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“Emerging Role of Public Libraries”

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Emerging Role of Public Libraries*

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Discusses the future role of public libraries, current trends, libraries in transition; need for their emerging as community cultural centres, becoming the third space for citizens of the world, the first being the home and the second the workplace of people. Librarians as part of the creative class need to take up the role of cultural entrepreneurs, offering educational and cultural programmes, besides information services for a cross section of people from all walks of life. The public library besides being a physical space also needs to be at a virtual space by adapting to new communication technologies and offering digital information. They need to continue to evolve as their communities need them, while maintaining their basic purpose of providing information and promoting knowledge and literacy.

Keywords: Public libraries, third space, cultural entrepreneurs, creative class, library programmes, digital space, technology

"The library is first and foremost a place...a place that promotes development in society. It is the family room of a community. That's the vision, that's the future."

- Akhtar Badshah, Director, Public Affairs, Microsoft Inc.

1 THE CHANGE

We are living in a fast changing information age where knowledge and creativity are the drivers of economic growth. Public libraries, being strong democratic institutions, repositories of knowledge and information and as trusted centres for community development are facing immense challenges of the fast changing times. It is an opportunity for public libraries to play a central role as centres of learning in helping citizens to adapt to this world of ever changing information technologies, and serve as dynamic community centres. There is no doubt that libraries have an important changing role to play as the ‘hub of creativity and innovation’ in the digital age. It is time that public library ‘leadership steer the libraries’ in the right direction to become central to human society’s growth and development.

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** Library Directory, American Library, 24 Kasturba Gandhi Marg, New Delhi-110001.
2 THIRD SPACE: A COMPLETE EXPERIENCE: LIBRARIES AS COMMUNITY CENTRES

In its emerging role, the public library is evolving as a third space. For the 3rd citizens of a country the first space is the home, the second is the trusted work place and the third safe space to realize their aspirations, learn and grow is the public library. Public libraries facilitate people to operate as individuals and as groups and support the society’s basic and advanced information needs through a vast range of resources. The public library is a welcome space for one and all for a whole range of human activity – reading, learning, and meeting, acquiring new skills and finding entertainment. In its new role the public library has to provide a complete experience to patrons, a home beyond home, where they belong.

The library is also a virtual space for individuals and societies to thrive on the rich and varied digital resources for their mental and spiritual growth. Patrons should be received as guests, who get inspired by a ‘stimulating environment’. The public libraries need to be dynamic versatile community centres for one and all. The trend that is catching on is that public library is becoming a community centre that welcomes a cross section of people from all walks of life.

Students study individually or as groups to do their assignments, prepare for competitive exams, do group discussions; participate in discussions and competitions such as essay writing, fine art creations and the like.

Teachers have the opportunity to get latest updates to plan and prepare lessons and attend train the trainer programmes.

Professionals get latest soft skills through DVDs; online resources. Interactive programmes, workshops and lectures.

Authors get relevant references, background materials and a perfect ambience for creating new literature.

Researchers get primary source material on areas of their academic interests.

Parents, accompanying children get light reading materials for entertainment and lifelong education.

The underserved groups get opportunities to read, learn languages, life skills to become economically independent.

Job seekers get information about suitable employment opportunities through print and electronic resources.
Retired people find a comfortable and peaceful place to read and also learn skills to do post retirement work.

3. THE CREATIVE CLASS THEORY OF RICHARD FLORIDA

American Sociologist Richard Florida has devised a new theory of a creative class. He clubs librarians in the creative class along with innovators and R&D workers and opines that librarians are knowledge workers and are part of the creative industry. Public libraries are therefore the best platform to promote creativity in communities and enrich the lives of people.

4. LIBRARIANS AS CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURS

As public Libraries are centre of learning, community development, entertainment and creativity. Librarians need to take up the new role of being cultural entrepreneurs to maintain thriving libraries in the internet age. Libraries can help promote information about life and culture of societies, besides spreading knowledge and promoting emotional and intellectual growth.

There has been a phenomenal growth in cultural participation by public libraries, a trend of increased cultural activity in the west, in US and UK in the past decade. A dominant trend has been that the major cities have been promoting themselves as centres of creativity. It is creativity – it is cultural participation which is becoming a force behind socio-economic development. This has given the librarians opportunity to be part of the creative industry and act as cultural entrepreneurs, as they are so well placed amidst all resources for human development.

It has been observed in US that people are increasingly participating in many forms of cultural activity offered by public libraries like art performances, concerts, theatre, opera, dance etc. These libraries are patronized by citizens at large and the government has also shown interest in cultural exchange and preservation of cultural heritage.

Another recent trend in many countries has been that ‘public libraries are being merged with other cultural organizations’ to create new cultural centres. Libraries today need to offer a complete life package, not just books and reading; so the need today is to create experience – offer lifestyle libraries to the younger generation. Public libraries have a responsibility of providing educational experiences, entertainment and aesthetic experiences. The literary collection offers cultural empowerment and enrichment of the soul to the community of library
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users. So the public libraries besides providing factual information for intellectual growth also have the responsibility of offering something less tangible but essential to a satisfying and productive life – nourishment to the spirit.

5 THE THREE BASIC COMPONENTS OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

51 LIBRARY COLLECTION

Books will stay, provided we are responsive to our clientele. The collection needs to be a balanced mix of print and digital - of academic, educational materials and leisure reading. We must rethink on our collection, focusing on e-materials, databases, DVDs, e-journals, popular subjects of peoples’ choice and test materials for the young.

52 NEW SERVICES

The new services in these times of change will include the following:

- Public access technologies – Internet access for all in the library
- Online information – remote access to authentic databases
- Digital reference services to members
- Outreach, educational and cultural programmes for all

53 STAFF

Trained and technology savvy staff will be needed to provide efficient service in the present day public library. There is a need of ongoing staff development programmes to keep pace with growing technologies for libraries like the web 2.0 technologies. Libraries must earmark funds for staff development to be able to provide the best services with the use of sophisticated information technologies. Keeping pace with the modern times, a public library needs to catch up with technology to be a state of the art library, representing the spirit and ethos of the best public libraries in the world.

6 AMERICAN LIBRARIES IN INDIA

Talking of American public libraries in India – they provide information on life and culture in the United States. They are constantly celebrating multiculturalism and diversity in the American society. Through their programmes and activities these libraries are promoting the quintessential of Americanism – the socio-cultural values of freedom, liberty and individual achievement of the “I do” society. American
Libraries are known world over for their superlative information services and offering the practical tools that people need to improve their lives.

These libraries are socially and culturally inclusive; they preserve traditional and indigenous knowledge and folk memories. They are a perfect blend of traditional print and the most advanced electronic resources, with the most desired sense and spirit of service with a smile to the public. They celebrate national days; commemorate their national heroes like Martin Luther King, Lincoln and Kennedy. American Libraries offer cultural programmes that encourage adults and young adults to think and talk about ethics, culture, history, art, literature, music and the creative process.

7    EXAMPLES OF PROGRAMMES OF A MODERN PUBLIC LIBRARY

• Library orientations
• E-library presentations
• Database trainings
• Computer skills trainings
• Debates and discussions
• Reference hunt and quizzes
• Book launch and discussions
• Talks, seminars and workshops
• Stand-up comedy show
• Poetry reading
• Musical evenings
• Theatre and film screenings
• Meet and Greet
• Specific festival celebration
• National Days
• Library appreciation Day

8 DIGITAL PUBLIC LIBRARY OF AMERICA (DPLA)

The DPLA is an extensive and entirely free online collection of books, photographs, manuscripts, moving images, and other quality content from a network of libraries, museums, archives, and institutions across the United States.

According to The Atlantic, the DPLA is the result of over two years’ work on the part of 42 of the nation’s top libraries and research organizations. Its website features scanned and otherwise digitized
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materials from such content hubs as the Smithsonian, the New York Public Library, Harvard, the National Archives, and the University of Virginia, just to name a few. It also brings content from digital libraries across America – including the Digital Library of Georgia, Minnesota Digital Library, and Mountain West Digital Library – into one point of access for users.

91 THE PHYSICAL SPACE

There is a need to ensure that the look and feel of a public library is contemporary, ahead of times, and a trend setter. It should be attractive with print and digital information resources, facilities to study, read, write, discuss, socialize, and participate in programmes. The library should have welcoming interiors, making it an open structured multipurpose space.

The library should be a neutral and safe public space that provides opportunities for all to grow intellectually, emotionally, and socially and to develop new literacies for learning and expression.

In the public library of today, there needs to be a common area, Wi-Fi access, flexible furniture, programming room, serious reading space, internet browsing, compact shelving system to accommodate more books in less space, programme assistance system like screens and sound system to conduct programmes in the library, a vibrant gaming zone for kids and teens, dedicated movie screening area with surround sound and 3D experience, a centre for cultural programmes, debates, discussions, seminars and workshops, an intellectual space for serious users, uniting online access to traditional media where one can download a book or check out a book; take I-Pads to the library or read the newspapers.

92 ADVANCE AUTOMATION

The Library functioning should be completely automated, with access to the facility and services through the smart library cards. Some innovative system should also be in place along with manual functioning that can monitor the automode. Touch screens should be used as online public access catalogues. The library should install security systems and RFID technologies to run efficiently.

93 LIBRARIANS AS INSTRUCTORS

The Public Library of today can take the lead in helping the general public understand technology by taking on instructional role. The librarians have to experiment with creative spaces so the future role of the
library can define itself. Staff members, library users, and the community at large can experiment and determine what ideas are drawing attention. Some possible uses include internet work stations, podcasting stations, blogger stations, audio-visual studios, imagination rooms and art studios.

Workshops should be organized on skill building, learning new technologies, language and communication skills, creative arts like painting, music, theatre, dance and commercial arts like printing, photography etc. which cannot be done through internet. There should be an innovative community engagement and programming for all age groups, using local expertise as resource.

A public library needs to become a multi-purpose community centre in coming years, offering creative and dynamic educational, entertainment and aesthetic experiences to its users. Instead of merely providing information, it will help individuals thrive through access to knowledge, cultural heritage, and lifelong learning by engaging, serving, and empowering all sections of the society especially the young through its programming and resources. It is time that public libraries reinvent themselves to remain relevant in the present day society.

94 ASPEN REPORT

Book circulation is not the central focus of America’s public libraries anymore as per a report released in October 2014 by the Aspen Institute Dialogue on Public Libraries. The report is about the future of America’s public libraries and how they can best serve the changing needs of their communities. The report establishes that as we move forward into the digital age, our communities are changing — and what we expect from our libraries also is changing fast. “While the public library was conceived in an age of information scarcity, today’s networked world is one of information abundance and mobility,” states the report. “Public libraries have the DNA needed to thrive in this new information-rich, knowledge-based society.

Library patrons are also expecting big change in public libraries. In her article in *The Atlantic*, as Deborah Fallows writes- the Columbus Metropolitan Library of Columbus, Ohio, recently asked its ‘facebook fans to share five words’ describing their childhood libraries and five words describing how they imagine libraries two decades from now. Some of the results are - Books still are most important but the libraries will shift priorities: It won’t be a quiet place but a place for meeting people. It will not be about only study and research but it would also be
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about entertainment. Other notable descriptors of the library of the future include “access,” “technology,” “information,” and “Internet.”

In order to make the library of the future a reality, the Aspen Institute report, October 2014 suggests that public libraries leverage three of their most important assets: people, place, and platform.

People: The library must shift away from just building collections to building human capital for the future. This not only refers to the users of the public library but also its librarians, who will act as curators of the library’s content for the posterity.

Space: The public library of the future is both a physical and virtual place. While the latter is going to be the future, the physical public library will remain significant to its community. However the physical library will become less about patrons checking out materials and more about realizing their personal and professional life goals.

On the less tangible side of things, the report recommends that the virtual space of the library “must be considered as a wholly independent but highly integrated experience.” Experiences in the virtual space must be just as engaging as those in the physical; neither is more or less important than the other.

95 Perspective

Today there is a need for libraries to become community learning platforms. They should serve as a platform for users to create, learn, and innovate. The book catalogue alone is not enough, the report says. Libraries will need much more, including new forms of access and distribution infrastructure, to support the needs of their communities.

For us, our public libraries are important; they should continue to evolve as the institutions, their communities need them to be, while maintaining their basic purpose of providing information and promoting knowledge and literacy.