



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

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- Some people (including some librarians) regard the book as outdated.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.