The Role of Libraries in the Digital Age

As library directors ponder the role of libraries in the digital age, external developments overlay many considerations. Although many of the best library leaders have something to say about the topic, what is best for your library should be negotiated with the staff and the board with the public foremost in mind.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services has established a website, “Museums, Libraries and 21st Century Skills,” dealing with how cultural institutions such as libraries can engage its users in problem-solving, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovative learning experiences. “The website provides a quick online assessment for libraries and museums to evaluate their readiness to engage the public and to deliver 21st century skills, a downloadable pdf of a report and in-depth assessment matrix for library and museum practitioners and policy makers.” Note the excellent bibliography.

The report, Opportunity for All: How the American Public Benefits from Internet Access at U.S. Libraries, describes the results of “the first, large-scale study of who uses public computers and Internet access in public libraries, the ways library patrons use this free technology service, why they use it, and how it affects their lives. It was conducted by the University of Washington Information School and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Institute of Museum and Library Services.” The press release summarizes the findings.


Bertot, John Carlo and Charles R. McClure, Public Libraries and the Internet 2008: Study Results and Findings (Tallahassee: Florida State University, 2008) makes the point that “although public libraries provide substantial public access services and resources across a range of areas, their ability to do so successfully is not limitless and has reached a saturation point in key areas of their ability to maintain, enhance, and grow public access technology services.” It discusses challenges related to buildings, costs and staff, provides detailed statistics useful in making a case with the board and/or funders. You may want to begin with the Executive Summary.

The ALA publication Libraries Connect Communities: Public Library Funding & Technology Access Study 2007-2008 confirms what we hold dear regarding the role of public libraries, our volatile funding, inadequate buildings and staffing levels, etc. “The
interconnectedness of funding, staffing, buildings and maintenance cannot be underestimated, as all have a direct impact on the amount and quality of public access technology services that public libraries can provide to their patrons.”

Presentations at the 2009 ALA Annual related to this study also make the point that this is “information that can help library directors and library IT staff benchmark and advocate for technology resources in communities across the nation. The data are also of importance for policymakers at local, state, and federal levels, manufacturers of information and communication technologies, and the communities served by public libraries.”

“From Linking to Thinking: How We’ll Live When Information Surrounds Us,” recorded at the ALA MidWinter 2009 OCLC Symposium, consists of 3 streaming video segments. “Does using the Web change how we think and learn?” OCLC’s Roy Tennant moderates a discussion between David Weinberger (author of Everything is Miscellaneous and co-author of The Cluetrain Manifesto (Both available through Access Pennsylvania Database)) and Nova Spivack (Semantic Web pioneer and publisher of the Twine search/sharing tool) that explores answers to questions like these: “How will we organize information when everyone is connected all the time? Will the Web add intelligence to everyday objects and our personal activities? Change is coming to the Web, but how will the Web change us?”

Sara Davidson’s slides from an ALA Annual 2008 presentation provide an overview of reference services at the library at the new University of California campus at Merced. She points out how the new technologies impact reference work, and this is transferrable to public libraries. For example: “We value persistent, asynchronous, multi-user forms of communication. In simpler terms, we are asking how we can answer those repeated questions in more efficient ways than at a reference desk with librarian..... We value our librarians as managers who work on broad solutions. In order to have time to dedicate to these solutions, we decided that staffing a traditional reference desk multiple hours a day was probably not the best use of our time. We want to provide information just in time without sitting at a reference desk just in case.”


“Best Practices in Virtual Reference,” streaming video segments from the ALA MidWinter 2009 OCLC Symposium, consists of “two innovative approaches to improving reference service for our users: building a better search engine using the knowledge of reference librarians, and building a multilingual, multinational reference service.” The presentations are by David Lankes, director of the Information Institute of Syracuse, and Paul Ulrich, Berlin Central and Regional Library.
Karen Calhoun and Janet Hawk presented “Online Catalogs: What Users and Librarians Want, a Review of Market Research Data” at the OCLC Program for Cooperative Cataloging Participants meeting at ALA Midwinter, January 25, 2009. This is pertinent to library directors who think about the future of the online catalog and how library users access the information that the library can provide.

The OCLC Presentation Center will keep you up to date on digital age topics.


Gaming in libraries is still controversial in some areas. In order to explain how gaming ties into literacy to your board and community you may wish to consult the American Library Association’s “The Librarian’s Guide to Gaming.” Examples of evaluation and assessment tools are provided. The Young Adult Library Services Association includes information regularly in its listservs, electronic newsletter and VOYA.

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- Emerging Technologies for Public Libraries