in keeping patrons up to date on the most current library information. It’s nice to use to share program ideas and information with other librarians, and as a children’s librarian, it’s a convenient way to keep in contact with teen patrons as well as young parents. Currently, the Free Library is focused on developing smartphone applications, so the near future will show what additional advancements in communication the library will put to use.

5. Are there barriers that prevent you from implementing new technologies in your library, such as insufficient staff time, limited funds, or a lack of professional development opportunities for staff?

- X Yes
- No
- Not sure
If yes, please explain.

| Developing applications and a more user-friendly web interface on the Free Library’s website is difficult if not impossible under our current financial constraints, but it is recognized as a future need. Short staffing cuts back on the time we can devote to keeping our facebook page up to date. |
The Future of Public Libraries

6. Over the past few years, have online library services, such as chat reference and online renewals, affected the services that you provide within the library building? If so, how?

   I am a part of our building's askherePA team. I like the experience when I get legitimate reference questions, but we are mostly demoralized by the amount of chat reference users that log on simply to mess around with the librarians.

7. Has the recent increase in the kinds and amount of information that is available online affected your work over the past few years? If so, how?

   Not really. As librarians, we are fortunate to have studied methods of how to conduct productive online searches, and know how to evaluate the resources we are presented with in terms of their authority and factuality.

8. Does your library provide any services via online social networking tools, such as Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube? If so, please describe these services.

   At this point we do not.

9. How do you think your job is likely to change over the next five years?

   It’s changed so dramatically in the year and a half I’ve worked here, I can’t help but think that will continue to be a trend.
10. How do you think your library’s collection is likely to change over the next five years?

I think we will have more materials that are remotely accessible, as well as a larger media collection. Our foreign language collections are also likely to shift language groups and expand. I think we will see a large influx of Arabic materials.

11. How do you think your library’s public services are likely to change over the next five years?

We continue to serve communities of ever increasing diversity, and as the populations shift, we will reassess our community’s needs.

12. What do you see as the likely future trends for public library services in general?

More computer classes offered in the library, English classes for New Americans. More and more, people seems to see the library as a place of community learning which is a great opportunity for us to meet the needs of the community.

13. What do you see as the major roles of the public library in today’s society?

Aiding job seekers, providing computer services to the economically challenged, assisting small businesses, helping new Americans to assimilate, and providing quality children’s services to children and caregivers alike.
14. How, if at all, do you think these roles of the public library might change in the future?

I think the library will become more involved in computer literacy instruction at all levels in the community. Rather than threatening our position, the digital age will make the library all the more necessary in helping our patrons to navigate their searches.

Demographics

15. What are your areas of specialization? (Check all that apply.)

- [ ] Reference services (e.g., information assistance, readers’ advisory, etc.)
- [ ] Technical services (e.g., cataloging, acquisitions, etc.)
- [ ] Systems, database or network management (e.g., website maintenance, IT support, etc.)
- [ ] Library administration
- [X] Children’s or young adult services
- [ ] Other (please specify): Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference.

16. How long have you been a librarian in a professional-level position?

- [ ] Less than a year
- [X] 1-3 years
- [ ] 4-9 years
- [ ] 10-20 years
- [ ] More than 20 years

17. What is your highest educational degree?

- [ ] Bachelor’s degree
- [X] Master’s degree
- [ ] Doctorate
- [ ] Other (please specify): Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference.

18. Age:

- [X] 25 and under
- [ ] 26-34
- [ ] 35-44
- [ ] 45-54
- [ ] 55-64
19. Are you:

☐ Male

X Female

☐ 65 and over

THANK YOU!