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Social capital and community building in rural Ontario libraries

Abstract: This presentation reports on a study that investigated the relationship between public libraries and social capital in rural communities in Ontario. Preliminary findings suggest that, in contrast to urban communities, the use of libraries in small towns is not significantly related to increases in levels of social capital.

Résumé : Cette communication présente une étude portant sur la relation entre les bibliothèques publiques et le capital social dans les régions rurales de l'Ontario. Les résultats préliminaires suggèrent que contrairement en milieux urbains, l'utilisation de bibliothèques en milieu rural n'est pas intimement lié à un accroissement du capital social.

With the prevalence of the Internet and the turbulent economic climate, the future of the public library as a community institution is in question. While the idea of the library as primarily an information provider wanes, library boards are demanding proof of a return on investment and public libraries are searching for additional ways to increase their relevance and impact on neighbourhoods. As a result, the public library as a community meeting place is becoming the library's new vision and the creation of social capital its possible new purpose. The concept of social capital explains, in short, the social and economic benefits of community activity. According to Putnam (2000), social capital is a resource found in "dense networks of social interaction" that encourage reciprocity and generalized trust among community members and help people work together to achieve common goals. Social capital, in theory, increases community cohesion. Given the increasing isolation of North Americans (Putnam, 1995; Oldenburg, 1999; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006), places that provide an opportunity for neighbours to meet and get to know one another play an important role in creating a productive social environment. Libraries appear to be one of these places where informal social interactions take place (Leckie & Hopkins, 2002); where neighbours meet, get to know one another and possibly work together to improve their communities.

In an increasingly virtual and digitized world, however, the value of physical spaces where real people congregate can sometimes be ignored. Place has much to do with social capital:

The idea of quality of place can be complex and perceptual. It integrates the characteristics of physical growth and environmental quality, along with the ideas of social equity and governance. These elements offer a tangible framework for understanding, and even measuring, the success and resiliency of communities (Hanna, Dale, & Ling, 2009).

In order for communities to work they need accessible gathering places, such as libraries, where people can interact and learn about each other. Libraries gain even greater importance as businesses and services relocate to the outskirts of towns and cities. When services and businesses are removed from the centre of a community, social capital is reduced and equitable space and access to social and economic diversity opportunities are diminished (Hanna et al., 2009). As society moves towards communities of interest rather than communities of place, the importance of the quality of the physical space may be lost.

Although studies that examine the role of public libraries in contributing to social capital in urban communities have begun to appear (Johnson & Griffis, 2009; Gong, Japzon, & Chen, 2008), rural areas have so far been neglected as a focus of these studies. Rural communities deserve special attention since they have different characteristics than urban communities. For instance, rural communities are usually less diverse than urban communities and often face a decline in the numbers of young people as they migrate to urban centres for higher education or jobs (Besser, 2009). At the same time, people living in small towns are more likely to have built up strong interpersonal relationships with other residents through their long residency in the community. This suggests that small towns should be characterized by high levels of social capital, which would result in higher levels of trust, greater civic engagement and more involvement in community organizations. In communities where there already is a high level of social capital, then, what impact do libraries have on the ability or willingness of people to work together to achieve common goals?

This paper reports on an ongoing study that investigates the relationship between public libraries and social capital in rural communities in Ontario. The study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods in its design. First, to understand broader trends among library use, civic engagement, community involvement and levels of trust, the researchers administered questionnaires that collected detailed information on respondents' lives both inside and outside the library. And, second, to better understand the "place" of the public library in the lives of its most frequent users, the researchers conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with library users and staff members at each library that explored whether such things as library programming, staff help, the use of library materials and services as well as attending community meetings at libraries help to increase a user's sense of connectedness. For comparison, the researchers administered similar questionnaires to non-library users at nearby shopping malls, coffee shops and other gathering places in each participating community.

Preliminary findings suggest that in comparison with poor urban communities where libraries have a significant impact on building social capital (Johnson, 2010), libraries in rural communities are only one of a number of places where residents have opportunities to gain needed resources and interact on a social level with each other. The study explores implications for practice and identifies areas for further study.

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