WHY LIBRARIES ARE RELEVANT IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

The libraries of the United States are integral and valued parts of the communities and institutions they serve. There are a number of kinds of libraries commonplace in the United States, including public, school, college and university, legal, and research libraries, each of which has a constituency they serve. The libraries with which people have the greatest familiarity and the two types they utilize on the most frequent basis are the public libraries, those which primarily serve municipalities, and school libraries, those which serve kindergarten through twelfth grade schools. It is upon these two that this paper places its greatest emphasis. Public and school libraries have been changed for the better by and their patrons benefited from the adoption of advanced means of access to library materials, such as computerized library catalogs, online databases for research, and computers available for public use. Libraries are now much more than buildings housing collections of books and periodicals, where children gather for "story hour" on Saturday mornings. Libraries and librarians are now challenged as well by both the actuality and the pace of technological advance in American society, most especially by the recent availability and capability of the digitization of data and documents. The digital revolution has caused many in society including policy makers, citizens-at- large, and librarians themselves to ask whether it is important that libraries be relevant to their communities. This paper will address the question of why relevant libraries are important to American society and how librarians are working to maintain and enhance their libraries relevance.

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INTRODUCTION AND HYPOTHESIS

Public and school libraries were relative rarities in the United States until the last quarter of the 19th century. To be sure, there were libraries present in the country prior to that era; however access to them was frequently limited in some manner or another, not the least of which was distance. These early libraries tended to be associated with certain groups, such as college professors and students, members of some fraternal organizations, members of women's groups, and wealthy families. The advent of the library, the community or public library as a commonly available resource for both scholarship and recreation had a profoundly democratizing effect on American society. It is this democratizing influence that lies at the heart of public and school libraries value to communities and the nation. It is accurately descriptive that many early public libraries were known as "free public libraries." The fact that library material was available at no charge to library patrons gave all people in a community equal access to works of literature and reference as well as newspapers. Funds to support public libraries were commonly raised through a combination of taxes on property and donations from community members. This same funding structure remains in place today. School libraries were and are funded by a similar mechanism, frequently with funds from the states as well. The people of America's cities and towns believed that having a public and school libraries were an asset that paid dividends in the form of a better educated populace especially with regard to their children.

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Libraries have changed dramatically in the intervening years since computer access began being available and the pace of change has accelerated with time. Libraries have, and in some cases have facilitated, the adoption of new technologies and methods that have enhanced their ability to perform their core mission: Providing access for their customers to as wide a range of material as possible for the acquisition of knowledge and reading for enjoyment.

The mission has not changed, however the means of accomplishing it is being altered and alternative means are becoming available for people to access the written word, once the nearly exclusive realm of libraries, due to innovation, and this has called into question whether there will be a need for libraries in the future. Given the technological changes and other challenges with which they are presented, will libraries remain a vital, relevant element in their communities?

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LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature indicates that libraries remain relevant in American society. There has been considerable research performed to assess how relevant libraries are given the advent of a range of digital alternatives to traditional library content which consisted of media produced on paper. The most comprehensive research is the *US Impact Public Library Study*, performed by the University of Washington for the Gates Foundation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (University of Washington, 2010), which found that the public libraries of the nation were relevant to, and within all socio-economic groups and in all regions of the country. The American Library Association (ALA) engaged the Harris Interactive Organization in 2009 to perform research in many of the same areas of library function and relevance as the University of Washington/Gates Foundation study. The data from the Harris poll was combined with the work of several other research organizations; the product was *The State of America's Libraries-2010* (American Library Association, 2010).

The results of the University of Washington research and the ALA's various studies confirm that library usage, a key indicator of relevance, has been rising for the past ten years, a trend that has intensified since the onset of the recent economic recession. The rise in library usage has been experienced across all types of libraries open to the public: Academic, public, and school libraries have each experienced increases in customer visits and resource usage (ALA, 2010). Public library visits in fiscal year 2009, for example, totaled 1.4 billion visits, an approximate 5 per-cent increase over fiscal year 2006, while circulation of public library materials was 2.2

billion in fiscal 2009, an increase from fiscal 2006 similar to that shown by library visits (ALA, 2010). The IMPACT/ Gates Foundation study offers a slightly different perspective than the ALA survey: Sixty-nine percent or 169 million of the residents of the United States over the age of 14 visited a public library at least once in the year prior to the study (U. Wash., 2010). The IMPACT and ALA studies seem to indicate that public libraries are, at least for the present, doing well in the marketplaces of information and customer interaction.

A study carried out by the Odyssey opinion research firm for ITHAKA, owners of the JSTOR academic database, in 2006 provides another view of how the relationship between libraries and their customers is changing. This 2006 study was a follow-on to nearly identical studies conducted in 2000 and 2003, giving a perspective of how attitudes of faculties at colleges and universities toward the libraries at their institutions has changed over a relatively short time period with three reference points. The ITHAKA study demonstrates that, over the span of three studies, the faculties' view of the utility of what the library offered in research materials and professional journals had decreased with time due primarily to the availability of the same or similar material through web-based sources. The faculty saw themselves as decreasingly dependent on library resources for research materials over time. On the other hand, the faculty view of the relevance of the librarians remained relatively unchanged (ITHAKA, 2008). While this study was carried out in the context of academic libraries which are often closed to the public, whereas the IMPACT and ALA studies related primarily to public libraries, the ITHAKA study may be predictive of what is to come for public libraries. The increasing number of digital or online resources available to libraries and their customers has changed the calculus of how

information, and more correctly, knowledge, is acquired, transferred, and recorded. How well

libraries and librarians adapt to this changed environment will determine how relevant they

remain in their communities.

There was an earlier revolution in how information was recorded for access by library

customers that bears directly on the current situation. The invention in the 1860's of paper based

on wood pulp and its subsequent widespread availability both transformed the market for books

and enabled the mass printing and circulation of newspapers. Prior to wood pulp paper, books

were very expensive and newspapers were very limited in size and circulation (Baker, 2001).

During the post-Civil War era, several factors converged that changed American culture

dramatically and the delivery of information and knowledge with it. The Industrial Revolution,

the rise of large urban centers, the invention of the telegraph, the lacing together of the country

by railroads, higher literacy rates due to widespread public education, the vastly increased

number of public libraries (in major part due to the Carnegie endowment), and the availability of

cheap paper, all of these together served to democratize information and knowledge during the

latter part of the 19th Century and early 20th Century, much as the digital revolution of today is

having a similar democratizing effect. Libraries across the country established large collections

of books that were comparatively inexpensive to acquire, and often maintained collections of the

local newspaper and occasionally newspapers from other cities as well. The newspaper archives

were placed into bound volumes separated by years or portions of years and stored for use in

reference and research. In the 1950's concerns arose among librarians, especially those in the

major cities, that they did or would have a major problem with storage space and that the paper used in their collections of books and newspapers was self-destructing to the point of loss of viability due to its acid content (Baker, 2001; Darnton, 2010). These perceived issues led to the mass microfilming (which later proved to have its own preservation and quality issues), disposal by sale, and/or destruction of much of a century's worth of the country's historical record and creative efforts. Baker and Darnton differ as to the severity of the loss and whether it made libraries less trustworthy as preservers of the printed word. The issue of what should be saved is apparently not one that is resolved for any length of time nor at any point in time, rather it should be carefully addressed in an ongoing manner with guidelines biased in favor of preservation (Darnton, 2010; Johnson, 2010). Baker's view is that "the ostensible purpose of a library is to preserve the printed word" (Baker, 2010). The collection of a particular library constitutes a large part of how relevant it is to its customers.

There is a host of literature generated within the various professional library communities which discusses how libraries can retain their status as a relevant, vital resource for the customers they serve and often offers suggestions of what has been found to be effective in other libraries. Numerous studies have verified the value of recreational reading by children in improving academic performance. A study conducted in 2006-2007 examined children's book selection from the International Children's Digital Library (ICDL). Not surprisingly, when selecting books from the thumbnails of book covers displayed on the ICDL results screen the first criteria they used was the perception of the book they gained by examining its cover. This was followed by the descriptive text concerning the book's characteristics: Subject matter,

number of pages and whether the book seemed suitable for boys or girls. The children frequently

took advantage of the ICDL's preview feature which allows the viewing of snippets of the books,

and further refined their choice of book (Reuter, 2007). The data presented in this study confirms

the thought that how a book is perceived (judging it by its cover) will remain a primary reason

for selection of books whether they are old technology paper or new technology digitally based,

now an important issue for librarian whether to purchase media including books in one format or

multiple formats. Using data provided by computer programs, librarians are able to refine their

material purchases based on numbers generated by their customer's choices whether they be

children or adults.

The Benton Foundation study reflects the prevailing wisdom of its time that libraries would

be challenged to remain relevant in the digital age. Through the use of separate surveys of library

patrons, followed by use of a focus group, the Benton study identified library patron's desires for

what services and amenities they believed libraries should offer in the future, as well as their

willingness to pay for doing so. The study found that patrons were willing to pay additional taxes

to support keeping the libraries relatively technologically current, with the exception 18-to-24

age group of respondents who favored spending money on their own technology rather than

contributing to the libraries' systems. The 18-to-24 age group was the least supportive of

maintaining and building library buildings, and they were the least enthusiastic group about the

importance of libraries in a digital future (Weiss, 1997). When the focus group was discussing

that same question, their preference was for the library to remain "just behind the curve. We

don't need them to be on the curve, because most people aren't" (Weiss, 1997). Marilyn Johnson

took up this issue in the book, *This Book is Overdue!*, pointing out that the focus group used in the Benton survey consisted of 11 people all of whom were of the same socioeconomic background, described themselves as frequent library users and that the value of the findings from the group should be viewed in that context. Another quote from the focus group was: "In 30 years, libraries would be relegated to a kind of museum where people can go and look up stuff from way back when" (Johnson, 2010). With the benefit of the 13 years that had elapsed since the Benton study and its focus group, Johnson readily makes the point that libraries have thus far energetically resisted any such fate.

The education of the young people of the nation has always been a high priority as it is seen as the key pathway to a successful future. Public education is one of the key elements of the social contract on which the nation prides itself. Public education's resonance as an issue about which the people of the nation are concerned can be measured by the number of references candidates for public office make to improving public education in their presentations. In any case, public school libraries are an important part of the school systems that provide education to the nation's children. School libraries are increasingly staffed with non-professional personnel including line teachers and volunteers. There are some underlying reasons for this trend in school library staffing. The first reason is a lack of available funding to maintain professional staffing; a second is a shortage of people who have completed a Masters of Library Science degree and are also credentialed teachers or who are certified library and media technicians (Achterman, 2008). The number of colleges that offer library science degrees has declined; this has reduced the

number of available professional librarians. This is likely a consequence of the level of compensation offered to library science graduates. Libraries as a class of institution are increasingly viewed in some quarters as less relevant in an era when so much reading and research material is available through the various electronic media. In an era of difficult fiscal choices for legislative bodies, libraries may have become a lower priority item for the reasons stated above and have been losing ground in the competition for resources as a result.

The literature concerning libraries in educational settings has repeatedly demonstrated that libraries add value in terms of student learning achievement, when school libraries are adequately and professionally staffed. The Ohio Study, conducted in 2003 to assess the impact that having professional librarians in school libraries had on student's standardized test scores, demonstrated that student achievement was higher in all grades when a credentialed library and media specialist (librarian) was present and participated in teaching students. This study confirmed the results of similar studies performed in 20 other states and one Canadian province. The students in the Ohio study also responded with an over 99% affirmative response when asked whether their school library and librarians had been helpful or useful in both academic and recreational pursuits, apparently in confirmation of their library's relevance (Todd & Kuhlthau, 2004). A more recent study of student achievement in California public schools (sampling grades 4,8 and 11) confirms the findings of the Ohio study, noting that there was a clear positive effect at all three grade levels and across all disciplines when school libraries were staffed with certified library media specialists (Achterman, 2008). This study also pointed out that California ranks last of the 50 states in school library funding.

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RESEARCH ANALYSIS

Several recent large-scale studies that shed light on the issue of library relevance have been used in research for this paper. Most were performed by professional organizations at the behest of either an interested party, such as the American Library Association, or concerned non-profit, such as the Benton/Kellogg Foundation. One very thorough study was completed by a Doctor of Philosophy candidate who researched school library staffing in California. The Gates Foundation's University of Washington study of 2010 (U.S. Impact) was conducted by the university's information school with the Foundation's proposed participation in and contribution to funding greater broadband access, libraries included, in the United States.

U.S. IMPACT was the first national study focused on the usage of computers available in libraries, specifically what were patrons using the computers for, what socioeconomic group they represented, and what if any alternative means of computer, internet, and/or library services access they may have had. The study had 44,000 voluntary participants who either responded through a telephone interview or an online questionnaire. 400 libraries also participated, with four libraries and their patrons chosen from across the country completing a more intensive survey. U.S IMPACT reported that 77 million people used library computers to access the internet in 2009. The study's findings were quite unequivocal in that library computer and internet services provide the only access that millions of people have to performing a large number of tasks, access that the rest of the population might take for granted. Those tasks include filling out and submitting applications for employment, educational institution admissions forms,

renewing vehicle registrations, all of which are increasingly required to be submitted online. This same "underserved" population used library computers and internet access to research health issues, find tax and other government forms and information, complete online coursework, and do homework (32.5 million people). Libraries are an excellent place for educational pursuits; if a student has a question, the librarians will know the answer or they know to find the answer. A large number of the this same group used the library computers to communicate with family, friends, and employers (It can be assumed that at least some were using the computers to access their social networking accounts, but that number was not reported separately). People who were traveling without a computer comprised another user group. There were a significant number of library patrons who had their own laptop computers, but preferred to use the library's broadband connection "hotspot" rather than the access they had at home because the library's was more capable. Patrons in both the underserved and general population reported receiving a great deal of help from library personnel in learning to use computers, and help navigating websites and forms. There was no statistically measurable and accurate way to quantify how many hours librarians and staff had devoted to helping their computer customers, but as 64 million people reported receiving assistance from librarians, the number would be significant. The U.S. IMPACT study carries with it the subtitle: "Opportunity for All: How the American Public Benefits from Internet Access at Public Libraries." U.S. IMPACT therefore offers a close look at one very important way in which librarians provide a needed service and libraries remain relevant by democratizing access to information.

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The American Library Association's study offered data that confirmed the U.S. IMPACT findings that there has been a steady increase in the number of patrons who are using the libraries' online capabilities because that is their only access to computers and the internet. The ALA study also found that: Librarians are working more hours due to increased demand for library services; library budgets have come under downward pressure as a result of lower revenue collections at the local and state levels, h

owever libraries' cost structures have continued to rise; and library visits are going up with circulation statistics following that trend despite the increased availability of library materials online. Achterman's doctoral dissertation research confirms this situation is duplicated in the school libraries. Libraries are, of course, only one of a range of public institutions and agencies faced with rising costs at a time of tightened budgets and have to compete for funding through advocacy of their own cause.

The numbers associated with library usage are somewhat astounding. Public library visits amounted to 1.4 billion persons and circulation (items actually checked out) of materials totaled 2.2 billion with children's materials accounting for 740 million of that total. Attendance at library children's programs was 59 million with all of these numbers taken from the 2007 fiscal year, the latest year available when the ALA's study was published. The total number of internet computer terminals available in public libraries was 208,000, yet there were occasionally lines of people waiting to use them.

INTERPRETATION AND CONCLUSION

The idea that public and school libraries are a worthwhile investment for the nation and its communities to make is quite old. The reasoning that underlies the concept of universal access to the printed word has not changed. In 1876, the U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Education published its assessment: *Public Libraries of the United States: their History, Condition and Management.* The book is 1187 pages and, though the prose of the mid-to-late 19th century differs from that of today, the meaning of the author's text is clear: Public libraries could be a tremendous asset to their communities. The public library and school library movement, if it can be called that, was gaining momentum at the time of the publishing of *Public Libraries,* and it continued to do so for many years as the value of libraries was demonstrated for the citizenry on a first-hand basis. That momentum was aided tremendously when Andrew Carnegie embarked on his philanthropic venture of giving away a substantial portion of his fortune for the construction and stocking of public libraries. Over a period of thirty years ending in 1919, the Carnegie Foundation provided the majority of funding for 1500 libraries, a number which in 1919 represented half of the total number of public libraries in the country. Carnegie always provided most but not all of the funds necessary to construct and equip a library, while securing a formal agreement from the city or town that the rest of the money would be raised locally. This was in keeping with his thought that "he would help those who helped themselves"

to improve their lives. There has been considerable speculation about Carnegie's motivation for his philanthropy, whether it was a form of atonement for whatever nefarious tactics he had employed in amassing his fortune, or a gesture based on his belief system. Whatever he may have intended the gifts to accomplish, he succeeded in furthering the democratization of information and knowledge.

Library technology did not change in a major way for many years. Of the developments that did achieve widespread adoption there are two that are very worthy of note. Inter-library loan alliances became an additional and efficient means for librarians to broaden the reach of their libraries by accessing the collections of other libraries. At the same time, inter-library loans added to the knowledge and information available to library patrons, an additional democratizing influence brought about by library activity. The second development that occurred over time was the change in the gender of the majority of librarians. When referring to librarians, the 1876 *Public Libraries of the United States* invariably uses male pronouns; the literature published in the 1920's and since that time uses female pronouns referring to librarians. There was a democratizing influence of a different kind operating in that instance.

The computer revolution was the next major agent of change to impact how public and school libraries function. Libraries were early, if reluctant, adopters of computer technology; as Johnson points out, the first computerized library catalog was generated in the 1970's during the punch-card and tape data storage era. Widespread library involvement with computers began with the advent of the personal computer and internet for access to information from library sites, and

cataloging databases that put library records on digital media for access. There followed a

concerted effort on the scale of the post-Sputnik reaction to "put a computer in every classroom"

and computer laboratories in every school, the goal being to make every student computer

literate. Public and school libraries invested heavily in computers along with the infrastructure to

operate them and staff to maintain them, and initially received considerable governmental and

philanthropic support to do so. The positive outcomes of these efforts were customers (students

and library patrons) that were computer literate, a vastly more accessible library records system,

and gradually an increased, simplified access to information. There also was a generational

divide created among librarians and the generational divide. Johnson refers to the people born

and educated prior to the computer revolution as "digital immigrants," those educated after as

"digital natives." Librarians had to bridge that divide quickly in order to be able to teach others

how to use the new systems, and simply to understand the new terminology that accompanied the

technology. There are, of course, some ongoing issues that accompanied the computerization of

libraries. Access to some internet content has to be restricted or prohibited, especially in school

settings. Censorship is a major issue for librarians. They are instinctively hesitant to impose

censorship in almost any circumstance that relates to First Amendment rights. Another quite

different issue arrived with computers is their tendency to occasionally fail, or become obsolete

because their operating system no longer supports commonly used software. The same is true of

cataloging systems; they periodically become obsolete because the vendor no longer supports the

version installed in a library's server. Transitioning a library's catalog to a new system can be a

frustrating, even agonizing experience, in spite of the vendor's assurances it will take place seamlessly. The purchase and maintenance of computer systems in libraries and schools is both an ongoing and recurring expense not present in their budgets 30 years ago.

The fact that a book written 135 years ago such as *Public Libraries of the United States,* written about a fairly specialized subject is available online, in full text with illustrations and at no charge, illustrates the primary reason behind some people's opinion that libraries will be less relevant in the future: The rapidly growing numbers of books and periodicals that are available in formats other than paper. Google Book Search is scanning millions of existing books and making them available online, though not entirely for free; Apple and Amazon among others offer digital readers that can download books, again not entirely for free; e-Books have been available for a number of years, and as a consequence demand for ink on paper books is now declining. However, the number of titles published is rising. No change occurs in a vacuum, and these two factors, smaller book publishing runs, but more of them, taken together will almost inevitably cause the per copy price of printed books to rise. Rising book prices won't benefit any of the parties, least of all libraries. Rising prices only exacerbate the problem. Publishers of scholarly journals and research libraries have been locked into a similar situation by the increased availability of journals online, the subsequent dropping of subscriptions by libraries, and the resultant rise of print subscription prices. Bookstores, by some measures a competitor of libraries, are under pressure (reference: Border's managed bankruptcy and reorganization) for the same reasons.

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Librarians have assumed willingly a role as defenders of First Amendment rights where printed matter is concerned. A yearly celebration appropriately called "Banned Books Week" is held in public and school libraries to inform the public about librarians active role in defending the public's right to choose their reading material free of interference from censorship. A brief listing of books that are routinely challenged by those who would like them deleted from library shelves and teacher's reading lists includes Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* J.D. Salinger's *A Catcher in the Rye,* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* each a work judged to be a major classic in American literature. Rather than assume the public needs protection from such works, controversial though they may have been, librarians prefer that the reader's and society's interest is best served when the reader makes their own informed judgment. Librarians have also assumed the role of defenders of the Fourth Amendment in relation to provisions of the PATRIOT Act that allow law enforcement access to library circulation records without consideration of probable cause. They have sought to have the Act amended to require a higher evidentiary standard be met to allow access to library records. Librarian's active defense of the public's rights is another way in which they make themselves and their libraries relevant to society.

Over the course of the past four years the writer of this paper has volunteered approximately 300 hours (I don't keep track) in the libraries of a local high school and middle school. This time has afforded me an opportunity to observe two librarians while they were performing both of their roles, as librarian and as teacher. These librarians are both actively engaged in teaching

students how to perform research using both print and digital resources, an essential skill for any student, especially those who will pursue higher education opportunities. The students are also given some instruction in differentiating good online sources from the bad. In other words, the first hit produced by a Google search may not be the most informative or valuable resource, research more deeply. The classroom teacher remains engaged with the students during the lesson, which conforms to the model that has been demonstrated most effective by research such as that done by Achterman. This time has also provided some insight into how school libraries actually work. Given the time constraints and remembering the students are of middle and high school age, the library staff does well at imparting useful information to the students.

Public and school librarians will remain quite relevant in the digital age. Their relevance is exemplified in the consistent manner in which they seek to inform and educate the public to achieve maximum democratization of knowledge. The demand for library services is slowly moving from print media to digital, but the relevance of libraries in the digital age lies in their ability to offer everyone access to all forms of media. Librarians have proven in the past to be adaptable and versatile in making libraries fit with changing environments, and they'll keep doing just that.

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