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REIMAGINING “PALACES FOR THE PEOPLE”: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES’ ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ASOCIAL SOCIETY (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:

The “loneliness epidemic,” a public health crisis characterized by reports of higher levels of social isolation and loneliness, has been attributed to features of modern living, including urbanization and the increase of one-person households. Public library workers are contending with individuals navigating this crisis. Findings are presented from a state-of-art literature review focussed on recent English-language, peer-reviewed studies (n=235) of public library programming, services, technology and policies in the context of trends in the contemporary asocial society. Across published research, public libraries fostered connection through the following means: encouraging feelings of belonging, creating connections through technology, reinforcing cultural identities, creating safe physical spaces, addressing issues of accessibility, creating new educational programming, and creating new recreational/social programming. The findings allow for a reimagining of the roles of public libraries but not without a reckoning about workplace culture and workloads of library staff.

1. Introduction

Public libraries are trusted community hubs that foster connections with individuals of different socioeconomic statuses (Audunson et al., 2019; Martell, 2008; Riso et al., 2020; Terrile, 2021); ages (Dalmer & Mitrovica 2022; Goulding & Crump, 2017; Masten et al., 2019; Sung & Bamkin, 2020; Wynia Baluk et al., 2021); ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds (Johnston, 2019; Mehra & Davis, 2019); and sexual and gender identities (Frederiksen, 2015; Jardine, 2013; Mehra & Braquet, 2011). Located in diverse settings, library branches offer resources and programs that meet the specific needs of their

communities as they navigate the effects of our increasingly asocial society (Jaeger et al., 2015). Libraries are engaging with individuals contending with higher levels of social isolation and loneliness, as well as increased rates of mental illnesses and antisocial behaviours (Moxley & Abbas, 2016). The shift to online environments during COVID-19 has exacerbated feelings of disconnection. During these times of change, public libraries have proactively facilitated resilience, helping communities withstand and adapt to difficult circumstances (Adams & Krtalić, 2022; Gregg & McKendry, 2019; Koscieljew, 2019). Sociologist Eric Klinenberg (2018) includes public libraries among his list of “palaces for the people”: social infrastructures that serve as the underpinnings of social life. Social infrastructures are physical places and organizations that shape communities’ resilience and connection and the way people act and interact (see: Mattern, 2014; 2021).

While several individual studies have separately examined libraries’ outreach efforts, what remains unknown is the broader knowledge landscape regarding public library practices, spaces and activities that collectively create and reinforce social connections in an increasingly asocial society. Funded by a SSHRC Knowledge Synthesis Grant, this state-of-the-art review, a review type that identifies the trends in the current state of knowledge and outlines priorities for future investigation (Grant & Booth, 2009), is in response to this gap.

2. Methods

Our research team of 3 investigators (Canadian faculty members), 5 national and international collaborators, and two PhD student research assistants systematically searched *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts*, *Scopus*, *Library & Information Science Source*, *Library Literature & Information Science Index*, and *Library and Information Science Abstracts* for peer-reviewed articles in English, published between 2012-2022 to answer the following four research questions:

1. How do public libraries help patrons create or maintain connections in their communities?
2. What population groups are included in public library research and in what ways are they differently impacted by public library services, materials, and/or spaces?
3. How are public library virtual programming and services (especially prominent during COVID-19) changing the ways in which patrons engage with public libraries?
4. In what ways does the Canadian public library research landscape compare or differ from that in European and Australasian countries, and what lessons can we glean from these differences?

With 2708 articles initially retrieved, we removed 1649 duplicates and an additional 388 articles based on abstract and title-level screening. A further 436 articles were subsequently removed upon closer screening and reading. Using Covidence, a systematic review management software, five core members of the team (Dalmer, Rothbauer, McKenzie, Oswald and Martin-Yeboah) read through the included articles and extracted key information from each (e.g., bibliographic information, information about library services, and pertinent information related to exploring an ‘asocial society’) in order to answer our

research questions. This knowledge synthesis is therefore based on a reading of 235 articles that met the inclusion criteria for this state-of-the-art review.

3. Findings

Underlying a majority of the included articles is an acknowledgement that the role of public libraries continues to change, from operating as information repositories to now also operating as community hubs. The ways in which public library staff engage with their communities and patrons are, therefore, also shifting. Focusing in particular on the current state of public library-related research knowledge on issues related to growing feelings of disconnection, isolation and loneliness, articles explored the multiple ways in which public libraries afford connection for and among their patrons.

Public libraries draw on their spaces, staff, collections and materials, programs and relationships with community organizations to bolster feelings of connection. Given the distribution and accessibility of public libraries across different countries, in urban and rural locales and in neighbourhoods of high and low poverty, the ways in which public libraries both connect with and provide connection manifest differently depending on their contexts. Research on this topic reflects the many different population groups that public libraries engage with and support on a daily basis. The research focuses on a myriad of population groups, including: children, youth, older adults, parents, unhoused populations, differently abled individuals, immigrants and non-permanent residents, among others. This breadth of population groups, each with their own unique circumstances, needs and expectations, is indicative of the range of factors and contexts that library workers take into consideration and incorporate in their programs, collections, arrangement of physical and virtual spaces, and administration. While noting the many different population segments under study alongside the important work being done by library workers, a concerning trend in the articles surveyed includes library workers' interpretations of patron populations without also including the voices of those communities.

Across published research, public libraries fostered connection through the following means:

- Encouraging feelings of belonging
- Creating connections through technology
- Reinforcing cultural identities
- Creating safe physical spaces
- Addressing issues of accessibility
- Creating new educational programming
- Creating new recreational/social programming

The longer-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on public library outreach and activities are still being determined. The scope of this review captures early responses to the pandemic as libraries globally contended with fears and anxieties about personal and

public health and the consequences for library operations due to enforced lockdown measures. In innovative ways, libraries developed strategies designed to extend remote access to digital materials, and created new services and programming to include those excluded from such access by social location or status. Importantly, public libraries remained nimble and prioritized the needs of their communities (Kostagiolas & Katsani, 2021, Reid & Mesjar, 2022) as they developed new strategies in response to lockdowns and other public safety measures.

In addition to general trends outlined above, our presentation will highlight significant implications that emerged from our reading of the included research, particularly those that provoke a reimagining of public libraries as “palaces for the people”, including:

- The importance of the public library as a community hub with an increased attempts to reach members of some of the most marginalised and invisible communities
- Amplification of the space of the library for the unique, “library-specific” character of these kinds of community spaces
- Recognition from across stakeholder groups of the importance of library worker expertise

At the same time, real tensions are described in the literature that highlight the ways in which public libraries and library staff are being asked to step into new social inclusion roles. This is occurring in a climate in which neither are adequately resourced for the intensifying array of work and extension of library mandates. Libraries under pressure to do more with much less funding and support were noted in Canadian (Frederiksen, 2015), United Kingdom (Goulding, 2013), and Australian (O’Hehir & Reynolds, 2015) contexts. Funding, and by extension the ability of librarians and library systems to produce the material and programming required to reach their goals, is an ongoing challenge globally.

4. Conclusions

Our analysis corroborates Scott’s (2011) five facets of public libraries as agencies of community building: libraries as conduits to information and learning, libraries as spaces of social inclusion, libraries as fostering civic engagement, libraries as bridges to community resources and involvement, and libraries as promoting economic vitality.

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