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When the library business is booming why are public libraries in decline and what can we do?

By Ken Chad
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A response to...

‘Empower, Inform, Enrich. The modernisation review of public libraries.
A consultation document.’ DCMS . December 2009

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Contents

Contents

Biographical note	3
PART 1. The challenge	3
Preamble: The library business is booming. People want libraries	3
The new 'Networked Information Economy'	4
Technology the Web and a new competitive environment	4
The library function is big business	5
Changing business models: free or 'absurdly cheap' services	6
Summary	7
PART 2. What should public libraries do?	7
Understanding the value chain	8
The key roles of the public library.....	8
PART 3: Some ways forward	9
Education	9
Technical and business skills.....	9
Leadership and a national approach.....	10
Standards	10
Freeing up library metadata	10
Community Engagement	11
Audit of library IT.....	11

Biographical note

Ken Chad spent 10 years working in various roles in public libraries and over 20 years working for technology companies involved with libraries all over the world. As a Director and Board member of Talis from 2001 to 2007, his customers comprised nearly one quarter of the public library authorities in the UK. Ken started his consultancy business in 2007¹ and has helped libraries and organisations such as the JISC, the Research Information Network (RIN). Ken Chad Consulting currently manages the *Local Government Library IT 'LGLibTech' (wiki) website* –a valuable community resource on all aspects of Library IT in Local Government².



PART 1. The challenge

Preamble: The library business is booming. People want libraries

The 'library' business is booming. By July 2007 members of LibraryThing had catalogued more books than Harvard University (15,731,298) and, in these terms, it is now the second-largest library in the United States.³ Not a bad achievement in less than five years. One of the world's most successful companies provides a free 24/7 online 'library' service and has a mission statement that could be happily emblazoned on the front of every public library: 'organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.' The company is Google of course and, as well as its core search service, it scans books and makes them available online. In October 2009, Google announced that the number of scanned books is over ten million⁴. Most scanned works are no longer in print or commercially available and one million are in the public domain. The Wikimedia foundation behind Wikipedia is a non profit charitable organization with a mission that would also find an honourable place in libraries. It exists to encourage 'the growth, development and distribution of free, multilingual content, and to providing the full content of these wiki-based projects to the public free of charge'.

Against this inclusive view of the 'library function', the decline of the UK's public libraries is even more dramatic than that reported in the DCMS consultation paper⁵.

¹ See <http://www.kenchadconsulting.com>

² <http://lglibtech.wikispaces.com/>

³ Stephen Abram. 'LibraryThing'. Stephen's Lighthouse blog. 4th July 2007
http://stephenslighthouse.sirsidynix.com/archives/2007/07/librarything_1.html By January 2010 LibraryThing had grown to over 47,000,000 books catalogued

⁴ According to Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_Books

⁵ 'Empower, Inform, Enrich. The modernisation review of public libraries: A consultation document'. DCMS December 2009. http://www.culture.gov.uk/reference_library/consultations/6488.aspx

This paper looks at the context and suggests ways in which libraries can address some of the decline.

The new 'Networked Information Economy'

'For more than 150 years, modern complex democracies have depended in large measure on an industrial information economy.....In the past decade and a half we have begun to see a radical change in the organisation of information production. Enabled by technological change, we are beginning to see a series of economic, social and cultural adaptations that make possible a radical transformation of how we make the information environment....'⁶ This is how Yale Professor of Law, Yochai Benkler, describes the context. The time period he describes also neatly encompasses the rise and development of public libraries⁷. So we can view public libraries themselves as one of the manifestations of the 'industrial information economy'. How will they adapt to the New Information Economy?

The business model of the free public library effectively put an end to commercial circulating libraries that had operated since the 18th century. This, like so many changes, did not happen overnight. When I was a very young child the building in my High Street with the name 'Library' was in fact the local newsagents, stationers and assorted other bits and pieces shop. It retained the name 'library' because at the back of the shop was a small commercial circulating library. By the 1960s it was already an anachronism and, although the shop itself remained in business, the library part was eventually closed. It could not compete with the free public library some quarter of a mile away. Even its prime high street location didn't save it. The business model of a public service paid for by taxes eventually put it out of business.

'Enabled by technological change, we are beginning to see a series of economic, social and cultural adaptations that make possible a radical transformation of how we make the information environment.' Yochai Benkler.

Technology the Web and a new competitive environment

Libraries have employed, often with considerable skill and imagination, all sorts of technologies over time and in the 1990s were web pioneers. I think it is a pretty safe bet that public libraries were the first local authority service to provide widespread access to the public over the web. Nevertheless these technologies didn't fundamentally change the *business model* of public libraries. Over the last decade the web, though still a baby judged against the 150 year span of the public library, has developed and matured at a remarkable rate. It really is enabling those 'radical transformations of how we make the information environment' that Benkler describes. Libraries in all organisations, but especially public libraries, face a

Libraries ... especially public libraries, face a huge *competitive* challenge.

⁶ 'The wealth of networks. How social production transforms markets and freedom.' By Yochai Benkler Yale 2006. Available for free download at www.benkler.org

⁷ The Public Library act of 1850 is a reasonable milestone on which to base this assertion.

huge *competitive* challenge. As more and content is available digitally the challenge and the competition will increase. The e-book is not just another format for a book but a major disruptive force to public libraries.

New competition means public libraries now form a decreasing part of a much larger 'library experience,' which is now inhabited by global library/information organisations. Not all are commercial like Google or Amazon. As mentioned earlier Wikipedia is a charity dependent on donors. However what these organisations all share is an understanding that the 'stuff' of libraries is not only important but can be managed, accessed and delivered on a global 'web scale'. This goes right to the heart of the increasing challenge to a library services run exclusively by a *local* authority. What other local authority service is in such direct competition with global giants such as Google, Amazon or Wikipedia?

The library function is big business

The web gives organisations global reach. They can take advantage of the 'Long Tail'. 'As the costs of production and distribution fall, especially online, there is now less need to lump products and consumers into one-size-fits-all containers. In an era without the constraints of physical shelf space and other bottlenecks of distribution, narrowly-target [sic] goods and services can be as economically attractive as mainstream fare' ⁸.

Most libraries, especially public libraries, take a narrower view, administered -as they are- on a local basis. There is no 'world-wide public library'. Indeed there is no effective national aggregation of English (much less UK) library catalogues developed specifically for the *public* to use. Four years ago the MLA reported. 'It's technically not impossible, we know it can be done; it's really about looking at how we join up different systems in different authorities.'⁹ So why the lack of progress? It's not *that* hard is it? The technology exists. WorldCat¹⁰ and Google Books have demonstrated that.

Using Google Books I can find and view online (for free) the text of, for example, Dickens' 'Hard Times'. It also gives me links to online services where I can buy the physical book. I can buy a new copy of *Hard Times* and have it delivered to my home for as little as £1.99. AbeBooks provides a catalogue of books far more extensive than almost any public library: it claims over 110 million 'listings.'¹¹ The equivalent of branch libraries is a global network of *thousands* of second hand bookshops and other providers. These services don't just deliver books either. They build

⁸ See the Long Tail website http://www.thelongtail.com/the_long_tail/2005/09/long_tail_101.html

⁹ 'Libraries begin uncertain new chapter.' Chris Alden. Guardian 22 February 2006.

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/referenceandlanguages/story/0,,1715274,00.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.worldcat.org>

¹¹ 'More than 110 million new, used, rare, and out-of-print books are offered for sale through the AbeBooks websites from thousands of booksellers around the world'

<http://www.abebooks.com/books/CompanyInformation/>

communities of users and weave their way into our lives. Sharing is an attribute in the new 'Web 2.0' world and, of course, chimes well with the ethos of public libraries. You therefore might think some imaginative and savvy librarian created the Web 2.0 service 'LibraryThing.' After all it employs library catalogue records (MARC records from the Library of Congress, no less¹²) to enable people to catalogue their own books. But this is more a tactic to enable them to share information about books with others. In June 2006, just ten months after it was launched, LibraryThing caught the attention of the Wall Street Journal.¹³ '....his concept has blossomed into a vibrant community with 47,670 registered members -- some paying -- and a user-created catalog that includes more than 3.6 million volumes'. Membership is now over 200,000 members. At LibraryThing, more than 10 million books from the personal libraries of booklovers have been cataloged, tagged (a short but personal descriptive term rather than traditional library or bookstore classification) and rated out of five'.

Changing business models: free or 'absurdly cheap' services

It is not, of course, that libraries are being singled out. The changes I describe are part of a much wider phenomenon. Just think of the impact that the ability to download and share files has had on the music business. Companies like Skype™ have enabled free telephone and video calls. Radio and TV is changing too. One look at the BBC web site confirms that. There is so much free content

'Online, Amazon and AbeBooks have everything I need; in fact, they have everything anybody could ever need, and AbeBooks, especially, is absurdly cheap.'
Bryan Appleyard

available for download and also available for re-use. Bookshops, often held up as good examples in many ways for public libraries, are also under threat. In a controversial article in the Sunday Times in 2006¹⁴ Bryan Appleyard said. 'I, along with almost everybody I know, stopped buying in bookshops years ago. Why bother? Online, Amazon and AbeBooks have everything I need; in fact, they have everything anybody could ever need, and AbeBooks, especially, is absurdly cheap'. Does he bother to use public libraries I wonder? The reality for many users is that the public library is *not* free. It is true I can borrow the *book* of Hard Times for free, but if I want the spoken word CD, or the DVD I have to pay a fee. Borrowing a library book can incur significant travel costs and if my library service does not stock the book I want I might have to pay something like £2.50¹⁵ for an inter-library loan.

¹² 'LibraryThing takes its book information from Amazon, the Library of Congress, or one of more than 680 other libraries worldwide' <http://www.librarything.com/quickstart.php>

¹³ 'Social Networking for Bookworms'. By Aaron Rutkoff. The Wall Street Journal 27th June 2006 http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB115109622468789252i8U6LIHU7ChfgbxG1oZ_iunOIWE_20060727.html

¹⁴ 'A novel use of technology.' By Bryan Appleyard. 15th October 2006, Sunday Times. http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article668357.ece

¹⁵ See for example London Borough of Richmond upon Thames http://www.richmond.gov.uk/home/leisure_and_culture/libraries/library_loans_and_fines/library_reservation_fees.htm

Then there looms the potential fine for bringing the book back late.¹⁶ So suddenly £1.99 for what you might consider a 'permanent loan' that is delivered to my door in days does seem, as Bryan Appleyard says, 'absurdly cheap'.

Summary

Commercial and non commercial organisations employing new web-based technology are undermining the business model of traditional library services. Free global internet search, low cost book delivery, free digital content and online social networks to share content reduce the need for people to use traditional library services.

So let's not mince our words. These new web-based global services are a serious challenge to public libraries. The web has already challenged academic library

These new web-based global services are a serious challenge to traditional libraries

services as we saw with the outcry in 2005 when members of library staff at the University of Wales in Bangor were threatened with job cuts.¹⁷ The University consultation paper making the case for staff

cuts bluntly stated, 'Librarians do not deliver 'value for money' when compared to the internet'. Librarians lost their jobs. It is clearly time to ask if public libraries provide value for money compared to the competition?

PART 2. What should public libraries do?

I should make it clear that I am not advocating that tax funded public libraries should necessarily replicate these commercial web-based services. It may not make sense to enter direct competition. The real question in my view is how can public libraries *compete*?¹⁸ Can they offer a service that is more relevant, more engaging, more personalised, cheaper, better, faster, more comprehensive and easier to use? How much will it cost? What will be the price to users? In this context one of the most valuable assets public libraries have may well be the buildings. A physical community space infused with books and other resources is *not* something Google or Amazon have on offer.

¹⁶ 16p at day at the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames

http://www.richmond.gov.uk/home/leisure_and_culture/libraries/library_loans_and_fines/library_fines.htm

For a bewildering list of charges and fines at Essex Libraries see

http://www.essexcc.gov.uk/vip8/ecc/ECCWebsite/content/binaries/documents/Library_Fines_Fees_and_Charges_Poster_2005_to_2006.pdf?channelOid=null

¹⁷ For a summary see 'Bangor University librarians face job cuts

Drastic restructuring of University Wales Bangor library proposes the demise of subject librarians.' By Mark Chillingworth, Information World Review 07 March 2005. <http://www.vnunet.com/information-world-review/news/2083942/bangor-university-librarians-face-job-cuts>

¹⁸ For more detail see my presentation to Leicestershire Libraries in 2008..

<http://www.slideshare.net/kenchad/how-can-public-libraries-compete-leicestershire-june-2008-511683>

Understanding the value chain

Librarians need to understand better where their services fit in the 'value chain' and where they can add unique value. I am interested in the topic of technology and how it is transforming society. Amazon 'knows' this because it has been tracking my book purchases and my searching activity---my 'clickstream'. So it recommended the Benkler book to me. I had not heard about it elsewhere. I clicked on the link in my email from Amazon and was able to 'search inside' some of the book's content online and read reviews. Searching inside, I saw that I could download the complete book in PDF format—for free from the author's web site! Amazon also suggested some related titles I might be interested in—and they are genuinely relevant. So in my path to gaining a better understanding of what is happening in the world, Amazon adds value. How much value does the library add? I search for the title in my local library catalogue. The response is: 'Nothing found'. End of story.

Librarians need to understand better where their services fit in the 'value chain'

The key roles of the public library

Libraries need a clear vision in order to be effective. I think it needs to be centred on a broad view of democracy. For me Philip Pullman expressed it very well and it is worth quoting him at some length. '[Reading] places demands on the reader, because that is the nature of a democracy: citizens have to play their part. If we

'Our relationship with books is a profoundly, intensely, essentially democratic one' Philip Pullman

don't bring our own best qualities to the encounter, we will bring little away. Furthermore, it isn't static: there is no final, unquestionable, unchanging authority. It's dynamic. It changes and

develops as our understanding grows, as our experience of reading - and of life itself -increases. Books we once thought great come to seem shallow and meretricious; books we once thought boring reveal their subtle treasures of wit, their unsuspected shafts of wisdom.'¹⁹ I would expand this view beyond books into the new digital realm.

So this idea of democracy is not a narrow party political one. It is not static either. In his book 'Setting the people free, the story of democracy' -John Dunn, Professor of Political Theory at the University of Cambridge, describes how the idea of democracy has radically changed over time. There has been constant tension between what he calls the 'order of egoism' and the 'order of equality'. He goes on to say. 'A ruling people cannot confront one another in conditions of acute inequality.'²⁰ The order of egoism (in essence liberal free market capitalism), though recently challenged, remains in the ascendancy. Dunn supports that in general but argues that the scales need tipping some way towards the order of

¹⁹ 'War on words.' By Philip Pullman, Guardian 6th November 2004.

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1343733,00.html>

²⁰ 'Setting the people free. The story of democracy.' By John Dunn. Atlantic Books. 2005

equality. The public library can bring its own particular contribution to equality. Public libraries (unlike academic libraries) are for *everyone*. That doesn't mean the same service for everyone. Libraries provide a very differentiated children's service, for example. In a democracy libraries also have a role, in my view, to be just a little subversive. Libraries are home to the Bible, the Qur'an and the works of Richard Dawkins. As the education system becomes more and more commoditised with the learning process geared ever more closely to the job market, public libraries have an increasingly valuable role as knowledge liberators. Information is power and public libraries, have a key role here. I recall Jacob Bronowski speak movingly of his early education achieved through his local public library. Why don't public libraries work more closely with the academic library sector to provide access to the wealth of electronic journals? Right now when students leave university they become disenfranchised from this service.

PART 3: Some ways forward

We need an action plan. At Ken Chad Consulting we are focussed on technology, change and its implications. So our contribution is modest, but we hope a valuable one, in the areas we know best.

Education

A concerted effort is needed in order to better appreciate the technology and business model context, what users are doing, what they want and the nature of the new competition that public libraries face. In their book 'Blue Ocean Strategy' Kim and Mauborgne describe a strategy that avoids the rival-filled 'red ocean' of heads-on competition, and instead they encourage organisations to find the 'blue ocean' of uncontested market space. Is there a 'blue ocean' for public libraries? If there is, does the domain have the skills to find and exploit it?

Technical and business skills

The public library sector needs a skills and talent programme to develop and bring in people who have the business and technical aptitude to enable libraries to compete. By business I do not mean public libraries have to operate as commercial companies. They do, however, now compete with commercial companies so need

The timeless skills around information management and metadata are at the heart of libraries and also the new information age.

to understand what they are up against. The timeless skills around information management and metadata are at the heart of libraries and also the new information age. Businesses like Amazon and Google™ have come to realise that these are important and much wheel reinvention has gone on. The notion of 'tagging,' which is at

the heart of so many 'Web 2.0' services like YouTube™ and Flickr™ is really no more than adding subject metadata. It is cataloguing. The key difference is really one of approach. Tagging (or 'folksonomy') is a very bottom up user-centric approach. Librarians apply subject metadata in a top down authoritarian way. Both approaches are valid, but tagging is the one getting the biggest development effort.

Leadership and a national approach.

Libraries need to scale up. There are over 200 public library authorities in the UK, and no single authority can hope to match the scale of even a modest global web-

Libraries need to scale up

based service. The present state of national Inter-Library Loan (ILL) is dire. I waited so long for my request (with no information on progress) that I gave up and bought the book on Amazon.²¹ Some positive steps are being taken, in particular in Scotland and Wales, but it may be too little too late. It is not that I do not appreciate the plethora of technical, administrative and political barriers, but where will we find the Sergey Brin equivalent saying 'We want to be bold--we want to make a big difference'²² –and then orchestrating the necessary resources to *do* it? Technology is a real asset in enabling this scaling up but it needs leadership and imagination.

Standards

In general, the library domain has a good record on cooperation and standards. However, the standards driving the global information industry are not the next iteration of library cataloguing rules. In general the baton has passed to W3C where standards like the Resource Description Framework (RDF)²³ have been developed. Neither local government in general nor libraries in particular have an impressive track record of working within the W3C so there is a big gap to fill.

'We want to be bold--we want to make a big difference.' Sergey Brin

Freeing up library metadata

As the amount of digital content grows the complexity of rights can seem overwhelming. So it is not a bad idea to start with the easier task of making the *metadata* more accessible. This will not solve everything of course but it would be a worthwhile and (technically at least) relatively easy step in making content (print and digital) more *discoverable*. It seems to me that public sector metadata providers (like the British Library) get in a classic business model muddle here. Restricting access to catalogue records by charging for them or restricting rights to re-use them is not core to their business strategy. Public sector organisations often get caught up in narrowly conceived 'cost recovery' models which are not aligned to their strategy

So let us start by getting all library metadata in a big, free, open pot (or lots of pots) and liberate it for lots of discovery and access

and may even harm the overall sector economy. OCLC has done some great pioneering work here and so has (my old company) Talis. UK public libraries should support them. So let us start by getting all library metadata in a big, free, open pot (or lots of pots) and liberate it for lots of

²¹ See 'I can discover it but I can't have it: resource discovery and fulfilment' my Panlibus blog entry: for 27th September 2005. http://blogs.talis.com/panlibus/archives/2005/09/i_can_discover_.php

²² Sergey Brin, Google founder. Quoted in 'Engine Of Fun And Profit.' By David Lagesse in USNews.com. 31st October 2005.

²³ See W3C website <http://www.w3.org/RDF/>

discovery and access opportunities including Google and many other search and social software services. Open it up freely so some smart developers can get their hands on it to develop new services like 'LibraryThing'. Let us *not* simply create another 'destination' web site that no-one, except librarians, will really know or care about.

Community Engagement

I applauded the recent BIG lottery fund project to fund community engagement by libraries but was disappointed when they told me the fund would not support technology. This is a shame given that so many of the new web-based services are 'social' software (Facebook, SecondLife, etc.) -designed to create and engage

Shouldn't libraries be using their information management and metadata skills to enable web-mute communities speak to the world?

communities. Wikipedia, despite the recent criticism remains, in my view, an amazing community achievement. Why didn't a group of libraries do it? Given that public libraries still maintain a large degree of trust in

their communities it seems to me they are well placed to use technologies like wikis to help mobilise a variety of community created content. This seems to me to be a big opportunity that is ripe with exciting and democratic possibilities. Shouldn't libraries be using their information management and metadata skills to enable web-mute communities speak to the world? Is so little being done a consequence of a lack of resources or (as I suspect) a lack of leadership, vision and technical skills?

Audit of library IT

Finally, I believe all public libraries should do an audit of their library IT. Many authorities have aged and uneconomic systems. They may still be giving sterling service of a sort but, as we have seen, where the value resides changes over time. An audit would show how money could be redirected to new higher value, user-centric services. It would also reveal opportunities for integration and interoperability with other local authority systems. In my experience this is just one small but important way the local authority enhances its view of the value it places on its library service.

It's time for libraries to fight back!

Ken Chad, Ken Chad Consulting Ltd, 25th January 2010