ADDRESSING THE CURRENT CHALLENGES FACED BY LARGE PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Searchers Working Paper 1

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The Searchers

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Synopsis

This paper identifies two key challenges for large public libraries in the 21st century. The first is to obtain a thorough understanding of the nature of the environment in which they operate, including social, technical and policy aspects. Such understanding, however, is insufficient to guide program and policy choices. The second challenge is for libraries to develop a policy framework that clarifies institutional goals and brings coherence to diverse and sometimes conflicting policy demands in a rapidly changing technological and service environment.

This paper shows how the research project, The Searchers, will address a current gap in the research on online information searching, while also critically engaging with emerging debates on public value to develop a conceptual and policy framework within which the research findings can be interpreted and applied.

Introduction

‘The very existence of the public library appears in jeopardy; public librarians appear both concerned and confused. They find themselves asking, as did their predecessors over 100 years ago, what is the purpose of the public library?’ (Harris 1973:52)

Large public libraries face enormous challenges in the early twenty-first century. This paper begins by analysing current developments in digital technologies, showing that questions surrounding the uptake of new technologies are new manifestations of ongoing debates about the role and purpose of the library. The paper then outlines the policy context in which libraries are operating, identifying some of the new challenges for strategic decision-making as well as changes in the ecology of information.

With specific reference to the Searchers Project, it is argued that research into the changing nature of information-seeking and information-provision is necessary, but will be insufficient to guide program and policy choices. Ultimately these choices require the support of a policy framework that clarifies institutional goals and brings coherence to diverse and sometimes conflicting policy demands. The third aspect of
the Searchers project will explicitly address this issue, increasing the value of the empirical research.

A time of rapidly changing technologies

We are living in a period of tremendous change with respect to the printed word. Massive numbers of books are being digitized and anyone with access to the Internet can use a search engine to find out something on any topic. A widely circulated set of 15 ‘provocative statements’ about university libraries claims that before 2011 ‘All information discovery will begin at Google, including discovery of library resources’ and that ‘There will be no more librarians as we know them’ (Taiga Forum Steering Committee 2006). Since the early 1990s, those in the library profession have been asking whether libraries will still be needed in the digital age and, if they still exist, what libraries and librarians might look like (Levy and Marshal 1995; Benton Foundation 1996; Borgman 1996; Mackenzie-Owen. 1997; Herring 2001; Council on Library and Information Resources 2003; Watstein and Mitchell 2006; Werle and Fox 2007). These questions have been asked with respect to academic libraries, large public libraries and local public libraries. In response, libraries are reinventing themselves, trying to secure a place for themselves in a world where it seems that both their collection facilities and their reference services are becoming irrelevant.

There are spectacular examples of libraries embracing the latest digital technologies and reinventing themselves online. Glamorous avatar librarian, Emerald Dumont, has a real-world counterpart who works in an Australian library. She is one of more than 400 real-world librarians who work on virtual library services in the 3-D online environment Second Life (www.secondlife.org). It is possible to do a course on virtual world librarianship through the (real-world) Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. According to the official website of the (virtual) Australian libraries building, there are more than 4,000 visitors a day to Information Island, the island in Second Life where most of the libraries are located. Some Second Life libraries make their real-world library collections accessible through external web links while some have items especially made for Second Life. Librarians can volunteer to do a shift on a Second Life virtual reference desk, and visitors can join virtual book groups. Libraries have also been experimenting with social networking sites such as mySpace and Facebook. For
example, the State Library of Carolina has a mySpace site with 119 ‘friends’, (at the
time of writing), including other cultural institutions, librarians, students of
librarianship and members of the public.

These are not isolated examples but part of a growing movement of public libraries
involved at the cutting edge of digital technology. Librarians have recognized the
potential for Web 2.0 to facilitate large-scale user participation and the expression of
multiple viewpoints. In Australia, several State Libraries have hosted conferences
with the themes of Library 2.0 or Web 2.0, and sessions on blogs, wikis, RSS feeds,
podcasts, virtual reality, instant messaging, LibraryThing, MySpace, Facebook,
Youtbe, Second Life and so on. The 23 Things Online Learning Program is a self-
paced learning program where staff become competent in using internet tools such
as blogs, podcasts, wikis and tagging. The State Library of Victoria (SLV) has
sponsored the implementation of this program in libraries throughout Victoria.

While new digital technologies are enabling new forms of library service, the
traditional services of libraries are also changing, and these changes may bode the
end of the catalogue, the end of the book and the end of reference services.

Cataloguing is a resource-intensive and expensive process. In the 1980s, most
libraries switched from card catalogues to online catalogues and now the Library of
Congress is considering discontinuing the cataloguing of materials using Library of
Congress Subject Headings (Campbell 2001; Calhoun 2006). A possible
replacement for the catalogue is a Google-like interface with a single search box and
relevance-ranked results based on keywords (Calhoun 2006). Already, many
individual libraries provide electronic access to hundreds of newspapers and millions
of articles through subscriptions to electronic databases. Massive digitization
projects currently underway, such as the Google Books Library Project and the Open
Content Alliance, mean that by 2010, millions of printed books will be available in
digital form on the Internet.

Libraries have traditionally provided reference services to people visiting the library,
and in recent years have extended this service to online reference services, whereby
people use online chat software to ask librarians questions and receive answers in
real time. For example, in Australia, AskNow! is a national online reference service involving a roster of ten libraries. It answers approximately 35,000 inquiries in a year. Now, with the increased use of internet search engines (Fallows 2005), it is no longer obvious that the form of these reference services is appropriate. The argument is made that people expect to find things at the library in the same way as they find things on Amazon, Itunes, and Google (Dempsey 2006) and that librarian reference services may be redundant. It should be noted that the merits of all these developments are not uniformly accepted within the library profession. For example there has been a heated debate among the library profession about the virtues of the traditional catalogue and the limitations of Google (Mann 2007; Herring 2001).

**Old debates in digital clothes**

Superficially it may appear that new digital technologies have exploded on to the scene, necessitating the creation of a new library universe. A more critical look, however, reveals that these questions surrounding adoption of particular new technologies continue old debates about the role of the library. These debates are about the role of the library’s physical space, the role of the collection and the role of the library in organizing and providing information.

The library profession has long debated the role of the physical space, whether the library should feel like a hub of community activity or a quiet place for study and research (for example, Totterdell 1978; Council on Library and Information Resources 2006). The grand architectural styles of large public libraries were intended to inspire reverence for these collections of the world’s accumulated knowledge and symbolize state progress (Muddiman and Black 1993; Newman 2007). However, these grand places have been criticised for making users feel oppressed and alienated. Now debate over the role of the physical space has been extended to the role of virtual space. While in 2006-07, there were just over one million visits to the buildings of the State Library of Victoria, in the same year, there were more than double that number of visits to its website and more than 22 million visits to websites it supports. Questions about the role of the library space take new form. If the library collection is digital, what should the virtual space be like and what are the implications for the physical space?
Parallel to the debates about whether the physical space of libraries should support serious research or conviviality, are debates about the extent to which the content of the library collection should inform and the extent to which it should provide entertainment, whether the library should ‘embrace the mass media or fight its alleged ill-effects’ (Jones 1971:126). In current times, this includes debate over whether libraries should stock new-release DVDs and computer games and whether the library should participate in commercial social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. Current debates about e-books (Grafton 2007) echo debates about the introduction to the library of formats other than the book, such as CDs, videos, computer games, and comics. Some interpret the inclusion of popular or low-brow materials, as the ‘blockbuster model’ of libraries (Webster 1999; Webster 2005), an effort to increase library users in response to funding cutbacks. However, there is a tradition of librarianship which advocates inclusion of popular materials as a way of bringing to the library people who would otherwise feel alienated (West 1972; Totterdell 1978).

Provision of information to citizens has been a key role of public libraries and has been seen as important for a healthy democracy (Australian Parliament: House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies 1991; Landheer 1957). It is a principle of the Australian Library and Information Association that ‘freedom can be protected in a democratic society only if its citizens have unrestricted access to information and ideas’ (http://www.alia.org.au/, accessed 10/9/2007). Since the late 1950s, however, there have been two schools of thought in the library profession about the nature of the role of libraries in information-provision. One school of thought is that libraries have a progressive social role in educating the public, others consider that it should aim for neutrality (Gerard 1961; Landry 1993). Decades later, there is still no consensus amongst librarians about this (Kaur 1995). The question of whether the library should provide online reference services or leave it to Google, is actually a recent manifestation of this broader ongoing debate about the role of libraries in information-provision.

While Google has as its stated mission ‘to organize the world’s information and make it useful’, libraries have a much longer tradition of organizing information with the first known catalogue appearing in Leyden in 1595 (Landheer 1957). The role of
libraries in organising information has not, however, been uncontroversial. Cataloguing systems such as the Dewey Decimal System and the Library of Congress Subject Headings are top-down ways of organizing information. Materials are classified according to a predetermined scheme and using controlled vocabularies. The advantages of classification schemes are that they are professionally created and there is a logical schema of relationships between different headings. Like all systems of categories, this means that they also support, and create, a particular view of the world (Bowker and Star 1999). For example, in the 1970s, under the Dewey Decimal System, homosexuality was a subdivision of the category “Disorders of personality” and frequently categorized under “Sex Offences” (Jordan 1975).

New internet technologies make possible an alternative to the top-down structure of catalogues. A folksonomy is the outcome of user-tagging, whereby users label material in a way that makes sense to the user. The disadvantages of user tagging are that different users may use different terms, and its resulting structure may be completely meaningless (Mathes 2004). For example, Library Thing (www.librarything.com) is an online service to help people catalog their books and is used by various public libraries as a supplement to their catalogues (Rethlefsen 2007). Along with tags of ‘economics’, ‘politics’, ‘communism’ and ‘radical’, popular tags used to classify The Communist Manifesto include ‘unread’, ‘own’ and ‘living room’.

The questions of whether the Library of Congress should abandon its subject headings in favor of keywords and whether public libraries should arrange their shelves like bookstores according to headings rather than, say the Dewey system should also be seen as part of this debate about the role of libraries in the organisation of information. Librarians themselves are keenly involved in these debates, in particular through discussions on blogs.

These debates about the role of the physical space, the role of the collection and the role of the library in the provision and organization of information are obviously related. They are part of a bigger question about the purpose of libraries. The danger is that concerns about library take up of technology will be presented in terms
of some technological imperative, rather than as debates about the role and purpose of the library. Australia’s national digital agenda for libraries, described below, could be read as a case of presentism, this being ‘the conceit that one’s own times are radically different from those that went before’ (Webster 2002:267). It is worth noting here that in the late 1940s, radio, movies and TV were seen as grave threats to reading and the use of libraries (Berelson 1949).

A new policy context: Australia’s national digital agenda for libraries

“The Big Bang: Creating the new library universe” (National & State Libraries Australasia 2007) was published in June 2007 by the peak body for National and State Libraries in Australasia (NLSA) and is a companion document to a document put out a year earlier called “Libraries in the Digital Environment” (National & State Libraries Australasia 2006). These two documents describe aspirations for the new library universe, ‘the national digital agenda’ for libraries. Having been endorsed by all members of NSLA, these documents encapsulate the current policy directions of large public libraries in Australia. The thrust of the documents is that digital technologies are mainstream and are shaping user expectations and behaviour. The required response for libraries is to reinvent themselves. The documents state ‘an agreed preference for digital over print resources’ (National & State Libraries Australasia 2006), and the need for people to be able to access the information they need from anywhere and at anytime. One consequence for librarians is that “No job will be unchanged” (National & State Libraries Australasia 2007). Although this is a document specifically for the National and State libraries, national library associations have an important role in creating a coherent policy framework for all libraries (Joint and Wallis 2005). Large public libraries have a vanguard role and it is clearly intended that local libraries should also get on board. The rhetoric of the national digital agenda is that libraries need to respond to new digital technologies, to get with it or get left behind. slv21 is the State Library of Victoria’s policy response to the perceived impact of digital technologies. “The principle behind slv21 is the transformation of the Library’s service model to one based around digital information and access appropriate to the 21st century, while achieving a sustainable funding base for the future. “ (Library Board of Victoria 2006:4). One of the main tenets of slv21 is that “Victorians will be able to access information when and where they want it” (Library Board of Victoria 2006:15).
New challenges for strategic decision-making

The rapid development of digital media and online services has three particular consequences for the strategic decision-making of major public libraries and the formulation and implementation of major policy statements such as The Big Bang.

The first is that libraries operate within an increasingly complex and cross-portfolio policy environment. At the current time this comprises whole-of-government information policy, digital content policy (sometimes aligned with economic or industry portfolios rather than cultural ministries), education and citizenship policy, and the libraries’ ‘home’ domain of cultural policy. The question of sustainability has been increasingly pressing for cultural institutions over the past decade or so, but resolution is more likely to be found in areas of public entrepreneurship, partnership and innovation than expectations of increased public outlays.

The second consequence is the development of a digital economy that defies standard economic analysis. Marginal cost pricing for some forms of information provision is driven down to near zero, challenging conventional market failure arguments underpinning the public funding of cultural institutions (Anderson 2008). Alternatively, the cost of other digital products, particularly the digitisation of ‘analogue’ library collections, is so high that partnerships with major private players in the digital industry are considered the only feasible arrangement to provide on-demand access (British Library 2006). The limitless availability of information and variety of delivery platforms has led to conceptualisation of an “economy of attention” (Lanham 2006), in which libraries compete with online commercial enterprises and other public institutions for scarce human attention.

The third consequence is that libraries must reconcile different timescales in making strategic and resource decisions. The speed of technological change – the uptake of ‘social’ media provides a pertinent example – calls for rapid strategic responses and program development over a period of months or a few years. However the role of major libraries as cultural storehouses and information commons operates on an extended timescale and is connected more directly with institutional and social values than program or audience concerns.
Establishing the value of libraries

One of the prime movers of the Melbourne Public Library (SLV’s predecessor), Sir Redmond Barry, identified four rationales for the library’s establishment: political, economic, cultural and moral (Figure 1). Setting aside Barry’s redemptive tone, his combination of intrinsic and instrumental goals remains remarkably current. In essence, Barry was making an argument for the value of the library. The terms of his advocacy chime with recent debate in policy studies about the concept of public value as a way of framing and assessing the objectives of public sector institutions (Moore 1995, Smith 2004, O’Flynn 2007, Rhodes and Wanna 2007).

<table>
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<th>19th Century Rationales for Public libraries -</th>
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<td>• Political – cultivate and expand the public mind for the exercise of political privileges, make good citizens and useful and faithful subjects</td>
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<td>• Economic – assist with exploitation of natural and artificial resources, prevent wasteful expenditure</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Cultural – stimulate intellectual culture, elevate public taste, but do not seek to cater for the idle and inquisitive or entertain the frivolous</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Moral – provide an alternative to the temptation of the public house and the “gross pleasures that enslave the senses” (adapted from McVilly 1976:18-20)</td>
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Figure 1: Redmond Barry’s Rationales for a public library

Public value analysis calls for a re-examination of why public institutions perform a set of functions rather than the private market or civic organizations, and how institutional resources can be organized to best discharge institutional goals. In addition to service roles, the rationales focus on universality and equity. But cultural institutions have seized on the language of public value to convey more intrinsic and enduring notions of value – the value to individuals and society yielded by deep, creative engagement with art or with reading, for example.

The concept of public value provides a useful analytical framework for decisions about the use of SLV’s institutional capital – authority, trust, cultural collections and professional expertise – in the digital era.
While this paper has outlined changes in the technological and policy context of large public libraries, there are also changes in the ecology of information (Nardi and O’Day 1999) which need to be better understood in order for the library to provide services appropriate to the 21st century.

Changing information ecologies

Clearly the advent of the internet has resulted in changes in the nature of information-seeking and information-provision.

- An Australian study undertaken for the Libraries Working Group of the Cultural Ministers’s Council in 1994 (Mercer 1995) found that 53% of library non-users and roughly 90% of library users would automatically use the library if they wanted to find something out.
- In contrast, a study undertaken by the Pew Internet & American Life Project in 2007 (Pew 2007) found that almost 60% of respondents would consult the Internet when they needed to address problems, while just over 10% would consult the public library.
- An OCLC study conducted in 2005 found that ease of use, convenience and accessibility were as important as information quality and trustworthiness in choosing amongst electronic information sources.
- In Australia, the Bureau of Meteorology website and Wikipedia are the most commonly visited online reference sources.
- In the early 1990s, the ‘content’ industries were traditional, specialized industries, generally with high entry costs. These included newspapers and magazines, film, TV and video, packaged software, recorded music, books, online information services, computer games and consumer directories (Mercer 1995). In 2007, Web 2.0 technologies enable user-contributed content to directly compete, in scale and popularity, with these established industries.

The Searchers: the nature of information search and online information provision

The Searchers will address two issues that have not yet been adequately addressed by existing research, namely the changing nature of information search and online
information provision. There have been many fine-grained studies undertaken on what sort of search terms people type into search engines if they are researching a particular topic, how their eye travels down a web page of search results and so on. There is also a range of large-scale quantitative surveys that attempt to address issues related to information search. However, existing research does not relate social context to practices and values around information search nor investigate how these have changed with the advent of the internet.

Statistics on the use of search engines and wikipedia are often quoted as evidence of the decreasing relevance of the library in providing information to searchers. However, while such statistics do demonstrate changes in information search, the interpretation disregards the multifarious nature of information search.

Both anecdotal evidence and preliminary analysis of online searches suggests that the small amount of effort expended in using a search engine means that a multitude of additional searches are being undertaken that are of little consequence to the searcher.

To give an example: In casual conversation, I make reference to the character Skipper from *Gilligan’s Island*, a popular TV series from the 1970s. I can’t think of the name of the actor who played the Skipper, so later when I am seated at the computer, I type “Gilligan’s Island Skipper” into a search box. Almost immediately, I retrieve 50,000 search results and hardly need to glance at the first of these to see that it was Alan Hale Jr. who played Skipper. I am momentarily satisfied, and then return to what I was doing. Without the resource of the Internet, I would have finished my conversation without giving Skipper another thought.

This type of additional inconsequential search can be compared to the additional type of communications facilitated by SMS, email, and instant messaging (IM). In Australia, hundreds of millions of SMS communications are sent each month (see Wallace 2003). Obviously, IM, SMS and email can be used for communications that mean quite a lot to the sender or recipient, but the fact of communication tells us nothing of its significance. Similarly the fact of ‘information searching,’ tells us nothing about its significance or the level of information sought. In terms of significance, the searcher may be idly searching as in the example above. In terms
of the level of information sought, it may be facts, an understanding of an experience or conceptual understanding. These complexities make it very difficult to meaningfully interpret pre-coded responses to questions such as “How do you decide which electronic information source to use” (question from OCLC 2005).

Some analytical purchase on the complex nature of information search is needed in order to sensibly discuss the appropriate role of the library in information provision.

Figure 2 depicts the library as just one amongst a multitude of different types of information sources, most of which have arisen in the last 10 years. Of particular relevance when analyzing the role of the library, given these information sources, are issues of accessibility, reliability, validity and authority of content, and potential or actual conflict between commercial interests and the public good.

![Figure 2: A schematic depiction of information sources](image)

With regard to accessibility, it should be borne in mind that more than half of Australians are categorized as functionally illiterate when it comes to interpreting prose or documents (ABS 2006) and that roughly one in four Australians aged over 15 do not use the Internet. (Neilson/Netratings 2005/06, World Internet Project 2007 - unpublished data). Another point regarding accessibility is the way that information is structured. One of the library’s key contributions to the organization of information
is the development of the catalogue. Providing search results through an algorithm is very different from using a highly structured environment such as the Dewey decimal system. The implications of these different structures of provision for accessibility of content (for different types of search) has not been researched. Hence, the Searchers project will provide new understandings in its critical analysis of online information provision.

### Understanding the policy and strategic implications

Libraries can be regarded as adaptive institutions, in their responses to changing policy and technologies. The enduring roles of major libraries are inevitably reshaped by the online environment, but not replaced. Figure 3 maps new challenges against those of Barry’s described earlier.

**Challenges for Public Libraries in the Digital Era –**

- **Political** – strengthening democracy through the development of information competency and participation in e-government
- **Economic** – promoting innovation and competitiveness in the digital economy, especially for small economies such as Australia
- **Cultural** – preserving cultural memory (in analogue and digital forms) and cultural distinctiveness in a sea of globalised content
- **Ethical (moral)** – securing public domain characteristics of digital space by ensuring equity, accessibility and universality of the online environment; while preserving these characteristics in the library’s physical spaces.

**Figure 3: Mapping Redmond Barry’s Rationales to the Twenty-First Century**

Research on these issues is necessary to guide policy and program choices for SLV. However these choices require the support of a policy framework that clarifies institutional goals and brings coherence to diverse and sometimes conflicting policy demands. As well as conducting empirical research into the nature of information searching and online provision, the project will critically engage with emerging debates on public value in order to develop a conceptual and policy framework within which the research findings can be interpreted and applied.
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