



POSITION PAPER - The Role of Public Libraries in Civil Society

Statement of Position

Public libraries are essential to community life because they not only provide opportunities for individual growth / life-long learning they also support community development, building social cohesion and supporting democratic processes through free access to information and ideas for all.

Context

Public libraries are undergoing a transformational change as a direct result of changing technology. They no longer serve only as lending institutions, but serve a wider public through a variety of programs and services. As with any new technology, digital communications provide a variety of ways to augment the many other forms of human communication but they have not replaced the myriad other forms of communication entirely.

Effective communication between and among individuals and groups depends on multiple factors, all of which are in play during any exchange. However, it remains true; if you want to reach out and touch someone, you need to be in the same room with them. Meaningful relationships; with ourselves, within our families, with friends and neighbours as well as fellow citizens, still depend on human contact.

In his essay *The Modern Library and Global Democracy* published in The Meaning of the Library, James H. Billington, Librarian of Congress, suggests, “. . . *the exploding virtual world has helped accelerate three kinds of human loss in the real world: of memory, of community, and of language.*” To mitigate these losses, libraries provide access to information and ideas that can inform personal and community conversations related to our values, beliefs, and ways of living; in other words our Living Heritage.

Saskatchewan Libraries

Statistical information related to Saskatchewan libraries can be found on the Government’s website: www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/education-and-learning/library-system-in-saskatchewan and the Saskatchewan Library Trustees’ Association website: <http://slta/about/history>.

The first public libraries act in Saskatchewan was passed in 1906 just one year after Saskatchewan became a province. The province’s Public Library System includes: seven regional library systems, two municipal library systems (Regina established in 1909 and Saskatoon established in 1913), a federation of northern libraries (also called the Pahkisimon Nuyeq’ah System) and the provincial library and literacy office.

According to the Government’s website identified above, this system of libraries provides “access to more than four million books, CD’s, DVD’s, e-books and other library materials . . . access to more than 60,000 audio and eBook downloaded right to your electronic device; access to more than 400,000 downloadable audio books and other accessible formats for individuals with print disabilities; access to books and materials from out-of-province libraries through an interlibrary loan; access to multilingual services for individuals who speak other languages; and one library card for all Saskatchewan libraries.”

However, when defending library cuts announced earlier this year, the Minister of Education was quoted by the Canadian Press, (March 28, 2017) stating, “the number of items checked out of all libraries has dropped by 1.6 million items since 2007 and the number of library cards has dropped by 175,000.”

In addition, recent headlines from the Saskatoon StarPhoenix and CBC News reflect the current climate within which Saskatchewan libraries are operating.

Saskatchewan libraries end province-wide sharing by cutting ‘One Province, One Card’ program by Dave Deibert, Saskatoon StarPhoenix; Published on: April 4, 2017 | Last Updated: April 4, 2017 10:59 AM CST

‘We made a mistake’: Sask. government turns back page on library cuts: Province to restore \$4.8M in budget cuts, keep library-to-library loan program by Stefani Langenegger, CBC News Posted: Apr 24, 2017 12:30 PM CT | Last Updated: Apr 24, 2017 5:37 PM CT

The latter headline was in response to public resistance organized by the Save Our Libraries group following the budget announcement. The following excerpt is taken from the website, <https://savesasklibraries.ca/>

The latest Saskatchewan budget eliminated provincial funding for public libraries in Regina and Saskatoon and cut funding for regional libraries in half, or by \$3.5 million.

This decision will have a devastating impact on regional libraries, who are losing the majority of their funding with no notice. They will have no choice but to cut important programming, reduce hours, layoff staff, or close branches. And our communities will suffer from the loss.

Libraries are about more than just borrowing books. Meeting rooms are used by community groups, library staff host education programs and clubs, and provide important access to computer terminals and internet. There are services for seniors, children, employment support, language and reading groups, citizenship test preparation, and help for newcomers to build their resumes. And in rural communities, libraries provide a priceless sense of community – a safe space for teenagers and kids, a gathering place for seniors, and a central hub for the whole community.

The decision to cut library funding reflects short term thinking based on economic considerations alone. The decision to reinstate the funding was based on the understanding that Saskatchewan residents clearly value the public library system for the cultural, social and environmental values the institution reflects and nurtures; and the essential role libraries play within communities and a democratic society.

The Role of Public Libraries in Civil Society

Libraries support individual growth / life-long learning.

Every individual requires support to reach their full potential. Confidence to contribute in a meaningful way comes from a strong sense of identity, belonging and place in addition to the development of specific skills and abilities and specific subject knowledge and understanding.

Public libraries provide free access to information and ideas through which individuals can pursue their interests, explore diverse perspectives, consider different ways of doing things, and develop alternatives for future action. Library collections contain a diversity of sources and a variety of interpretations through which individuals are able to consider their own world view, values and beliefs. Moreover library workers are trained to guide/assist individuals in their pursuit of learning.

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) established a policy framework for public libraries in their 1994 document, a *Public Library Manifesto* which focusses on the educational mission of public libraries. Within this framework twelve key roles are identified:

- 1. Creating and strengthening reading habits in children from an early age*
- 2. Supporting both individual and self-conducted education as well as formal education at all levels.*
- 3. Providing opportunities for personal creative development*
- 4. Stimulating the imagination and creativity of children and young people*
- 5. Promoting awareness of cultural heritage, appreciation of the arts, scientific achievements and innovations*
- 6. Providing access to cultural expressions of all performing arts*
- 7. Fostering inter-cultural dialogue and favouring cultural diversity*
- 8. Supporting oral tradition*
- 9. Ensuring access for citizens to all sorts of community information*
- 10. Providing adequate information services to local enterprises, associations and interest groups*
- 11. Facilitating the development of information and computer literacy skills*
- 12. Supporting and participating in literacy activities and programs for all age groups, and initiating such activities if necessary (IFLA/UNESCO, 1994, p.1-2)*

Central to the paradigm shift libraries are undergoing is the fact that creativity, knowledge and innovation, and access to information have become the key to driving economic growth and promoting economic development in a globalized economy. Public libraries are well positioned to provide programs and services to those who would benefit most from free access to information and skills development.

Library programs and services inform citizens about local issues and build social cohesion in the process.

Social cohesion and responsible citizenship depend on the human capacity for empathy; the ability to imagine ourselves in someone else's shoes that enables us to understand their thoughts and feelings. Whether fact or fiction; library collections contain materials that enable individuals and groups to explore their options. In a related vein, social cohesion depends on reciprocity; the give and take that occurs when values and ways of living are negotiated within a community. Such a dialogue depends on an active citizenry willing to negotiate a set of values, beliefs and ways of living that recognizes common ground and respects differences at the same time.

As argued by Nancy Kranich in *Libraries: The Information Commons of Civil Society*, 2002,

“Information is essential to civic participation, . . . When people are better informed, they are more likely to participate in policy discussions where they can communicate their ideas and concerns freely. Most importantly, citizens need civic commons where they can speak freely, discern different perspectives, share similar interests and concerns, and pursue what they believe is in their and the public’s interest. Effective citizen action is possible when citizens develop the skills to gain access to information of all kinds and to put such information to effective use. . . .Ultimately, discourse among informed citizens assures civil society.”

Library programs and services support democratic processes and sustainable community development.

Acknowledging the power of the past to shape the present is as always, the first step in addressing contemporary issues and concerns. Herein resides another challenge / opportunity for libraries and library workers to encourage and support reflection and facilitate public discourse.

To quote Kranich again, *“Libraries provide the real and virtual spaces in communities for free and open exchange of ideas fundamental to democratic participation and civil society. . . libraries serve as the source - often the sole source - for the pursuit of independent thought, critical attitudes, and in-depth information.”*

Libraries provide spaces/places that function both as private space and as public places. Also called a third space where individuals share experiences with people they don’t actually know. Because they are geographically specific places, they provide opportunities to get to know those who live nearby, people who may appear very different but who turn out to share many similarities once we get to know them better. Neighbours meet neighbours as well as other community residents to learn together, discuss local issues, and consider different perspectives and options. In other words, library programs provide opportunities to act locally but think globally as we strive to create a sustainable future.

Conclusion

As with the introduction of any new technology there are unforeseen consequences that accumulate over time. With almost three decades of internet and digital technologies behind us now, it is time to re-evaluate when and how this technology is used, and to find ways to minimize the negative consequences in order to maximize the benefits. Technology provides many useful tools, what humans choose to do with them will determine their value in the long term. Understanding the impact of technology is a first step in transforming public libraries.

In addition, the development of public programs and the use of various communication technologies now available should be assessed based on a series of questions such as those proposed by Ursula Franklin in her Massey Lecture Series, [The Real World of Technology](#). Consider whether the proposed program:

- (1) promotes justice;*
- (2) restores reciprocity;*
- (3) confers divisible or indivisible benefits;*
- (4) favours people over machines;*
- (5) whether its strategy maximizes gain or minimizes disaster;*
- (6) whether conservation is favoured over waste; and*
- (7) whether the reversible is favoured over the irreversible?"*

Libraries and librarians are positioned to assess the pros and cons of digital communications in order to maximize the benefits and minimize the cultural, social, environmental and economic costs. Communities and democratic processes depend on an active citizenry informed on local and global issues, therefore, communications technology plays a fundamental role in how information and ideas are accessed and shared.

Public libraries and library workers contribute to community development as they support and guide individuals in their attempts to address social issues and concerns. Making sense of the bits and pieces of information found on the internet requires the ability to weave them together in a meaningful narrative. We are all born with the ability to empathize but it must be nurtured and valued by society to be sustained as a survival mechanism. Facilitating this process in a safe, culturally sensitive environment, a third space as some would call it, promotes citizenship and social cohesion and provides individuals opportunities to consider their own wants and needs in the larger context of the needs and wants of others in their community.

Recommendations

Because public libraries are essential institutions that not only provide opportunities for individual growth / life-long learning but also support community development, building social cohesion and supporting democratic processes through free access to information and ideas, Heritage Saskatchewan recommends that:

Governments at all levels work together to ensure libraries are resourced appropriately so as to maintain their relevance and value within the communities they serve.

Governments at all levels work with libraries throughout the province to collect comprehensive statistical data that can be used to inform decision-making in the future.

As the Government of Saskatchewan reviews the Libraries Act they engage in extensive public dialogue about the current and future role of public libraries within communities.

As the Government of Saskatchewan reviews the Libraries Act they employ systems thinking and take a holistic approach to cost/benefit analyses that include the cultural, social, environmental and economic values of public libraries.

In the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation the Government of Saskatchewan implement the Recommendations of the Minister's Advisory Committee on Library Services for Aboriginal People, 2001.

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Heritage Saskatchewan Alliance is the collective voice of all those who value heritage in Saskatchewan. Our vision is to see heritage as a valued and dynamic legacy that contributes to our sense of identity, creates an understanding of our past, is used to build communities in the present, and informs our choices for the future.

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