Public **Libraries** in an **Age** of **Uncertainty** — A **UK** Perspective

Recently, ACT region library staff were very fortunate to hear a stimulating and forward-looking presentation on 'Public Libraries in an Age of Uncertainty' by Chris Batt OBE, CEO of the UK's Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. This was followed by a presentation and workshop by Adie Batt, Head of Libraries in the London Borough of Croydon.

Chris's presentation surveyed the recent history of information in society and current technological developments to illuminate libraries' most urgent contemporary challenge: their diminishing perceived relevance and political purchase. He then offered a vision of how public libraries can be lifted to new relevance, offering a case study from the UK as an example of achievable transformation.

Libraries have been a strong, vital thread in the social fabric of many Western countries, a shining instance of collective action, and a source of universal education in times when knowledge was priced more exclusively. However, we are now experiencing radical change in the nature of media and information: a deluge of information and entertainment in a networked, work-driven, 24/7 society, where plummeting costs of private access

to this saturating flow lead to 'informed bewilderment'[1]. This has propelled trends, in library usage, public expectations, and the perceived relevance of libraries. Chris posed the question, 'Are libraries on the way down?'

For the Google Generation, if it doesn't pop up on the Internet with minimal effort and at marginal cost, it doesn't exist — throwing into doubt for library users and policy makers the value of existing library services, skills and resources. Libraries are under constant threat of being outpaced by technology and its costs, in a climate of insecure funding. They are also at risk of shrinking into an information landscape dominated not just by the Internet, but by Web 2.0. Whilst remaining wary of the '2.0' label, Chris addressed some key implications of the web's recent gear change into a significantly more dynamic, participatory platform — one that is lived in, customised to, manipulated by and targeted at each individual. This landscape now includes:

- proliferating information devices, formats and avenues of delivery

- free or near-free content and 'endless information abundance'

- complex forms of social, online

existence, including a blurring of virtual and real interactions and consequences

- dynamic 'mashups' of data sources and applications — confluent information streams, tailored to precise need, with spectacular functionality, breadth and specifity.

In these circumstances, public libraries are encountering significant difficulties in getting on the policy agenda and advocating for funding when the politics of information is largely framed in terms of satisfying private interest (e.g. broadband). They are vulnerable to becoming an obsolete information safety net, providing the lowest quality services to the marginalised. Chris signalled doubt over the effectiveness of an appeal to 'history, belief and emotion', or declarations of libraries' worthiness and legitimacy.

Rather, Chris identified three types of intervention required to steer library services forward and 'win a seat at the table of national policy':

1. Chris referred to the work of Manuel de Castells. For more inf–ormation, see: Castells, M. (2001). The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

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1. **incremental development** — do better what is already done
2. **synoptic change** — do new things in new ways
3. **build a better narrative** — public libraries as a compelling story that people will listen to.

To illustrate, he outlined the UK's ten-year public library transformation, 'Framework for the Future'. Funding was used as a catalyst for making enduring improvements and additions to library services, benchmarked against ambitious national library standards. Chris identified several strategic efforts crucial to this reinvention. Libraries need to be marketed using convincing, refreshing, nationwide promotional materials, which demonstrate the quality of services available with conviction. He noted how leadership and advocacy capabilities were being developed in the profession, via large-scale programs. UK libraries are being positioned as a development agency, able to deliver on governments' social and economic policy priorities (e.g. literacy, community cohesion). Library leaders have also successfully 'sold' libraries to policy makers as essential to 'digital citizenship'.

What might 'synoptic change' mean for librarians and users? Librarians recognising the public value of new kinds of services that are now possible using current information architecture; achieving cooperation across and beyond the collections sector in order to implement seamless, participatory and indispensable discovery and access pathways that meet and exceed users' expectations, and; leveraging digital and digitised content and the enduring knowledge-facilitating skills of librarianship to achieve for users what Google alone cannot. Chris's view of the future public library reflects a belief in libraries as a unique intersection of virtual space (the online library), community places and development opportunities.

Adie Batt's presentation, followed by a workshop with staff from the ACT Public Library Service, provided a practical, up-close case study of how one library service had reinvented itself. Croydon's library service seems to have progressed, particularly by:

- 'doing better what is already done [by most libraries]' e.g. comprehensive infants', children's and adults' reading and literacy programs

- deft self-promotion that sold a better story about what public libraries offer

- ambitious outreach and community engagement that demonstrably accorded with government policy priorities in education, social cohesion and community development.

Chris and Adie Batt together offered exhilarating insights, ranging from national policy and future scenarios in the world of information, to practical initiatives in meeting the demands of daily patron service. Their presentations left an audience in Canberra, and doubtless others around Australia, invigorated with the possibilities for considered rejuvenation in library services.

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Chris and Adie Batt spoke at several state libraries during their visit (including those of Victoria and NSW), and their presentations can be variously accessed in transcript, PowerPoint or mp3 from these libraries' websites: <www. slv.vic.gov.au> and <www.sl.nsw.gov.au>. Further information on many of the issues raised in Chris's talk can be found via the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council website at <www.mla.gov.uk>.