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From “a great counter attraction to the ale-house and low music hall” to “the one place everybody goes”: the public library in *The Globe and Mail*, 1860-2016. (Poster)

Abstract or Résumé: Canadian public libraries espouse a set of values that may not be congruent (e.g., preserving “high” culture vs providing access to inclusive collections). Tension or conflict can result when stakeholders emphasize different values, so it is crucial to attend to values in stakeholder accounts, including those in the mass media. This poster presents a) emerging findings from a study of the representation of public libraries in *The Globe and Mail* since 1860; and b) reflections on the research and research communication process as an innovative experiential learning opportunity for the interdisciplinary team of faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students.

1. Introduction

Canadian public libraries espouse a generally consistent set of high-level values and associated purposes (e.g., Gorman 2015). However, these are not entirely congruent (e.g., preserving “high” culture vs providing access to inclusive or popular collections, Tajla 2000). Conflict, tension, or social exclusion can result when different stakeholders prioritize different values and purposes (Stooke and McKenzie 2012, McKenzie 2019). In an environment where public libraries are increasingly called on to justify their value in economic terms (Aabø 2009), it is crucial to attend to the values and purposes emphasized not just by library users (e.g., Oliphant 2014, PEW Internet 2013), but by broader stakeholders including the mass media. This poster presents emerging findings from a study of the representation of public libraries in *The Globe and Mail* since 1860.

2. Methods

We searched ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Globe and Mail (1844-) for “*public librar**” *in Title*. This search string represents a balance between recall and precision: it was precise enough to ensure that each item at least mentioned public libraries, and although it was not as comprehensive as a search for “*public librar**” in the body of the text, it produced a large and complete sample (777 items). We divided the results by decade, and each team member took responsibility for reviewing a subset of results to a) get an overview of decade-by-decade coverage and b) determine which results included substantive, analyzable statements about the value of public libraries.

We then reviewed the initial evaluations together until we reached consensus on the items to be included and excluded for analysis. We eliminated items that did not include some statement on the value or purpose of the public library (e.g., summary minutes of library board meetings published throughout the 1890s; lists of newly-acquired or popular book titles, published

monthly in the 1940s and 1950s). Our data set consists of 144 items, representing several journalistic genres (news stories, features, columns, editorials, letters to the editor) and ranging from a paragraph to more than 6000 words in length.

Data analysis is ongoing. We followed the two-step analytic strategy of Nelson and Irwin (2014), who studied the representation of librarians and technology in the professional LIS literature over time. First, each researcher independently read the full text of each item in their decades and coded its overall “discursive response” to the phenomenon under study. Next, to gain a “finer-grained sense of the data and relationships between concepts,” (Nelson and Irwin 2014, p.898), we generated detailed codes that captured the nuances of each item and then compared across decades to develop a full code set. This poster will present some initial themes from our analysis.

3. Findings

Whereas Nelson and Irwin (2014) found that representations of librarians’ occupational identity with respect to the Internet developed over time in relation to the evolution of the Web and the refinement of search engines, we found that several discursive responses persisted over time, although their character and specificity changed. Our poster will highlight two of these:

- The public library is a place for community. This discursive response appears in descriptions of a library as a showcase building that signals a city’s status or serves as a community living room. It represents the library as a place for people in times of trouble (e.g., economic downturn); a haven for those who have no other place (immigrants and newcomers, the unemployed, those without secure housing, etc.); and a place of respite and leisure where all tastes are represented.
- The library is a place for quality. This discursive response appears in early debates on the appropriateness of fiction in the library and in discussions of the place of the library in educating the working class. It represents the library as a place that supports individual self-improvement and community education, but maintains high standards for library workers and users (in intellectual, cultural, aesthetic, spiritual, and/or moral quality of resources and behavioural expectations).

These responses parallel Talja’s (2001) findings and reflect a fundamental tension in public library values: is the library a place that serves users as they are or one that seeks to improve individuals and the broader community and society? The answer to these questions is, of course, not unitary and exclusive, and these two discourses do not represent a persistent binary. Rather, the articulation of these discourses have developed, adapted, disappeared and reappeared, persisted; and the relationship between them has conflicted and interwoven, in newspaper representations of the public library over the past 150 years.

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