

MORE THAN JUST BOOKS: PUBLIC LIBRARIES PRESENT AND FUTURE

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Thank you for the invitation to speak to you about the future of public libraries. In doing so, and making some predictions about their future, I am mindful of the fate of those who have attempted predictions about the future of technology, such as Thomas Watson chairman of IBM who in 1943 stated that ‘I think there is a world market for maybe five computers’.

He was far from alone. Ken Olson, president of the Digital Equipment Corporation said in 1977 ‘There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home’. Further back one Lee De Forest asserted that ‘While theoretically and technically television may be feasible, commercially and financially it is an impossibility’ and even further back, in 1876 the chief engineer of the British Post Office, Sir William Preece, stated ‘The Americans have need of the telephone, but we do not. We have plenty of messenger boys’.

And so the list of bad predictions goes on. Even those who have speculated on public library futures have demonstrably got it wrong, as the following example from 1937 shows.

In 1935 the US Carnegie Foundation’s Munn-Pitt report¹ castigated the abysmal state of Australia’s public library system in all states, particularly in Qld, SA and WA, and observed that the reason for the lack of public outcry about the situation was that

...most Australians have had no contact with a progressive and complete library system and know nothing of its functions and facilities.

In 2012 we could paraphrase that to read

...too many library funding decision makers still have had no contact with a progressive and complete library system and no nothing of its functions and facilities.

That 1935 report provided the impetus for the Australian states to start to address the need. In South Australia, as in Qld, action was very slow, in part because of the very equivocal position on investing in free public libraries taken in 1937 by one W H Langham, the president of the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery Board – the body charged with responding to the damning Munn-Pitt report.

Langham stated² that the feeling of his board was that ‘the Broadcasting Commission takes the place of the library, its programs giving recreation and enlightenment to listeners’, and that ‘Other countries are now paying dearly for free libraries, which are meeting with much the same competition’.

The other competition to which Langham referred was ‘modern enlarged newspapers and magazines’ and ‘the talkies with their never-ending sessions’.

In 2012 he could add the internet, ebooks, iPads, dvds, cds, free to air and pay TV, video shops, electronic games, cheap paperback books, graphic novels, Amazon.com, and the great expansion of book and magazine publishing to his reasons for not investing in a public library system for all.

‘The result’ he concluded 75 years ago, ‘is that books have to take a second, third and fourth place where formerly they were the first’. Great care was needed, because ‘it is just as easy to overspend on libraries as it was on the railways before we learned our lesson’.

One wonders what he would have made of South Australia's book filled modern and innovative public library system today, with its unique system of rural joint use libraries between schools and public libraries, and which is in the process of implementing a new library management system which will issue just one library card to be used to borrow from any library in the state.

It is now a very long time since public libraries were just about books but a primary question for public library futures is, will pbooks and ebooks in 2012 and beyond have to take the second, third and fourth place predicted by Langham? Most commentators think not.

Books and reading: the future

Tom Peters, one of the more insightful of those commentators, has observed that ³

Reading already is an umbrella term encompassing a wide variety of human behaviours. The boundaries and varieties of reading experiences continue to expand and evolve. For example, perhaps the way gamers interact with highly structured, complex games, qualifies as a new form of reading.

He further observes that ereading is reinvigorating an interest in reading, and the frequency with which people read, and that as we move further into the 21st century the balance of power between authors, publishers, booksellers, content resellers, and readers will shift.

Readers have an opportunity to gain more power and control over their reading experiences, but it will not come to pass without a struggle. Librarians need to help readers and be advocates for them during this messy process...Libraries, as public good institutions, have the responsibility to promulgate and defend the rights of libraries and the reading public, while respecting the rights of authors, publishers, aggregators, and manufacturers.

The current standoff between six of the world's largest publishers and public libraries about ebook lending access, principles and practice is very much a manifestation of public libraries worldwide asserting their public good responsibilities and the rights of the reading public. As the just released *IFLA eLending background paper* ⁴ by the International Association of Library Association and Institutions notes

There are a variety of technical, legal and strategic issues which arise from the addition of downloadable ebooks to library collections which have led to concern, confusion and frustration for libraries and their users, publishers and authors.

The resolution of those issues will clearly take time, but precedent suggests that, ultimately, fearful publishers and authors will see the good sense of working with public libraries to grow their markets and enable more access to reading by all.

This is because increasingly at the core of the public library multidimensional mission is learning for, and about, life through reader development. As Tom Peter's says, they should pursue this mission by continuing to study the needs, wants and habits of readers and redesign library content collections, systems and services to help them improve their reading experiences – they need a longterm commitment to readers by

...experimenting with new reader services, collecting new genres and media formats, and providing access for all readers to the devices, networks, content, and online communities that will continue to emerge.

In conclusion

There have been for decades predictions of the redundancy and demise of public libraries, books, and reading. These predictions have more recently focused on the end of pbooks (paper books) and their replacement by ebooks (electronic books).

However in Richard Watson's Top Trends blog ⁵ he commented in 2011 that some time ago he predicted the extinction of public libraries, 'because, in an age of ebooks and Google who needs them', but that since this prediction he has changed his mind.

I got it totally wrong... Whether or not we will want libraries in the future I cannot say, but I can categorically state we will need them, because libraries aren't just about the books they contain. Moreover, it is a big mistake, in my view, to confuse the future of books or publishing with the future of public libraries. They are not the same thing.

Indeed they are not the same thing, as the continued growth in the use, valuation and demonstrable return on investment (at least \$4 for every dollar invested) in public libraries shows. This is a consequence of their cradle to grave provision of locations, spaces, resources, services, programs, community connection and capacity growing – and to their accommodation of whatever formats content appears in.

In its strategic plan 2008-2018 the Melbourne Library Service, of which its CBD branch is the busiest public lending library in Victoria, summarises this by stating that ⁶

The Melbourne Library Service is many things to many people: it is a place, a space, a partner, a virtual world, a source and a facilitator.

Libraries are not only physical facilities and places to borrow material. They are community hubs and places where people can meet for information, recreation and to foster a love of lifelong learning.

Similarly, Dr L McTurk, the CEO of the City of Christchurch in New Zealand has observed that ⁷

Libraries are at the hub of our communities. The benefits to our communities are well worth the ongoing substantial investment. In future, we anticipate even more innovation in the way libraries help create inclusive communities, and are centres for lifelong learning, fun, and creativity.

Public libraries are in fact quite unusual, if not unique. They have multiple identities because they respond to a public that is by its nature very broad and inconsistent. Their cradle to grave roles and responsibilities have resulted in over 200 descriptors being applied to them, more than any other public agency.⁸ Many of those descriptors are focused on public libraries as community hubs, connectors and anchors. A descriptor from the UK also identifies them as *council shop windows*, the contention being that public libraries are the most visible, used and valued indicator of progressive local government. They are the public face of councils because they very visibly give something back to the community, and on which people are generally happier to have their rates spent than on good council administration buildings or fancy footpaths, regardless of the need for them. This has certainly proved to be the case in Christchurch where the city council is very highly regarded by the community for its investment in its public libraries, which is now focused on restoring and renewing them after the earthquakes.

A lesson from history

In a way, the community and social focus, ownership, pride and self improvement imperative for investment in public libraries for all now and into the future is not far removed from that which led to Australian communities and their state governments – as in Dalby – investing in the 19th and early 20th centuries in 2000 mechanics' institutes. In Queensland these were called schools of arts, of which in 1935 there were still about 300 in the state.

However by 1935 the subscription lending libraries of those institutions were to be described in the Munn-Pitt report as 'cemeteries of dead and decaying books.' In the main they were impoverished, had no books for children, few reference books, little nonfiction, out of date collections, no qualified staff, and were used by less than 3% of the population, compared with the 60% which uses public libraries today.

Yet way back in 1877 J P Bell, the MLA for Dalby, had asserted that 'there was no better way of expending money than by voting it for Schools of Arts...and that...these institutions and Savings Banks were the two most useful institutions for the working portion of the community'.⁹

What is critical for the future of public libraries in Australia is that today's state and local government leaders and decision makers show a similar understanding to that of J P Bell in 1877, and learn the lesson of the demise of the mechanics' institutes and schools of arts, by recognising

- what great things public libraries now do with low funding
- what more they could do if funded well.
- what an outstanding documented return on investment they provide.
- how much they are used and valued by a very large percentage of the population as the communities third place after home, school and work.
- how limited, at only about 10c per Australian per day, their funding still is, particularly in rural and regional Australia, and particularly now by state governments. If, over the last 25 years, state governments had continued to contribute their share of public library funding at the same level as local government, Australia's public library system would now be about twice as well funded as it currently is, and closer to world best practice.

The whole of Australia's public library system, used by 13 million people of all ages, and available to all costs in total less than the annual budget of just one large Australian university with 30,000 students, and the equivalent of 2% of the expenditure on school education. Australia currently spends just one third of world's best practice on its public library system. It should, and can, do much better.

A final prediction

As I suggested at the beginning of this paper predicting the future can be a risky business. Nonetheless I am willing to predict that one hundred years hence, in 2112, Australia's public library system will be flourishing, much evolved in what it provides, facilitates access to, and helps create – and that it will still contain books printed on paper!

As someone once observed, for all that they provide and represent, if public libraries did not exist they would have to be invented. But fortunately they do now exist in Australia, over 1500 of them, and I congratulate the Friends of Dalby Library on your support for your community's third place – and commend your role as a voice for all in your community about its importance and improvement.

References

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