The Public Library in a Knowledge-Based Economy

Paul Sturges
Professor Extraordinary
Department of Information Science
Gloomy Predictions

- Some people (including some librarians) regard the book as outdated.
- They see the future as entirely dominated by the Internet and its successors.
- They believe this means a complete disintermediation and an end to the library profession.
- They do not see libraries surviving, except for a few irrelevant monuments.
A library in Africa
Old and New Roles for the Public Library

• A more positive view is that the book is far from finished and that there is still a role for libraries supporting
  – Leisure
  – Formal Education.

• It is also possible for the public library to function as a socially committed enabler in the knowledge economy.
IFLA’s Attitude to Change

• IFLA, the global body representing libraries and librarians, takes a positive view.

• IFLA FAIFE offers new roles for libraries in society through Workshops on:
  – Internet Manifesto
  – Public Access to Health Information
  – Transparency and Good Governance
FAIFE Trainers in Manila
Roles for the Public Library

• Developing the Public Library as a Focal Point or social destination
• Taking Public Library services out to the people in Outreach programmes
  – Physically transporting traditional services
  – Disseminating information to the community from the Public Library
• Developing Information Literacy in the community
The Public Library as Focal Point

• Public libraries often bemoan their use by school children doing homework: they should seize this as an opportunity.
• The library may have little space but it can offer a welcome to clubs, committees, working groups.
• Libraries that do have spare space should use this to make the library a ‘social destination’ or ‘third space’ in the community.
A Focal Point for Young People
The Public Library and Outreach

• The library can achieve even more if it rejects the limits of its walls.
• The library can form alliances for better information provision with
  – Schools,
  – Churches,
  – Clinics,
  – Community Centres, and many others.
• People who live too far from the library can be reached by innovative methods (physical and virtual).
Innovative Transport for Outreach
Using the Cell Phone for Outreach

• Around 2004 the number of cell phones overtook land lines in Africa
• There are now more than 280 million cell phones in Africa and they are increasing at an enormous rate
• This contrasts with a maximum of 67 million Internet users
• The cell phone is an ideal tool for outreach activities
West African Herdsman Using Cell Phone
Why the Cell Phone?

• The people themselves have identified that cell phones perform functions which they need.
• When state telecommunications monopolies are broken up and competing cell phone companies create a market, people find ways to acquire cell phones.
• They also pay for them, modify them, repair them, share them, rent them out and exploit them in ways scarcely imagined in the industrialised countries.
• The Public Library should seriously consider disseminating information via cell phone messages.
What the Cell Phone can do

• Although cell phones require
  – Electricity to charge their batteries
  – Telecommunications networks
• Once these requirements are met, the cell phone can deliver what people need
  – Contact with friends and family
  – Contact with officialdom and financial networks
  – Employment and business opportunities
• Without further complication and at a low cost.
An Extended Family
Case Study: Managing the Extended Family

• Heads of households in extended families are able to deal with their problems and can organise support instantly using cell phones they give to their dependents.

• Budgeting for daily purchases of food and identification of the best bargains can be done by phone.

• Contact with family members working in the cities and abroad (who can supply remittances and loans) is instant.
Information Literacy

• Possibly the chief enabling role that the public library can take is through Information Literacy Instruction.
• This can begin with Literacy itself and continue with Critical Reading.
• Important contributions are
  – Digital Skills Instruction
  – Internet Use Instruction
• An Information Society does not just happen – it needs professionals and institutions that will help make it happen.
Conclusions

• Librarians, particularly public librarians, spend too much time complaining that their status (and pay) is low.
• There are opportunities in a Knowledge-Based Economy for libraries to make a vital contribution to social change.
• Librarians should not wait to be told to accept these opportunities: they must seize them and transform themselves in the process.