Libraries as Instruments of Information Policy: The Role of Canadian Public Libraries in 'Connecting Canadians'

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ABSTRACT

With sweeping changes in the way Canadians seek and use information in recent years, public libraries have been on a quest to stake a claim in the information society. In addition, Industry Canada has named public libraries as vehicles for its 'Connecting Canadians' initiative. This paper reports the results of an analysis of public libraries' responses to these imposed roles. The web sites of Canada's 22 largest cities were analyzed for evidence to support public libraries as: providers 1) of "access" to information technology, 2) to content intended to support economic and community development, and 3) to expertise in information literacy skills.

RÉSUMÉ

Les bibliothèques publiques sont en quête de revendiquer la société informatique. De   plus, Industrie Canada a nommé les bibliothèques publiques comme les véhicules de son initiative 'Connecting Canadians.' Cette étude présente les résultats d'une analyse des réponses des bibliothèques publiques à ces rôles imposés. Les sites Web des 22 villes candiennes les plus grandes étaient analysés pour l'évidence qui soutiendra les bibliothèques publiques comme : fournisseurs 1) de « l'accès » de la technologie informatique, 2) du contenu prévu pour soutenir du développement économique et communautaire, et 3) de l'expertise dans les capacités de l'alphabétisation informatique.

INTRODUCTION

This study was conducted to examine the response of Canada's public libraries to the Canadian federal government's 'Connecting Canadians' policy. That policy is the government's primary response to issues arising in our current "information society". These issues are largely related to the increasing pervasiveness of information technologies (IT), which have presented public libraries with a myriad of challenges and opportunities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The articles consulted for this review went back as far as 1993 – only eight years ago, but an eon in the unique timeline that measures the history of the information age, particularly the Internet. Almost a decade ago, public librarians were contending with a relatively new technology in the public sphere that was long on promises and short on utility (McClure, Ryan and Moen 1993). While the potential of the Internet was evident, so were the problems inherent with this technology. Concerns about installation and

upkeep, staff training, budget restraints and the actual usability of an unstructured, uncontrolled database were paramount.

The concerns raised by librarians in the early 1990s have not changed (Eve and Brophy 2000; Ekos Research Associates 1998). Information technology still costs money to buy, upgrades come faster than many libraries can afford to keep up, and while there are signs of improvement, the World Wide Web has grown exponentially, with no signs of slowing down. To say that time has erased or even dulled these concerns is a statement not supported by the literature. The questions asked by the earliest of the articles are echoed throughout the others and the library community today. In spite of these problems, however, the Canadian government has gone forward with its 'Connecting Canadians' policy (Manley 2000), employing public libraries to assist with its mandate. How have public libraries taken up the challenge? Are they willing partners, or reluctant participants? While the study focused on whether some of these questions can be answered, the literature review did offer some surprising insights into those questions and offered some interesting perspectives on the issues surrounding them.

The articles consulted for this literature review presented three overall themes for discussion, and revealed some unexpected insights to some of the underlying issues concerning the relationship not only between IT and public libraries, but even more fundamental issues concerning the role for the public library as envisioned by librarians, the public, and government in the new information age. Each of these issues speaks to the central focus of this study, which is the assessment of the public library's role in the Canadian government's 'Connecting Canadians' initiative.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES – A QUESTION OF IMAGE, BALANCE AND LEADERSHIP

The place of Internet usage within the library and related issues is one the major themes apparent in the literature. It is interesting to note at this juncture that other forms of information technology – CD-Roms, E-books, and IT literacy, were not considered in the literature with the same degree of concern. This may speak to the overwhelming power of the Web, and that while those other forms of IT may be somehow compatible which library mandates, the Internet offers a unique set of problems and issues associated with its presence.

The most interesting of these issues concerns the role of the library within the new information age. The US, home of the Internet, seems to be suffering from a crisis of image stemming from three different sources – the public, the media, and librarians themselves. The very question – who are we? (Or perhaps, who are we *now*?) is at the heart of the problem. The public library, the articles suggest, is a bastion of democracy where anyone may go to find a safe refuge in the world of books, where the doors are open to provide all people access to education and learning (Raber and Budd 1999, 182). To disregard this important public role, the literature seems to suggest, is a violation of the very tenants of democracy.

Related to this issue is the idea that by denying people access to technology and the Internet (which is out of the reach of many economically disadvantaged people), libraries will disadvantage this same population a second time. Since many documents and educational opportunities can be found only online, those unable to get access to them will be left behind (Raber and Budd 1999, 192; Eve and Brophy 2000, 11). Thus, by denying the importance of providing Internet and other related IT services, the public library will be contributing inadvertently to a new class of information 'have nots'. In the new information age, this for many would be considered un-democratic.

The battle for democracy then, in terms of free and open access to information, is being fought in the stacks of US public libraries. The image of the library is as much at the heart of this struggle as any democratic values. As Raber and Budd (1999, 180) suggest, "images can be tools to affect reality...public images of libraries become political weapons whose deployment may play a significant role in library development."

The weapons are being used. One of the perhaps unexpected players in this scheme is the computer/IT industry, which has managed, through sophisticated marketing campaigns, to almost firmly erase any compatibility between the new purveyors of information – themselves – and the traditional holders of that mandate, librarians.[5] The advertising campaigns launched by these companies may be currently winning the public perception war that libraries, while good places to take small children for story time, are behind the times for serious, up-to-date and efficient information gathering (Raber and Budd 1999, 182; Bales 1998). It may be that they have some librarians convinced as well (Vavrek 1999).

Where is the public left? The literature would suggest that the public believes that libraries should be involved in helping people find access to information online (Bales 1998, 82). The problem, however, again seems to be one of awareness. More than one author makes the point that regardless of whether libraries should provide IT and Internet access, the image of libraries and librarians is not one that lends itself to being information providers in the digital age. The literature also suggests, either explicitly in text or implicitly in tone, that librarians, caught between two self-images, have perhaps not been the leaders in tackling this image problem.

Two articles in particular highlight this issue. Susan Bales, in her aptly named article, "Technology and tradition: The future's in the balance" (1998), suggests to librarians that they must take leadership roles in helping the public to understand the new role of technology within the traditional library framework. She reiterates that the public would want a balance between the two (Bales 1998, 83) and librarians must be the intermediary between the technical and the traditional. The nostalgia and comfort associated with libraries must be neither downplayed nor allowed to hold back future

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[5] It is perhaps not too difficult to recall any of the multitude of television commercials promoting Internet service providers and search engines which promise almost instant retrieval of perfectly relevant information based on any combination of subject headings or keywords, saving time and, one presumes, a trip to the library.

roles the library can play by "marrying the Information Age to the idea of discovery and enlightened guidance" (Bales 1998, 85).

On the other side of this issue is Bernard Vavrek, who in little over one thousand words perfectly illustrates the traditional librarian under bombardment by technology (Vavrek 1999). By bringing automation into libraries, he argues, librarians are trying on the one hand to compete with computer giants like Microsoft and Yahoo!, and on the other being complicit in the marginalization of personal service, independent thinking and sensitivity to the client that these large corporations are known for. While correct in raising the on-going issues that are inherent in bringing information technology in the library, and recognizing that in fact, technology is not a panacea for all of the library's woes, he seems to be more worried about traditional values that are so close to the American public's heart.[6] By suggesting that American women might disavow the library because of its use of technology, he is at the same time insinuating that these same women – and their children – might have no significant desire or requirement for it.[7] Again, the image of libraries being nothing but story corners for tots (not a bad image, but certainly not their only use) is touted as the one America cherishes, without regard to any consideration of actual library use, or perhaps, *potential* for use by the public he claims to respect. By suggesting that librarians in the new information age will simply provide wall plugs to patrons, instead of services (Vavrek 1999), Vavrek has clearly given up any consideration of a leadership role for librarians in the new information age, in favour of holding up the bastion of the traditional library image.

What was interesting about the US literature is that while the problems associated with IT are not unique to that nation, the angst about the shift to technology within the library, the concern about the library's status as a democratic institution, and the cautioning tones to librarians to keep in mind the 'old-fashioned' feel of the library when introducing new computer-based services, are issues almost entirely limited to the American writers.[8] Whether there is an actual culturally based mind-set at work here cannot be assessed; however, it was nonetheless a very strong theme running through all of these articles, and was felt worthy of mention, considering the context of the study. None of the articles of Canadian authorship on similar topics mentioned any kind of problem particular to image, to the ideas of the democratic mandate of public libraries or other such issues. Again, this is not to say there is no awareness of the problem of staff training, spreading around sparse funding, or creating Internet policies. However, there is a definite sense that instead of spending too much energy on what the public might think of technology's place in the library, Canadian libraries have focused upon what this technology can do within the library to reach out to the public.

The reason for the difference is unclear. However, some articles suggested more practical reasons for the more welcoming arms of technology, especially in smaller

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[6] Bales, in fact, states in her article that the technological must be rooted in the traditional because "Americans worry that technology will replace 'old-fashioned learning', and that some constellation of tradition and values will be lost in the shuffle" (p. 85).

[7] Internet usage amongst women has grown significantly, and currently outnumbers male usage by 1%.

[8] The VITAL study, based in the UK, also voiced some of these same concerns; however, since this was the only UK based article consulted in this review, no generalizations could be made.

libraries. The need to connect distant communities with the larger centres is one key area in which technology has been seen as a help, rather than a hindrance, to keeping communities in touch (Curry and Curtis 2000). In a study of smaller libraries across Canada, Curry and Curtis state that generally speaking, libraries across the nation, even those which faced obstacles to getting connected, did so "en masse as early as it was practicable" (Curry and Curtis 2000, 83). In further contrast to the American scenario, the benefits of this technology did seem to outweigh the considerable problems that still haunt IT within libraries. However, when faced with what might be essential changes to the provision of library services, there is still a sense of balance for what might be both lost and gained. "The open democratic basis for library service may be lost," replied one survey respondent with regard to the possible use of user-based fees for IT services. However, this person concludes, "At the same time, we suddenly offer immediate access to the rest of the world" (Curry and Curtis 2000, 100).

CONNECTED CANADIANS

Part of the reason for what might be described as the matter-of-fact attitude toward IT in Canadian public libraries may stem from the fact that Canada is the most connected nation in the world. In 1999 Canada became the first country to connect all of its public libraries and schools to the Internet (Licenik 2000). This was part of the federal government's initiative 'Connecting Canadians', which was introduced in 1997. According to the literature, the reason for this policy was to help Canadians overcome the challenges of physical disabilities, those living in remote centers and others with accessibility obstacles, and to create a network that would allow Canadians to interact with each other, their government, and the world, unhindered by physical or social barriers (Manley 2000). This federal policy has been assisted on the provincial level as well, with even the smaller provinces like Nova Scotia making concerted efforts to have their libraries and schools not only connected, but investing in projects such as the creation of CAP sites to help facilitate the practical use of electronic tools (Canadian Library Association 1998; Nova Scotia Department of Culture and Education 1998). It is interesting to note that in matters of democracy, the Canadian government believes that access to basic telecommunications is a "universal right" and not only recognizes the idea of a class of people as disadvantaged that do not have such access, but clearly delineates where it stands on the issue of universal access to information (Canadian Library Association 1998). It may be this same fundamental attitude toward access to information in particular, and to the world at large in general, that makes the drive for Canadian libraries to connect to their patrons via the Internet such a different issue than for their American cousins.

The same might be said for the Canadian public as well. Canadians (with some exceptions) it seems, expect information technology to play an emerging role in the new economy and believe that the public library should play a role in providing that access (Ekos Research Associates 1998). How this connection between libraries and IT is being made in the public consciousness is not clear. However, it seems that libraries have been spending considerable energy bridging the gap between traditional services and

technological ones, and the public is not unreceptive to these changes (Canadian Library Association 1998).

How libraries are bridging these gaps is evident in literature addressing concepts of technological integration. A discussion of the NII (National Information Infrastructure) in the US (McClure, Bertot and Beachboard 1996) lists several initiatives that libraries must consider when developing strategies for effective public connectivity. Included is a list of several different roles for IT within the library community framework that mirror the analysis of public library web sites in this study. These roles include: public access centre, liaison for government information, network literacy centre, economic development centre, and facilitator of distance education (McClure, Bertot and Beachboard 1996, 234). These services are consistent with current non-IT based roles for public libraries, and with what is presently happening with IT in Canadian public libraries (Görgeç, Lew and Curry 1999; Pilon 2000). McClure et al. stress the need for librarians to take action on these issues, which, from both the literature and our survey of Canadian public library web sites, is in fact what is happening. The general impression one derives from the literature is that Canadian libraries are finding a place for IT within their existing mandates without sacrificing their essential nature to a new medium. Rather, IT plays a part by helping libraries facilitate 'traditional' services in a faster way; in other words, IT helps libraries enhance present services, rather than replacing them, something that is suggested by Susan Bales and is in line with the adapting library model of Raber and Budd (1999, 183-184; Bales 1998, 85-86).

WEB PAGES FOR LIBRARIES

How libraries use IT to extend their traditional services is often manifested in their web pages. Thus, we also examined literature describing how libraries can best utilize web pages to bring their traditional mandate to a wider audience. These articles highlight an important part of the new face of the public library. Like public access to the Internet and the provision of IT services, the discussion of library web pages likens some of its raison d'être to the facilitation of traditional library roles (Agingu 2000, 31).

Websites are the gateway for the library and the Internet, and therefore to the world. Access is only as good as the web page's accessibility, from both internal and external viewpoints. Two of the articles provided criteria for a successful web page (Agingu 2000, 34-35; Sylvan 1997), many of which matched the evaluation of web sites done in this study. All of the articles note that web pages provide a positive tool for libraries, be they academic or public, to help facilitate increased awareness of services, events, and perhaps most importantly, a sense of a library community, albeit a 'virtual' one. LibraryNet has honored some of the most innovative uses of web pages by public libraries across Canada, and illustrates the ingenuity of community libraries – from the Rural Library Access pilot project from Pictou-Antigonish Regional Library in Nova Scotia to the Canadian Health Network project set up by the Vancouver Public Library. These libraries harness the power of the Internet, not to blind their clients with technology, but to allow them unparalleled access to local history projects, health information, job banks and children's literacy projects (Pilon 2000). Again, these are

projects that one might find in any public library, without having to leave the house, the province, or the country. To answer Bernard Vavrek's question 'so your library has a web page, so what?' one might only take a quick look at what some of these communities are doing with IT which, so far, has not disconcerted the population of mothers and tots enough to close down the local library.

While there is no doubt that the continuing debate about the role of public libraries in the information age will continue, there seems to be, according to the literature, a greater degree of comfort with the idea of IT as part of the library culture in Canada than in the United States. Whether or not this has to do with the geographical isolation that IT can help communities to overcome, initiatives on the part of the government, or perhaps some unnamed cultural difference, is uncertain, and beyond the boundaries of this study. Certainly, however, the leadership of librarians on this issue is of paramount importance, and this leadership may be partly assessed by how libraries utilize IT to further ingrain their place in the new information age in the minds of their clients.

In Canada, as elsewhere, the issues of the reallocation of resources to accommodate IT in the face of ever-shrinking budgets is an ongoing issue that will not resolve itself quickly. Regardless of this, however, there seems to be the acknowledgement, by both the Canadian library community, as well as the Canadian public at large, that IT is a fact of life for public libraries in 2001, which will be used to enhance traditional services, in addition to offering new ones.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As public libraries have integrated IT into their services, the Canadian federal government has identified libraries as primary vehicles for its 'Connecting Canadians' initiative. Sponsored by Industry Canada, this policy seeks to use libraries to promote digital democracy, reduce the digital divide, and promote the economic self-sufficiency among Canadians (Skrzeszewski and Cubberley 1996). As the opening page on the 'Connecting Canadians' web site states: "Connecting Canadians is the federal government's vision and plan to make Canada the most connected country in the world" (Industry Canada, http://www.connect.gc.ca/en/100-e.htm). A cornerstone of this vision is LibraryNet, advertised by Industry Canada in the following way: "Public libraries have always championed life-long learning. But now, new learning opportunities via the Internet are giving Canadians a renewed hunger for information, knowledge and education. Providing public access to the Information Highway ensures that all citizens have equal opportunity to access informative Web sites that are important to them" (Licenik 2000). It was the primary concern of this study to explore public libraries' responses to these imposed roles.

Method

To explore these reactions, the publicly available web sites of Canada's 22 largest metropolitan areas (Appendix 1) were analyzed for content.[9] These libraries serve approximately 60% of Canada's population. In particular, evidence was sought to support public libraries as providers 1) of "access" to information technology, 2) to content intended to support economic and community development, and 3) to expertise in information literacy skills. These are the roles for public libraries that have been promoted by Industry Canada, with little concomitant support, outside of some hardware provided to public libraries hosting CAP sites. The analyses were conducted in late Fall, 2000 using an empirical, quantitative, content analytic method. The content analysis categories were developed inductively, from information available on the web sites. The authors recognize that web sites may be subject to frequent revision, so results and interpretations are limited to the period of analysis.

Results

All but one of the public library web sites provided a clearly understandable web page, indicating basic scheduling, hours of operation, and information on location, making contact with the library, and becoming a library member. An online catalog was made available on 19 of the 22 sites (86%), and online circulation services were available at 15 (68%) sites. Membership registration was available online at 2 sites (9%). Some form of electronic reference service was available at 12 sites (55%). This ranged from providing an email based reference service to online ready reference, which provides online access to sources such as CIA World Factbook, Bartlett's Quotations, and similar material. Information about adaptive technologies (for disabled persons) was noted on a minority of sites (n=10, 46%). Computer courses (such as using Windows or using email) were provided at 8 libraries (36%), and web tutorials (such as instructing clients on searching techniques for different databases or the Internet as a whole) were available at 6 sites (27%). A majority of the libraries (n=14, 64%) indicated that they lend CD-ROMs, and e-books were available for lending at one library. Other access to information technologies (e.g., database access) was provided at 11 libraries (50%).

Availability of economic and community development information was not clear at two libraries. However, 14 libraries (64%) linked clients to information on job hunting, 3 libraries (14%) provided links to parenting resources, 4 libraries (18%) provided information (in the library) for small businesses, 13 libraries (59%) provided access to space for community groups, and 12 libraries (55%) provided some adult literacy programming. Six libraries (27%) provided research services for clients, and 6 libraries (27%) provided multilingual resources. Links to government information (access to the three levels of government through links to their websites, and sometimes to international organizations like the United Nations) were provided on 15 sites (68%). Thirteen libraries (59%) included a CAP site in the library system. Links to small business information was provided at 16 sites (73%). The web sites of 12 libraries (55%) indicated that the library provided legal resources, and health information was available

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[9] The intention was to analyze the web pages of the public libraries serving Canada's 25 largest cities, but web pages for libraries in Montreal, Quebec City, Sherbrooke, and Trois Rivieres were not identified.

at 10 libraries (46%). Four libraries (18%) had an online book club. Other economic and community development services were available at 13 libraries (59%). These included services such as small business startup guides, job search techniques for students, and community access programmes.

Responses to the development of information literacy skills included safe surfing information, noted on 15 sites (68%). Library tours were available at 8 libraries (36%). Virtual tours were available on 2 sites (9%). Web-based information literacy tutorials were available at 7 libraries (32%), online web-awareness in the form of information, tutorials and links to web-awareness groups (such as MediaWatch) were available at 9 library sites (41%). Information on how to search the Internet was available at 11 sites (50%), and instruction on how to search the online public access catalogue was available at 7 libraries (32%). Instruction on web searching was available at 3 libraries (14%). Special attention to providing information about the Internet for seniors was evident at 5 sites (23%). Other forms of attention to information literacy, such as proper citation of electronic sources and subject specific searching techniques were noted at 5 sites (23%).

When the list of public libraries was divided in half between the larger and smaller metropolitan areas, a clear difference between the two groups emerges. Libraries serving larger metropolitan areas are those that tend to provide electronic and digital reference services. They are also more likely than small cities to provide Internet access, computer courses and web tutorials. Libraries in larger cities also provide more job-hunting resources, parenting resources, space for community groups, adult literacy programs, links to government information, and health information. These libraries are also those that tend to provide the safe surfing information, and instruction on how to search the Internet and the web, and how to search the online public access catalogue.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While these data are preliminary, and further attention to the research question is required, some trends did emerge from the data. Libraries seem to be attempting valiantly to fulfill the expectations made of them. Most are using the web to provide basic library information, most are providing access to the internet, to electronic reference services, and to other forms of IT in the library. In addition, most libraries are attempting to provide resources for economic and community development. The area that appears to remain the most challenging is developing clients' information literacy skills. A minority of libraries attended to this need, and those libraries that do so tend to be serving larger municipalities. What of the clients of libraries serving Canada's smaller centers? Is the digital divide, already characterized by an urban/rural split, to be reconstituted in the context of public libraries? The barriers for libraries seeking to fulfill these roles, including resource restrictions, issues having to do with responsibility for providing library services (i.e., these roles are federally-imposed, and public libraries are municipal services), and other challenges facing public libraries, are questions for another phase of this study. It is the voice of public librarians on these questions that will be sought next.

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