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Legitimacy for large public libraries in the digital age

Abstract
Purpose
This paper critically analyses recent developments in the relationship of large public libraries with digital technologies, suggesting a way of rethinking the future of large public libraries.

Design/methodology/approach
This paper bases its critical analysis on a review of the literature and reference to specific cases. Historical quotes preceding sections augment the argument that many of the current concerns about digital technologies are not new issues for libraries.

Findings
Issues around library take up of digital technology are continuations of debates that have occurred throughout the history of public libraries about the role of the library. In Australia, library policy makers are focusing on technology and an imagined user in an effort to prove the legitimacy of large public libraries to funding bodies, the library profession and library users. Such attempts seem doomed to fail.

Practical implications (if applicable)
Public libraries need to be clear about their purpose as publicly funded institutions in the digital age. This requires a renewed understanding of a library's publics and a critical understanding of the nature of services available using digital technologies.

Originality/value
This paper presents an alternative way of thinking about the future of large public libraries, with much of the discussion also relevant to local public libraries.

Keywords
Public libraries, digital libraries, legitimacy, public good, library 2.0

Paper type
Conceptual paper

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)

On the edge of the central business district of Melbourne, Australia, stands the State Library of Victoria. Built in the 1850s, it is an imposing edifice in the classical style. In the forecourt is a recently added postmodern sculpture with the title 'Architectural fragment'; the top corner of a submerged stone portico juts two metres high above the asphalt. The letters "LIBRA" are embossed in gold on one face with the successive

letters submerged.   On the adjacent face the letters 'RY' are visible, the preceding letters submerged. It is impossible to say whether the portico is sinking into the ground or rising up out of it. This sculpture is perhaps an apt symbol of the current situation of the State Library of Victoria and other large public libraries in the digital age. Are networked digital technologies rendering these institutions irrelevant, destined to sink into oblivion? Or are these institutions about to emerge as more relevant than ever?

Venture through the grand entrance of the State Library of Victoria and upstairs into the majestic, newly-renovated domed reading room. There, one may get the impression that not much has changed in the last 100 years; silence still hangs in the air as scholars pore over dusty tomes. In other parts of the library, however, it is evident that the library has been changing with the times. Downstairs, backpackers compete with students for free internet access at one of the dozens of computers. In a room to the side (Experimedia), visitors can play the latest computer games or interact with hands-on digital exhibits. In the library gallery is an exhibition of photographs of 'celebrities', including huge portraits of the cast from television series Desperate Housewives and 'bad-boy' rap musician Eminem. Stay back after hours on Valentine's Day and you may meet your soul mate at 'Text Appeal', a literary form of speed-dating, organized and hosted by the State Library of Victoria.

Publicly funded cultural institutions need to balance their attempts to prove legitimacy to their funding bodies with efforts to prove legitimacy in the cultural sector (Gans 1968; Lindqvist 2007).   With particular reference to public art institutions, Belfiore (2004) refers to this as the 'legitimacy game'. Although perhaps not experiencing the same level of politically vulnerability as public art institutions, large public libraries also have to play this same 'legitimacy game'. This article analyses recent developments in the relationship of large public libraries with digital technologies as attempts to play the 'legitimacy game' in the changing digital environment. Although the focus of this paper is on large public libraries, and the State Library of Victoria in Australia is referred to as a case example, much of the discussion is also relevant to local public libraries.

Changing libraries
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 references 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, Youtube, 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 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 possibly 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).

Australia's national digital agenda for libraries
The response of libraries to new digital technologies is not only due to the commitment and enthusiasm of the many individual librarians who are excited by the potential of the online environment. There are clear institutional drivers of library involvement with these technologies. In the US, the Internet2 K20 initiative to build an infrastructure of very high speed broadband (up to 100 GBps) is being presented as an opportunity to reinvent libraries (Werle and Fox 2007). In Australia, a policy community of large public libraries is explicitly driving this change. "The Big Bang: Creating the new library universe " (National & State Libraries Australasia 2007) is a policy document similar in tone to the TAIGA 'provocative statements'. It 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, that is, by the CEOs of each of the member libraries, 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 completely. 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)

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).

In modern times, 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. But if concerns about library take up of technology are specific manifestations of ongoing debates about the role and purpose of the library, why are they presented in terms of some technological imperative, rather than as debates about the role and purpose of the library? Furthermore, what are the likely consequences of this? Webster considers that the technology-driven response of libraries is 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).

The following suggests that library policy makers are focusing on technology and an imagined user in an effort to prove the legitimacy of large public libraries to funding bodies, to the library profession and to library users.

A legitimate purpose

'The public did not ask for public libraries. Why should they do so: they had no idea of what a public library could do or mean. They did not know that they needed or would use it. They did not, on the whole, even know that books had anything worth while to give them. It was only when there were public libraries that most people had any realization that they had anything to give. In other words, here is, definitely, a case when supply created demand, not when demand created supply....'
(McColvin 1956)

As a publicly funded institution, the large public library has to be seen as legitimate by the public, not only because it is the public who will use the library but also because they ultimately fund it. In Australia (Public Libraries Unit 2005), as in the US (Public Agenda 2006) and the UK (Library and Information Commission 1997), the library is considered a good thing and most people see funding of libraries as a good use of their taxes. In 2004, more than half of Australian population were registered as borrowers (ABS 2004). However, in an increasingly tight fiscal environment, large public libraries are continually having to justify their existence rather than rely on their status as a universally approved 'good thing', or as Cubitt puts it, 'society's gift to itself' (2006:584). The purpose of large public libraries has to be seen as legitimate not only by the public and the funding bodies, but also by the library profession (Rasmussen and Jochumsen 2003). Having to play the legitimacy game is not a new phenomenon. In 1968, Caldwell (1968) wrote about Australian public libraries having to justify their existence in the face of an uncertain future. A brief look at the history of public libraries shows that they have always been in transition (Gerard 1961), keeping up with the changing requirements of their stakeholders.

In the nineteenth century, free libraries were established for working people so that they could read books they couldn't afford to buy (Worpole 1993). The public library made up for the inadequacies of the education system. Stimulating reading and boosting literacy was seen as of moral and economic benefit to the whole community (Landheer 1957). The grand buildings of the State Libraries had the additional functions of providing a legal depository for published works and engendering pride in the State. Since then, much has been written about the purpose of libraries (Berelson 1949; Totterdell 1978; Talbot 1992; Muddiman and Black 1993). Reference is often made to 'core values' of librarians (Stehr 2004) and the 'grand tradition' (McColvin 1956) of public libraries in promoting knowledge, advancing democracy and empowering citizens through providing the possibility for self-education. The general consensus, however, is that there is no agreed purpose of libraries (Hafner 1993; Alstad and Curry 2003). For

example, Landry (1993) provides a list of eleven concurrent traditions and rationales for the public library in the UK, all of which could be considered as applicable to the public library in Australia.

While Alsted and Curry suggest that the two traditional missions of 'advancing democracy through an informed citizenry' (2003:2) and 'popularizing the library to attract more users' (2003:1) pull libraries in fundamentally different directions, I would argue that these twin missions are complementary. Problems occur when there is a shift to one at the expense of the other. Various commentators suggest that since the late 1980s there has been a discernible shift towards attracting users at the expense of the public good purposes (Akey 1990; Mulgan 1993; Webster 1999; Alstad and Curry 2003). Belfiore describes how cultural organizations are using performance indicators to show that they are legitimate using 'rhetoric of the "arts for the many, not for the few" (2004:195). This has parallels in efforts by large public libraries to increase the number of library users. The funding of the State Library of Victoria depends largely on evidence of use, as measured by agreed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), such as an increase in the numbers of people accessing the library's website or going through the library's doors (Library Board of Victoria 2006). Given that these KPIs are used as proxies for achievement of the library's objectives regarding the enrichment of the cultural, social and economic lives of Victorians, a focus on achieving KPIs is an obvious way for the State Library of Victoria to prove legitimacy to the funding body.

This does not mean that KPIs do prove legitimacy to the library's publics, or indeed, the library profession. Recognizing this, in the UK, some libraries are moving away from a focus on KPIs to a social audit approach. This approach uses qualitative data collection to assess the actual outcomes of libraries and assess these against the broad objectives of the library. It involves identifying the broad purpose of the library as well as the actual experience of users (Linley and Usherwood 1998).

Internet technologies: Opportunity or threat?
While there are those in the library profession who fear that the Internet, digitization of books and the increased coverage of search engines will make public libraries and librarians obsolete, others regard engaging with the latest technologies as an opportunity for libraries to prove legitimacy not only to funding bodies but also to part of the library profession and public.

According to Webster, in the 1990s UK libraries were criticized for failing to keep up with the latest technologies. Librarians were regarded as 'outdated custodians of public information, fixated on books, and neglecting the modern forms of electronic information delivery" (Webster 1999:377). Unflattering stereotypes of librarians abound and these are perceived to have caused some difficulties in attracting young people to the profession while new digital technologies can be seen as providing librarians with the opportunity to revamp their image, (Rasmussen and Jochumsen 2003; Gordon 2006). Accordingly job descriptions for librarians are changing (Fisher, Hallam et al. 2005). At least one of the large public libraries in Australia is offering voluntary redundancy packages to ease the departure of the old breed of librarians and help usher in the new.

Writing about the UK, Hand captures this ambivalence towards technology in his observation that libraries regard the Internet as both threat and saviour. "On the one hand, the Internet is seen as a direct 'threat' to libraries, particularly their role as legislators of modern knowledge and culture. On the other hand, the Internet is perceived as 'saviour' of the library in 'information' or postmodern culture'"(Hand 2005:371). Those who see the Internet as the saviour of public libraries 'are convinced that new technology-based information, multimedia, delivery, and above all, the Internet are the only future for public libraries' (Webster 2002:178) and 'a way of securing both the cultural and economic position of the library as a public funded agency' (Hand 2005:372). This view is evident in a 1997 report for the UK government New Library: The People's Network. (Library and Information Commission 1997). This document recommends what it refers to as the complete transformation of libraries in the UK.   It identifies a need for all UK citizens to have internet access and skills in order for the UK to become an 'information society'. Here technology is not just perceived as the saviour of libraries but also as the saviour of the UK economy. Librarians were to have an 'evangelist' role in leading the population to embrace technology (Hand 2005).   In Australia during the same period, the State library of Victoria, through VicNet, was promoting the uptake of ICT by all Victorians and led the way in training Victorians in internet use.

In the 1990s the positioning of libraries at the forefront of technology was linked to arguments about the economic advantages of technological literacy. However, this can only be a short-term strategy to secure a legitimate place for public libraries. As argued by Pugh (1998), it is implicit in the policy directions outlined in The People's Network, that libraries and librarians have an interim role as a gateway to the information society rather than being a structural element of the information society itself. The corollary of this view is that there is nothing that is valuable or necessary about libraries or librarians once there is universal access to (and ability to use) the Internet.

With hindsight, one can discern a strong flavour of technological utopianism in The People's Network, reminiscent of early e-democracy claims that the Internet would enable each citizen to participate in government (Rheingold 1993). In the decade since The People's Network was written, much of what it says about technology is out of date; for example, it could not foresee the ubiquity of search engines or social networking sites.

In 2007, the argument in favour of libraries embracing digital technology is slightly different. In Australia it is framed as a response to user expectations and hence a way of attracting more users (National & State Libraries Australasia 2007). It appears, however, that a particular story about user expectations is driving the debate.

Imagined user expectations
Historically the user as s/he exists in library policy discourse has tended to differ from the actual user (Gans 1968). Detailed empirical studies have shown the gap between the library profession's beliefs about what users do and what users actually do (Hand 2005; Akselbo, Arnfred et al. 2006; OCLC 2007). The library user constructed in The Big Bang

and State Library of Victoria documents is a technosavvy early adopter who has high expectations of the library's ability to provide services 'when and where they want them'. For example, this user may want information delivered to her/his internet enabled mobile phone. This imagined user is similar to the technosavvy users in the writings of futurists, those with an interest in selling technological solutions and market research into early adopters of technology. It bears a strong resemblance to the 'NextGen' or 'digital natives' (Prensky 2001) and their presumed expectations around libraries (Abram and Luther 2004; Dempsey 2006). However, this user is not representative of the population. Market research into technology use is generally only interested in understanding consumers with spending power, such as, those in the top 40% by income. While the 2005 OCLC survey of perceptions of libraries and information resources (OCLC 2005) has also been influential in providing a picture of user expectations to library policy makers, the respondents of this survey are a self-selected sample from the Harris Poll Online panel who have volunteered to be involved in online research studies. In Australia, it is estimated that one quarter of people aged over 15 do not use the Internet (Nielsen//NetRatings 2006) and one quarter of library users surveyed in 2006 said that they had no access to the Internet apart from at the library (Public Libraries Unit 2005:37). Those who do not use the Internet tend to have less education and lower income than those who do.

The principles of the Australian Library and Information Association stipulate that public libraries are to serve everybody and the State Library of Victoria has a mandate to serve the whole Victorian community (Library Board of Victoria 2006:4). Berelson (1949) introduced the idea of several publics rather than a single public of library users. He considered that the challenge for public libraries was to optimally allocate resources between these different publics. The publics of the State Library of Victoria include people who use the library and those who do not. It includes the young, the old, those who live near the library, those who live hundreds of kilometres away, different cultural groups, those who can access the internet, those who can not and so on.

Getting to know the library's publics

'Unless we have a picture of library users and non-users, it will be difficult to assess what kind of library the library of the future should be' (Landry 1993:5).

Landry argues that we need to go beyond age and gender to an understanding of the character of library users and non-users and what makes them feel attracted to the library or not. At present we have sparse data on the users and non-users of the State Library of Victoria. As with most large public libraries, the users of the State Library of Victoria are not representative of Victorians but are more educated than the general population. In addition, they are younger than the Victorian population. One third of them are university students (unsurprising given that the library is located next to a university with a small campus). Not much is known about what visitors are doing in the library. The only hard data is from a yearly State Library of Victoria survey, according to which half (49%) of its visitors are there to use the library collection. It is also obvious from a visit to the library that many people are there to use the free Internet access and a few are there for a snooze. Nowadays, however, the library user is no longer just the person who goes

to the library. Library users also include those who pay online visits to the library through, for example, the online catalogue and databases. There is no data on these visitors other than the knowledge, that as users of the Internet, they are likely to be better educated and have higher income than the general population.

Despite the claims of the Big Bang and slv21 that their policy directions are designed to meet user expectations, there is little actual data on user expectations; most knowledge comes from opinion or anecdote (Bawden 2006). The few studies on user expectations that exist, find differences in expectations for different segments of the library's public. Some interesting data on user expectations comes from a Danish study, where interviewees were asked to envisage the library as a car. In general, "either the library was compared to an older but reliable family car such as a Toyota Corolla or the comparison was to a bus" (Rasmussen and Jochumsen 2003:88).

Even if correctly characterizing the expectations of the user or the library's public, to what extent is it appropriate for the direction of libraries to depend on these expectations? While some library researchers explicitly conceptualise the public library as operating within the consumer market (D'Elia, Jorgensen et al. 2002) the following example indicates how the public library's relationship with its publics is different from the relationship between a provider of goods and services and the consumer.

Library policy makers presume that library users now expect that a library collection will be as easy to use as a search engine interface. Bawden considers that libraries trying to meet these expectations are in a no-win situation, and argues that "the more a digital library interface looks and feels like a web search engine, the more the unrealistic expectations of its performance may increase" (2006:350). He also suggests that as the simplicity of a search engine does not take advantage of the way that the library collection is structured and managed, it is not the best way to assist the user. Hence, he advocates a combination of meeting and managing user expectations. Implicit in Bawden's analysis are particular ideas about the library's purpose.

Conclusion: a legitimate purpose for libraries in the digital age
'Very few public libraries have clarified and determined their purpose in clear terms – whom they aim to service, with what, for what purposes, and… with what priorities. Vague phrases such as 'the right book to the right person' or 'the public library should serve all the people' simply beg the question'
F. Sharr, State Librarian of Western Australia (Sharr 1974:137)

As commentators have repeatedly pointed out (Caldwell 1968; Landry 1993; Landheer 1957), there is a tendency for library policy makers to confuse means with ends, or services with purpose. While it is important to show that the services that libraries provide are timely, relevant, and accessible, and make effective use of available technologies, it is essential that libraries can articulate a 'coherent and socially relevant sense of purpose' (Muddiman and Black 1993). Otherwise, they are likely to experience a 'crisis of legitimacy' (Muddiman and Black 1993) or, to borrow from Webster's (1999)

scathing analysis, end up as 'zombie institutions' with no sense of what they should be doing.

This paper is not advocating business as usual for large public libraries. As the world changes, libraries and librarians also need to change, renegotiating their purpose in the light of an informed conception of the public good. The argument made here is that embracing digital technology is not in itself a viable strategy for ensuring the legitimacy of large public libraries. The situation has parallels with that experienced by other publicly funded cultural institutions where failure to negotiate a legitimate purpose can ultimately backfire. For example, Belfiore advises arts organizations to articulate the intrinsic value of the arts to society. Critiquing policies to increase patronage as being 'policies of survival', her conclusion is that these policies might actually turn out to be 'policies of extinction' further undermining the 'legitimacy of the arts sectors' claims over the public purse' (2004:200). Perhaps as Rasmussen and Landry suggest, what is unique about libraries and will ensure their continued existence is their 'ordinary' and 'all-encompassing quality' (Rasmussen and Jochumsen 2003).

As has been shown, debates about the uptake of new digital technologies continue old debates about the role and purpose of the library. Technological developments in the provision, dissemination and organization of information should be critically assessed in terms of how they can be used to further the library's purposes. Rather than just catering to the needs of technosavvy users, the library's purposes need to be renegotiated with respect to the needs of the library's publics. This will require research on the library's publics and the role of public libraries in on-line information provision, as well as a more critical analysis of new digital technologies, such as online search and Web 2.0. Simple consumerist models are inappropriate to guide libraries into the future. As a publicly funded institution, the library needs to serve the public good. Did I imagine it, or did the stone tip of the submerged portico move, if ever so slightly?

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