

The Status and Future of Canada's Libraries and Archives

Personal Background

I grew up on a farm in Saskatchewan and attended a one room school with a one shelf library. A larger school unit was introduced the year I started high school and I was bussed to Ituna, 15 miles away. I don't remember their library, but a friend told me about the Provincial Library mail service which I used. After a BA from the University of Saskatchewan, I worked at the Windsor Public Library as a sub-professional for five years while completing a Library Science degree from the University of Michigan in 1971.

I worked for the Provincial Library of Saskatchewan from 1971-2007 with a few breaks in service. In 1982 I represented EasyData library system in Great Britain, between 1989-1991 I worked briefly at the library of Memorial University and a longer period for the Newfoundland and Labrador Development Corporation library. From 2000-2005 I was seconded to the Canadian Plains Research Center to work on the Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan, completed for the centennial of the province.

Following retirement I have been a volunteer on a number of projects including assisting with a recent history book on Regina's Warehouse District and on a history of the Regina Public Library which is in progress.

Informational, Educational, Cultural, and Recreational Needs

Libraries in general serve the informational, educational, cultural, and recreational needs of our patrons. Special libraries will focus on more specific needs of their clients; whereas public libraries attempt to meet all of these needs in a broad way. Some needs are easily anticipated and are available immediately. Libraries also make available potentially useful resources not necessarily requested by the public.

In some cases people meet their needs in other ways: by using online sources, by other libraries, from acquaintances, other institutions, businesses, etc. Often the needs are not met; the person doesn't know where to turn and doesn't think to use the library or doesn't expect the library will meet their needs.

Libraries have to make difficult choices in developing and promoting their services to meet these demands and with limited resources.

Libraries and Archives

With some exceptions the last 30 years have been tough on libraries and on Archives. There are several reasons: political (Reaganism and Thatcherism spreading through countries with advanced economies have led to reductions in services); technological (the advance of computer technology adding costs to service and reducing the need for some core library services); educational (training of new staff and upgrading the skills of present staff); cultural (changing demands from the public); and financial, (tough competition for public funds with increasing need for new and upgraded infrastructure and other services).

These conditions have hurt many libraries and archives. Libraries have cut services, cut staff, reduced collection building, and some have closed, Archives have cut their hours of service; collections in storage wait to be catalogued; and professional staff positions have been cut. Collections and services are scattered in different locations.

Public Service

People will use a service that is useful, efficient, easily accessible, and welcoming.

Technological Advances

Libraries continuously adapted to changing technology. The rapid improvements in computer and information systems are the most significant change we have faced in centuries. Libraries have been able to introduce many of the recent technological advances to improve services to the public. Speculating on potential future changes is scary but also exciting.

Much of the new information technology encourages speculation that libraries will become obsolete. It is encouraging that librarians have managed to participate in the planning and development of new information systems and their adaptation for library use.

Bilingual/Multicultural

Saskatchewan has a diverse population which includes: Aboriginal, Metis, British and French, pioneers from across Europe, refugees, professionals from third world countries, and recent arrivals from all parts of the world. Most have assimilated into an Anglo-Canadian culture although there are varying degrees of assimilation and values and rights to be respected.

Libraries have provided information and services for many of these populations but more staff and information resources are required to provide needed services. Some of the material required is in a variety of languages, some is needed in simple English, and some is produced by various ethnic groups in Canada, often in English. Particularly for the most recent immigrants some material needs to be created. Library staff will have to work closely with individuals and organizations to improve and expand these services.

Funding of Libraries and Archives

Most libraries and archives have had difficulty maintaining adequate funding levels. Library and archival staff have used creative means to maintain and improve services. More funding is coming from donations, particularly from the private sector. We should be wary of possible conditions that might reduce the independence of libraries and archives to maintain and manage their collections and services for public use.

History and Future of Libraries

Libraries have existed for millennia and I expect that they will survive and improve in the future. They have existed in many different ways and have survived a variety of serious challenges. Changing technologies have been challenges before. These challenges have been bypassed, adapted, adopted and overcome in the past and libraries have become more accessible.

The future is difficult, maybe impossible to predict. I am not envious of your job in planning for the future.

Good luck. Thank you for the opportunity to make my presentation.

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