

ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract:

As part of the National Knowledge Commission (NKC), a set of recommendations has been developed to improve India's long neglected library system. This article explores the implications of these recommendations, with a specific focus on India's public library system and the social development gains that are often associated with public libraries.

Keywords: National, Knowledge, Commission, Libraries, Digital, Age etc.

Role of public libraries in digital age:

Since the founding of our country, libraries have always been important to freedom. Today we are in the midst of a tremendous shift in the way Americans consume literature and other content, but one thing has not changed -- the library must continue to play a central role in providing open and free access to information and ideas.

Exactly what that role looks like is the subject of much debate and many differing perspectives. Some believe libraries will shift into learning and information centers while others insist, they will maintain their role as a physical location for cataloging and loaning books -- in addition to housing sources of information technology.

While providing books was a standalone function for libraries throughout the last few centuries, their offerings have evolved with the digital age to meet the changing needs of their patrons. In fact, according to an article in the [November 2009 issue of American Libraries](#), more than 71 percent of public libraries provide their community's only free public access to computers and the Internet. Not surprisingly then -- due to the economic hardship -- more people are using libraries. [A study](#) sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and published by the Institute of Museum and Library Services last year found that 69 percent of Americans 14 years of age or older visited a public library in 2009.

Regardless of its exact nature, technology will play an increasing role in shaping our future libraries. For centuries, the book publishing industry has worked closely with and supported libraries, and they have done so without influencing the freedom of the institution. It is now time for the technology industry to step up and play a similar role.

Here is how technologists can, and should, help support libraries:

- Offer training and support -- free of charge -- to libraries for items such as digital reading devices, tablets and other media devices. Helping technology companies as well as libraries, this will serve to educate the general public in the long run.
- Provide special access to materials - something publishers have been doing for years. While technologists can't always control pricing, we can offer special programs to help educate the public and broaden access.
- Open lines of communication, offering libraries insight into how technologists see the market evolving. This will help library administrators make informed decisions regarding the future of their institutions.

Public libraries provide a key role in both facilitating access to information via the internet, as well as providing [free internet access to bridge the digital divide](#), which does not only exist between industrialized and developing nations. Taking away this important role would disenfranchise people further, and mean they would have to refer to a commercial provider.

Given that they are likely to have very few available resources, how can anyone morally argue that there is no longer a need for libraries to provide free internet?

Secondly, there is the issue of IT literacy. There is a common belief that once everyone has broadband, all problems relating to access to information will be solved. But it is not enough. There are still many users who cannot search the internet correctly and successfully. Some simply select the top result in Google rather than ensuring that their search terms are appropriate, and that the resource is reliable. It is not just the general public – even respected journalists seemingly fail to grasp the intricacies of search engines. Take, for example, this piece by [Evelyn Gordon](#) in which she claims that Amnesty International had made only one statement about the crisis in the Congo during 2009.

What appears to have happened is that she has used the search term [congo amnesty international](#) and clicked on the link [Congo Amnesty International](#), which does indeed produce one result for 2009. However, this refers to the Republic of Congo not the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is what the article itself was referring to (Amnesty actually made more than [20 statements on the DRC](#) during 2009). A simple error has led to inaccurate information being imparted via a supposedly experienced journalist (which was then repeated by another journalist, [Melanie Phillips](#)).

Consider the implications this has in a democracy where the proliferation of misinformation is caused by poor IT literacy. And that is without even considering the issue of [adult illiteracy](#), or the fact that [it is not compulsory](#) for new academies to include a library.

Librarians not only provide access to physical materials, they are also trained in using the internet appropriately to extract information for users – a skill that has been at the heart of the profession for many years. This ensures that misinformation is minimised and helps to maintain a well-informed society. Furthermore, as information professionals, they play an important role in facilitating access to government information that is otherwise inaccessible to the disenfranchised. This is also crucial in a democracy, particularly during times of economic crisis. And yet, when they're needed most, libraries are talked of as an irrelevance by policymakers who think libraries should be run by [untrained volunteers](#).

Statistics may show a decline in library goers (although these are not accurate reflections of how the service is utilized), but figures obtained from [Cipfa](#) demonstrate a [49% increase](#) in the usage of library websites. Libraries are not declining in importance – people are simply changing the way they use them. It does not then follow that we need to abandon libraries as they are now and shift everything online, which would be a disaster.

Libraries are a bridge between the information-rich and the information-poor. They need reinforcing, not dismantling. We need to continue to provide a highly skilled service that is able to meet the needs of the general public. The service ought to continue to innovate to take advantage of the way in which people are interacting with the service in a different way. It needs to continue to bridge the gap between those who have access to the internet and those who do not, while also ensuring it delivers on other aspects of its core service (book loans, local studies materials, etc). If the service is cut, we run the risk of an ill-informed society that is ill-equipped to prosper in the "information age" – a dangerous prospect for any democracy.

As is often the case in times of change, organizational structures and the language for describing an organization's activities do not adequately reflect the transformations under way. Consequently, while the descriptions that follow derive from traditional functions of libraries (collection development, cataloging and access, user services, and place) these descriptions fall short in the contemporary context.

The sections that follow use selected examples to explore the dimensions of change in the classic roles of libraries. Are core functions and expertise being sustained? How have

external forces left their mark? The cases include instances where traditional functions have been stretched and build on core activity, as well as instances where innovation reflects a significant break from past activity. The cases also reveal an evolution from models that capitalize on the distributed environment to models that are more open and diffuse.

Conclusion:

As researcher has argued here in this article, an investment in public library services, while only a small and modest part of the solution, can make a large difference in the achievement of social development and education goals.

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