The Public Library's Future:
Content, Reference, and Instruction

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Abstract

This literature review explores the future of public libraries based on the responses of one survey taken by a public librarian. A public librarian to participate in the survey was sought and located through the use of three formal letters presented in person at the reference desk of the Aliso Viejo Public Library. The reference librarian on staff that received the letters consented to distributing them among colleagues. The public librarian that agreed to complete the survey anonymously is a reference librarian at the Aliso Viejo Public Library in Aliso Viejo, California. The survey intended to receive feedback regarding the future of public library services as well as the future of new technologies for library services. Through careful evaluation of the returned survey with the public librarian’s responses, three themes of interest came to the forefront of the literature review. These three themes are the following: the decreased reliance on books and the increased reliance on digital content, the decreased use of reference services, and the increased importance of information literacy of emerging technologies. The subsequent review of the literature reveals definite trends of increased digital content use and the elevated importance of educating the community on new and upcoming technologies available for use in the public library. The literature portrays reference service as a changing and evolving public library service, not one experiencing a decrease in use by the public. By reviewing the literature, it is apparent that a definitive relationship exists between all three themes regarding the future of public library service.

Keywords: public library trends, reference services, digital content, ebooks, information literacy, technology literacy
Introduction

Students of Library and Information Science face the frequent onslaught of negative, doomsday comments from friends and family regarding the future of the public libraries and the trends that will ultimately cause its downfall. Will libraries become obsolete if library patrons rely less on physical books and more on digital content? Are traditional reference services all but extinct? Will the public library function as an instructional institution for new and emerging technologies? This paper seeks to explore the validity of such comments and questions with a focus on the following themes: books vs. digital content, reference services, and information literacy of the latest and present technologies. A review of the literature on these topics attempts to refute the now stereotypical claims that the public library is a dead and/or dying beacon of public intellect and education. As a result of this investigation, it becomes clear that the three key themes of the literature review collaborate to demonstrate the importance of the public library, thus ensuring its future.

Survey Results

The Aliso Viejo Public Library is located in Orange County, California, and serves a population of 41,835 community members (U.S. Census Bureau 2009) with four professional librarians and 61,112 volumes (American Library Directory 2011). In 2009, the ethnic composition of the community was the following: 72.9 percent Caucasian, 15.7 percent Hispanic or Latino, 14.1 percent Asian, and 3.1 percent African American (2009). The foreign citizen population of Aliso Viejo accounts for 23.2 percent of residents with 28.2 percent of community members speaking a language other than English at home (2009). Children under five years of age account for 9.1 percent of Aliso
Viejo residents and senior citizens, age sixty-five or older, only make up 4.4 percent (2009). The majority of community members, at 74.7 percent, are eighteen years old or older (2009). The median household income of the Aliso Viejo community is $94,917 and only 1.9 percent of families live under the poverty level (2009). 84.6 percent of the population has graduated high school while 53.3 percent has received a bachelor’s degree or higher (2009).

The librarian at the Aliso Viejo Public Library who agreed to participate in the survey is a male librarian between the ages of thirty-five and forty-four. This particular librarian specializes in reference services, has been a professional librarian for four to nine years, and has received a Master’s Degree as his highest level of education. The librarian indicates that there are barriers that keep the Aliso Viejo Branch from establishing new technologies. These barries include all of the impediments listed in the survey (insufficient staff time, limited funds, lack of professional development opportunities) as well as, “...strict county policies that over-monitor use of outside social networking sites” (Anonymous librarian, survey, May 3, 2011). In “The Future of Public Libraries” section of the survey, the librarian attests that users are not necessarily aware of the online services provided by the library and expresses his observation that, “Less people are using reference services to find information” (2011).

Although the librarian states a decrease in use of reference services, he subsequently notes that, “More people are asking for help using new technologies” (2011), thus suggesting that less people are using traditional reference services as opposed to not using reference services at all. The importance of digital content is
stressed multiple times in “The Future of Public Libraries” section. The librarian sees his job and the library relying less on books and more on digital content in the future.

**Literature Review**

The survey’s emphasis on digital content replacing traditional books creates a domino affect regarding the changing nature of reference services and the increased importance of technology literacy instruction. The literature review concentrates on the three factors of this domino affect in an attempt to demonstrate how intertwined they are in determining future trends of the public library. Like the survey indicates, as technologies evolve and change over time and public library content becomes primarily digital, users will rely on reference services less for information finding purposes and more for technology literacy and instruction.

**Digital Content**

Over the past two decades, the collections found in public libraries have slowly transformed from being primarily print collections to collections with a substantial amount of digital content (Visser & Ball, 2010, pg. 187). This transformation has occurred due the increased importance the public has put on digital content and individual participation in the canon of digital content available online (2010, pg. 187). The growing popularity of digital content (Duncan, 2010, pg. 44), such as ebooks, within certain communities leads one to question the public library’s role and place within the digital content world. Duncan, in “Ebooks and Beyond: The Challenge For Public Libraries” reports on a survey sent to 40,000 library patrons on the Sunshine Coast regarding new technologies and reading (2010, pg. 44). This survey indicates the extreme
public desire to utilize digital content such as ebooks and e-audiobooks through the use of technologies like the Kindle, iPhone, and iPad (2010, pg. 44).

Reasons for the spike in community interest of digital content and digital content devices include improved technologies, convenience, and an increased number of titles available (2010, pg. 46). Digital content in the form of ebooks like the Kindle provide lots of reading material available in a convenient form at any moment the reader desires, thus possibly increasing the frequency of reading in users (Peters, 2010, pg. 16). Peters also reports that, "...reading has reinvigorated...interest in reading..." (2010, pg. 17). In addition to increasing reading frequency and reinvigorating users to read, digital content allows users to experience a greater sense of anonymity in their reading choices (Dearnley, Morris, & McKnight et. al, 2004, pg. 227). Researchers on high school and doctorate levels alike can benefit greatly from the time-saving and convenient full-text indexing of digital content like Google Books (Jones, 2009, pg. 86).

These alluring qualities of ebooks are often overshadowed by the negative aspects of books in the form of digital content. One of the most condemning characteristics of digital content is image quality of the material presented in the form of Google books, ebooks, etc. (2009, pg. 79).

"The digitized images of individual pages are not always reliable-poor scanning can occasionally be so extensive as to render a digitized volume unusable-and folded maps and other illustrative matter are routinely scanned in their folded state, rendering them useless for research" (2009, pg. 79).

Books online also require users to be able to maneuver the intricacies of the Web regardless of interface and complexity (Visser & Ball, 2010, pg. 188). Trying to discern and understand digital content complications may discourage users from using and accessing digital content to answer questions and read materials (2010, pg. 188).
Herring contends that a further negative characteristic of digital content is the reality that, "...the Web is great at supplying discrete data...it isn’t very good at providing you the right bit of knowledge" (2011, pg. 32). The Web’s inability to provide this is caused due to the extreme amount of digital content on the Web that is false and/or misleading to users (2011, pg. 32). Thus digital content will not replace books in Herring’s eyes because, "...the Web is jammed-packed with misinformation, disinformation, fraud, and more" (2011, pg. 32).

Apart from not always providing reliable data, digital content such as the books in Google Books is not always available to everybody in the public domain (Jones, 2009, pg. 87). Jones states that as of 2009, only 15 percent of Google Book materials were available to the entire public sector due to copyright laws (2009, pg. 87). Not only are forms of digital content limited to users due to copyright laws, but not all users have the Internet capabilities to utilize the demanding requirements needed to view digital content (Herring, 2011, pg. 39). Requirements not accessible to all users include, "...high speed Internet access, a stable Internet Provider, good, regularly updated equipment, the ability to download, and unlimited free printing" (2011, pg. 39).

The increased presence of digital content and ebooks presents a unique challenge for the future of public libraries and the means by which they offer information to the public. Although ebooks are experiencing an increase in popularity with younger generations, older generations and the predominant group of library users today may not welcome ebooks as readily with open arms (Duncan, 2010, pg. 45). As the generations that grew up with technology age and subsequently use the library more frequently, public libraries will have to respond in kind to the digital content demands of a
technology literate generation (2010, pg. 45). The public library exists to provide information and information resources to the community,

“All libraries serve readers, and the best libraries serve readers well. As the nature of reading and the population of readers continue to evolve in this century, libraries will need to develop, test, and deploy new services. For example, libraries must come to grips with the experience of reading on personal, portable, networked devices, which seems to be the emerging dominant type of reading” (Peters, 2009, pg. 20).

Public libraries are thus responsible to adapt services to patron needs as the future promises an increased amount of digital content. One area of service that the public library will need to transform is the reference desk. Reference desk services, due to an increase in digital content, will be used predominantly by the public not for information purposes, but rather for technical assistance of emerging technologies.

**Technology Literacy**

Information literacy is defined as, “...the degree of interaction with written text that enables a person to be a fluent, functioning, contributing member of the society in which that person lives and works” (Gordon & Gordon, 2003, pg. 15). In the information age, Internet connectivity is no longer an indulgence, it is a neccessity to be information literate (Visser & Ball, 2010, pg. 193). In order to be information literate, patrons must also be technology literate. Public library users depend on librarians and staff to provide this neccessity, used for job hunting, studying the law, or reading up on medical issues, and subsequently require technology instruction on how to utilize this invaluable resource.

Whether patrons come to the library to check email, do research, or checkout ebooks, librarians must be aware that even the simplest use of technology requires skill
and a basic understanding of the device being used. This reality of the technological roadblocks between users and information and the library’s duty to serve the community determines that the public library of the future must provide technology literacy instruction,

“As a natural extension of library service, libraries offer the added value support neccessary to successfully navigate the Internet. The library is an established community hub for informational resources and provides dedicated staff, technology training opportunities, and no-fee public access computers with an Internet connection” (Visser & Ball, 2010, pg. 191).

In “Defining Information Literacy”, Eisenberg, Lowe, and Spitzer summarize three forms of literacy closely related to technology literacy as additional literacies neccessary to successfully navigate the Internet (2004, pgs. 8-9). These three forms of literacy are computer, digital, and network literacies, all branches of information literacy, (2004, pgs. 8-9) and are neccessary to understand in order to benefit fully from the Internet and the widespread digital content available there.

Senior citizens of today, many of whom are uncomfortable with digital content and find it confusing, are a particular demographic of library users lacking any computer, digital, or network literacies and are therefore information illiterate in the digital age. Balas describes the confusion experienced by many senior citizens, “In the library, senior citizens can get bewildered when trying to use OPAC or various databases. They often have good research skills but are more familiar with the card catalog and printed indexes...” (2006, pg. 26). She further determines that in order to fully serve this patron demographic and other demographics experiencing computer, digital, and network illiteracies, public libraries must develop informative instruction sessions for the community in order to ensure that patrons are equipped with the tools needed in today’s society to be information literate (2006, pg. 26).
The elderly are not the only patron demographic determining the future role of the public library as a source of information and instruction on computer, digital, and network literacies. The complicated and confusing interfaces of catalogs and databases can baffle even the most seasoned researchers, thus confirming the need for the various technology literacies and librarians trained in instruction (LaGuardia, 2011, pg. 302). Confusing and therefore frustrating databases and catalogs has led to the creation of both databases and catalogs with simple interfaces like Google that lead researchers astray from scholarly resources and content (2011, pg. 302). In order to lead researchers in the right direction and properly teach patrons how to find quality information provided through simplistic databases, public libraries must initiate library instruction to curtail the use of faulty, worthless data (2011, pg. 302).

Public libraries, as information literacy experts, are held accountable to provide such information literacy sessions by the very values that characterize traditional public libraries (Harding, 2008, pg. 159). As the community’s main access to the Internet and in many cases the first learning experience of children, public libraries of the future should take advantage of the, “...teachable moments...” (2008, pg. 160) regarding technologies that are present in libraries everyday. Although the future includes multiple different evolving technologies, all of which will require additional competencies, librarians must keep up to date with these technologies to establish information literacy in their patrons with workshops, demonstrations, and classes (LaGuardia, 2006, pg. 29). Group instruction on technology literacy will be paired with individual, unscheduled sessions that occur at random at the reference desk (Harding, 2008, pg. 161). The future of
reference services points in this direction, a service reinvigorated by the potential to spread technology literacy through an evolving reference desk (2008, pg. 161).

Reference Services

In the article “A Personal Choice: Reference Service Excellence”, Radford expresses that she has, “...never seen a more exciting time for reference” (2008, pg. 108) as public library attendance and reference service statistics have increased between the years of 1994 and 2004 (2008, pg. 111). David A. Tyckoson, former President of the Reference and User Services Association, shares similar feelings on the current state and future of reference services by observing that his library visits yield bustling reference desks with reference librarians chatting away with patrons (2007, pg. 111). Although the anonymous librarian that participated in the survey for this paper indicated that patrons will use reference services less in the future, Radford argues that such a future is not the case as reference services continue to advance and evolve (2008, pg. 110). Reference librarians who hold this perception of the future of reference services are stuck in the traditional, apathetic role of the reference librarian from the past (2008, pg. 110). The future of reference involves, “Groundbreaking experiments in outreach to user communities including on-ground as well as cyberspace communities” (2008, pg. 110).

Such a groundbreaking experiment that took place in the King County, Washington, Library System (KCLS) is discussed in detail in “Going Mobile: The KCLS Roving Reference Model”. KCLS, in 2003, transformed their traditional, behind the desk reference service and instead put staff on the front lines as floor-traveling reference librarians (Pitney & Slote, 2007, pg. 55). By changing the traditional reference service model, reference librarians were able to assist patrons at the scene of information
queries and technological mishaps instead of passively waiting behind the reference desk (2007, pg. 55). Increases in digital content and the continued presence of patron computer, digital, and network illiteracies are factors that together require and support the KCLS concept of the roving reference librarian, ready to provide technology instruction on digital content at the point of need.

Despite the groundbreaking differences and changes in reference services, the reference librarian of today faces similar changes experienced by reference librarians in the past ten years. These changes include the scope of user preferences and expectations as well as new digital content in the form of databases, ebooks, and other resources (Auster & Chan, 2004, pg. 57). Reference librarians of the future can expect a similar trend of change and must learn to evolve alongside it, “The secret to a vibrant future for reference is to embrace the change, indeed, to take up the challenge to go beyond more adoption of change, and to become change agents (Radford, 2008, pg. 115). In order to embrace change, reference librarians must remain information literate to subsequently keep patrons information literate.

To do this, reference librarians need to remain educated on emerging technologies and digital content (Auster & Chan, 2004, pg. 57). Reference services of the future will transform into a service predominantly categorized by technology and digital content instruction provided by a reference staff well-educated on information, computer, digital, and network literacies (2004, pg. 59). In addition to providing technical instruction, patrons will continue to rely more and more on the reference librarian to assist them in sorting out the large amounts of information retrieved via digital content (O’Gorman & Trott, 2009, pg. 328). As digital content continues to evolve and increase, reference
librarians will carry the important role as information detectives and technology instructors to library communities, therefore ensuring that patrons achieve information literacy.

**Conclusion**

The public librarian who completed the survey indicated that reference services will be used less in the future, but the literature reviewed counters this claim. If the survey had been conducted through an interview, the librarian would have been asked to expand on his comment that users will use reference services less in the future in order to determine if he was referring to traditional reference services. The survey's stress on digital content proved to be appropriate, as the literature reviewed demonstrates the increased popularity, presence, and use of digital content in the public library. Likewise, the librarian's observation that patrons will continue to seek assistance in navigating new technologies is also supported by the literature as it determines a definitive link between information and technology literacy.

This literature review establishes the future of public libraries in communities across the United States. The notion that public libraries will become extinct as patrons use digital content more and physical books less is unfounded. If anything, an increased presence of digital content use in public libraries ensures the future of the public institution as patrons and communities will need assistance navigating through, utilizing, and understanding the vast amount of digital content available. The technology used by patrons to view digital content also safeguards the future of public libraries since libraries will serve as instructional institutions for emerging technologies in order to ensure patrons are digital, computer, and network literate and thus information literate. The
increased presence of digital content and the subsequent need to provide communities with an understanding of new technologies secures the future of reference services, albeit untraditional. Reference librarians will be sought by patrons to navigate digital content and to assist them on their journey toward becoming technology literate. Thus, friends and families of librarians and Library and Information Science students can cease concerns about the future of the public library as long as digital content continues to proliferate and technologies don’t stop evolving.
References


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)

CALIFORNIA

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
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:

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<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>
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<td>Library website</td>
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<td>Blog(s)</td>
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<td>Social bookmarking (e.g. Delicious, Furl)</td>
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Other (please specify): 

Other (please specify): 

Other (please specify):

4. What technologies do you feel are most critical to meeting your patrons' needs online (including, but not limited to, those listed above)?

- Online catalog
- Calendar of events
- List of online databases
- Individual web sites for branch libraries

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?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Not sure
If yes, please explain.

ALL OF THE ABOVE
AS WELL AS STRICT COUNTY POLICIES
THAT OVER-MONITOR USE OF OUTSIDE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES.
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?

Not really - most people are still not aware of these services.

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?

Less people are using reference services to find information. More people are asking for help using new technologies.

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

Facebook is used to promote library services and events.

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

The library will continue to become less reliant on books and more reliant on online materials, digital materials (ebooks).
10. How do you think your library’s collection is likely to change over the next five years?

Less books
More online & digital content

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

More computer availability is needed as well as more digital content

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

More digital content
Staff who can keep up to date with rapidly changing technologies

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

Making information available for all
14. How, if at all, do you think these roles of the public library might change in the future?

Not much. Just more digitally based

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

- Children's or young adult services
- Other (please specify): Special Services to the older population

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

- Less than a year
- 1–3 years
- 4–9 years
- 10–20 years
- More than 20 years

17. What is your highest educational degree?

- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate
- Other (please specify):

18. Age: ☐
25 and under
26-34
35-44
45-54
55-64
65 and over

19. Are you:

[ ] Male
[ ] Female

THANK YOU!
I certify that:

This paper/project/exam is entirely my own work.

I have not quoted the words of any other person from a printed source or a website without indicating what has been quoted and providing an appropriate citation.

I have not submitted this paper/project/exam to satisfy the requirements of any other course.

Signature: Leigh S. Moynihan

Date: June 5, 2011