The Public Library's Future: From Challenge to Opportunity

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As the public library faces the decade of the 1980s, it also faces several challenges—challenges which, some feel, call into question its very ability to survive. The catalog of woes is familiar. The public library faces budget cuts, accusations that it is no longer relevant to the needs of individuals and communities, claims that the public library has lost a sense of purpose. "The public library, once a symbol of local pride, is fast becoming an endangered institution —a victim of declining tax revenues, rising costs and public indifference."[1] This article examines four of the challenges facing the public library: the challenge of societal complexity, the challenge of technology, the fiscal challenge, and the challenge of planning.

These challenges are by no means simple, and yet they are by no means insurmountable. In fact, out of these challenges will come opportunities for the public library to perform, to reaffirm itself as a viable institution, "to so mutate as to provide for more effective adaptation to its changing environment."[2]

The Challenge of Societal Complexity

One challenge which the public library as a public institution and public librarians as practicing professionals will face in the 1980s is the challenge of helping patrons cope with an increasingly complex world. As individuals face this growing complexity, they will need information to help explore options available to them in almost every phase of their lives.

Several developments present individuals with the need to seek alternative solutions to daily problems. The inflation and economic uncertainty of our time have called into question many traditional economic solutions and now force individuals to find new answers to financial problems. Technological advances, a decline in public sector employment and the development of the service industry, coupled with the fact that individuals now seek new rewards and satisfactions from their jobs, increase the number of individuals making career change decisions. Dwindling energy resources, the need for alternative energy sources and the feasibility of certain high technology approaches to meeting energy demands have also become topics of concern for an increasing number of individuals.

Society also offers individuals an abundance of information to be used in seeking solutions to the above problems. The number of governmental agencies available to help individuals has doubled in two decades. Information and information services continue to grow. Paradoxically, this information abundance is often an information maze, and citizens are unable to find the information which they need and which is available to them. The future

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promises more of the same as "pluralism, once the bedrock of the American heritage, now rises to claim its birthright and to multiply options until the human mind has difficulty in coping."[3]

Because the public library derives its demands from the public at large, the library and public librarians will be challenged to provide access to opportunities which allow patrons to explore options and choose the ones that meet their personal needs and requirements. The public library must help its patrons find solutions to the increasingly complex problems presented by today's world. In doing so, the public library must help individuals sift through the glut of information to find the relevant resources and experiences.

If the public library does not provide these kinds of information services, it will become irrelevant to the needs of its patrons. Already, as one study of New England residents has shown, many individuals do not consider the public library an effective information resource.

> Libraries were rated as less effective than professional people, businesses, and government agencies. . . . Libraries are not the first or only phase that the majority of survey respondents turned to for the resolution of an information need. In fact, many of them labeled libraries as irrelevant to their information need.[4]

If the public library is irrelevant to the needs of the individuals of society, other groups and organizations will usurp important functions that the public library can and should perform.

> Within the last ten to fifteen years this country has witnessed rapid growth of information brokers and information-on-demand enterprises, increased specialization of the media—particularly periodical literature—the emergence of many special purpose I & R services, the development of new home entertaining/informing media, the improvement of bibliographic control devices such as indexes and current awareness services. All of these can be expected to compete to some degree with the public library in its reference and information mission: like a library, they all facilitate the individual's access to information.[5]

The challenge to the public library to respond to patron needs in the area of societal complexity is not a challenge to perform a new task. It is, rather, a challenge to expand public library's traditional role as a provider of information for self-fulfillment and self-education.

Public libraries have always provided information in a number of areas. They must now provide information, resources, and opportunities to patrons so that they may explore their personal goals and meet their personal needs in the face of an increasingly complex world. Such a task includes identifying the areas in the daily lives of individuals which will be affected by increasing societal complexity. It will also become important for public librarians to develop interpersonal skills and to understand the processes of change through which many individuals are going.

For the practicing librarian, knowing the library's collection is no longer enough. Librarians must also know the information resources of their communities. They must be prepared to provide their patrons with access to opportunities and experiences that are not limited to print. Public librarians must, for example, be as comfortable and as confident in recommending career testing and counseling services as in recommending a book on career change.

Knowing the community's information network also means knowing where gaps exist in that network.

> We intervene in the system when it does not work. And the commercial system can break down at different points—which is to say that for some reason people are not getting the information they want, the information to which they have a legal right, or the information they should want if they are to be responsible members of society.[6]

The public library has a challenge and thereby an opportunity and responsibility to fill such gaps in the information network of its community.

The challenge of societal complexity also requires that the public library integrate itself into the information network of its community. The public library must provide information about and make use of its community information resources, even those which might be seen as competing with the public library. "Paradoxically, some of these 'competing' developments, when used by the library, can also enhance its services."[7]

The Challenge of Technology

The past decade has seen numerous technological advances—the development of microcomputers from Intel's first chips to the recent introduction of 16-bit microcomputers, the mass marketing of video recording devices such as video cassettes and video discs and the increasing use of cable television.

Public libraries themselves have not been unaffected by the new technology. Developments such as automated circulation systems, computer output microform catalogs, on-line reference services, and library access to cable television are only a few of the technological revolutions that libraries themselves have experienced.

But technology continues to develop. In only one area, that of computers, the 1980s should produce a number of important developments. The decade should see the real popularization of the computer, as microcomputers drop in price and increase in capacity. Within five years, for example, every freshman at Carnegie Mellon University will receive a microcomputer as part of the University's orientation program. Furthermore, the development of optical-digital computers will not only reduce hardware size by 2500-fold but also increase capacity and processing speed by allowing for parallel processing of data. Computers will be even less expensive, even more powerful and even more pervasive.

Some feel that the coming technological changes threaten the very existence of public libraries. "F. W. Lancaster, professor of library science at

the University of Illinois, and Lewis Branscomb, vice-president and chief scientist, IBM Corporation, predict that the public library may be bypassed and that public libraries may be only a passing fancy.... If the public library does not soon develop a role in the emerging electronic revolution ... we will become irrelevant to the people who require rapid, convenient, and energy conscious access to information and materials."[8] Public libraries may be superseded by commercial information brokers who will go directly to the former library patron, who will have a computer at home.

A less pessimistic, but hardly optimistic, forecast emerges from a recent Delphi study on the future of lifelong learning in the public library, which predicts that "the library will become an electronic entity ... probably against its will, and definitely at least one full decade behind peak demand."[9] The public library, it is predicted, will arrive on the scene with too little, too late.

The technological challenge to public libraries is to use the new technologies to better accomplish the library's old goal of providing access to information. "What is the potential of technology in public libraries? It is to expand traditional functions. It allows the library to capture, publish, store, and retrieve information for the community."[10] Or, as the Director of the Pikes Peak Library District recently expressed the challenge of technology, "The issue is not technology. The issue is access and the use of technology to increase access."[11]

In order to use the new technologies which will inevitably arise, public librarians must develop criteria by which those technological advances can be evaluated. What is crucial is not the particular technology but the development of a framework by which any technology can be judged and, if useful, added to the public library's "range of tools available to solve problems."[12]

A second, and more ambitious, aspect of the technological challenge is that the new technology can allow the public library to provide a more individualized service to its patrons, "to achieve ... a custom-tailored presentation of information to a user in a form that is possible even uniquely suited to his own lexical, syntactic, rhetorical characteristics."[13]

Library service has largely been a matter of providing information to patrons with little regard for the individual's uniqueness—the specific reasons for the request, the individual's skills and abilities in using the information, or preference of format. In short, the user is made to adapt to the library's information system, instead of vice versa. Public librarians, facing "the increasing demand by users of systems that they be treated as individuals,"[14] will have to use the new technologies to make public libraries "user need-driven, rather than primarily driven by what happens to be available."[15]

The development of increasingly individualized service is by no means easy. It requires a more sophisticated understanding of user needs and of the situations in which individuals use libraries.[16] It requires an understanding of the psychology of information processing and the potential applications of technology.

The challenge of technology demands a retooling and re-educating of professional librarians. They must not only be aware of technological advancements; they must understand how those developments can be used to improve

access for individuals. Given the information explosion and the increase of user-initiated demands, the implementation of new technologies by public libraries may not be a question of better service; it may be the only way that adequate service can be provided.

The Fiscal Challenge

The 1970s ended with California public libraries reeling from the blows of Proposition 13. Fear that a rash of comparable tax cutting measures would sweep the country was somewhat quelled when only one of eight such proposals passed in 1980. While similar referenda did fail in other states, the mere possibility of more California-like experiences does point to the fragile fiscal structure of our public libraries, which depend on the local property tax for nearly eighty percent of their funding.

Many public libraries ended the 1970s and began the 1980s faced with the fiscal crisis of budget cuts. Few of the nations' large urban libraries escaped local funding shortages. Although most medium-size and small public libraries have avoided similar large scale cuts in budgets, few have kept pace with inflation. For all public libraries, potential budget cuts and the corrosion of inflation are very real problems which again point to the fragile fiscal structure of public libraries.

Recent studies have argued for an increased role for the states in the funding of public libraries. A study conducted by Government Studies and Systems, Inc., for the Urban Libraries Council in 1977 found "a need and valid rationale for state government to increase state aid for public libraries."[17] The National Commission on Libraries and Information Science study, *Alternatives for Financing the Public Library,* proposed that state government provide 50 percent of the funds needed to support public libraries. (Presently, public libraries receive only 13 percent of their funding from state sources.)

Increased state funding would free public libraries from their presently skewed fiscal base. The current funding situation allows public libraries to be continually buffeted by the vagaries of local governments.

> America's public-library resources have been developed in a hit-or-miss fashion. By being dependent primarily on local funding and local decision-making, they have been subjected variously to stringent budgets and backwoods thinking; to openhanded funding and gifted leadership; and to every shade in between.[18]

Increased participation by state government would help stabilize a large portion of the public library's funding base.

Furthermore, state funds are primarily derived from income and sales taxes. These two taxes generate more revenue as wages and prices rise. In contrast, revenue from local property tax remains relatively constant, increasing gradually as either assessed valuation or the tax rate rises. Tying public library funding to the more flexible state revenues generated by income and sales taxes is especially preferable in times of inflation.

The public library's function as an educational institutional also argues for an increased role for the state in funding. The states participate more in the funding of public education, providing on an average of 45 percent of the funds needed to operate public schools. Likewise, state government should assume a larger share in public library funding. But a state's share of public library funding is only one part of the fiscal challenge. There is the further question of how those funds should be distributed.

The goals of state funding in North Carolina need to be more adequately developed. The General Statutes of North Carolina provide some guidance in specifying that state aid "shall be used to improve, stimulate, increase and equalize public library service to people of the whole state."[19] But more specific goals and objectives must be formulated, and the state aid program should then be evaluated based on those objectives.

Much has been made, for example, of the recent Renfrow report[20] regarding North Carolina's state funding of public schools. Such funding, says the report, should be based on the ability of a county to pay for educational services. Every student deserves a certain level of education. Where the school district cannot afford to provide this level of service, the state must step in with the funds needed to reach that level.

The parallel argument is clear: each citizen deserves a given level of library service and, where the county or region or municipality cannot afford that level of service, the state must step in to provide the necessary funding.

The Renfrow report also argues that the funding of public education should take into consideration the actual costs of different educational programs. The cost to educate a mentally retarded child, for example, is more than the cost to educate a non-retarded student. Rather than fund schools based on the simple average daily attendance, the report argues, aid to the schools should consider the actual service demands of a school's students.

Likewise, public library funding by the state might take into consideration the constituencies served by the various libraries. Such a state aid program would give added weight, for example, to the geographically isolated or the urban poor or other individuals that require more costly library service.

Sara Hodgkins, Secretary of the Department of Cultural Resources (which includes the Division of the State Library), is convening a committee to review the present formula for state aid to public libraries. That committee, composed of legislators, public librarians, library friends, and library trustees, must deal with the question of the goals of state aid to public libraries. Without clear goals state aid to public libraries will be an ineffective, hit-or-miss program no matter what level of funding the state provides.

The Challenge of Planning

In order effectively to meet the challenges of the future and to avail themselves of the opportunities of the coming decade, public librarians must make a commitment to long-range planning. If public libraries are to develop services and bring together resources to meet the educational and enrichment needs of their users in an increasingly complex and information-based society, there must be plans of action.

Otherwise, the public library will react to the future rather than plan for it. The public library will become an ineffective, reactive agency rather than a creative, visionary institution. Weingand's Delphi study paints a grim picture of the future without adequate planning: "The projected time lines indicate a five to ten year lag between societal change and library response."[21] The result of not planning is that public "libraries will change only under pressure and will probably not realize the dynamic, risk-taking leadership potential."[22]

In order to insure that the public library remains a vital institution—that it continues to develop ideas and services to solve future problems and to meet community needs—public librarians must engage in community-based planning. Note that there are two key concepts here: that there should be planning, and that the planning should be community-based.

It was suggested above that public libraries individualize service to users based on those users' particular needs, abilities and purposes. Likewise, a public library must individualize itself and its services to the community that it serves, taking into account the particular needs and resources of that community. A glaring weakness of the standards approach to public library service has been that local conditions and needs were largely ignored. "What public librarians need now are not rules for sameness but tools which will help them analyze a situation, set objectives, make decisions and evaluate achievements."[23]

From an understanding of its community, a public library derives a sense of mission. "Useful standards can be formulated; reasonable measures of achievement can be devised, if one knows what they are being devised for."[24]

Reviewing the challenges outlined above, we can see the importance of planning in each area. Public librarians must be ready for the coming societal issues which will face their patrons. Public librarians must plan for future technologies, developing guidelines by which to evaluate them. Without an adequate explication of its goals, state aid to public libraries will be largely ineffective, no matter what amount of funding it receives.

The recent publication of PLA's *Planning Process*[25] presents public libraries with a valuable tool in meeting the challenge of planning. The *Planning Process* recommends that public librarians assess the community and library environment, evaluate current library services and resources, determine the public library's role in the community and set the library's goals, objectives, and priorities. The document should be immensely helpful to librarians engaged in community-based planning. "If communites differ, and they surely do, the *Planning Process* will aid the library manager in tailoring the institution and its services to meet the particular needs of the community."[26]

From Challenge to Opportunity

We have examined four challenges which currently face the public library. Patrons dealing with an increasingly complex society make more complicated information demands of the library. Developing technologies challenge the public library to participate in the emerging electronic revolution. Economic uncertainties highlight the fragile fiscal base of most public libraries. The future

challenges the public library to plan creatively for what will come or else to react ineffectively to what takes place.

These challenges derive from the fact that the public library is a public service institution and, as such, receives its goals and objectives, its objectives, its support, its patrons and its demands for service from the community of which it is a part. As the demands of society change and as the needs of individuals change, the public library must adapt or else become irrelevant. "When change produces new types of stress for an institution, it has to adjust—or die."[27]

But challenges are also opportunities. The challenges facing the public library are opportunities for it to reaffirm its viability and relevance in tomorrow's society. This link between challenge and opportunity has been effected before in the history of the public library. The public library has always had the capacity to adapt to society's changing needs. Such adaptability "underlies the creation of telephone reference services, reference departments, business and industry information services, and, most recently, information and referral (I & R) services and the introduction of computer-based bibliographic search services."[28]

What is now required is that public librarians continue in this tradition of durability—through flexibility and adaptability. To continue in this tradition requires a sensitivity to present situations, an appreciation of future challenges and an ability to produce creative solutions. Such a program is especially important for librarians in these times of turbulence and challenge.

> And in turbulent times, the first task of management is to make sure of the institution's capacity for survival, to make sure of its structural strength and soundness, of its capacity to survive a blow, to adapt to sudden change, and to avail itself of new opportunities.[29]

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