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Public Libraries, Digital Literacy and Participatory Culture

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Abstract

In recent years public libraries have experimented with user generated or community contributed content through the interactive tools of Web 2.0. For some commentators this establishes not just a new relationship between libraries and their publics, but signals the end of information hegemony and an ‘expert paradigm’. Such claims need to be treated with caution. This article argues that public library experiments with user generated content can be more usefully analysed in the context of wider institutional mandates around literacy, civic engagement and access. This article critically examines some recent library developments in this field, with a particular focus on Australian libraries.

Keywords: libraries, participation, literacy, social media, Australia

1. Introduction

The promotion of literacy is a raison d’etre of public libraries. The instrumental value of reading for self-improvement and social accord was a central argument for public provision of library services, endorsed by rival nineteenth century political philosophies of laissez faire individualism and state sponsored reform (Black, 1996). The role of public libraries in enhancing literacy, access to information and civic engagement, through the expert oversight of librarians, has been consistently advocated as a solution to emerging social problems. Examples include the responsible use of newly-won political rights in the nineteenth century (Black 1996, pp. 58-60), the integration of migrants into host communities in the early twentieth century (Molz & Dain 1999, pp. 5-6), and juvenile delinquency in the mid-twentieth century (Naylor 1987). Library sector concerns with literacy diversified in the late twentieth century, especially in the context of a developing ‘information society’. Building on a tradition of public library charters and statements of principle defending free and equitable access to information (for example Duncan 1961, see also Robbins 1996), the Library Association of Australia released a policy statement on information literacy in 1979. Its third and latest iteration, issued by
the now expanded Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA, 2006), says that

> rapid social change, the emphasis of lifelong learning, the increasing rate of technological change and the movement towards an information-based society are factors which suggest, as never before, that literacies are an essential instrument for effective participation in society.

Consequently, argued ALIA, public libraries “must actively commit time and resources to coordinating literacy activities at all levels and to promote literacy among all members of their community, users and non-users alike”. The rapid development of digital technologies saw this concern framed specifically around digital literacy and engagement. By 2008, the peak institutional body National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA) nominated “community created content” through Web 2.0 or social media tools as one of its strategies to user empowerment in the “new library universe” (NSLA, 2008, pp. 4, 5).

In the face of these ambitions, though, there are concerns within the Australian library sector that library-based literacy initiatives are under-recognised and under-funded. These concerns focus on two areas that are particularly identified with libraries – information literacy and early childhood reading (Harding 2008; Marshall & Strempel 2009). How, then, are public libraries placed to respond to the emergence of digital literacy as a skill that is seen as increasingly central to participation in cultural, civic and economic domains (Aabo, 2005)? ALIA’s plural framing of literacies resonates with a scholarly literature on the need for multiple literacies in a world of multi-media texts and global communications (Alexander, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). However, despite extensive discussion of technical aspects of digital libraries in the professional library literature, and a policy focus on the role of libraries in bridging the digital divide (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2009; Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, 2009), the connection of libraries and digital literacy has received little attention.

Public libraries have been conventionally seen as the centerpiece of the informal or parallel education sector (Horne, Marsden & Peacock, 1993). Conversely, Mercer (1996) argued that libraries have increasingly straddled the formal (school) and informal education sectors, in ways that are not well recognized, planned for or rewarded. Developments in digital communication technologies add weight to Mercer’s argument. Digital technologies are changing the relationship between formal and informal learning and between “in-school” and “out of school” literacies (Sefton-Green, Nixon & Erstad, 2009) in ways that require mapping and analysis. Part of this task involves bringing libraries (and other public cultural institutions) into the picture. This article sets about the task by placing literacy into a library context. The section that follows tracks the development of library interests in information literacy and the emergence of digital literacy with its criticism of positivist notions of information seeking. But what are the normative underpinnings of digital literacy and participatory culture, and how do these
inform library practice? The article then discusses three participatory projects in Australian public libraries. Contrary to analysts who view the development of participation and user generated content as signaling the end of information hegemony (Walsh 2004; Miller 2005), this article suggests that the online environment is providing a forum of experimentation in which public libraries are combining the pursuit of long-standing mandates relating to information access and the development of literate populations, with new forms of engagement and knowledge production. In choosing three diverse library projects for analysis, the article argues against a monolithic and technologically-determined view of the ‘impact’ of digital technologies on either public libraries or publics. The projects under scrutiny certainly signal new relationships between libraries and their publics, but also evidence the role of public libraries in reinforcing connections between ‘old’ and ‘new’ literacies.

2. Literacy and libraries

Literacy is a complex and value-laden concept. Snyder (2008) hardly overstates the case in describing recent debates around school-based literacy as a battleground. The long history of contest over the texts and contexts that frame literacy instruction suggests that it is not simply about skill development or competence, but about

…the institutional shaping of social practices and cultural resources, about inducting successive generations into particular cultural, normative ways of handling texts, and about access to technologies and artifacts (eg, writing and the Internet) and to the social institutions where these tools and artifacts are used (eg, workplaces, civic institutions). (Luke & Freebody, 1999)

In the Western world, the rise of Protestantism, industrialisation, the emergence of a middle-class, and the provision of mass schooling shaped a literacy concerned with moral guidance, grammatical standards and elite culture. Despite their notional commitment to self-directed learning, the scornful attitude of some public libraries to popular fiction reflected their subscription to elite conceptions of literacy and concern over its demotic forms (Donaldson, 1981; Hammond, 2002). This tension can be traced through to the present day in both libraries and schools, especially in debates over the acquisition, placement and use of new communication technologies and electronic texts (Boyce 2006).

While the term ‘literacy’ has been used to frame this discussion, prior to the 1970s usage of the term was generally restricted to non-formal education settings and called attention to the problem of adult illiteracy. Reading and writing were the terms conventionally favoured in formal educational discourse (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, pp. 7-8). The new and wider usage came from diverse sources: radical education, linguistics and cultural studies, and the economic upheaval and new skill requirements associated with post-industrialism. Lankshear and Knobel (2006, chap.1) provide a useful guide to the expanding presence of literacy in pedagogical, scholarly and political programs since that time, leading to the emergence of digital literacy as “one of the hottest ‘literacies’ going around” (p. 21).
Libraries played a significant role in the pluralisation of literacy from the 1970s, through their advocacy of information literacy (Mutch, 1997; Owusu-Ansah, 2003). The vanguard American library sector made a distinctive contribution to emerging post-industrial discourse by stressing evaluative rather than simple information retrieval and management skills. The American Library Association argued that information literacy underpinned “lifelong learning” in an environment where “a good job today may be obsolete tomorrow” and “what is true today is often outdated tomorrow”. Libraries were promoted as key institutions for the continuous updating of information resources and skills necessary for effective workforce participation, civic engagement and personal management (American Library Association, 1989).

Academic and school librarians were especially responsive to these concerns, producing a substantial theoretical and practice literature around information literacy (Rader 2002; Virkus, 2003). Discussion of the role of public libraries in promoting information literacy has been more equivocal. The willingness and capacity of public librarians to provide literacy instruction is debated (Bundy 1999, 2002; Harding 2008; Lewis 2009), despite libraries being prescribed a special role in this area (Berryman, 2005; Burns Owen Partnership, 2009; Environmetrics, 2005; I&J Management Services, 2008). But policy formation and advocacy, whether by professional sectors or from within government, brings no guarantee of on-the-ground resources. In the face of skill and resource shortages, lofty concepts of ‘information literacy’ may be operationalised in public libraries as instruction in proprietary software and monitoring public terminal use.

Looking past these structural concerns, though, there have been criticisms of the pedagogical underpinnings of library-based literacy programs. Intriguing links between early reading and information literacy have been made in this context. The attention to early reading (or “family literacy” as some put it (Wasik, 2004)) and the concept of information literacy have been seen as conflicting with new practices and epistemologies of digital and online environments (Kapitzke, 2003; Luke & Luke, 2001; Sefton Green et. al., 2009). The burden of this criticism focuses on the difficulty of school systems in coping with new forms and uses of communication technologies. New attention to literacy standards and testing regimes are seen as a tactic to discipline adolescent identities framed by multi-media texts. Similarly, the concept of information literacy is criticized for its reliance on notions of autonomous learners and textually-fixed truths, a positivist outlook which appears increasingly remote from the socially created, distributed forms of knowledge that are held to be characteristic of digital environments.

*From ‘read’ to ‘read-write’*

Digital literacy, along with similar formulations such as web literacy, gained currency in the mid-1990s (Bawden, 2001; Godwin & Parker, 2008). In line with the library sector’s emphasis on information literacy as an overarching concept, web literacy was initially located as an information literacy subset. But where the library sector had invested significant intellectual and strategic resources in information literacy, other “literacy constituencies” (Owusu-Ansah, 2003, p. 221), notably the academic domains of
education and cultural studies, gave digital literacy a distinctive theoretical shape. The most obvious contrast with information literacy was a shift from the consumption to the production of information and expressive culture, from “read only” to “read-write” modes (Hartley 2009, p. 17). This contributory or participatory aspect was theorized before the development of Web 2.0 or social media tools, notably in connection with radio, television and video (Jenkins, 1992). However, the low ‘entry costs’ of Web 2.0 brought the concept of participatory culture, and the skills of digital literacy that underpin it, to wide attention. A participatory culture is

[a] culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. (Jenkins, Purushtoma, Weigal, Clinton & Robison, 2009, p. xi)

Consequently, the expanding use of the internet in cultural, commercial and government settings has led to a reframing of the digital divide as a “participation gap” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 258), concerned not so much with questions of access, but opportunities for involvement in participatory culture (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2009, p.3).

However, for Sefton-Green et. al. (2009) the now ‘taken-for-granted’ status of digital literacy masks the complexity of its construction. ‘Top down’ versions of digital literacy, serving the civic and economic aspirations of governments, jostle with ‘bottom up’ out-of-school, self-taught and commercially mediated kinds. These authors argue that because schools do not control access to digital literacy, in the way that they have regulated and credentialed print literacy and numeracy skills, it has been necessary to build an alliance between schools and homes as co-contributors to digital education.

The use of digital media, argues Snyder (2008, p.174), involves a trade-off between standards and creativity: standards are less exacting, but language is used in interesting and creative ways. Debate over old/new literacies is most acutely focused on mobile phones (Goggin, 2008). Should they be seen as disruptive influences in a learning context driven by objective standards and framed by the walls of the classroom? Or do they signal new possibilities for student-centred learning in diverse institutional settings (Sharples, Taylor & Vavoula, 2007)?

Sefton Green et. al.’s (2009) call for greater attention to the intersection of formal and informal learning domains focusses on a school/non-school binary, inviting examination of the role of public cultural institutions. There is ample evidence of the contributions of libraries and other public cultural institutions to school-based programs that use digital resources. In Australia, these initiatives range from dedicated education spaces on major library websites (State Library of Victoria 2009a) to the establishment in 2005 by education authorities of The Le@rning Federation, which draws on the collections of public cultural institutions to develop curriculum-based “digital objects” for use in teaching programs (The Le@rning Federation 2009). Such initiatives build on established links between Australian education authorities and cultural institutions through, for
example, the secondment of teachers to institutions to assist with the preparation and conduct of school visits.

However, empirical analysis of school-based uptake of digital technologies suggests, in Australia at least, that computing and web resources have tended to be used by teachers in preparation tasks rather than integrated in classrooms. This finding appears to be consistent over the past decade, despite the expansion of digital technologies and curriculum resources during that period (Meredyth, Blackwood, Russell, Thomas & Wise, 1999; education.au, 2008). Individualistic (lack of familiarity and confidence) and structural reasons (lack of time) contribute to this pattern (Condie & Munro 2007). School leadership has also been identified as a significant indicator of the integration of computing technology in schools (Dawson & Rakes, 2003; Schiller, 2003).

Lewis (2009) has also identified some risk-based limitations in the use of digital technologies in schools. These include the blocking of access to social networking tools as not conducive to a safe learning environment. State education authorities (the Australian jurisdiction responsible for public education) have responded by developing centralized networks, protocols and resources (for example see Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009). While internet filtering and other forms of censorship by public libraries have their own controversial history (Moody, 2005; Trushina, 2004), informal education institutions can promote the use of digital technologies in less constrained ways. For example the American Library Association’s (2009) Libraries, Literacy and Gaming project promotes libraries as a “third place” alternative to the home-school nexus. There are also sophisticated examples of the third place strategy as a lead-in to wider library programs in Australian library systems (Yarra Plenty Regional Library Service, 2009). These strategies have not been free of contest. Allocating library budgets to buy games instead of books echoes earlier controversies over the acquisition of popular fiction. As Dressman (1997) argues, libraries are spaces where order and desire are continually negotiated.

The enthusiastic uptake of digital technologies as educational tools in the public cultural sector can be attributed to several factors. These include voluntary rather than compulsory attendance (libraries need to attract patrons, schools conscript them), institutional diversity (in contrast to school standardization and bureaucratic direction), different learning contexts, a long association with technology and information networking, and (especially for galleries and museums) visual and kinaesthetic orientations. Public libraries, though, have received less attention than museums in the critical discussion of digital literacy and participatory culture. The conceptualization of “digital material culture” has presented an epistemological challenge to object-centred museums that has generated significant critical debate (Cameron & Kenderdine 2007). The relationship of digital information to print seems on the surface to be more straightforward, and has been approached in technical and service terms rather than ontological or cultural perspectives (Baker, 2001; Jeanneney, 2006).

3. Participation New and Old
It is abundantly clear that institutional practices of libraries, and the wider GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) sector, are changing significantly with the development of digital technologies. Different institutional roles and forms of expert mediation within this sector modulate these changes. Libraries typically seek to connect reader to text through cataloguing and reference services, museums present collection material through interpretive strategies (Goodrum 2006). Digital technologies have encouraged convergence and cooperation within the sector, and facilitated closer alignment with formal education programs. For libraries, the provision of wireless networks and casual seating arrangements, to encourage notebook use and group work, is now a motif of major regeneration projects. Library websites have moved to the strategic centre stage as virtual visitors surpass physical ones, and public libraries seek to maintain presence in the commercially dominated field of information search. New policy settings reorient the traditional library model based on public ownership of physical collections towards location and delivery of digital texts wherever they reside, promising to “serve…users as and when they seek information” (Patterson & Mercer 2009, p. 2).

The reform of especial interest here is the development of a new interactive relationship with users. Australian public libraries have rapidly adopted social media tools and encouraged user contributions ranging from library blogs, collection tagging and folksonomies, to partnership in collection documentation. However, consistent with Harding’s (2008) observations on information literacy and public libraries, we have few guides to this new terrain. Can it be confidently stated that such diverse developments are evidence of paradigmatic change or the weakening of central authority? To what extent do they serve long-standing library mandates around access, engagement and education? To what extent is ‘participation’ connected to wider literacy strategies? The following discussion of three Australian public library programs explores these questions.

The State Library of Victoria (SLV)’s Inside a Dog website (State Library of Victoria 2009b) was launched in 2006, and responds to concerns expressed by educators and the library sector about teenagers’ (especially males’) disengagement with reading. The site interweaves print and digital cultures, encouraging contributions from its 12-18 year-old target audience through blogging, book reviews and recommendations, and the production of creative works that engage with specific texts. The site has had almost half a million visits since its inception. Visitors viewed an average of just over 4 pages per visit – perhaps a more meaningful metric than gross visitor numbers. The site is hosted by SLV’s Centre for Youth Literature (CYL). CYL was established in 1991 and has established a reputation as a national leader in this field. Melbourne, home to SLV, has a strong literary culture - in 2009 it was designated a UNESCO City of Literature. Youth reading is given special prominence through the Victorian premier’s (the government leader) sponsorship of an annual reading competition. Institutional factors, then, create a receptive climate for Inside a Dog’s focus on books. CYL’s use of the interactive web reflects a desire to make reading a collaborative rather than solitary experience, and rests on the conviction that book and screen are complementary rather than dichotomous.

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1 Figures from Google Analytics site analysis, provided by SLV. The author acknowledges Lili Wilkinson, Centre for Youth Literature, SLV, for information on website usage and discussion of Inside a Dog’s programs and aims.
(Centre for Youth Literature 2009). This pedagogical reasoning recognises the importance of the internet in youth culture, particularly its role in constituting the relational or social self (Maczewski 2002). This contrasts with cultivation of the private self through the individual acquisition of knowledge, commonly associated with formal schooling (Burbules 2006). In this regard, it is revealing that although Inside a Dog is used in some school programs, peak use occurs between 4 and 6 pm. The nature of entries to Inside a Dog’s annual competition for creative responses to works of young adult fiction shows that the website acts as a catalyst for creative productions across a range of media and developed outside formal schooling. Competition entries are received in the forms of music, art, costume, film and more, in addition to writing, and projects are often produced through physical-world collaboration. Inside a Dog is a relatively modest exercise in participation, if that concept is assessed strictly in terms of computer-mediated engagement. The now ageing website has inevitably come under pressure for an upgrade to include more interactive and personalised features. But what is most interesting about Inside a Dog, in terms of the research questions posed above, is the extent to which it has connected reading with a range of cultural practices, resisting reductive links between digital media and participation.

A second example is the Australian Newspaper Digitisation Project (ANDP) (National Library of Australia 2009a). ANDP was established in 2006 with the aim of placing online nineteenth and twentieth century newspapers from each Australian state and territory. The project is coordinated by the National Library of Australia (NLA) and is being undertaken in collaboration with the Australian state and territory libraries. ANDP is a complex and large-scale project. It uses external contractors to create image files of microfilmed newspaper pages, and to convert the files through optical character recognition (OCR) processes into a full text searchable format. After uploading to a public website (http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper), several thousand volunteers correct errors arising from the OCR process to improve the accuracy and readability of on-line copies. In this case, historical knowledge and print literacy skills are part of the multi-literacy repertoire required to successfully undertake the volunteer role. Clearly, the internet's low transaction costs, and NLA’s resources and authority, make such a project possible and encourage new, co-productive relationships between institutions and users. The volunteers make a significant commitment to realising the libraries’ aims of widening access to newspaper holdings (Holley 2007, p.5). However, the location of this project in a global digital economy, through using contractors based in India for the OCR process, highlights the limits of an analysis focused on the relationship between libraries and their users. The project is located within a global digital economy that brings state, market and non-market sectors together in new ways. In this regard, one interesting ‘literacy’ angle is that English skills are available more cheaply in India than other Anglophone economies. The libraries’ strategic aims for the project are most strongly connected with traditional roles of access and preservation, and benefits to participants are described in terms of empowerment and social networking (Holley 2009, p.27). Literacy is not a specific program objective, although some of the volunteer cohort – specifically older people with an interest in genealogy - value acquiring digital skills and experimenting with digital media (Holley 2009, p.21). However, the project provides an
opportunity for experimentation and social learning, features of informal education processes around digital literacy.

The third example is one that brings Australian libraries and museums together in promoting photographic holdings through placement on the open source image website Flickr Commons (Flickr 2009). The Flickr Commons, launched in 2008, provides unrestricted access to images from – at last count - the collections of 27 major libraries and museums around the globe (Flickr 2009). Australian libraries and museums were early movers in this initiative. Depending on the collection and institution, users are able to tag and comment on images, contribute to collection blogs, view current-day images of historical street scenes using Google Maps, and mash up files to make new images. Placement on Flickr Commons has promoted some little-used collections, supplemented institutional knowledge, and encouraged creative re-use and innovation (Chan 2008; Bray 2009; Hagon 2009; National Library of Australia 2009b). The National Library of Australia’s Re-picture Australia – which invites users to mash-up images from NLA’s collections placed without use restrictions on Flickr Commons – is the most adventurous of these initiatives. However successful participation requires advanced digital media skills. None of the Australian institutions involved in this project have been as explicit as the Library of Congress – the Flickr Commons pioneer - in linking the enterprise to specific institutional goals around literacy and learning (Springer et. al. 2008, p.41). The institutions, though, have a shared view of their role in providing opportunities for creative engagement with digital technologies and cultural content in the public domain (Holley 2009, p.22). While acknowledging the new relationships established with library publics in online environments, this initiative hardly signals the end of an expert paradigm. Indeed, in contributing to new dialogue and practices around the information commons, cultural institutions have pushed along Australian debate over copyright restrictions and the uses of public sector information (Government 2.0 Taskforce). This suggests the importance of public libraries’ institutional authority in liberalising political and legal regimes around information.

Many other examples can be cited of public libraries, and other public cultural institutions, exploring new relationships with users through digital technologies. The past few years have been a dynamic period for program development in the public cultural sphere. As we have seen, numerous factors bear on specific program design, including the target audience, collection media, and the strategic goals and resources of institutions. However, where commentators such as Walsh and Miller describe such programs as epochal, program staff stress connection and continuity, describing these programs in terms such as “co-existence” (of crowd-sourced and expert knowledge) (Johnston 2008) and “old fashioned community engagement” (Chan 2008).

The programs outlined above are indicative of plural interests within the library profession and the multi-faceted nature of libraries. Similarly, participation is not a straightforward concept (Hague & Williamson, 2009), nor necessarily a new one in library terms. Shedroff (cited in Watkins & Russo, 2009, p. 275) challenges a passive/active binary by arguing that participation can be passive and institutionalised, arguing for the concept of co-creation as a more active alternative. Such debates can be
located within a longer process of re-imagining the library user. Earlier distinctions between ‘passive’ and ‘active’ library users can be identified, particularly during times of institutional change. The advent of open stacks, end-user searching, and online databases are earlier examples of shared responsibility for information management (Battles, 2003, pp. 132-3; Pfaffenberger, 1990). The re-alignment of ‘top-down’ or hierarchical authority and network relationships, despite its association with new technologies, can be seen as a long-standing library process of user education and self-management, within the wider person-forming ethos of modern liberal institutions.

The complex mandates of libraries and other cultural institutions also shape ‘participation’. The ventures described above can be seen as responses to political imperatives to boost visitation, especially for hard-to-reach audiences such as teenagers. They can be seen as development sites for innovations and new business models, and as showcases for the talents of their staff members. Commercial sponsors find their way into the ‘third place’ of youth-oriented programs. The US mobile telephony giant Verizon sponsors ALA’s literacy and gaming program, for example. A staff member of Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum’s, discussing the value of information harvested from community contributions to the museum’s Flickr site, was careful to note that free access to the images had resulted in no loss of sales to the institution (Bray, 2009). When we look behind the rhetoric of participation or user-generated content, we see complex technical, administrative and commercial dynamics.

The interest by public libraries in participation and co-creation has many benefits. First, the well-documented role of informal and peer education in digital literacy underscores the significance of the informal education sector. Libraries, argues Burbules (2006), have been slow to realise the educational importance of their institutional context. Peer or social learning diversifies a library pedagogy shaped and constrained by a tradition of one-to-one user instruction. However, around 20% of Australians do not use the internet (Ewing & Thomas 2010), and public libraries play a vital role in facilitating ‘participation’ in its most basic form, as connectivity. Second the recognition of non-institutional expertise adds to the stock of institutional knowledge and the democratization of that knowledge. Third, volunteer or community participation provides an alternative approach to public-private partnerships, which has been a policy emphasis especially in the digitisation area. This may encourage attention to regional and vernacular collections falling outside the scope of major digitisation projects. Fourth, the placement of collections in open source environments provides opportunities for creative engagement and innovation. Finally, such initiatives give impetus to debate over the cultural and economic value of public sector information and the appropriateness of copyright settings. The contribution of participatory projects to social capital and social enterprise should also be recognised, if its precise dimensions remain elusive. This view is not universally endorsed. McMurtry (2004), for example, argues that social enterprises offer low-cost alternatives to state funding, providing unofficial support for aggressive neo-liberalism. Such criticism needs to be weighed against the long tradition of volunteering in public cultural institutions, and theories of the evolving hybrid character of the digital economy (Lessig 2008).
4. Concluding Remarks

Digital technologies are not only changing library practices, they are changing the relationship between libraries and schooling, and formal and informal education, in ways that have yet to be fully appreciated. Major public libraries have seized on the concept of participatory culture to develop new relationships with their audiences, gather new knowledge about their collections, and create new platforms for innovative practice. However, the role and contribution of new library initiatives in the wider project of literacy requires further analysis. There is, as we have seen, a limited critical literature in the area of public libraries and literacy, and analysts who seek a more critical engagement between in-school and out-of-school literacy have not addressed the role or potential of the informal education sector.

The concept of digital literacy, argues Gibson (2008), opens up new possibilities for educational optimism after a lengthy period of literacy panics and partisan debate. The emphasis on media production, he argues, sidesteps sterile debates over media consumption. The increasing cognitive engagement required by online games, and the growing economic significance of digital media tools, he continues, makes it increasingly difficult to set print and digital literacy in opposition. Indeed, as McWilliam (2008) argues, competence in both print-based and ‘new’ literacies are seen as increasingly important for social and economic participation in the twenty first century.

If digital technologies are new, the framing of digital literacy in terms of reflexivity and engagement in a new economy bears a strong resemblance to the literacy promoted by newly governmentalised states several centuries ago (Hunter 1997). Similarly, discussion of participatory culture calls up long-standing concerns over access. Participatory culture has been framed in technological, sociological and epistemological terms that focus narrowly on the use of social media tools. This construction has been influenced by critical responses to the central distribution of cultural products. However, universalist assumptions of internet access and social media use are not supported by empirical research, and discussion of digital literacy and participatory culture needs to foreground this issue (Peter & Valkenburg 2006; Willis & Tranter 2006).

Developments in participatory culture are welcomed by some as signalling the end of library information hegemony, and by an Australian library sector peak body as emblematic of a ‘new library universe’. This article has argued for a less apocalyptic view of current developments. By locating experiments in user generated content and participatory culture within the conceptual sphere of literacy, we can re-appraise the contributions of formal and informal education sectors to literacy, and recognise the distinctive role and potential of libraries in this area. Concerns over the growth of a neo-liberal “enterprise pedagogy” in schools focusing on the use of information technology (Brown 2005), find parallels with criticism of the library sector’s increasing focus on digital resources. However, there is much to be gained in libraries cultivating opportunities for participatory learning and co-creation that are hallmarks of digital culture and emerging theories of digital literacy. If not a new epoch, we are at least, as Palmer (2009) observes, in an exciting period of learning and experimentation.
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