

21ST CENTURY PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES

THE FUNCTION AND ROLE OF LISWA

By

Susan Feeney & George Cowcher
Public Library Services

<i>Project team:</i>	<i>Susan Feeney</i>	<i>Public Library Services</i>
	<i>George Cowcher</i>	<i>Public Library Services</i>
	<i>Debrah Lewis</i>	<i>Resigned</i>
	<i>Yvonne Morant</i>	<i>Public Library Services</i>

ABSTRACT

According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 1999), “the world of information and communication is going through a period of unprecedented and accelerating change. The public library is profoundly affected by this process of change. As the gateway to the world’s knowledge for all the world’s citizens, the public library has an enormous opportunity to enhance the scope of its services and become a vital bridge between the citizen and the existing world of information”. (page 1).

The 21st century is a time to establish a new direction for public library services that caters to a wide diversity of client information needs and a demand for a mix of traditional and non-traditional public information services. Librarians in the future will need to focus their resources and efforts on developing strategic partnerships and/or take competitors head on in the global information provision marketplace.

This paper will explore public library trends in Australia and overseas and posit the Library and Information Service of Western Australia’s (LISWA) leadership role in the development of excellent public library services.

INTRODUCTION

In its most recent guidelines for public libraries, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 1999) maintains that the reason and core purpose for the foundation and maintenance of most public libraries is one which “provides access to knowledge in printed and other formats to support formal and informal education for all” (page 4). Although the 21st century will see unprecedented and accelerating changes which will bring significant societal, technological and economic challenges, public libraries will continue to be primarily about community, learning, recreation and social advancement.

Notwithstanding this core purpose, public library services will still be required to change in a number of ways. Providers of library services will need to reassess the very definition of the ‘library client’ they serve. They will also need to review and evaluate the nature of the services they will be providing in the future. In the 21st century, competition in the information provision marketplace will increase and library service providers will need to become more innovative in both the services they offer and the way they are delivered. The notion that public libraries will service all the needs and/or desires of their regions with traditional services will simply no longer apply. Communities will require a different kind of information service, one that continually seeks to

satisfy information needs in more customised ways. As society becomes more complex, so the need for information and advice grows. As citizens and consumers, public library clients will need information on a wider range of topics, disseminated in a variety of ways and at a faster pace. With increasing amounts of information also becoming available electronically and home ownership of computers becoming more frequent, the library's hold on information resources will become more tenuous.

Public Libraries as a “place”

“Libraries used to be places where you had to be quiet. Today they are full of children learning to love books, business people trawling for commercial information and grannies surfing the Internet” (Smith, 1997).

Amongst public librarians, there is a continued tension between what Usherwood (1999) calls “the democratic ideal and the professional desire for the library to provide material of a high quality” (page 224). In the USA the debate has already split the library profession into two camps where, as Kruk (1998) outlines, “one side supports the view that public libraries are an instrument to promote an educated democracy and informed citizenry while the other equates democracy with giving people what they want” (page 159) and attracting clients at any cost. While that debate may continue for some time, the traditional role of the public library as a ‘place’, be that educational institution or simply a building for shelter and relaxation, appears to have a future role. However, libraries as single entities may no longer be feasible within some communities.

According to Dempsey (1998), the 21st century will see a nexus of schools, hospitals, libraries, parks, museums, public television and radio stations, community computer networks, local public access, education, and government channels of cable television and the growing universe of non-profit information providers on the Internet. This is already happening to some extent in Australia, as Government is actively encouraging agencies, community groups and the private sector to integrate their services by sharing resources, such as accommodation, staff and office equipment, and utilising information technology to deliver a range of services from one location.

The macro trends that have implications for the delivery of public library services in the next century are also wide reaching. One of the most visible macro trends is globalisation (Mulgan, 1998). Not only are trade and industry globalised, all professions are increasingly operating in the world arena rather than just in their own countries. Some libraries have already responded to this challenge and have established an international body of clients.

Changing Environments

Providers of public library services will also need to take into account the significant changes in working styles in some parts of the Australian workforce. By the year 2005 for example, less than 50% of those under age twenty-five or over forty-five are predicted to have what we call today ‘normal’ full-time jobs. According to Edgar (1999) “the rest will work outside the core of business enterprise, tele-commuting or working flexibly from home-based offices, contracting their labour either as specialists on a range of projects, or operating small businesses which supply the major companies with parts or skills as the demand arises” (page 37).

The importance of lifelong learning/self-directed learning and the ability to update existing education and gain new knowledge in the future will also see a change in the services offered by the public library. In the UK, public libraries have already been involved as strategic partners in a new initiative, the People's Network Infrastructure, which will connect all public libraries to the Information Highway by the year 2002. This initiative has, at its heart, the Government's commitment to developing community learning centres across the country.

The “Virtual” Client

Libraries now have, and will continue to have in the future, a formidable array of competitors in the electronic delivery of information services. The exponential growth in access to information and communications technology has resulted in an enhanced capacity within the private sector to do what libraries have traditionally done in the past. The ability to transfer information almost instantaneously may mean that public libraries could be bypassed in the future. Yet the development of new services using information and communications technology presents exciting opportunities to take library and information services direct to the home and workplace.

Assuming that library clients are only those that come into the library is a dangerous assumption and will be even more so in the future. One of the aspects of the digital environment is that it removes the constraints of geography and time. Through remote access and dial-in capabilities, library clients can be virtual, and frequent, clients. Within this context, there will be a need to redefine the notion of ‘client’ that looks beyond traditional regional and sectoral boundaries. While continuing the traditional role of ‘provider’ of information services, the public librarian is already well positioned to offer information ‘brokerage’ services. Librarians also have a place in the digital age as actual information creators. Boundaries between publishers, the book and periodical trade, database producers and libraries are becoming more and more fluid and there is little sign of where the boundaries will fall in the 21st century.

Providers of library services have the potential to expand the range of value-added products they provide to clients. By utilising an already existing infrastructure and an extensive skills base in accessing the gateways of the knowledge economy, public librarians of the future are able, according to Moore (1999) to “contribute to the value chain that supplements the intellectual capital of government and business enterprises alike” (page 406).

Information Service Delivery Agencies

The public library could also play a significant role in the growing universe of non-profit information providers on the Internet. Providers of library services have a number of choices. They could focus their resources and efforts on the development of public libraries as the community hub through the use of effective and strategic partnerships. In the United Kingdom for example, there are already plans for the establishment of Idea Stores which will have all the features of a lending library but will also make available, amongst other facilities, adult and further education classrooms, open learning centres, homework clubs and crèche facilities.

Alternatively, providers of library services could take competitors head on and establish public libraries as single entry gateways/portals to information, introducing new services which establish them as total information service delivery agencies satisfying a demand not currently met by commercial agents in the marketplace. This could see libraries as the first point of contact and a single source of information for citizens. As providers of a total range of specialised information services, librarians could assume additional roles and responsibilities that include those of publisher, supplier and retailer. This would see a change from information being delivered through a variety of distribution channels to one being met seamlessly through libraries.

FUTURE SCENARIOS

Public libraries in Western Australia are conducted as a joint venture between the Library Board of Western Australia and the local government sector. In general, the local government provides the library building, staff and operating expenses. The State Government, through LISWA, provides catalogued and processed stock for the public library and strengthens the information and reference services available at the local public library with the expertise and more extensive collections based in the Alexander Library Building. The delivery of public library services in Western Australia is designed to minimise the problems which arise from a population of 1.7 million people in an area of 2.5 million square kilometres, one third of the land mass of Australia.

Public library services in the 21st century will continue to see the development of strategic alliances within and outside the library sector. Further technological development should make the process of increased collaboration even easier. Although throughout Western Australia there will be varying degrees of acceptance of the need for a changing environment, the fact remains that the information technology revolution is challenging the traditional role of public libraries as the prime depository of information stored in books and other materials. This has happened in two critical areas:

- Large databases of information are being created and maintained outside the public library system; and
- New channels of information access, which bypass the library system, are constantly being developed and opened up on a global scale.

The merging of public libraries with Government and private sector agencies should, according to Line (1997) “not be seen as a relegation to lower status” (page 80). It can, in fact, be an opportunity libraries can turn to their advantage. To do so however requires library service providers to develop new, flexible and integrated service delivery models to assist in the response to the rapidly changing global environment.

Background

The scenarios presented in this paper are aimed at enhancing library services to better meet community needs, achieve cost efficiency in operations and to posit LISWA’s leadership role in the development of excellent public library services in the 21st century.

The development of the scenarios is a result of only one part of the strategic planning exercise undertaken by the organisation and may or may not reflect the strategic direction finally pursued by LISWA. The scenarios were developed as a result of “blue sky” thinking, although examples of some aspects of the scenarios can already be found in public libraries across the State.

The scenarios are purposefully conceptual in nature and are presented here as a basis for extensive discussion and consultation with LISWA’s professional colleagues and key stakeholders.

Scenario 1- Community Hub

In this scenario public libraries would become community information centres serving a broad cross-section of citizens and businesses and establishing themselves as the vital and integral hub within the community. As multi-functional information centres, public libraries would cease to be considered as single purpose entities. Adopting a more coordinated approach to service delivery, this arrangement would facilitate an increase in the number and quality of services delivered (either face-to-face or online) as well as reducing the costs involved in capital and operational expenditure at a local, regional and State level. The scenario builds on the Government’s encouragement for agencies, community groups and the private sector to integrate their services by sharing resources, such as accommodation, staff and office equipment, and utilising information technology to deliver a range of services from one location. Individual groups/agencies would work together in mutual support, realising economic benefits and other advantages of sharing resources and capitalising on the opportunities presented by advances in technology.

Partnerships with other agencies and community groups would be established to ensure not only the public library’s involvement but also that their involvement is seen as integral to success. Information centres would capitalise on increasingly sophisticated information technology and communications to develop innovative approaches to service delivery.

LISWA’s role would be to foster the development of these community information centres primarily amongst small/medium country public libraries. As a catalyst, LISWA would work to establish strategic partnerships between public libraries and other groups/agencies from both the public and

private sectors and promote the library as the leader in the establishment and maintenance of the joint ventures within their regions. Rather than compete with commercial information sources, LISWA would ensure that local businesses work together in mutual support of the centres. As Rock (2000) outlines, libraries would come to be seen as “community melting pots providing a sort of social glue” (page 93) as one of the few remaining places where all sections of the community can come together.

This scenario would benefit from the development of a community information centre that employs a full joint use operation with other service providers. Financial and other synergies for the library that include minimised capital and operational costs, coordinated marketing activities, and the potential for new commercial ventures would emerge. The public library would develop into an economic and community focal point in the community and provide for the coordination of regional programs and service delivery through the collocated use of government and community resources. Services would be developed to respond to the regional social and cultural issues within the individual regional communities.

The “sharing” of Government and community resources is not a new concept in Western Australia. In this scenario, the civic responsibility of the library would be maintained yet there would be the potential for significant increases in activity and usage of libraries and a greater capacity to attract and accommodate new services. As such, public libraries would become integral to the provision of a wider range of community services within the region.

Scenario 2 - LibraryWest

This scenario would see the State Government delivering public library services throughout Western Australia. The current partnership arrangement operating between the State and Local Governments would be revamped. As such, the State Government would be required to negotiate the purchase or leasing of library buildings and infrastructure and the employment of staff would be administered under State rather than Local Government administrative processes. In essence, Local Government would enter into contractual arrangements with the State to provide library services to their community. The key difference that lies in this model is one of accountability. In LibraryWest, the State Government would be primarily responsible for the delivery of public library services throughout the State.

The State Government public library service would be managed and operated through LISWA, meeting the wide diversity of information needs and demands for both traditional and non-traditional services required in regions. Through the establishment of a seamless State library system, clients would have single membership at all public libraries. There would be one network across the State of all library holdings that could be utilised for communicating information of civic importance.

Under this model, Government policies would apply throughout the State ensuring greater social and economic equality amongst its citizens. Corporate sponsorship would also be far easier to attract as sponsors would perceive, appreciate and capitalise on the value of the “critical mass” of libraries. Further, the collective voice of public libraries would be stronger in attempts to lobby State and Federal governments for support.

Scenario 3 - Servicing all WA

This scenario would see the providers of public library services considering citizens from all over Western Australia as their clients, rather than those specific to a particular region within the State. The intent of this scenario is to put into place a truly Statewide service.

Public libraries would plan for total State self-sufficiency for their activities and use as their “competitive niche” their unrivalled network of information outlets. LISWA would act as the promoter and instigator of strategic partnerships and public librarians would capitalise on new

information technologies to service their clients through remote access and dial-in capabilities as well as traditional on-the-ground services.

In its capacity as the State Library, LISWA would act as a “department store” as outlined in *2020 Vision* (Mercer, 1996). The related, yet independent, “corner store” network of public libraries across the State would service the wide and eclectic clientele, meeting their diverse needs with an increasing range of products and services provided in print or electronically from anywhere within the integrated system.

This model would see the definition of the public library client changing considerably. Clients would encompass patrons from across the State, from any number of public libraries. Clients would be part of a seamless library system with single membership, accessing facilities at all libraries through one network across all the State’s libraries holdings. There would be benefits to State taxpayers with public libraries working together for their mutual benefit especially in areas of telecommunication systems. Through this model there would also be the potential to contribute to the economic development of the State especially as it relates to the knowledge economy and the creation of an information empowered society. Libraries would be perceived as leading edge institutions amongst the population at large and the government of the day and would be better placed to assist and address the globalisation issues facing their communities.

Scenario 4 - WA : The Knowledge State

This scenario would see Western Australia’s taxpayer funded public libraries join forces with libraries from other library sectors all over the State to deliver services to all citizens of the world. Utilising information and communication technologies to reach their global patrons, LISWA would take a leadership role in forming strategic partnerships with other State public, academic, and school libraries.

As they tap into resources from all over the nation’s online systems, libraries would have the capacity of being more customised in their service delivery. They would operate in a highly sophisticated digital environment with little constraint in terms of geography and time where library clients being served would be “real” or virtual. Remote access and dial-in capabilities would dictate the need to find new ways to service clients across the world while still providing more traditional services and collections to meet local needs.

Implementing a model such as this would require community access to the widest possible information bases. LISWA would act as both leader and broker of the strategic partnerships that would need to occur, and, as a consequence, promote the West as the ‘Knowledge State’ in Australia. The exchange of resources between libraries would become far more extensive than ever before. Every library would be open to a multitude of users and the role of the librarian would develop as that of knowledge navigator and, in some instances, creator of information.

This model would result in a shift in functions of the library from “depository” to gateway and navigational aid along a continuum, which goes far beyond the current functions of any one sectoral library. It would also see libraries as a collective having global clients and, as such, the delineation currently amongst traditional library sectors disappear. Libraries would all speak through “one voice” and become the access points and carriers for transactions in the knowledge economy. They would capitalize on the unrivaled network amongst libraries across the State and the extensive library client base already in place. As a collective they would provide a single, united, coherent library and information sector unparalleled in Australia.

Scenario 5 - Libraries : The Vital Bridge

This scenario would see a new way of clients accessing information. Libraries would be established as direct links between the creators and the seekers of information, assuming the responsibilities of both publishers and retailers. While librarians have, to some degree, been involved in publishing and retailing activities in the past, these roles would be extended to become

integral to their day-to-day operations. While not relinquishing their traditional roles, librarians would become the key intermediaries in providing customised and seamless services to the public. Librarians would actively solicit information from authors and writers in response to client requests. Where information was not available they would contract authors to produce information or, in some cases, choose to become the information creators themselves. Libraries would act as intermediaries and provide the venues in which the seekers of information would come together with the originators of information; activities which are more typically undertaken by publishers and retailers today.

Libraries would establish themselves as single entry gateways or portals to information be that in print or electronic form. The services traditionally available would continue, however new services would be introduced which would ensure that the libraries of the future are considered total information service delivery agencies rather than simply repositories of information.

In this model, LISWA would play an important leadership role in providing the impetus in moving libraries to become delivery agencies that provided complete solutions in meeting the customised needs of the public. LISWA would also provide the framework in which other libraries operate and the model to be emulated.

Under this scenario, a new set of “library” objectives would be established which would see the development of a broad, cross-informational sector approach to matters of competition. With all traces of the stereotype librarian fast disappearing and the notion of the librarian as the “intelligent agent” emerging, libraries would assertively establish a single, united, coherent information service ranging from publishing through to distribution for its clients.

CONCLUSION

While the core role of the public library is unlikely to change over the next five years, providers of public library services must continue to review and evaluate the nature of the services they provide if they are to continue to remain relevant. In some instances, this may require major paradigm shifts that will provide significant challenges in implementing.

Public libraries have operated under the current model in Western Australia for almost 50 years but there are now many threats and challenges to be faced. While these threats and challenges are not unique to Western Australia, they present us with an opportunity to address them in a way that best suits our situation. In providing successful and relevant library services to the public, we must develop strategic alliances within and outside our existing sector. Competitors in the electronic delivery of information services continue to expand and their high profile presence must be addressed. In an increasingly electronic world and with decreasing funding, libraries and other associated information and knowledge providers must work together to ensure the needs of the people of Western Australia are met.

This paper outlines a number of scenarios that posit LISWA’s leadership role in the development of excellent library services to the public. Each involves re-positioning of roles and the development of flexible, integrated service delivery models. In this rapidly evolving world it is necessary to adapt to changing circumstances and the scenarios aim to place libraries in a position of continuing relevance.

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