

Information Technology and the Public Library as a Local Institution

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Abstract - *The public library is a local institution that plays a part in these discussions Public libraries have been community places in addition to fulfilling their basic roles as providers and repositories of information to the local community. It could be argued that in accordance with its nature, a public library with physical space should be encouraged to offer access to network information in order to fill the gap between information "haves" and "have-nots." An example of such an opinion was expressed by Hardy R. Franklin, President of the American Library Association: "if we are to remain a vibrant democracy, we must ensure that all people living in this country have equal information opportunity, that libraries serve as the public access point, or the public 'on ramp' to the information highway.'" Michael Dertouzos,*

*Professor at the Laboratory for Computer Science at MIT, concurs that there is a need "...to help the poor access and use the new technology. This can be done through various assistance programs, some already established much appreciated, provided that they are supplied and staffed to take care of the many people who will flow toward them."*²

Key Words; Association, Vibrant, Programs, Democracy,

INTRODUCTION

"Virtual libraries" in cyberspace that are accessible by computer from anywhere will replace existing physical public libraries. Such notions, started by the "paperless library" where "Librarians need no longer operate within the four walls of an institution"³ by Frederick W. Lancaster in the late 1970's, have been made more realistic by recent remarkable innovations in information technology. At the conference titled "Global Library Strategies for the 21st Century" in April 1996, for example, Paul M. Horn, Senior Vice President for Research at the International Business Machines Corporation, said that the cost of information storage had been decreasing by 40% a year over the last 20 years and that he could see no change in the trend. He thinks that at some point in the future, it would theoretically be possible to store all 16 million volumes in the Library of Congress on a disk the size of penny.¹ William Mitchell, Dean of School of Architecture and Planning at MIT, sees the future of the library as one where "the huge stacks shrink to almost negligible size, the seats and carrels disperse, and there is nothing left to put a grand facade on. All that is solid melts in air."²

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Despite these opposite views, the majority of communities remain indifferent about the future of public libraries, even though the library is nearing a critical point for its significance due to the development of the information technology society. In another way, the situation of local public libraries can be seen as a paradox. Information has never been as important as it is now, and historically public libraries are supposed to be a community resource for information. Yet, public libraries remain at the margins of the IT society.

Furthermore, information technology has de-emphasized the significance of the physical space of libraries, making them easy targets for budget cuts. Public libraries are therefore representative of the transformation of institutions in an information society.

In 1993, there were 8,887 central public libraries and 7,017 branch libraries,) for a total of 15,904 public libraries in the United States. According to the Federal - State Cooperative System for Public Library Data (FSCS), 94.9%

of public libraries serve **99,999** people or less in their legal service area, 2 and **79.5%** of public libraries serve 24,999 people or less.³ Public libraries are one of the most common public institutions found even in smaller towns.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Many of those public libraries are located in the center of the communities, often on "Main Street." When they were first established in the latter half of the nineteenth century, libraries were placed "alongside sanitation, street lighting, public parks and hospitals as the minimum social services that a democratic society owed itself." Also, "when smaller cities were competing to attract investment money to local business and real estate," the public library was a strategic "feature on a par with light, water and sewer systems,"² differentiating towns from their surrounding communities. "It was generally understood that a town which failed to educate its population would fall behind in the race for business supremacy"³ with "a frank concern for a prosperity which rival cities were seeking to destroy."⁴ **A** public library on Main Street was brick-and-stone proof of civic superiority, concern for education and high-minded culture, and commercial vigor to support it."⁵ On the other hand, when the major projects of the Carnegie libraries were implemented later around the turn of the century, they were the only large public buildings in many small towns. They became "**hubs** of social activities like concerts, lectures, and meetings and did double duty as museums and community storehouses."¹ This all goes to say that at one time, the public library enjoyed an important position in those local governments. Ever since the system of public libraries spread out all over the United States about a century ago, the public library remained an independent branch of Sidney H. Ditzion, "Arsenals of a Democratic Culture; **A** Social History of the American Public Library Movement in New England and the Middle States from **1850 to 1900**," 1947, **p. 7 2**. 2 Herkimer Free Public Library, N.Y. "Proceedings at Dedication," **1896**, Cited **by** Sidney H. Ditzion, "Arsenals of a Democratic Culture; **A** Social History of the American Public Library Movement in New England and the Middle States from **1850 to 1900**," 1947, **p.7 0**. 3 Newburyport Public Library, Massachusetts, "Dedication Exercises of the Simpson Annex to the Newburyport Library Building of the City of Newburyport, **1882**, **p. 2 7** .

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'Theodore Jones, "Carnegie Libraries across America", **1997**, **p.17**.

municipal governments. This independence effectively functioned to establish its steady role, but also brought a growing dissociation from city management even though local governments have been the main providers of support. Harris pointed out the library's inclination towards its own administration and organizational matters. As the public library system grew around the century, he wrote that as "administrative functions were becoming so extensive," the typical librarian had "less and less time for reflection on either his clientele or the library's purpose." Librarians "spent the majority of their waking hours attempting to reduce library work to a 'mechanical art,' " which made "the library a new bureaucracy adhering to more and more inflexible rules of operation." He thinks, as a result, the public libraries "began to lose touch with the founder's vision of the library's purpose."² Despite this dissociation, local governments are still the major source of funding for local public libraries. The percentage of income provided **by** local governments is **78.2%** for all public libraries,³ **78.3%** for those serving **99,999** people or less,⁴ and **77.5%** for those serving 24,999 people or less.⁵ At the same time, compared to other city functions, the expenditures for public libraries are not trivial in city budgets.

CONCLUSION

Massachusetts spent 1.47%' of its budget on the public library, while it spent **0.92%** for community development,² including **0.13%** for its Economic Development Division.³ However, it seems that local governments are rather reluctant to be actively involved in discussions concerning the direction of public libraries other than to tightening their budgets. It depicts the public library as a wallflower while other aspects of city life such as urban redevelopment, and transportation dance away. This tendency continues to the present.

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