Vision, mission, trumpets: public libraries as social capital

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Abstract Consistent with international experience, trend indicators for Australian public libraries are positive. However if they are to have recognised and achieve their potential educational, informational, cultural and social capital contribution to society they need to clearly and confidently delineate and communicate their vision, values and mission. In particular they need to assert their capacity to build social capital as a basis for increased investment by local government in new library buildings, spaces and facilities.

Just over 50 years ago, in his report on Australian public libraries,[1] British librarian Lionel McColvin observed that 'Better library services for Australians won't just happen'. His next observation was that 'The few must lead, must fight, must persist.'

It is because the relatively few laypersons and professionals have led, fought and persisted since the 1950s that Australia overall now ranks in the top 12 public library nations, a status it certainly did not have in 1956 when the US, UK, Denmark and New Zealand were identified as the leading public library nations.[2]

The importance of partnership

The national coverage, accessibility, usage, resources, technological, program provision and return on investment basis for that claim I have explored in several papers. In one of those[3] it was argued that local government must increase its investment in what is by far its most heavily used and valued community service if the public library is to achieve its full potential for the community.

To that observation could well be added 'and all state governments need to restore and truly maintain their funding and infrastructure partnership with local government in the provision of public libraries'. In other words, state governments should not engage in the sophistry that it is local government unilaterally increasing its funding to improve its libraries rather than state government reducing its funding which has seen the ratio between local and state government funding change significantly over the years.

State and local governments may contest their relative contributions to the decent funding of this nation's largest and most heavily used educational, informational and cultural resource. However the reality is that the achievement of public libraries for nearly all Australians derives since the 1950s from their partnership. It is a symbolic, infrastructure and funding

partnership which largely explains why 99 per cent of Australians now have access to a public library and through that to the nation's total library resources, and beyond. It is a partnership which largely explains why Australia, with its large area and small and often sparsely distributed population has a greater evenness of provision, access and statewide library cooperation than, for example, the USA which still has rural areas in some states with no public rural libraries, and poor libraries in others.

The return on investment

It is therefore salutary to consider the outcome of the current modest investment by local and state governments in public libraries
- 547 independent services with 1,500 service points including mobile libraries, but not their stops—there are more public library outlets than McDonalds
- 9% of the static service points are joint use libraries with educational institutions—the second highest percentage worldwide after Sweden with 40%. South Australia also has 40%
- the public library membership represents 49% (56% median) of the population, although it is estimated that 60% (13 million) use them—this is broadly comparable with other developed countries, the highest being Finland with 80% membership
- 95% of Australians think public libraries should be publicly funded—direct user pays is not a significant issue
- 100 million visits a year—their buildings, including the state libraries, are the most trafficked public buildings in Australia
- public access to over 4,000 internet terminals
- largely through its public libraries local government is by far the largest educational provider in Australia—something few in local government, and even fewer in formal education, recognise
- the return on investment is likely to be between $2.50 and $5.50 for every dollar invested

That return on investment is emphasized in the following table, most of which indicators reflect an encouraging growth in the resources and usage of the public library system overall.

The Australian public lending library system: trend indicators 1986-2002

Year	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002
Number of services	470	523	533	534	547
Number of branches	820	847	857	973	1 403
Total service points	1 406	1 470	1 500	1 597	1 479
Number of bookmobiles	116	100	110	90	76
Number of joint use libraries	NA	NA	NA	110	130
Total bookstock	24 793 116	26 956 439	31 379 744	30 403 004	34 123 659
Magazine titles	42 086	46 907	59 981	55 436	50 383
Audiotapes/talking books/CDs	1 267 275	1 118 908	1 186 559	1 111 707	1 334 627
Videotapes/DVDs	27 266	68 700	241 400	437 698	923 191
Public internet terminals	NA	NA	NA	1 335	4 045
Total loans	97 793 116	110 077 112	141 984 430	138 730 792	172 205 840
Staff – EFT positions	4 554.39	4 709.39	5 660.66	5 438.5	6 203.51
Average membership as % of population served	40.6%	40.26%	43.9%	45.8%	49.2%

Source: second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth editions of *Directory of Australian public libraries*

The indicators from 1998 and 2002 include

- total bookstock has increased from 30,403,004 to 34,123,659
- audiotapes/talking books/CDs have increased from 1,111,707 to 1,334,627
- videotapes/DVDs have increased from 437,698 to 923,191—almost double
- public internet terminals have more than doubled, from 1,335 to 4,045
- total loans have increased from 138,730,792 to 172,205,840, almost a doubling since 1986. Most libraries report an increase in loans although some, particularly in rural areas have experienced no increases or decreases
- total staffing, after a slight decrease from 1994 to 1998, has increased from 5,438.5 in 1998 to 6,203.51 in 2002
- average membership has increased from 45.8% to 49.2%
- the number of joint use libraries has increased from 110 to 130, whilst the number of mobile libraries has continued to decline from 116 in 1986 to 76 in 2002. However, of those 76 many are state of the art, particularly in Victoria which has recently replaced 17 of its mobiles using state government grants[4]
- the number of print magazine titles has also declined, from 55,436 in 1998 to 50,383, but many public libraries now have electronic access to hundreds of fulltext magazines through datasets, which they did not have in 1998

What is not measured, of course, is the widely reported increasing inhouse use of public libraries, and the inhouse and remote use of their burgeoning electronic resources and reference services.

The level of investment

- the total local and state government investment in local public libraries is $550 million pa—about 7c per Australian per day. This is the budget of just one large Australian university with 35,000 students. It is equivalent to only 1.6% of the total $40 billion pa expenditure on institutional education in Australia

- the individual local government annual investment ranges from less than 1% pa of rate revenue to over 6% in some parts of Australia. Percentages of total annual local government expenditure would be even less

- percentages of rate revenue allocated to their libraries by country local authorities are generally less, sometimes much less, than in urban areas

- the subsidy investment by state governments in 2000 as a percentage of state expenditure was

New South Wales	.039%
Queensland	.173%
South Australia	.261%
Tasmania	.308%
Victoria	.112%
Western Australia	.130%

The NSW conundrum

Very conspicuously the worst performer of the states is NSW, where the NSW government contributes a risory $11.5 million and local government over $120 million. This must prejudice the partnership which has underpinned the development of free public libraries in NSW since the second world war. That the Tasmanian government contributes .308% of its expenditure to its integrated library system begs the question, if Tasmania can, and chooses to

do so, why does not NSW and the other states? Just imagine what could be achieved in NSW, particularly in country areas, if local government maintained its current funding level, and the state government increased its public library subsidy to even the modest .173% pa of Queensland.

The local government perspective

The fact that some local governments invest over 6% of their rates on what is by far their most heavily used and valued community provision also begs the question, if some can, and choose to do so, why do not the others? They are questions which demand a response because the difference between a poorly staffed, housed, resourced and reactive library service, to one that is outstanding and proactive may be as little a shift in rate revenue expenditure of 2% by a local authority, or a shift in state government expenditure of .25%. Do the sums after this conference and imagine how much more you could contribute to your community if you experienced that sort of shift in funding. A doubling of national investment in local public libraries would still only result in about $1100 million pa being spent on them. However too often public libraries do little individual and collective research and analysis of their funding, funding which usually has no basis other than historical.

Very few public libraries seem to know what percentage of rate revenue and other council outlays they receive, and what the rationale for what they do receive is. They therefore have no basis on which to argue for a progressive adjustment to enable them to deliver for the community. This argument is not easy, particularly if a local authority's main aspiration is low rates and mediocrity in all things, but a few facts and figures can help sustain it. Local government around Australia is facing constant pressure to provide new and better services but that is no excuse for its library service not to be given a very high funding priority, for the community return and other reasons explored in this paper.

Although local government generally has moved greatly to meet its ever increasing responsibilities, the 'rates, roads and rubbish' preoccupation of some in local government persists. The following observation by a rural librarian would be echoed by not a few of her rural and regional colleagues in particular

> Our council is run by old men who generally don't use the library themselves and whose thinking doesn't extend much beyond roads and rubbish. They never seem to have problems in finding x $ for a new grader but ask them for a small amount to benefit the whole community through the library and if it is given at all it will be with a patronizing comment 'you've done very well this year but don't expect any more next year'. They don't seem to realize what a community uproar there would be if the library closed, or that it's the most heavily used service they provide.[5]

Libraries rate very highly

It still seems to come as a surprise to local authorities who engage in surveys of client satisfaction just how highly libraries typically rate. Therein lies one of the challenges facing elected members, Public Libraries Australia, Friends of Libraries and professionals alike—to ensure that all Australians, and especially those who make decisions on their behalf, are aware of what constitutes a good modern public library service. Public libraries tend to be well used regardless of their quality, although they are always used more if they are good, as the opening of every new library building demonstrates. People often do not know what constitutes a good public library, even if they have a sense that the library on which they depend is deficient. They thus do not know when they are being denied one, and they certainly do not know how little—that 7c per Australia per day—they pay for them. And even when library users are dissatisfied with their libraries, they are notoriously difficult to persuade to complain to their local authority out of deference to the feelings of library staff, or

for fear that the local authority might actually *reduce* library services and resources. Local libraries are no longer a privilege—they are a requirement in a civilised society. Yet at present the only part of Australia where local government is *required* to support public libraries is Tasmania.

It is, in fact, a remarkable development of just the last 30 years, that virtually every local authority in Australia, ultimately voluntarily, now supports a public library service.

Increasing the investment

So what are the factors which must, to use Lionel McColvin's words, be fought and persisted against to increase Australia's investment in its public libraries? They vary, of course, from the ideological to the plain ignorant, but all are ultimately political.

As far back as the 1898 conference of the Library Association of Australasia, a speaker reviewed the success of free municipal libraries in the US and UK and observed that

> The general subject of free libraries has been the theme of ardent controversy, by some denounced as the 'Socialist's Continuation School', and by others supported as the legitimate demands of the people, and as proper a function of government as primary education…

> It has been said that the purpose of a library and of books was to bring more sunshine into the lives of our fellow countrymen, more good will, more good humour, and more of the habit of being pleased with one another…if this be so, then a free library which appeals to a wider circle than one which is not free, is a wise investment, and deserves the closest attention of social economists and reformers.[6]

Political perspectives

There has been little research into why decision makers at all levels can be so blinkered about investing in libraries, despite the fact that they are so cost effective, contribute to sustainability, and so conspicuously deliver valuable and valued goods.

However an international study is now underway to provide information on national, local and regional governmental attitudes to public libraries, in terms of
- value for individuals and groups in society
- contribution to economic development
- contribution to political priorities

It is a study which involves a series of indepth interviews with politicians and senior bureaucrats in Australia, Croatia, France, Norway, Sri Lanka, Uganda and the UK.

The study is being coordinated by Bob Usherwood, Professor of Librarianship at Sheffield University in the UK, and led in Australia by Kerry Smith from Curtin University in WA. It was first described at the annual conference of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (Ifla) in Glasgow in 2002, and more recently by Kerry Smith at the biennial conference of the WA Local Government Librarians Association in Fremantle in March 2003.[7]

One slowly disappearing reason for the low investment in public libraries is the limited exposure that today's decision makers in local, state and the federal government would have had to decent public libraries during their childhood. This was noted by Graeme Frecker, past president of the Australian Local Government Association at the first national public libraries conference in 1994. He observed 'At most only one in six of Australian born residents over

50 would have had ready access to public library services in the formative years of childhood'.[8]   Another unresearched factor which, anecdotally, influences local authority attitudes to libraries is gender. Many elected members and CEOs, particularly in rural areas, are still middle aged or older males, the very cohort which tends to make least direct use of public libraries. A final factor is ideology. Although there are numerous examples of small businesses and individuals who have made their way in life because they used their local public library well, the many self made business people and private professionals in local government are also unlikely high advocates for such an apparently socialistic device as a public library.

However it is interesting that conservative state governments in Australia often seem to make a better fist of supporting public libraries than do labor state governments. Some on the left side of politics have certainly viewed, with some validity, public libraries as institutions of, and for, the middle classes. In general, libraries are still not linked in people's minds with social capital, social inclusion or community regeneration.

Indeed one of the major challenges for public libraries is how to connect better with the marginalised in society—they may have the empathy and will to do so, but too few have the specialised professionals and resources to sustain systematic programs. This is part of the marketing conundrum to which reference will be made later.

The master conflict

As Harold Perkin, in his magnum opus on the rise of professional society observed, it is the tension between public and private sector professionals which is manifested in the struggle for society's resources. He saw it as a struggle

> …between those who benefit directly from government expenditure and those who see themselves as the source of that expenditure…the struggle between the public and private sector professions is the master conflict of professional society.[9]

The constant quest for public library recognition and funding is arguably part of that master conflict, perhaps more so because many elected members in local and state government would be private sector professionals. A national survey of what proportion of elected members are indeed private sector professionals would thus be of some interest.

Many public librarians around Australia could also identify a councillor or two who not only do not use their library—directly at least—but take perverse pride in significant life achievement, like Shane Warne, 'without ever having read a book'.

The selling of a vision: better libraries for a better Australia

The major challenge for public libraries and advocates, of better libraries for all, such as the Australian Library and Information Association, Public Libraries Australia and Friends of Libraries Australia, is just how to convey to decision makers the breadth, depth and potential impact on the whole community of the modern public library.

It is a rare challenge because no other agency in society has the breadth of role, the user range and diversity and the potential impact. In an age of specialisation and community silos, public libraries are unique. Indeed the profession of Librarianship is unique in its overt commitment to the free flow of information and ideas. This commitment is reflected well in the Australian Library and Information Association's March 2002 *Core values statement*. The vision, mission and strategic planning of every public library should, in turn, reflect in some way the seven values contained in that statement, the preface to which asserts that

A thriving culture, economy and democracy requires the free flow of information and ideas.
Fundamental to that free flow of information and ideas are Australia's library and information services. They are a legacy to each generation, conveying the knowledge of the past and the promise of the future.
Library and information services professionals therefore commit themselves to the following core values of their profession.

Those values are

1 **Promotion of the free flow of information and ideas through open access to recorded knowledge, information, and creative works**
We assert that this access across time and across cultures is fundamental to a thriving culture, economy and democracy

2 **Connection of people to ideas**
We guide, inform and educate the seeker in defining and refining the search, and foster intellectual freedom and all forms of communication

3 **Commitment to literacy, information literacy and learning**
We enable independent and formal lifelong learning by providing resources and expertise to meet the needs of learners, and of the human spirit

4 **Respect for the diversity and individuality of all people**
We accept each request without bias and in confidence, and strive to meet it with all our resources and expertise

5 **Preservation of the human record**
We seek to preserve the cultural memory, knowledge and evolved wisdom of humankind, to explain the past, illuminate the present and inform the future

6 **Excellence in professional service to our communities**
We strive for integrity, competence, personal growth, and service to our profession and to our communities

7 **Partnerships to advance these values**
We advocate cooperation between all library and information services, and with related agencies, for the private and public good

Terms which have used recently in international literature to describe the breadth of public libraries include
Umbrella institution of the learning society
Cathedral of human knowledge
Lifelong learning vanguard
Ideas centres
Knowledge warehouses
Digital nerve ends
Places of connection
Learning channels
People's network
Knowledge integrator
Knowledge network
Local gateway to knowledge
Content foundry
Imagination's stronghold
Infomocracy's place
Streetcorner universities
Unique testbed of civic values
The new village green

The key elements in that vision of better public libraries lighting up lives are comprehended in the list *Twelve ways libraries are good for the community*.

- Libraries inform citizens—the public library is the only institution … whose purpose is to guard against the tyrannies of ignorance and conformity, and its existence indicates the extent to which a democratic society values knowledge, truth, justice, books, and culture
- Libraries break down boundaries
- Libraries level the playing field
- Libraries value the individual
- Libraries nourish creativity
- Libraries open kids' minds
- Libraries return high dividends
- Libraries build communities
- Libraries make families friendlier
- Libraries offend everyone—every library in the country ought to have a sign on the door reading *This library has something offensive to everyone. If you are not offended by something we own, please complain*.
- Libraries offer sanctuary
- Libraries preserve the past[10]

Although many Australian public libraries may have a good sense of their vision, values and mission, few articulate or publicly convey them well. Data in the sixth edition of the *Directory of Australian public libraries*[11] indicates that many libraries still do not have a vision or mission statement or client charter. Of those that do, relatively few are really aspirational. Some of them are trite, and provide no philosophical and accountability basis for greater investment in public libraries. Too many public libraries, particularly in rural and regional Australia with their lack of professional staff, have no vision to sell. They need guidance from their state public library divisions consultants, where such invaluable positions still exist.

One vision statement which is appealing and which cleverly links with the Smart State of Queensland is Caloundra Library's

> *Smart libraries build smarter communities*

The selling of a mission: lighting up lives

Although Australian public libraries are relatively stronger in identifying their mission or goals rather than their vision, again, relatively few do it well.

Among the more interesting ones on the eastern seaboard are ACT Library Services, Ashfield, Auburn, Blacktown and Bourke in NSW, and Ipswich—again in Qld—which has

> *Vision*   An informed and empowered community: connecting information, ideas and people

> *Mission*   To provide opportunities for learning for life and community engagement to maximize the potential of the citizens of Ipswich.

Interesting US examples can be found at www.shylibrarian.com/missionstatements.htm.

Unlike libraries in the UK with *Best value* accountability, and public libraries in Victoria which had the unique world experience of being exposed to compulsory competitive tendering (CCT), public libraries in NSW have not received one of the few benefits from those processes—a real driver to discover or rediscover vision, mission and accountabilities.

Of the Victorian CCT experience, one commentator has concluded that

> Despite its glaring simplicities, on balance the introduction of competitive processes has been beneficial in driving change. Management processes and staff skills have been transformed, an intensive focus on customer service, accountability and innovation are clearly evident, there is a greater understanding of role and mission and a clarity of purpose amongst staff.[12]

An article published in the December 2001 issue of *Australasian public libraries and information services* came to essentially the same conclusion, and highlighted the fact that the CCT process was beneficial in raising the profile and awareness of the importance to the community within council. As one librarian quoted in the article observed

> There is doubt that library staff were totally unprepared to be challenged and quizzed in such a fundamental way. They really believed that the public understood what they were doing and therefore politicians understood. *And it really showed that the politicians and the newly appointed councillors had no understanding of what a library did*. It was only when libraries went back and started saying we are a core service in society that they regrouped and came back really strongly and they came back very confidently.[13]

A major conclusion from the research for that article is that CCT resulted in a much greater emphasis being placed on the evaluation of public library services.

The reason why this CCT experience is referred to, is that it suggests that a useful starting point for a public library seeking to improve its profile, funding, usage and user satisfaction would be for it to put itself in the place of these Victorian libraries a few years ago. In other words that, from the beginning of 2004, you will be exposed to CCT—*how ready would you be?*

The importance of the mission statement

A starting point would have to be consideration of vision and mission to comprehend values, educational and societal role in lifelong learning, the facilitation of information literate citizens, and community connection.

Beyond that, there are now some useful tools to help any public librarian engage in persuasive argument about the mission and benefits of a public library, and to help convince a local authority of that small percentage shift in its expenditure which may represent the difference between a mediocre and reactive library, and one which can proactively fulfill its potential for the community.

One tool which is helpful is *The library's contribution to your community: a resource manual for libraries to document their social and economic contribution to the local community*.[14] This is a Canadian manual which has been reprinted for sale in Australia and New Zealand. Many libraries in both countries are now using it. To develop the manual the researchers interviewed elected members and administrators, reviewed the literature and sought input from librarians of different sized public libraries. It is useful because it
- identifies hard data to demonstrate your library's benefits—the type of information that decision makers want to evaluate the value of library services
- can be used by libraries of all sizes
- deals with all library services
- addresses a broad range of social and economic benefits
- includes a number of survey institutions
- has an extensive bibliography

Another useful Canadian publication, of which it would be good to have an Australian equivalent, is *Dividends: the value of public libraries in Canada*, which was reprinted in *Australasian public libraries and information services* in 1999.[15]

More recently, a major UK research project *The economic value of public librarie*s has been completed. This is described in full in the September 2001 issue of the above journal.[16]

Also, at the September 2001 conference of the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa, Dr Glen Holt from the St Louis Public Library in the US, who has consulted in Australia, gave a presentation about the major *Public library benefits valuation study* in which he is involved.[17] The purpose of the study is to develop a practical, transportable, conservative methodology to estimate the direct return from taxpayer investment in, initially, large urban libraries.

Evidence based advocacy

Points made by Dr Holt in his presentation were

Imagine you are
   - a corporate CEO active in a major civic organisation
   - accustomed to accountability and quantitative performance measures
   - sceptical of government bureaucrats and warm, fuzzy anecdotes
   - about to listen to a presentation by the local library director

   - Your attitude—'libraries are invaluable'—*prove it*

In the rest of his presentation Dr Holt gave numerous examples of the dollar return on investment in public libraries demonstrating that they are a 'high yield blue chip investment' *providing a greater capital return than the Dow-Jones industrial average*, ranging from at least $2.50 to over $5.00.

The study has involved asking people how much money as cash payment or reduced taxes they would accept to vote to close their public library. *Over 80 per cent refused to answer the question*, and many gave very strong responses as to why they would not accept money to close the library, including
   - they are a community resource
   - extremely important for students
   - needed for education
   - people can't afford books
   - not everyone can afford computers
   - provides information unavailable otherwise
   - I wouldn't be in business if it closed
   - libraries are essential to democracy
   - because I am civilised

The rates debate

This provides refutation of the comment we sometimes hear from local government that 'we know we need a new or a better library but rates would have to go up, and that would not be acceptable to ratepayers'. This is often an obfuscating furphy—the reality is that local government has the capacity to borrow without increasing rates significantly and even if some rate increase is necessary ratepayers will generally endorse it for such an outstanding community asset as a public library. A new library is much more acceptable to ratepayers than a new civic centre, for example. Few ever go near their civic centre; most do use their

public library. Those ratepayers will certainly vote with their feet when the new library is opened. Local government also needs to listen to the voice of the total community, not just ratepayers. This includes residents, and users of its libraries from outside a particular local government area, all of whom indirectly contribute to local business income and local rates.

Public library beneficiaries

The Holt study has also identified for the St Louis Public Library the following beneficiaries of it
- households and families   67%
- educators and their students   14%
- businesses and professionals   19%

Evidence based advocacy for better public libraries for all Australians therefore has increasing international and Australian evidence on which to call, but more is needed to substantiate the following assertions about public libraries

- *established network* libraries are part of an established network, and often a number of established networks. They have partners and are experienced networkers

- *public places* libraries are safe public places, freely accessible to all the community and should be open long hours including evenings and weekend

- *staffed by library professionals* libraries are staffed by people who are educated in the information and people business

- *existing infrastructure* libraries reside in buildings which provide the entire infrastructure required for them to perform their functions

- *highly valued and very well used* libraries have strong community links

- *part of a broader organisation* libraries are financially supported by their local councils and communities. There is potentially considerable strength and many resources to be drawn from this association

- *community focal points* libraries are a focal point for the communities which they serve. People already use libraries for a broad variety of purposes

- *wide geographical distribution* libraries enjoy a wide geographical distribution. There is access to a public library almost everywhere in Australia

- *cooperation between different levels of government* public libraries are jointly funded by local and state government

- *multifocused service providers* libraries have expanding roles

- *most heavily used and appreciated service provided by local and state governments*

Public libraries as social capital

From that list, one aspect which warrants greater emphasis is the public library as community connector and focal point.

In the growing literature on community building there is much discussion about the concept of social capital. As first defined by Coleman, Bordieu and others, it 'is essentially the network of linkages, trust and bonds within a society that allow an individual to operate within that society that accrues advantages to that individual'. The idea has been extended by such writers and researchers as Putnam and Cox, 'to mean the advantages that accrue to a society from the aggregated networks of individual trust'.[18]

The World Bank defines social capital as

> … the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions… Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions that underpin a society—it is the glue that holds them together.[19]

Researchers have identified that social capital, and its underpinning of trust, has been declining for the last 30 years in developed countries such as the US, UK and Australia. This was cogently identified by Robert Putnam, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard University in his 2000 best seller *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*.

In his book he identifies that Americans used to bowl in leagues in very large numbers, usually after work. They no longer do so and this symbolises a significant social change. He shows that Americans—and this is true in Australia—have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and social structures, whether the P&C, church, recreation clubs, political parties, or bowling leagues. The shrinking access to the social capital that is the reward of communal activity and community sharing is a serious threat to civic and personal health.

Putnam's work shows how social bonds are the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction. For example he reports that getting married is the equivalent of quadrupling your income and attending a club meeting regularly is the equivalent of doubling your income. The loss of social capital is felt in critical ways. Communities with less social capital have lower educational performance and more teen pregnancy, child suicide, low birth weight, and prenatal mortality. Social capital is also a strong predicator of crime rates and other measures of neighborhood quality of life, as it is of our health. In quantitative terms, if you both smoke and belong to no groups, it is a close call as to which is the riskier behavior.

He also observes that a hundred years ago, at the turn of the last century, American's stock of social capital was at an ebb, reduced by urbanisation, industrialisation, and vast immigration that uprooted Americans from their friends, social institutions, and families. Faced with this challenge, social capital was rebuilt through cooperation and linkages. He contends that a similar challenge faces 21st century society in rebuilding eroded social capital.

A recent very insightful article about this issue is 'American's front porch—the public library' by Michael Cart.[20] That article reflects on Putnam's conclusion that social capital requires that we transcend our social, political and professional identities to connect with people unlike ourselves. It also reflects on the examples he provides.

What is lacking, asserts Cart, is any inclusion by Putnam of public libraries as a much used venue that is already providing experiences of universal sharing—figuratively, as America's front porch, or as Hugh McKay, the Australian social analyst, has described the modern public library, the community's 'village green'.

Cart states

> This scanty attention to libraries is not confined to Putnam's book; it is, as Kathleen de la Pena McCook demonstrates in her book, *A place at the table*, an epidemic of oversight in the

burgeoning body of literature that is appearing about civic renewal and community building. McCook knows, for she has surveyed it diligently and, indeed, the invisibility of libraries is a recurring theme of her thought provoking book, which concludes 'the challenge is for librarians to establish their work and the work of their libraries as contributory to the national movement to build communities comprehensively'.[21]

The importance of library as place

Re:source: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries in the UK has recently published a major study aimed to assess the impact of a new library building on local communities, questioning the institution as a physical space and the role it plays in the wider community. *Libraries must also be buildings?*[22] examines a series of questions, one of which is 'the extent to which new library buildings can help ameliorate the breakdown in the social connections of British society?' Its chapter seven focuses on social capital, and concludes that social capital is being created in the exciting new libraries in the UK. The same would be true of the burgeoning number of excellent new library buildings in Australia, because as *Libraries must also be buildings?* points out

> The library is at any one time a meeting place, a learning resource, and a comfortable and relaxing public space. The buildings that are well designed and managed offer an array of resources that enable people and groups to establish relationships, carry on conversations, exchange ideas, and engage the life of the mind.[23]

Also pointed out is the notion of the third place, a place standing beside work and home and providing a vital role the other two cannot. The ingredients of success for that third place are

- they must be free or relatively inexpensive to enter and purchase food or drinks
- they must be highly accessible, ideally one should be able to get there by foot from one's own home
- a number of people can be expected to be there on a daily basis
- all people should feel welcome; it should be easy to get into a conversation. A person who goes there should be able to find both old and new friends each time they visit.

The social capital challenge

A major challenge for public libraries is to establish their work as contributing to building communities and social capital. Realistically they cannot do so alone. Although they can provide a lead, they cannot do it unless local, state and the national government themselves recognise social capital and their responsibility to lead in investing in it. Progressive local governments in Australia are doing so already.

There is certainly no way it can occur unless public libraries form partnerships and alliances, and are part of the decision making process in communities, where typically at present they are not.

McCook argues that ensuring librarianship is a central part of community building requires a restructuring of the work of frontline librarians, managerial commitment to active participation of librarians in community initiatives, and national leadership to secure librarians a full partnership in policy implementation.

The marketing conundrum

Public librarians are probably tired of conference speakers and researchers urging them to market their wonderfully multifaceted 'cradle to grave' role and potential more effectively. Therein lies the conundrum. Its public library is the one thing a local authority should want to

see used to the maximum—a public library can never be overused. However, from unattractive buildings, poor locations, lack of space, lack of professional staff, poor hours and restrictive policies one could conclude that some local authorities are more concerned to restrain use of their libraries and thus its need for funds. If a library does not have marketing expertise on its staff, does not have a marketing budget, and is reluctant to market for fear of being overwhelmed by even heavier demand, this is a reflection on the local authority, its CEO and elected members more than it is on the library manager. All council services need quality assurance but most do not need community 'cradle to grave' marketing. Their libraries need both if the return on investment is to be optimal.

You can't blow an uncertain trumpet

Theodore Hesburg, the highly successful president of the US Notre Dame University, once observed that

> The very essense of leadership is that you have to have a vision. It's got to be a vision you articulate profoundly on every occasion. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet.

This is an important message for public libraries and their supporters because, despite the great—largely unsung—work of public libraries across Australia, few national, state and local government decision makers recognise that in the age of information, lifelong learning and social capital deficit, investment in public libraries and public librarians is fundamental, not a soft option to be put lightly aside when other fiscal needs loom.

Public libraries at the vanguard: lifelong learning

There is much more to education and lifelong learning than institutional education and certification. As people like Chris Batt in the UK and Mark Latham MP here in Australia, have asserted, the lifelong learning agenda is not, and should not, be owned by formal education, although some in formal education have difficulty in seeing it as anything else.

In his article 'I have seen the future and IT works' Batt observes

> There is a vision of lifelong learning as an extension of more formal learning structures…
> There is nothing wrong with that but it is my firm belief that the public library can and does address a broader agenda which is about learning for life rather than lifelong learning.
>
> Learning is not simply about following accredited courses to obtain qualifications. It is about gaining knowledge to lead better, more fulfilling lives. *Such learning comes frequently in very small quanta …* Public libraries are unique in the way that they can allow those tiny portions of learning to invisibly change people's lives.[24]

And as Latham has stated

> In the past learning institutions were positioned within a strict education hierarchy…providers such as libraries were often positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy.[25]

Latham's contention is that many people, particularly big boofy blokes like himself, will never relate to lifelong learning if it is formalised within the silos of an educational system from which they are alienated. He also argues that

> Libraries are a victim of Australia's complex and overlapping federal system of government. The quality of service differs greatly across the country. Libraries are no less important to the prospects of lifelong learning in Australia than colleges and campuses… the focus is moving beyond the classroom and into the learning institutions of civil society. *This is the*

natural terrain of public libraries… For those of us who believe in an inclusive and just society, libraries are at the vanguard of our hopes and policy plans.

In the UK there are national politicians of like mind to Latham and the outcome has been the renaissance of interest in, funding of, and quality assurance of, the UK public library system, as evidenced by the commitment to the *People's network*, the report on new library buildings in the UK, and the funding of public library research.

What can be concluded from this is that local government is already by far the largest educational provider in Australia—touching 13 million Australians regularly—and through its libraries has the potential to be even more so. As suggested earlier it is doubtful, however, if many in local government are aware of this status, or are yet enthusiastic about something which should be central to learning communities, strategies initiated by local government.

This is despite the fact that typically already at least 30 per cent of public library users are school, Tafe or university students, and around Australia a stronger engagement is being made between school and public libraries in part as an outcome of a 2001 survey of both.[26] A recent comprehensive *re:*source report from the UK[27] similarly identifies that those in formal education have little awareness of what the public library offers and does to support learners.

From the cradle

If we start at the beginning, there are still many children who cannot be professionally assisted in their critical preschool literacy development by their local public library because that library does not have a children's/YA librarian. And too few public libraries are able to develop teacher staffed homework centres or are able to work in constant partnership with their local schools and their teacher librarians because of their lack of professional staff.

Cross sectoral advocacy

It is not a recognition issue for public libraries alone. For example there are still too many government schools in particular—those schools responsible for the education of 70 per cent of young Australians—which employ none or inadequate numbers of qualified teacher librarians and do not support their libraries well. A consequence is that children and teachers go without or the load is shed to public and other libraries, or by default to the internet with all of its severe limitations. Similarly if a Tafe or community college, a private educational provider or a university library is inadequate students will try to compensate through their public library.

One weak link in the chain of a nation's library infrastructure inevitably impacts on the others, but particularly on public libraries. It is a message librarians have been slow to conceptualise and slow to communicate to narrowly focused decision makers.

This is the primary reason why the different sectors in the library profession must communicate and must engage more. It is why I, as an academic librarian, try to keep myself abreast of developments and issues in, particularly, teacher librarianship and public librarianship.

Public libraries: where to?

At the beginning of this paper it was stated that Australia ranks, from being nowhere in the 1950s, to being in the first 12 public library nations. This is a significant compliment to local and state governments. It is little compliment, however, to the national government of this country. It is also a compliment to those laypersons and professionals who, to reflect Lionel McColvin's 1947 admonition, led, fought and persisted.

A question is, given the increasing attention internationally to the reality and potential of the public library, will Australia's position be maintained?

In 2002 Nerida Clifford, then Library Manager of the City of Joondalup in Western Australia, undertook a council funded study tour of libraries in Singapore, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, UK, Canada and the US. This is what she concluded

> *There is a sense of excitement internationally about the future of public libraries. Based on my observations, the most notable trends are*
>
> - libraries are a growth industry
> - libraries have redefined where their role in lifelong learning begins
> - libraries are playing a much more dynamic role in community development
> - some libraries are experiencing unprecedented memberships estimated at around 80 per cent of the population
> - usage of traditional lending services is generally continuing to increase at a steady pace often around 4-8 per cent annually
> - in person visits to libraries are increasing often at around 10-20 per cent annually
> - community demand for direct delivery of programs aligned to community learning and development of new skills is increasing rapidly
> - there is an increasing library staff role as teacher particularly in relation to IT
> - libraries are an integral partner in the lifelong learning process not a competitor with other learning providers
> - there is an unprecedented demand for libraries to develop and facilitate access to online services and information
> - purpose built technology/learning centres are being incorporated into library design
> - governments are identifying libraries as key access points to ensure equitable access to information
> - libraries are taking a much more professional approach to marketing
> - human resource requirements to service the global increases in loans, in person visits, program development and delivery and online services is partially being offset by empowering the user through self service facilities and automating materials handling
> - there is growing concern over an ageing workforce
> - opening hours increases are focusing on weekends rather than earlier opening and later closing
> - increasing costs are being partially offset by sponsorships and partnerships[28]

That overall very positive conclusion is largely mirrored by what is occurring in Australia and New Zealand. A scan of the detailed information in the new sixth edition of the *Directory of Australian public libraries* indicates, for example, a large number of new and extended library buildings, new mobile libraries and new joint use libraries; the need for more professional staff in many libraries; electronic developments; and increased weekend opening hours.

Some of those new libraries are outstanding, including three large ones opened in the last year in my home state of South Australia. However it is also clear that, as in developed societies generally, the library rich are getting richer and the library poor are, relatively, getting poorer. And the library poor remain, substantially, in regional and rural areas of Australia.

Benchmarks for better libraries

Those who follow public library debates in the US will be aware that *Hennen's American public library rating index (Haplr index)* has generated considerable discussion. Such rating systems inevitably do—witness the agitation in many universities about the *Good universities guide* when it was introduced a few years ago.

Money magazine's annual report on the 'Best places to live in America' uses *library books per capita* as one of its 89 indicators, but book availability has not been the sole measure of a library for many years.

In response to this, Thomas Hennen,[29] Director of the Waukesha County Federated Library System in Wisconsin, has developed an index using six input and nine output measures focused on circulation, staffing, materials, reference service and funding levels, with data derived from that collected by the Federal State Cooperative System, a division of the US Department of Education.

What is interesting about the Hennen Index is the extent to which the ranking of US libraries shows a strong correlation between quality libraries and social capital. States with outstanding public libraries, notably in the Pacific Northwest and upper Midwest, are states that rank high on Putnam's social capital indicators. This confirms, as Preer[30] suggests, that libraries *serve as both an indicator and creator of social capital*.

The Hennen measures are not markedly different from the nine KPIs nominated by the Council of Australian State Libraries (Casl), and which are used, to a lesser or greater degree, by all state library agencies as the basis of their annual statistical compilations. The problem is that no one has used that data for national ranking, library service by library service, although people like Brian Haratsis of Macroplan have done their own sums comparing states and capital city library provision.

If that ranking was done it would show that some Australians have access to very good library services, some have access to good services, some have access to mediocre services, and some still only have access to limited services. The *Directory of Australian public libraries* provides enough information to identify which libraries fit into each category, but not enough to provide national rankings. The poor and mediocre libraries are never identified and publicised, the progressive libraries and progressive local authorities often go unrecognised and unpraised.

One question which CEO's and local government elected members could well ask of their library managers is how they benchmark against Australia and international best practice in critical areas such as buildings, professional staffing, resources, technology, access and programs. To stimulate this interest it would be worth the ALGA and the state local government associations considering annual awards for public library excellence.

Other positives

Other things, however, are already starting to happen. That trumpet is being blown, and to good effect.

Public Libraries Australia is developing, and there is a burgeoning of Friends of Libraries as local trumpet blowers, and Friends of Libraries Australia (Fola) as a national trumpet blower. If you do not already have a Friends group, what are the reasons?[31] In considering one important role for a Friends Group, every public librarian used to pleading the library cause alone should remember the legal axiom that 'he who pleads his own cause has a fool for a lawyer'.

At the state level we have South Australia's innovative *2003@your library* program initiated by the State Library of South Australia and the University of South Australia Library. Look at its website www.slsa.sa.gov.au@YourLibrary to see its themes, objectives and expected outcomes. It involves all libraries in South Australia, thus demonstrating the essential connections between all of them in developing literate, educated and information enabled

citizens. It has also achieved extensive ongoing media coverage and major sponsorship in cash or kind.

Western Australia is one of the several states now planning a similar year of profile and connection but from that state came recently an initiative of its own, a compilation of good news stories about public libraries under the byline *Enrich, educate, explore, escape, entertain, evolve: public libraries making a difference to the people of WA*. There are some great stories in it, stories which all public librarians everywhere can tell—but who hears about them?

Perhaps it is time to blow your trumpet with more confidence and certainty. First, however, revisit and clarify your library's vision, its mission, and assess how well both reflect the unique potential of your public library to connect people, to develop social capital—and to light up lives of your community.

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