



Who Needs Public Libraries? A community-based approach to a decades old debate

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Abstract: This paper explores the common and long-held idea that public libraries will soon become irrelevant in the digital age. Unlike the majority of the literature published about this subject, however, it does not argue that libraries need to “lose the books” (Lafrance, 2015), nor that librarians need to become “become a hipper crowd of shushers” (Jesella, 2007). Instead, it contends that public libraries and librarians need only look to their communities in order to remain relevant through any societal or technological changes.

Introduction

When one Googles “are libraries still relevant?” over 91 million results come up, all with headlines like “Libraries, Still Relevant in the Digital Age,” “Libraries are More Relevant Than Ever” and “16 Reasons Librarians are Still Extremely Important.” In fact, even after the first seven pages of results, there is still not one article that proclaims that libraries are not relevant.

Why is it, then, that anyone who decides to embark upon a career in public libraries hears only comments like: “People still go to libraries?” “You need a masters’ degree to shelve books?” “Can’t you just Google it?” “Aren’t libraries on the way out?” or even, “People still read?”

This debate over the relevancy of public libraries is not new: for over thirty years, LIS researchers have expressed concern over how libraries would be able to keep up with “some nebulous image called ‘technology’” (Stueart, 1984, p. 1724). It was not until widespread use of the Internet in the early 1990s, however, that concern over relevancy became a hot topic for LIS professionals (Benton Foundation, 1996).

As technology becomes increasingly complex, ubiquitous and essential to day-to-day life, there are many who view the public library as increasingly irrelevant to the general population. Neither the popular, professional nor academic world can come to a consensus about how public libraries can stay relevant to a generation that has the worlds’ information at their fingertips. Most do agree, however, that the advancement of technology and the needs of the younger generations will most certainly render the public library as we know it obsolete.

Rebranding the Public Library

In an attempt to save the public library from extinction, many scholars, library professionals, journalists and members of the public have suggested ways to rebrand it and the librarians working within it (Agresta, 2014; Coe, 2015; Lafrance, 2015; Macikas, 2015; Matthews, 2015; Palfrey, 2015; Santhanam & Hickey, 2015; Spinks 2015; Thompson, 2014; Zickuhr, 2013). Although there are a few outliers, the majority of the literature reviewed suggests that the library rebrands itself in one of three ways:

Public Library/Librarian --> Information Centre/Information Literacy Instructor

Public Library/Librarian --> Free Fun/Entertainer

Public Library/Librarian --> Hackerspace/IT Specialist

The common thread among them is the idea that the public library must not just adapt to changes, but must fundamentally change, both physically and ideologically, by eliminating 'old-fashioned,' values and services in favour of new, trendy ones. By doing so, many public library leaders hope to maintain their library's relevancy, especially to the demanding and tech-savvy millennial generation.

I argue that a far more effective solution than completely rebranding the library is to put efforts and finances towards a different kind of paradigm shift: to "stop thinking of ourselves as the experts on what our communities' public library needs are and [to] view our communities' as the experts and ourselves as their facilitators" (Working Together Project, Library Culture, n.d.). Thus, instead of focusing solely on trends, academic research and feedback from patrons already invested in the library, the focus should be on collaboration with all members of the community, including non-patrons and those from socially excluded groups. This is called the community-led, or community development, approach:

Public Library/Librarian --> Collaborative service/Community Partner

Following this approach, there is no risk of the library becoming obsolete. Quite the opposite: barriers are broken, patronage increases, service improves and all members of the community thrive and grow.

Information Centre/Information Literacy Instructor

Librarians have long been known as gatekeepers of information. Historically, they may have been the only ones with the access to the information, or, at the very least, they were the only ones who knew how to find the information. Now that much information is easily found with a click of a button on a computer, tablet or smartphone, librarians have lost their control over knowledge.

Thus, some librarians have tried to convince the public that they "need librarians more than ever" since "in today's world, [people] have access to diverse and abundant information choices. However, the uncertain quality and expanding quantity of information poses major challenges... the role of the librarian is to teach people how to get the most value from information" (Iowa Library Services, n.d.). Even as far back as 1996, the Benton Foundation concluded in its report about "Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age" that "it will be the librarian "navigator" who will guide library users to the most useful sources, unlocking the knowledge and information contained in the vast annals of the information superhighway" (p. 4).

Almost two decades later, this limited vision of the librarian's role has become even more pervasive. Statements like: "The fundamental role of the library has shifted from warehousing a limited quantity of information to filtering and providing access to the seemingly infinite amount of information available today" (Holden, 2010, p. ix), or: "The people who work in libraries are helping other people make sense of the overwhelming mass of information online - and making it immediately relevant to their lives" (Palfrey, 2015, p. 11) are abundant in academic, trade and popular literature.

A few dissenters, most notably White Plains Public Library director Brian Kenney, are more realistic about the role that public librarians have in teaching information literacy: "For a while we tried to sell the public on the notion that they're terrible at search and need librarians to show

them how to properly seek and evaluate online content. It turns out that adults are as excited about information literacy as they are about flossing" (2015).

This is certainly not to say that librarians do not have a role in educating people about how to be information literate. Quite the opposite: first, teacher-librarians and academic librarians are perfectly positioned to teach innumerable students of all ages, backgrounds and abilities about how to search for, filter and evaluate information. Second, public librarians are occasionally asked to help patrons, especially those unfamiliar with basic Internet searching, how to both find information and evaluate it. However, as Kenney notes, most patrons' "eyes glaze over" when librarians attempt to explain how to use a reference database or how to evaluate Web content (2015).

An excellent example of patrons' disinterest in librarians' efforts to teach them digital literacy is found within my own library. For the past three years, one of the tasks assigned to summer students is designing and delivering a "Health Nut" program. This program is intended to instruct patrons how to use the library's health-related databases to make informed decisions about their own health. Last summer, it was my turn, and just like every student before me, I delivered a flop of a program. Why? Because, as the patrons' evaluation forms clearly demonstrated, they just do not want to learn how to find or evaluate the information. They just want someone they trust (like a librarian) to do it for them.

There is no doubt that most public library service staff have a similar story. This rebranding scheme, then, would most certainly result in disaster for public libraries.

Free Fun/Entertainer

The second public library rebranding scheme is based largely in marketing and manifested primarily in programming. Much of the media about and promotion of public libraries is clearly trying to appeal to a young audience: We aren't your grandparents' library! Librarians have tattoos, pink hair and ironic beards! We don't shush, we have FUN! We're hip, we're trendy, and everything we offer is FREE! (Teicher 2014; Jesella, 2007). Programs like Speed Dating, Punk Rock Aerobics, Broke A\$\$ Holidays, Wine & Words and Herb Garden Mixology (Zickhur, 2013) are doubtless well attended and tremendously fun, but they are still reaching only a infinitesimal part of the community.

This type of programming is a perfect example of the ways public libraries are struggling to reach the 18-35 year-old demographic. Reaching this millennial generation is, according to some, so important that if libraries are unsuccessful, they will lose "all perceived relevance within the next 20 years" (Matthews, 2015, p. 6). In an attempt to attract generation Y and Z, some libraries are going to ridiculous extremes. For example, in an attempt to make library resources "more like Google," Sno-Isle library launched a "Library That!" marketing campaign. The idea is that "Library That!" sounds enough like "Google it" that millennials would be more comfortable using the library website to search for information. Sno-Isle also launched a TEDx event with the same goal – attracting the coveted millennial generation (Matthews, 2015). This is problematic for a number of reasons: first, once again, the library is spending its limited resources marketing to a very specific and very small part of the population. Second, that small part of the population may not even respond to this type of marketing. If a millennial wants to Google something, why would they "Library" it? And even if they watch TED talks online, what evidence is there that they would come to the library to watch a similar talk? ¹

Once again, this is not to say that public libraries should not offer innovative and fun library programming, nor that they should not offer programming for the millennial generation. It is just important for library leaders to consider who their marketing and programming scheme is excluding before they turn exclusively to marketing the library solely as a fun, hip place where millennials can access and experience cool stuff for free.

Hackerspace/IT Specialist

The final rebranding suggestion is also by far the most popular, despite the high cost and incredible risk. Though there is not a remarkable amount of academic literature on the subject yet, there are hundreds of news articles, opinion pieces and blog posts about how public libraries must turn into Makerspaces or Hackerspaces in order to stay relevant (Agresta, 2014; Coe, 2015; Lafrance, 2015; Palfrey, 2015; Thompson, 2014).

The Internet did not, as feared, supplant public libraries in the 1990s. In fact, quite the opposite occurred: public library patronage increased by 61% from 1994–2004 (Scott, 2011). This was largely due to the fact that public libraries decided it was important for them to provide Internet access to their patrons and by 2007, 99% of American public libraries offered both free computer and Internet use to their patrons (A.P., 2007). Technology moves quickly, however, and many now believe that “only” providing access to the Internet and to computers is “no longer anything to write home about” (Agresta, 2014). Now, they say, some, if not all, of our public libraries must be converted into Hackerspaces. The argument is that public libraries are “on their way out,” that “hardly any of us know how to code, animate, edit video, create a design plan or use a 3D printer” and that hackerspaces “democratize educational tools” (Coe, 2015), so they are a logical next step in public library evolution.

There are a number of difficulties with this idea. First, “a video projector for presentations, com-puters loaded with video editing software...3D printers and related goods, scientific supplies and equipment... and of course, computers” (Coe, 2015) are incredibly expensive. What are the li-braries sacrificing in order to spend the thousands, or even millions, of dollars needed for equip-ment like this? To provide some context for the cost of these spaces: Fayetteville Free Library’s 2500 square foot Fab Lab received a \$250,000 grant from the state, a \$10,000 Innovation award, and raised \$13,670 from an IndiGoGo campaign. Still, this vast amount of money did not come close to covering all the start up costs, nor does it even touch annual \$1.6 million operating costs. And where does a public library find \$1.6 million extra a year? According to Fayetteville Free library, simply by “strategically relocating [funds]...away from underutilized resources such as databases and paid performances and lecturers” (Fayetteville Free Library, 2014).

Given that the costs to turn library spaces into hackerspaces are astronomical, it is important that libraries consider whether there truly is a need to do so. True, some believe that what the typical public library does best is “storing an underused circulating collection of paper books, ensuring community-wide access to Facebook on desktop computers, and sheltering homeless people” (Agresta, 2014). Others would agree that public library computer access is “for now, essential for a significant but shrinking slice of the population—mostly poor and elderly people—who can’t reliably access the Internet from home or on a mobile device” (2014). Both of these assumptions are not only untrue, they are also missing a significant point: Internet and computer access are some of the most important services a public library provides.

Not only is access to the Internet and to other basic technology a valuable, and arguably an essential, service that the public library provides, it is also a service that more than just a shrinking population of disenfranchised members of society makes use of. For example, a 2010 study found that 1/5 of Seattle residents rely on the public library as their sole source of Internet access (Scott, 2011). Moreover, Opportunity for All, a study on the public benefits from Internet access at U.S. public libraries found that “people of all ages, incomes, races and levels of education go to the library for internet access whether they have a connection at home or not” since many “find the library is an easier, faster, friendlier or more effective way to use these tools” (Harder, 2010). Finally, as cities increasingly attract location-independent workers and as students increasingly take online courses, the need for “space and amenities that expensive and unreliable coffee shops simply can’t provide enough of” (Spinks, 2015) is increasingly pressing in the public library.

Further, though many look down upon those using library resources to engage in social media, studies have found that online social interaction is valuable, meaningful and healthy. Internet use has been found to increase the mental well being of retired older adults, especially in terms of decreasing isolation, loneliness and depression (Cotten et. al, 2014). Parnard & Poussing (2010) found that one of the main sources of depreciation for social capital is when people move to another city. Engaging with friends and family over the Internet reduces this depreciation by “facilitating contacts with geographically dispersed friends or acquaintances. Thanks to the Internet, it is possible to maintain strong and weak ties across long distances” (p. 574). The same is true for minorities and newcomers. Robinson et. al (2015) found that “structural inequality often results in homophily in the composition of social networks that restricts access to valuable information on educational and job opportunities” (p. 574). The Internet, and social media in particular, are valuable tools that can be used to increase the size of their network and reduce its homophily, thereby reducing inequalities and increasing social capital (Robinson et. al, 2015). Finally, Johnson (2012) notes that though in order for communities to thrive people need to be able to interact and feel part of a specific community. This can be achieved in both physical and virtual environments, for “communicating by telephone, the Internet, and other media is effective in maintaining and building social networks, thereby contributing to social capital” (p. 54).

Why, then, if “simply” providing access to the Internet and computers is still such a valuable and well-used service, are public libraries looking to shift their focus, and capital, towards a more “tech-forward” initiative? Yes, one may argue that being on the cutting edge of technology worked well for public libraries in the past, what with their patronage increasing with their Internet provision increasing, but there is a great difference between offering something as essential as the Internet and something as exclusive as a Hackerspace. Where one is truly a tool for all to use, the other inarguably supplies tools to the very few. If so many are still struggling with basic access to and understanding of the Internet, why are public libraries even considering making such a colossal next step?

Collaborative service/Community Partner

“Libraries remain primarily successful in serving the middle-class while the disadvantaged, the non-literate and those from marginal social circumstances do not necessarily feel welcome and do not feel that the services provided are for them” (Working Together Project, Background, n.d.). The current scramble to maintain relevancy in the digital age only serves to reinforce this statement: the more libraries and librarians fear losing their patronage, the more, it seems, they pander to the middle-class. A community-led library, however, not only will never lose relevancy, but will also provide meaningful service to those of all classes. Though it may sound like a simple concept – to ask the community what it needs and work with them to make that happen – true community-led service is a complete paradigm shift for many libraries and librarians.

If we want to create a library service that reflects the whole community, we must stop thinking of ourselves as the authorities on what our communities’ needs are. Instead, we must view our communities’ as the experts and ourselves as their facilitators. By including community members, especially socially-excluded individuals, in the program development process, we can plan services that reflect their expressed needs rather than our interpretation of their needs (Working Together Project, Library Culture, n.d.).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The library does not need to ‘become’ solely a technology hub, a free service provider, or information centre. It can be, as it always has been, all three of those things, and more, tailored to the needs of its community, simply by shifting focus outward and following a community-led service model. The public library does not need to be rebranded. Public librarians and LIS leaders

must simply remember to look to their community, both patrons and non-patrons alike, and ask them what they want of their public library. They need to work collaboratively with the community in order to facilitate the move towards true community-led service. And public librarians must especially remember that they are community partners who will learn just as much, if not more, from their community as they will teach.

If you are interested in learning more about leaders in the community-development model of public libraries, look to innovators like:

- The University of Maryland which is refocusing their MLS program with community-building at the hub (Bertot, Sarin & Percell, 2015).
- The Aspen Institute, which advocates for the library as primarily a community anchor and connector (Garmer, 2014).
- The Working Together Project, which is dedicated to giving socially excluded communities a voice and to building connections between the resources of the library and the community's understanding of its needs (Working Together Project, n.d.)

¹An interesting note: as of May 2016, there is no evidence of the "Library That!" campaign on the Sno-Isle website. On the other hand, Sno-Isle Libraries' inaugural TEDx event in 2015 was so successful that they are planning another in November 2016. That said, much of their success was achieved through posting videos of the talks online, suggesting that indeed, many who enjoy watching TED talks prefer doing so from the comfort of their own home (Sno-Isle Libraries, 2016).

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Appendix A: Key Words and Definitions

Community-Led/Community Development Librarianship/Service: "a service planning process [which] involves relationship-building in the community in order to have discussions about community library needs. These relationships and the information gained from people should then inform a collaborative service (e.g., collection, policy, program, etc.) planning process in which the library and the community are equal" partners (Outreach, *Working Together Project*, 2008)

Hackerspace: "community-operated physical places, where people share their interest in tinkering with technology, meet and work on their projects, and learn from each other" (Hackerspaces, 2015)

Makerspace: "combine manufacturing equipment, community, and education for the purposes of enabling community members to design, prototype and create manufactured works that wouldn't be possible to create with the resources available to individuals working alone" (What's a Makerspace?, n.d.)

Millennials/Millennial Generation: "Also known as generation Y, the millennial generation refers to those born between the early 1980s to the early 2000s, with dates varying among countries" (Lundin, 2015)

Passionate about community building, lifelong learning and new adventures, **Devon McLeay** embarked upon a career in librarianship after years of traveling, teaching and working in customer service. A recent graduate from the MLIS program at the University of Alberta, she loves her job as a teen information specialist at Strathcona County Library, and is excited to implement her community led philosophy into her practice!