

I am writing as Chair of the Board of the Alice B. Donahue Library and Archives Board which operates a public library and archives in Athabasca, Alberta. This is a small town in Northern Alberta. The population is just under 3,000 and the surrounding County has just under 8,000 people. Here are our responses to the framing questions.

Services

1. Our library serves the residents of Athabasca, parts of Athabasca County, and residents in summer villages in the area. This includes natives and new Canadians as well as people from many ethnic backgrounds. Canadians as a whole get very good library service from the public, school, academic, and special libraries in Canada. While the services vary from library to library, most provide recreational reading, reference or information services as well as access to online databases and services. As well, many libraries provide meeting places for community groups and programs for their patrons that enhance their knowledge and skills. For the most part, these are of good quality. There is a great emphasis on working to develop literacy skills and other skills that will help people manage in society.

Archives are less well known by Canadians, but they are aware that they exist. I think that many people don't know that they can access archives for their own research. We operate an archive which serves the entire area.

2. Libraries have embraced whatever technology is in use at the time. As a result, we have some material that is in formats that are hard to use or people can't use as they don't have the machines to use them. In past 20 years technology has changed immensely. Libraries have been chronically underfunded and have struggled to embrace the many changes. They have managed to do so fairly well. What they haven't been able to do is to take older material in one format and change it to one that is useable by current technology. The best example of this is the number of videocassettes and cassette tapes and records that are in libraries. Most libraries and archives do not have facilities or staff to get them converted to digital format or even to CDs or store them on a streaming server. There needs to be much cooperation and a huge increase in training and funding for this to happen.

Archives have also embraced technology to store their collections. Projects are being done all over the country to digitize collections. The Athabasca Archives has digitized almost all of its oral history collection that is on cassette tapes. In addition, we have digitized about 4,800 photographs. We have had some grants to help us with both activities. Without the assistance of Athabasca University and some grants from various organizations, this would not have happened. The University stores our photographs on its servers.

3. We don't measure the outcome of our services. We record data about what we do, but we don't know what the impact is of the use of the services by our users. We sometimes ask for user's opinions about our services, but we don't have any effective way of measuring the impact of the service. We know that people like our service and feel that we offer valuable services to them as they keep using them and keep telling us how much they like our services.

Community Outreach and Awareness

1. In our town and county, people definitely know that the public libraries are there and they are very supportive of our library. About a year and a half ago, we had community meetings about how the library could meet community needs. These were well attended by a good cross section of the community. Out of the meetings came a Plan of Service for the library. This has been shared with attendees and the general community. There is definite feeling in our community that the library serves a valuable and important role in the community. Our users know that we are part of the larger library community as they often request books through the library system and get material from other libraries in the system or from other places.

The Athabasca Archives is well known in the area as being a great source for historical information about the Athabasca area and historical pictures of the area. The digital collection of photographs is readily available through our web site. The archives provides information regularly to researchers doing historical and family history research, and developers needing land records and old maps.

2. The public library in Athabasca provides a variety of services to users including: recreational reading, interlibrary loan, access to a variety of databases (provided by Northern Lights Library System and The Alberta Library), reference and information, story time for young children, author readings, informational programs, access to government information, access to computers and the Internet, photocopying, and access to print magazines. Our library system is a consortial service that is supported by four of the regional library systems in Alberta. We count the usage of most services, but we don't have any way of measuring the impact that service has on people. Often users will make informal comments about a service or program, but this interaction is not captured in a formal manner. The library staff do regular evaluations of the goals that are in our Plan of Service and make changes to services as needed. We do patron surveys to ask them what they think of the services we provide, but not on the impact of the service. In general, our users are very satisfied with the services that we provide.

The Athabasca Archives provides research assistance to users researching family history or local history. Our online collection of historical photographs is accessed regularly. Copies of historical photographs are often provided directly to researchers. They are also available on our web site. We are the depository for the historical records of many local community groups. Some individuals have donated their records to us. The Archives also ensures that the local newspaper is microfilmed yearly so that an ongoing record of it is available. We index some parts of the local paper and maintain a clipping file from it on various topics. Our archives records are on a provincial archives database.

3. In the digital era, patrons may need to have help with using online services such as how to search databases, how to search and use the library catalogue, or access and use audio books. We need to assist users with whatever they are doing as they request it. Libraries should be a place where people can find information that they need especially in online format.

We maintain websites for the library and the archives. These are possible because Northern Lights Library System has contracted with a company to host the web sites for libraries.

The records of the Archives are maintained in digital format as well. As mentioned, the catalogue records for the Archives are on the ANA database. We have worked with the Athabasca University Library to digitize many of our photographs and our oral history cassette tapes. Users need assistance in accessing the records of the archives as well.

4. There are many ways that libraries help to build communities. Libraries can be a place for people to learn together by attending programs. They provide informal spaces where users share what they are reading or doing and just share time together. These activities build communities. Library systems are providing options for the sharing of reviews of materials which helps others decide which books they want to read. The library is the place to house collective memory as they have many books, older issues of magazines or newspapers and other materials that aren't available anywhere else. The collection is maintained and catalogued so that it is easily accessible. It is vital that this material remain available to people as new users often want to go back to the original books or articles that were written many years previously. This is a vital role of libraries.

The Athabasca Archives builds community especially when groups of people do research to produce local histories of areas of the County.

Both the Library and Archives have Facebook pages. This builds community as we share what is going on in both areas with people who view and use our pages.

Both the Library and Archives host programs for people in the area. These programs build community as people attend and then continue the discussion generated by the program.

New Directions

Digitization

1. “Born-digital” material has many challenges for small libraries. First is to even know that it exists and then figuring how to access it if one even knows of its existence. Then one has to determine whether it is of reasonable and reliable quality. Then there is the challenge of letting users know that it exists and helping them access it.

While archival material isn’t often “born-digital” yet, we have digitized photographs and sound recordings as mentioned earlier. Now that material is only available in digital formats, it will become more challenging for our local Archives to store them as we will need to have computer space and associated software so that the material is accessible to users. Various video formats, digital picture formats, various sound file types, and the wide number of document formats will pose a large challenge to hold, catalogue, and make available to users in the future. This is possibly a bigger challenge for archives than it is for libraries.

2. The “brick-and-mortar library” will always be with us in our opinion. It will always be a place to go to find material, interact with others, access information for some, get assistance with finding information, or just sit and read. The paper book or magazine is still the most easily portable source for reading. One doesn’t need any special equipment to use it and you can use it anywhere as long as there is light to read by! They need to be stored in a readily accessible location and we won’t ever have everything digitized or online or in a format that everyone can use that way.

Archives will always be a “brick-and-mortar” building as there has to be a place to hold the original versions of material even if they are digitized at some point. While digitizing material may make it more widely accessible to people, there will always be a need to review the original format of documents and pictures.

Education

1. I don't have an answer for this question.
2. I think that library school professors and instructors need to come to small, rural libraries and archives and see how they operate. Then they will be able to determine what competencies their students will need in order to work in them. They also need to help students learn to be advocates for libraries and their users. The conversation hasn't started very much at all from what I can tell. While the same type of activity happens in many public libraries, there are unique challenges that rural librarians and library boards face that it would be good to study and document.

Resources

1. In Alberta there is already a consortia and library systems that have been formed to assist with the support the technological needs of public libraries. The Town of Athabasca is a member of Northern Lights Library System so the library and archives are part of the system. It is one of seven public library systems in Alberta. There is staff at the system office who are dedicated to dealing with and supporting technology in the libraries. We benefit greatly from the knowledge and skills of these people. We couldn't manage to operate in the complex world of library technology without their support. They do many things including servicing equipment and fixing problems to doing consorial purchasing of equipment that is then set up the same way. All the libraries have wireless internet available to users and web sites. Neither of these would be possible without the work of the library system staff.

It is unfortunate that the Government of Alberta has chosen to stop funding the Alberta Public Library Electronic Network (APLEN). This organization operated as a part of The Alberta Library (TAL) and provided good support for the systems and to larger public libraries in support of technology in public libraries. The work that APLEN did is supposed to be taken on by the Public Library Services Branch, but to date, very little seem to have happened and what has been done is not funded enough to do any good from what we can see.

The Archives Society of Alberta has done a wonderful job of assisting small archives such as ours and does many things on behalf of the archival community in Alberta including providing workshops, grants, advisors, and maintaining the database of archival descriptions.

2. Not applicable to public libraries or a public archive.

3. The budget of our board would have to at least double if not triple so that we could provide the quality of library and archival service to our patrons that we only dream about now. We need to have full time staff working for the public library and more staff time in the archives. We should be open many more hours than we are. We need to have more time to provide programs and space to provide programs.

Given ideal financial resources, in 2017, our full time library staff would provide: evening and weekend hours on more days as determined in consultation with our users. There would be a wide variety of current material, frequent varied programs for a range of users, and a summer reading program for the whole summer staffed by a student and supported by regular staff. The library would be full of people using the Internet or using other resources on our computers or reading the newest issues of their favorite magazines and newspapers.

Given an ideal budget, the archives would be open 5 days a week and have some evening hours so that they were more readily available to people. We would have a proper storage area for our documents that would maintain the appropriate temperature and humidity.