The Library and the City: Evolving Concepts

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Both the modern city and the modern library were born of technology and are evolving rapidly by taking advantage of and responding to technological developments. The library has a special place in the city and a symbiotic relationship with it. This paper explores some dimensions of that relationship and its implications for libraries as they embrace digital opportunities.

In his book *Invisible Cities* (Calvino, 1979), the great Cuban born Italian writer, Italo Calvino wrote of the Venetian adventurer Marco Polo returning from his travels to tell Kublai Khan of the cities he had visited. He speaks of the form of cities, of trading cities, of hidden cities, of cities and memory. The Khan does not necessarily believe everything he says but listens greedily, enthralled and inspired as his imagination and empire expand. The cities represent historical examples and imaginary possibilities. They illustrate the power that the ideas of cities have had from antiquity to the present as they have provided a place for business and interaction while offering more, the stimulating scent of opportunity and excitement.

1 Cities

Cities grew rapidly with industrialisation, firstly in Europe, then elsewhere. Their attraction increased although their atmosphere soured with the odours of too many people living close together, the rank smell of sewage in open gutters, the smells of unwashed bodies and decaying rubbish. It was the ever present threat of disease from the plague to cholera (Diamond, 1998). Then, towards the middle of the nineteenth century it began to change with the innovations that made large urban conglomerations possible (Merriman, 1996). Greatest among those were the new systems to provide clean water and deal with the torrent of effluent first in London then, progressively, elsewhere. New urban design, notably Baron Haussmann's redesign of Paris, made cities more liveable by creating boulevards and removing slums (at the price of considerable social dislocation). New transportation systems, especially London's underground and its successors elsewhere, made it possible to move quickly across large cities and for food and other resources to be brought to them quickly on the new railways and steamships. New sciences and technologies, including pasteurisation, freezing and canning, helped ensure that the foods would be safe. Lighting —first gas and then electric—made the streets safer and enabled nightlife to develop. New big structures of steel and concrete could be built and, later, Chicago demonstrated the potential of the new tall buildings. They grew with the technologies of industrialisation and

Lifelong Education and Libraries

became viable with the technologies of urbanisation.

Population of Major European Cities 1800 & 1850
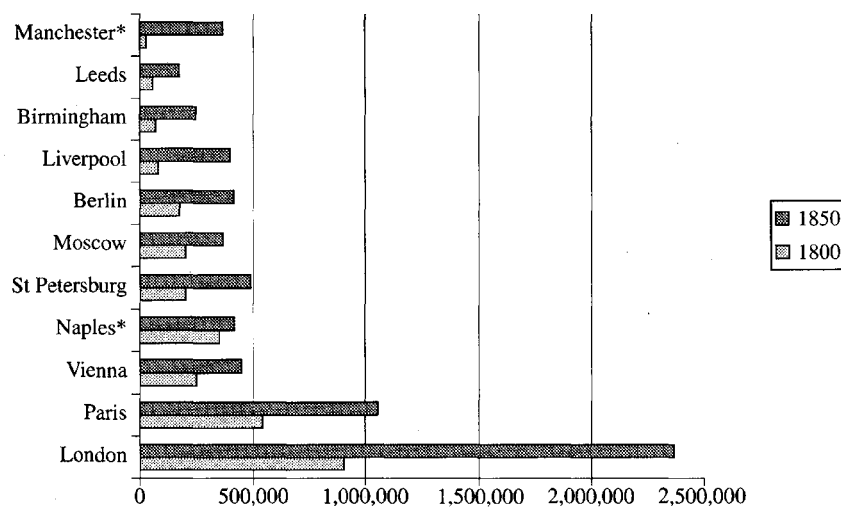
* Naples 1800 & 1871, Manchester 1772 & 1850 (from Merriman, 1996: 693)

These nineteenth century developments provided the key elements which permitted the growth of our twenty first century metropoles and megacities. Many are truly enormous with Tokyo, the largest, reading 26.4 million people and twenty or more cities, including Shanghai currently exceeding 10 million. They would have amazed Kublai Khan.

Population of Cities with 10 Million Inhabitants or More, 1975, 2000, and 2015 (in Millions)

1975		2000		2015	
City	Population	City	Population	City	Population
1 Tokyo	19.8	1 Tokyo	26.4	1 Tokyo	26.4
2 New York	15.9	2 Mexico City	18.1	2 Bombay	26.1
3 Shanghai	11.4	3 Bombay	18.1	3 Lagos	23.2
4 Mexico City	11.2	4 São Paulo	17.8	4 Dhaka	21.1
5 São Paulo	10.0	5 New York	16.6	5 São Paulo	20.4
		6 Lagos	13.4	6 Karachi	19.2
		7 Los Angeles	13.1	7 Mexico City	19.2
		8 Calcutta	12.9	8 New York	17.4
		9 Shanghai	12.9	9 Jakarta	17.3
		10 Buenos Aires	12.6	10 Calcutta	17.3
		11 Dhaka	12.3	11 Delhi	16.8
		12 Karachi	11.8	12 Metro Manila	14.8
		13 Delhi	11.7	13 Shanghai	14.6
		14 Jakarta	11.0	14 Los Angeles	14.1
		15 Osaka	11.0	15 Buenos Aires	14.1
		16 Metro Manila	10.9	16 Cairo	13.8
		17 Beijing	10.8	17 Istanbul	12.5
		18 Rio de Janeiro	10.6	18 Beijing	12.3
		19 Cairo	10.6	19 Rio de Janeiro	11.9
				20 Osaka	11.0
				21 Tianjin	10.7
				22 Hyderabad	10.5
				23 Bangkok	10.1

Source: United Nations, World Urbanization Prospects: The 1999 Revision, Table 5.
http://www.un.org/esa/population/pubsarchive/urbanization/urbanization.pdf (downloaded Nov. 1, 2001).

These megacities present tremendous challenges, including major social and environmental problems. Almost all are outside Europe and North America and they, along with smaller cities, struggle with the ceaseless flow of internal migrants from rural and poor areas. But the megacities face particular problems because of their size which means that their infrastructures are often overstretched.

The next level of cities, the metropoles, have around 5-10 million inhabitants and curiously display a lower rate of population growth than the megacities or those with 1-5 million inhabitants and hence experience fewer environmental and social issues. Those metropoles tend to be well connected both nationally and internationally with excellent telecommunications including a hub airport and strong transport to centres of population and production. Their economy is largely service based with multinational companies and brands well represented. They are magnets for visitors and migrants and their inhabitants tend to have above average education and enjoy a high quality of life.

At the next tier, the smaller cities are often growing rapidly through industrial development and finding it difficult to expand their infrastructures adequately to meet demand. They are facing the growing pains that the nineteenth century cities faced.

Thus, in short, we see cities under pressure around the world. There are many studies of their futures as well as planning reports which recommend solutions to their challengers. In many countries, the most urgent problems are the fundamental issues of health and hygiene —sanitation, clean water and adequate housing. Transportation is a key issue as cars, buses and cycles choke cities almost everywhere. Health services and education are stretched by population growth. In some countries, the HIV/AIDS epidemic is threatening the very fabric of society.

Solutions to these big problems can only be found if we apply knowledge. We need to understand the issues and then to explore responses by drawing on technical, social, environmental and other knowledge. Just as the nineteenth century innovators created sewage systems, mass transport and very large buildings, modern town planners, policy makers and technologists need to identify contemporary solutions. We need to use knowledge to create cities in which people will be happy, cities like Zenobia in Calvino's book since "if you ask an inhabitant of Zenobia to describe his vision of a happy life, it is always a city like Zenobia that he imagines" (Calvino, 1979).

2 Libraries

It is another nineteenth century invention, the modern library, which can assist to create cities which will offer their inhabitants that happy life. The modern public library began to develop from the middle of that century along with other civic facilities including museums, parks and zoological gardens, theatres and opera houses. Among early examples was the Boston Public Library, the first large free municipal library in the United States, founded in 1848 (Boston Public Library, 1998). The UK Public Libraries Act of 1850 outlined the expectations for this new type of library which were illustrated by the pioneering Manchester Public Library established in 1852 (Munford, 1976). They were to promote education,

provide suitable recreational opportunities and foster moral improvement (Murison, 1988) extending the role well beyond mere access to collections. Manchester's lead was followed elsewhere although the widespread development of public libraries in most countries occurred predominantly in the twentieth century (IFLA, 1963: 1-2).

The public library has come to be seen as a key educational and cultural institution that supports individual and societal autonomy. In 1836 Herzen called it "the open table of ideas to which each is invited, at which each will find the food he seeks" (Raymond, 1979). The *Public Library Manifesto* hails it as "the local gateway to knowledge, [which] provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups" (IFLA/Unesco, 1994). This is a "people's university" (Johnson, 1938) and more. In seeking to apply the ambitions of the Manifesto, the IFLA/Unesco *Guidelines* define the public library as an organisation established, supported and funded by the community which provides access to knowledge, information and works of the imagination to all members of the community (IFLA Section of Public Libraries and Gill, 2001: 1). Its purposes include education, information, assisting personal development, services to children and young people, providing a focus for cultural development, and offering a public meeting place. Like Calvino's Euphemia they are "where memory is traded at every solstice and at every equinox" (Calvino, 1979: 31). The *Guidelines* note that public libraries have "an important role in the development and maintenance of a democratic society by giving the individual access to a wide and varied range or knowledge, ideas and opinions" (*Ibid*: 2). The *Guidelines* are at pains to point to a great variety of approaches to providing public library services, in analysing their strengths and pointing to ways of operating more effectively.

In spite of that variety, there is considerable agreement on the purpose of the public library. It is considered by most librarians and authorities to be an institution for culture, information and education and there is strong, but not universal, agreement on its role as a "democratic institution". It offers children enjoyment and opportunities to develop as members of society. It supports students enrolled in educational institutions and those educating themselves. Businesses can locate information to support their activities. The sight impaired and those with other disabilities can obtain specialised services. And all members of the community can find entertainment through books, magazines, audio and video recordings, and increasingly Internet services. The public library informs, educates and entertains the community. In that tradition, the current focus in librarianship on "information literacy", in public libraries as well as educational libraries, adds a responsibility to assist library clients to develop the skills to access information. This function joins the previous roles of accumulating information resources, organising and providing access to information resources, providing access to information and offering assistance. In these ways, the public library and other types of libraries strengthen civil society through building social capital as well as helping to provide the knowledge needed to solve practical problems.

3   The Digital Library

With the proliferation of the Internet and the invention of the so-called digital library, new opportunities have arisen. They have reinforced the role of libraries, and especially public libraries, as information gateways which are less than ever constrained by political borders or the restrictive urges of authorities. Through the increasing use of public libraries to provide points of access for the general populace, we are creating a universal library which extends well beyond both the mainly print oriented libraries of only a decade ago and also the World Wide Web's information bazaar which we sample with Google.

As we are aware, the "digital library" became possible through the creation of bibliographic, factual and fulltext databases, the application of powerful inquiry technologies, and their linkage through complex communications networks. The library or information service came to be considered as a gateway providing access to information. It is a library model adapted for a world in which "we're all connected" (Ginsburg, 1993) and which encompasses print and electronic formats with an emphasis on organised access. Its features constitute a sophisticated content access system which can deliver an enormous number of resources digitally.

For example, in the case of the UTS: Library, the resources include 16,597 current individual serial titles delivered online out of the total 20,984 titles we offer plus an increasing number of e-books, reference materials, student readings, digital theses (through the Australian Digital Theses program) and other materials. Those e-resources as available as any of the physical resources, if not more so: they are all hot linked from the UTS:Library catalogue and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week from any Internet connected location in Sydney or around the globe. But we also offer an extensive range of services online including both email and online real time reference, information literacy training, guides to the literature in the various fields of interest to UTS students, digital student readings, and "MyLibrary" portal features. Electronic services extend to the physical collections, of course, enabling clients to identify desired items, reserve them, request them from other campuses, extend loans, etc. This constitutes a digital library: it offers a comprehensive range of services digitally to our clients whether they are located on campus in Sydney, across the road in an apartment or a ten hour flight away in Shanghai.

Establishment of the digital library and the application of the associated tools and techniques have led to considerable progress in information management and, more recently, knowledge management in improving quality of life and material progress. The model is characterised by a concern to promptly meet all the information needs of clients through universal access and delivery of the required information, with little concern as to format and no need to own the resources. According to a Danish study for the European Commission, the "updated public library" described above is a key player in the local implementation of the information society (Thorhauge, 2002: 108-114). It has key roles in safeguarding democracy, supporting education, providing local access to new technologies and promoting cultural identity.

But delivering this digital library is not without its challenges. Most people around the world face many barriers to accessing the digital library. In many regions barriers of particular

concern include:

- **Inadequate or non-existent Internet access** in most areas of developing nations and even in some parts of richer nations.
- **Lack of hardware, software and expertise** to access digital information.
- **Language barriers** since most digital information is in the languages of international trade, especially English.
- **Low levels of literacy and information literacy** which hamper the use of resources even when they may be available.
- **Lack of relevant content** for many peoples—their cultures and concerns are not described, and certainly not in their own terms.
- **Licensing or other contractual inhibitions** which stop the library providing access to casual users of the library (Byrne, 2004).

In many countries these constraints collude to make access to high quality information virtually impossible. It becomes impossible to research even local topics from the same basis in knowledge as those in richer countries, it becomes impossible to provide timely access to the knowledge needed for health and education, it becomes impossible to control and exploit one's own knowledge.

To present a stark contrast, while sitting in my office or at home on a broadband connection I can access not only the freely available websites, documents and other resources on the Web but also a tremendous range of databases and full text resources purchased by my Library, but most people do not have that facility. If a family member suffers from Alzheimer's, a form of dementia common in old age, I can easily look at the latest research literature as well as guides produced by hospitals and voluntary associations to inform myself and decide how to assist my relative and other members of the family who may be distressed by the condition, but most people cannot. Very few of the millions affected by HIV/AIDS in sub Saharan Africa, or even their doctors, can access those resources easily. In spite of the very worthy and worthwhile initiatives by BioMed Central (http://www.biomedcentral.com) and others to provide free access to the content of the biomedical research literature, many of the other barriers prevent access.

4   Libraries, Cities and the Information Society

This is where we return to cities. We need to address the challenges of our cities around the globe since a growing proportion of the world's population is to be found in them, especially in the megacities of the twenty first century. If we are to make them good places to live, if we are to solve their health, habitation and transport problems, then we need very good access to information and the skills to access and use it. This is a twenty first century answer to a twenty first century problem. It echoes the nineteenth century answers to the problems of cities in that era but is less technocratic. Where Haussmann could drive boulevards through the slums of Paris at Napoleon III's instigation, we now know that greater involvement and empowerment of the population is essential to successfully dealing with many of these issues.

They are the issues of an information society, a society which increasingly depends on the application of information and knowledge to achieving economic and social goals. This has been recognised through the World Summit on the Information Society, the first phase of which culminated last December in Geneva. The global community is now working in the second phase with a summit meeting planned for Tunis in November 2005.

In the first phase both the preparatory process and the Summit meeting itself demonstrated that the information society is not just a plaything for the rich Western nations but is crucial to all nations. It is vital to small Pacific Island nations which are threatened by rising sea levels resulting from global warming and also to enormous countries, such as China, which are undergoing tremendous changes both in the cities and in rural areas. The Summit's *Declaration of Principles* (World Summit on the Information Society, 2003a) and the accompanying *Plan of Action* (World Summit on the Information Society, 2003b) identify the principles on which an equitable information society will be based, the long list of barriers to achieving that goal, and an agenda, albeit imperfect, for addressing them.

In this current phase, governments, United Nations agencies and non governmental civil society organisations are working to make those hopes a reality. Some are moving very quickly, such as New Zealand which has recently issued a draft national digital strategy (New Zealand Ministry of Economic Development, 2004). Others are working more slowly but with a clear focus on creating an equitable and civil information society from which all their citizens can benefit. Some are temporising for various reasons.

However, for those of us engaged in the broad fields of library and information work, this is core business. The information society depends on us and we have a major responsibility to contribute to its development. To assist us, and our institutions and associations, to address the issues of the information society, IFLA has produced a commentary which shows the correspondences between the issues identified in those documents and the solutions which we in libraries and information services are pursuing (IFLA and Byrne, 2004a). It demonstrates that we are already doing much but it is patchy and uncoordinated, at least from a global perspective. With relatively modest additional resources we could build on our current activities and learn from others to make the information society work in and for our communities and nations.

5   What Can We Do?

Advocacy is the key. We need to demonstrate what we are doing and what we can do —or could do with some additional resources. To get started, we can read the IFLA commentary of the WSIS Declaration (IFLA and Byrne, 2004a), translate it into our own languages, adapt it to our local conditions and plan an advocacy campaign. To assist that advocacy, IFLA has also produced a summary which demonstrates how libraries are truly at the heart of the information society (IFLA and Byrne, 2004b). We can adapt that summary, insert our own examples and publicise them to the community and to governments. We can share those examples with our colleagues within our won countries and internationally.

While doing this work we must tell IFLA about it, and especially our examples of

implementing the information society, so that they can be used in global advocacy and in our presentations to the second phase of the World Summit in Tunis just over a year from now.

But we must also learn from each other, form partnerships and work together to achieve more than we could achieve on our own. Partnership is the key. We need to work collaboratively with other libraries and information services but also with other organisations such as telecentres and mobile health workers. Through such alliances we will not only be more effective but we will be more visibly effective and that, in turn, will bring greater recognition and more resources to us.

Through these measures we will better serve our clients, make our cities more liveable and help build an equitable and fair information society. It is up to us to create and promote twenty first century solutions for twenty first century problems.

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