

Pam McKenzie
Western University, London, ON, Canada

Jacquelyn Burkell
Western University, London, ON, Canada

Janet Allen
Western University, London, ON, Canada

The public library is....; mapping stakeholder perspectives on the values and purposes of the public library (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:

We used survey responses and statements of library organizations to create a corpus of items describing the value of public libraries. A sample of public library users and staff from the province of Ontario individually sorted these statements into groups and labelled the groups, and rated each statement with respect to its general importance, its centrality to the mission of the public library, and its uniqueness to the public library. We used GroupWisdom™ software to analyze individual responses into an overall concept map and to identify differences in patterns across different participant groups.

1. Introduction

North American public libraries have long espoused a set of high-level values (e.g., Gorman 2015, Maxwell 2006) and associated purposes that are generally agreed upon across institutions (e.g. London Public Library 2014), professional organizations (e.g., Canadian Federation of Library Associations 2017, Federation of Ontario Public Libraries 2018), and funding bodies (e.g., Ontario. Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport 2018). However, the values are not entirely congruent; for example, maximizing access compromises the preservation of a physical collection, and vice versa. For example, the goal of transmitting (implicitly high) culture to future generations (Maxwell 2006) conflicts with the value of democratizing collections and opening spaces to a more diverse public or meeting consumer demand (Talja 2001).

Public libraries are under increasing pressure to convey, and therefore think about, their value in economic terms (e.g., Aabø 2009, Federation of Ontario Public Libraries 2017). McKenzie and Stooke (2012) argued that in an environment where public libraries are competing for public attention and for public and private funding, it is crucial to pay attention to the goals and purposes emphasized by a variety of participants and stakeholders. They found that library staff and users sometimes emphasized different values and goals, and therefore saw different purposes for public library spaces, collections, programs, and services. Goals were often tacit, and might not be articulated even by the people setting them; the goals of one person or a group might be

clear to them, but not to another person or group; and in some cases the varying purposes were so different that they created tension or conflict, or led to social exclusion.

Surveys of library users (Oliphant 2014, PEW Internet 2013, Federation of Ontario Public Libraries 2015), nonusers (Oliphant 2014), staff (e.g., Pressley 2017), and community stakeholders (e.g., Mehra et al 2017) have addressed high-level values and purposes of single stakeholder groups but have not compared values and priorities across stakeholder groups, nor compared the relative importance of individual values and purposes. This study contributes to the prior literature by using a multi-method approach to understanding and comparing the relative importance of conceptions of the values and purposes of the public library both within and across stakeholder groups. This paper reports on the first two of three phases of data collection and analysis.

2. Phase 1

The first phase was the development of a concourse. First, we compiled values statements from public library organizations to identify common themes. Second, we analyzed themes in a corpus of open-web statements about the value of public libraries (reference redacted until after peer review). Following these two exercises, we created a candidate list of facets reflecting the values and purposes of public libraries. Third, we posted an invitation on the GroupWisdom™ platform for anonymous submissions of statements completing the phrase “Public libraries are important because...” We received 129 submissions, which we analyzed for their fundamental facets. We compared these to the other data sources to ensure we were capturing the breadth of all three. For example, one major theme present in the participant submissions but not evident in the library association value statements was the value of the public library as a place for the serendipitous discovery of new reading materials, which a user could try out to see if they like them with little cost or effort. After several iterations and group discussions, the research team ended up with a corpus of 30 statements each seeking to capture a characteristic attributed to public libraries. This corpus forms the data set to be mapped and sorted in phases 2 and 3.

3. Phase 2

Phase 2 is a concept mapping exercise (e.g., Kim et al 2018) for which we recruited a second group of anonymous participants representing library staff, users, and nonusers residing in the province of Ontario. Concept Mapping (Kane and Trochim 2007) is a systematic process for organizing ideas – in this case ideas about the function of the public library – in a common framework that represents the input and perspectives of diverse groups of stakeholders.

Each participant will use the GroupWisdom™ platform to organize the statements developed in Phase 1 into groups of like items, using whatever criteria they deem appropriate, and will create a label for each grouping.

We will also ask each participant to rate each individual item on three questions: How important is this item to society overall, regardless of whether it is done by the public library or another organization? How central is this item to the mission of the public library? How unique is this item to the public library? This will allow comparison across stakeholder groups (e.g., patrons, library staff) of the value placed on each of the identified conceptual groups of library purposes.

We will use standard q-sort analysis (see Watts and Stenner, 2012), through GroupWisdom™ software, to identify the different subjective perspectives expressed by participants, by comparing and integrating the item sorts. We integrate the results into a common concept map that provides a 2-dimensional mapping of the various items and their relationship to each other, with similar items appearing close together in the map, and dissimilar items appearing further apart. The analysis also identifies groups of items that are commonly sorted together.

This form of analysis will also allow us to identify which participants expressed each of the various perspectives, allowing comparison across various demographic characteristics (e.g., age) to determine whether different demographic groups have different ideas about the function of public libraries.

4. Phase 3

The third stage of the project will involve the use of Q-methodology (Kelly & Young 2017) to identify the different perspective on the function of the library held by individual library patrons. This stage of the project will involve a third sample, of library staff and patrons from multiple branches of local library systems, with wide representation in terms of gender, age, socioeconomic status, and other relevant factors. Each participant will be asked to sort the 60 items identified in Stage 1 according to how central or important each function is in their *personal* conception of the public library. Standard q-sort analysis (see Watts and Stenner, 2012) will be used to identify the different subjective perspectives expressed by participants, by comparing and integrating the item sorts. The analysis will also identify which subjects express each of the various perspectives, allowing comparison across various demographic characteristics (e.g., age) to determine whether different demographic groups have different ideas about the function of public libraries.

The result of this analysis and discussion will be a ‘concept map’ of the function of the library that identifies clusters or groups of purposes (e.g., the library as a point of access to information; the library as a community gathering place; the library as an archive of items of high cultural value and importance).

5. What we will report

Phase 2 recruitment and data collection is ongoing at the time of the CAIS proposal submission due date, but we anticipate that data collection and analysis will be complete in time to report full findings by the end of April should our proposal be accepted.

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