

Will the Public Library be “Googled”?
Future prospects for public libraries

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When four Montreal library directors were asked in September 2006 what their library would look like tomorrow, they generally agreed that it would be "whatever our users want it to be."¹ When contemplating the future of public libraries it is crucial to keep this point in mind. Public libraries exist because user communities support them, and as long as the library can continue to meet the needs of their communities they will remain vital community institutions. Although the Internet, and Google, is now the primary information source for many people, it has not yet replaced public libraries. In fact, many libraries today are growing and thriving because they are responding to what their users want. Avid "Googlers" would agree that Google also responds to what users want. Google has responded to demands for better e-mail programs with more storage space, and a search engine with added tools such as maps, image searches and language translators. However, Google, and the Internet as a whole, has its limitations and public libraries in turn have their own strengths which are different than those of the Internet. Technology will have a huge impact on the future of libraries but it is not necessarily a negative impact. The successful public library of the future will combine the strengths of new technologies with the traditional strengths of the library in order to meet the needs of their community.

Google is the most widely used and widely discussed Internet search engine. It can provide fast and free access to the wealth of information that is available on the Internet.² Tenopir (2004) cites studies which have shown that search engines, and Google in particular, are now the "information finding tool of first choice for many users" (p. 9). Furthermore, OCLC's 2005 report *Perception of Libraries and Information Services* shows that of participants who are familiar with search engines, "84 % begin their search for information on a particular topic using a search engine, while only 1 percent begin using an online database, and only 1 percent begin using a library Web site" (Walters, 2006, pp. 8-9). Even scientists list Google among the top three most reliable online sources (Tenopir, p. 30) and increasingly, librarians themselves are using Google for various information needs (Google at the Gate, 2006)

¹ From meeting with Frances Ackerman, director Fraser-Hickson Library; Celine Laperrière, director Pointe-Clare Public Library; Tanya Abramovitch, director Eleanor London Cote-Saint-Luc Library; and Ann Moffat, director Westmount Public Library on September 27, 2006, for Prof. Diane Mittermeyer's *Public Libraries* class. Graduate School of Library and Information Studies, McGill University.

² While Google itself is free to use, there are always the underlying costs of Internet access to bear in mind.

In addition to Google, many other Internet services are being used for information, entertainment, and social networking. The concept of Web 2.0 emphasizes an Internet where user created information such as wikis and blogs are increasingly the preferred format for websites. While, these Internet services may not conflict directly with the kinds of services the public library offers they are influential in determining of how users want their information - since the web is becoming more user-centered, library websites and library facilities will also have to reflect this growing expectation.

Regardless of the growing popularity of Google, its primary functions are distinct from than those of the public library (Long, 2002, and Rodger, D'Elia & Joregensen, 2001). Public libraries are information sources, but they also serve a broader purpose. The exact quantities of books on the shelves or the presence of electronic resources are probably not the first things most people see when they walk into a public library. Instead they will (hopefully) notice the presence of helpful staff, a warm welcoming atmosphere with lots of study and reading space, and bulletins about upcoming library and community events. According to Peter Bromberg, the library has never been a necessary place for information but it has always offered a third place: an alternative to being at home or work. He stresses the importance of the "library as place" even though the Internet now often makes the physical library seem less significant (Bromberg, 2006, October 3). Stevens (2006, October 6) agrees, he gives the example of the Princeton Public Library, which opened up their meeting room to show soccer games during the 2006 World Cup and quickly the library became *the* place to watch the game. Furthermore, Stevens says libraries are also about "quiet spaces to read or reflect, a room for three or more to gather and collaborate, [and] a safe haven for teens to game, dance and be." (Stevens, 2006, October 6). And let us not forget, that many people still value printed resources, and continue to demand that the library be a place to borrow, and read, books and periodicals (Moore, 2004).

Furthermore, the library can strengthen community spirit, and promote culture and learning. Chowdhury, Poulter, and McMenemy (2006), recognize the importance of the library as the place for creating and storing local community knowledge, which can be done through both physical and digital means (p. 456). Himmel & Wilson (2001) agree that librarians are crucial for fostering community. Libraries have the unique ability to be able to localize their resources and services. In addition to providing books and information to their

users, libraries provide quality interactive programming such as storytimes, information literacy, and book mobiles. These are ways that libraries can reach out to their communities, which Google cannot compete with (Long, 2002, p. 225). Rodger et al. (2001) show that the library is also the best source for local history and genealogy (p. 59).

Although many information needs can be met by the Internet, there is a difference between the kind of reference assistance available online and that available at the library. Libraries, unlike Google, have professionals ready and able to provide personalized reference assistance. LaGuardia (2003), argues that since Google is providing answers to simpler questions, the questions being brought to the desks are increasingly complex, time consuming, and larger in scope. Even when answers are available online, users often need assistance to sort through the information overload of the World Wide Web (p. 40).

All of these strengths of libraries can relate to one simple concept: human interaction. Whether through providing group meeting spaces, community programming, or individualized reference service, public libraries thrive on human interaction. As stated by Rodger et al. (2001), "it's our guess that tending carefully to parts of library service where the interaction of real people constitutes a part of the perceived value will allow public libraries to remain vital parts of their communities" (p. 61). There can be no doubt that as aspects of daily life become more confined to the digital world, face-to-face human interactivity may become an increasingly valued activity.

While libraries and Google each do have their separate strengths, many authors stressed that for libraries to remain relevant in the future they must continue to evolve their services to meet user needs, which may often mean taking a cue from Google and Web 2.0. This has created the concept of Library 2.0 for libraries. Although there's much debate over what Library 2.0 means, most agree that the concept is to improve libraries by adapting to new user needs and providing value-added services by making use of new technologies (Crawford, 2006).

To begin with libraries must end the misconception that Google is the enemy. Many studies show that Google is not a threat and that often there is a positive correlation between users of Google and users of public libraries (Pors, 2006, p.6). Furthermore, the interviewees in *Google at the Gate* (2006), agreed that Google need not be competition and one

interviewee, McGlamery, noted that linking library catalogues to Google could be a great value-added opportunity for small libraries (p. 43).

In his own blog, Michael Stevens suggested that librarians use instant messaging, blogs, and other tools to further the mission of the library, "and create virtually what has happened in libraries for years: conversation and connection with information and each other" (2006, October 6). Steven's also suggested that librarians embrace new user friendly ways of access such as "tagging" in addition to traditional cataloguing and controlled vocabularies. Improving services, does not have to imply use of new technologies but the possibilities created by new technologies do hold numerous potentials and according to Wolpert, "smart libraries will continue to take advantage of any and all opportunities to improve access to resources and service to their communities." (Google at the Gate, p. 43).

Google may now be replacing the public library for some information needs (for example Google was used to locate some of the blog articles cited in this paper), and some physical formats such as microfilm and large print indexes may be disappearing but few people will complain over the loss of these cumbersome and inconvenient formats when they are replaced by easy-to-access digital formats such as pdf-files and e-reference tools. No matter what innovations Google offers us next, it can never be all the things a public library is. It is not equivalent to sitting in a comfortable arm chair with an old familiar novel, and it is certainly no replacement for children's storytime, or professional reference assistance. Moreover, the presence of community one feels when walking into a public library is no different today from what it was before the "Googlization" of society began. Yes, the public library will become more wired and more virtual but the physical library will also remain because as humans we value interaction with each other and we value building communities and sharing experiences together. If libraries continue to evolve and use technology effectively they will remain relevant and may even be more widely used than they are now.

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