

Public Libraries in the Information Age

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The question posed for this seminar is 'do public libraries have a future?' The answer, at least at one level, is obvious: libraries are not set to disappear either in the short, medium or even the longer term. As institutions there are simply too many of them (over 4000 library sites in the UK), they are far too popular with the public (well over half the population are members), and they are so very well used (visiting the library is the fourth most popular pastime in the UK, ahead of visiting the cinema or even going to a football game) for this to present itself as a serious prospect.

But the simple matter of continuation isn't my concern here. Institutions do have a remarkable capacity to perpetuate themselves, even when they have lost the reasons for their being. They may very well continue as the living dead. In Britain today we have an excess of such zombie institutions - universities that don't know what it is they ought to be doing, armies without obvious enemies left to fight, mutual societies that are no longer know what it is they were founded to do, a House of Lords which continues to govern though it knows not why.

So I am concerned here, not with the perpetuation of libraries, but with the question, what is their point? What is it that defines their core being? What is, to adopt the language of the day, their mission?

I think that we need to ask what public libraries are for because, if we don't, then there is a serious danger that they will keep going, but in ways which are merely opportunistic responses to contingencies. This is the classic survivalist strategy, do anything to keep going, even if this subverts one's reason for being. As with the young idealist who enters a career to make a contribution, but finishes up doing the job only for the pay cheque, there is something perverse about such a situation. I sometimes feel that public libraries have adopted this posture, and this has meant they have been moved by circumstances in directions that, on reflection, they might not have wished to have taken in the first place.

From public to private provision

To better appreciate the importance of asking afresh what are public libraries for, I want to make two observations on recent history that have had important consequences for these institutions. The first is the apparently inexorable shift from public to private provision of goods and services. There are many reasons for this - Thatcherism, globalisation, the collapse of collectivism -, but what is crucial here is to acknowledge the rapid advance of what has been called the 'neo-liberal consensus' for libraries.

The effects are palpable in utilities such as gas, telecommunications and electricity supply where privatisation and liberalisation have transformed previous services. They are evident too, in higher education: it is increasingly self-funded, with students defined as 'customers' who must take responsibility for their 'investment' in degree programmes. And the effects are clear too in television, where subscription services advance at the expense of public service broadcasting, where digitalisation is to be pioneered on the basis of market criteria, and where the BBC is busy re-inventing itself as an entrepreneur, well capable of matching commercial competition for markets and hard-nosed management.

The pressures are telling, too, in the library realm. Hence provision from taxation is deeply unpopular. Budgets are continually reduced, even if the euphemism 'efficiency savings' is preferred. The market model of information dissemination is increasingly that of the Blockbuster video chain: let customers determine choice of stock, only supply the most popular as measured by issues, and let borrowers pay on the nail for what it is they want. And it is this model which is in the ascendant.

The shift from public to private supply influences not just libraries' dissemination of information; it impacts profoundly what information is generated and made available. Growing commercialisation means that, more and more, what information is made available depends on what is saleable, and what people get hinges on what they are prepared (and able) to pay. Of course, this is not a new thing, and nor is it necessarily to be deplored outright. Publishing, after all, is a commercial activity, and from it we have today paperback books that are cheaper in real terms than they have ever been. Nevertheless, commercialisation has accelerated and deepened its hold over recent decades. Look here, for instance, at the demise of the Net Book Agreement, and the resultant hike in the price of academic titles now that the book trade is more thoroughly marketised than ever, and the established habit of cross-subsidy of titles is difficult to maintain.

As commercialisation spreads the principle of private provision to every activity in society, so too does it pose challenging questions for institutions, such as libraries, that are organised on a principle - public service - that is antipathetic towards it. If libraries don't ask what it is they are about, then they meet the challenges of commercialisation unprepared and incapable of doing more than adapting to a business agenda.

The information revolution

The second factor is the much observed 'information explosion'. Whatever measure one takes, there has been an extraordinary growth of information in the present era. Nowadays we have round the clock television, many more channels than ever, a huge growth in book titles published each year... Above all, perhaps, we have the development of information and communications technologies, which, in the form of the internet, heralds an information superhighway which will bring prodigious amounts of information to all and sundry at the touch of a few keys so long as people are 'networked'.

Association with the latest technologies has an undeniable allure, and there is no denying the fact that network technologies will have enormous consequences for the library world, so it cannot be surprising that many a librarian, aware that the profession has something of a dated image and eager to prosper in unpropitious times, has eagerly endorsed ICTs (and even, in some cases, taken to describing themselves as 'information scientists'). Such people look to the day when theirs is a 'digital library', an 'information centre' with row upon row of computer terminals, and the librarian again has an appropriate esteem. The problem with this, however, is that librarians may be seizing on ICTs as their saviour without asking deep questions as to why and on what terms they ought to be doing so.

The attack on public libraries

Commercialisation and technological innovation need to be put alongside three further developments. The first of these was the sustained attack on the very idea of public libraries put forward in the 1980s by proponents of the market. The Adam Smith Institute, for instance, forcefully argued in its pamphlet, Ex Libris, that libraries were an unjust tax levied disproportionately on the poorer sections of society (who use the library least), that fully 80% of their revenue went on salaries, and that these employees then had the gall to select books for the public rather than to meet the expressed needs of borrowers as indicated by loan statistics. Private provision, in these terms, was preferable on every count: more efficient, less élitist, and above all accountable to those who pay for services.

The library profession was never able to offer an adequate response to this attack, not least because powerful politicians during the Thatcher and Major years openly endorsed it and didn't hesitate to make plain their disdain for public libraries, but also because librarians were cowed by continuous cuts in their budgets. Understandably, this drove the library world into survivalist mode. The message was keep your head down if you want to keep going. And librarians did just that.

Modernisation

The second change is that the ideological climate has improved for librarians. Chris Smith is the new minister, he is an enthusiastic supporter of libraries, and the abrasive language of a decade ago has gone. Librarians at least may feel that they have a sympathetic ear in government. However, the neo-liberal consensus has remained in place and extends far beyond Westminster. Reductions in book budgets continue, while the wider informational domain - publishing, broadcasting, electronic services - has gone on being marketised wherever possible and developed by private companies firmly along private lines.

New Library

The third change has been the willing endorsement by the Blair government of New Library: The People's Network, a report actually commissioned by John Major, but one strikingly consonant with Mr Blair's concern to be up-to-date in everything. The dominant refrain of the Blairites is 'modernisation', and this, at one with the zeitgeist, is the theme of New Library. The report is up-beat about libraries - provided that they rid themselves of the old-fashioned fuddy-duddy habits of 'library silence', policing by aged spinsters in Hush Puppies, and, above all, discard an over-reverence for books which inhibits the take-up of modern electronic technologies. More than this, New Labour promises additional resources should libraries enter wholeheartedly into the network era, suggesting a central role in policies of lifelong learning should public librarians equip themselves with computers that attract those citizens willing to take responsibility for their own, ongoing, retraining. Not surprisingly, many a librarian has been tempted by this offering. After years of being attacked, it is understandable that the profession seizes the embrace of those who express some affection.

A Poisoned Chalice?

I would have hoped that the public librarians had thought more about what it was that they were about before they had endorsed the Blair agenda. As with those in love, critical faculties are too often suspended. Feeling desired, it is understandable that the library world has welcomed New Labour. But against this enthusiasm, here I would return to my opening question: what is it that lies at the heart of public libraries, and how does this relate to ongoing informational trends? From my reading of the Library Association's tenets, one principle is central and has been so since the LA's foundation over a century ago. This has it that public libraries ought to strive to promote information as a **public good** - i.e. access to information should be uninhibited by ability to pay factors, available to citizens free at the point of delivery, and information should, as far as is possible, be untainted by commercial considerations. Of course, this is an ideal towards which librarians aspire, though in practice they must accommodate to day-to-day constraints. Nevertheless, the librarian's ideal that information is a public good is one which, like it or not, is at odds with recent history and continuing trends.

Adherence to this principle means, I believe, that public librarians need to highlight problems with the ongoing commercialisation of the information domain. This will require not only resisting attempts to levy charges on users. This is an important, if familiar, concern for libraries, and one which needs to be given attention, particularly since the gravest threat may not be from out-and-out privatisation, but from incremental and cumulative charges at the margins. But I think too that librarians also need to keep a close watch on the consequences of commercialisation for the quality of information that is being generated, as well as the terms on which this is to be made available, and to act accordingly.

Given the enormous growth in information that is nowadays being generated, librarians cannot hope to provide a fully comprehensive service. Accordingly, they need to make choices, an agonising situation

to be in no doubt, but not one that is unprecedented. Librarians have long had to prioritise their purchases, whether it be Jeffrey Archer rather than Agatha Christie, or Roald Dahl rather than Enid Blyton. There are processes by which they may be done, and they are never entirely satisfactory, but they cannot be evaded, not least because, in this day and age, the sheer volume of potential stock means that such decisions have to be made. In my view, a big problem is that librarians have become so cowed that they are prepared to evade this responsibility. They too readily retreat to presentation of 'performance indicators' which measure popularity in consumerist terms - the Blockbuster way. Librarians should take courage in their convictions, arguing that, as gatekeepers with finite budgets, then they must discriminate in what is stocked. They will have procedures to effect this, and these ought to be transparent, but librarians should insist that consumer demand is only one dimension of this process.

But, it will be insisted, doesn't the internet make all such angst redundant? In these days of electronic communications, the idea of a library being limited by space is an anachronism. Nowadays, we may order what we will whenever it is most convenient, so there may be no fear of censorship by an élite of gatekeepers.

There are so many problems with this. The most obvious, that there is an enormous disparity between the principle and those who have access to the internet, is being addressed by librarians in their rush to stock their institutions with computers. Yet that isn't my major concern. Much more compelling is that so very much of the information explosion with which librarians are trying to come to terms results in an evasion of the need to discriminate between the quality of a hugely inflated information repository. What I am trying to highlight here is the problem public libraries face, in 'buying' into the information revolution in hopes that it will reveal them to be 'modern', that they risk uncritically accepting the information that comes available on its own terms. And those terms are overwhelmingly commercial!

One consequence is that a great deal of the information revolution manifests itself as information garbage. This statement runs quite counter to conventional wisdom, but it is nonetheless salutary. Think, for instance, of the contribution of Rupert Murdoch to the 'information age'. One cannot but concede that it has been enormous. But think too of the quality of his contribution. Murdoch owns a large proportion of the British press and a big slice of world television, yet everywhere his influence has been pernicious, leading to a concentration on sensationalism, sport, escapism - disinformation of the first order. To say this isn't to suggest that there is no part for entertainment in society, but an informed people cannot have this to the exclusion of all else, something Mr Murdoch seems determined to provide.

Yet this is precisely what commercialisation is leading towards. Enthusiasts for the internet posit an era in which anything is available to everyone, but this is to turn a blind eye to reality. I would not want to deny that the internet offers a virtuoso form of information delivery, but reflection shows that what information it does offer is highly variable in terms of quality. Moreover, the better information on the

internet comes overwhelmingly from non-commercial sources such as universities, charitable and government agencies. I fear that cannot see this continuing for much longer. Universities, especially academic staff, do have deep-rooted commitments towards the open supply of ideas, but will faculty continue to put their courses on the net when these become increasingly a tradeable resource? Distance learning is beginning to come a significant income generator for higher education, and as such it will come increasingly something for which to be charged.

In addition, though it is the case that, at present, the internet is being offered to users on favourable terms, from both connecting companies and information suppliers, one must be suspicious about the longer term. Commercialisation is a close attendant of electronic communications. Like the drug dealers, internet providers realise the value of supplying free samples up front. Once hooked, then the price may well start to spiral. The fear is that, by then, libraries will be signed up into deals from which they cannot readily disentangle.

In sum, I would advise our public libraries to beware the hype of the new technologies, to be suspicious of the increased commercialisation of information, and to hold hard to the ideal of information as a public good.

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