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THE RÔLE OF LIBRARIES
IN
EDUCATION & TRAINING
IN AN
ELECTRONIC WORLD

Testimony
by
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of the
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Outline of Testimony

Introduction

Who Will Be Hurt If We Fail to Support Public Libraries?
  Children as Library Users
  The Poor
  The Job-Seeker and the Small Business Person
  The Citizen-Participant as an “Interest Group.”

Needs of the Libraries and the Librarians
  New Search Paradigms
  Courses in Library Schools
  On-the-Job, Continuing Education Courses
  Training Today’s Working Librarian

Training the User Community
  Young Library Users in the Computer Age
  Adult Users of Library Services
  Non-English Speaking/Reading Users
  Other User Communities That Need Special Assistance

The Federal Role for Libraries in the Information Age
  A Place for Libraries in the Federal Establishment
  Continued Federal Funding
  Preferential Rates for Electronic Access
  Receive Funding from a Universal Service Fund
  Receive Funding from a new Public Telecommunications Fund

Conclusion
Introduction. Good morning. My name is Grant P. Thompson and I am Executive Director of Libraries for the Future, a national non-profit organization dedicated to advocating on behalf of the users of America's public library system. We conduct research designed to understand how American's use their libraries and what they want from them, and we seek to design policies that will direct resources towards accessible, equitable and responsive information service.

I am delighted to be here today to talk about the role that public libraries can play in the education and training of a new generation of citizens and workers who will be living in an information-rich world. This is a world that will be quite different from the traditional world in which libraries have operated. For librarians, who long ago mastered their own jargon of “Cutter numbers” and “authority control,” even the lingo is new, “gigabytes” and “gophers.” Yet adopt we must and library users must be active players in telling libraries and librarians what we want and need from these venerable institutions.

Libraries for the Future (LFF) looks at the world of libraries not as professional librarians or even as a group representing regular and experienced users of libraries. We speak for those who may not realize that their library can be of help or who face barriers of language, education, economics, or experience that separate them from the resources of their library. LFF is for libraries, though not of libraries. Thus, although I will speak briefly concerning the needs of librarians for equipment and for training (both initial and continuing), the focus of my testimony this morning will be user-centered. I ask “What must our libraries provide in order to serve the under-served, to meet the needs of a nation facing opportunities and challenges beyond our wildest imaginings?”

There is an enormous danger that the vaunted Information Superhighway will be filled with trivialities and commercial gee-gaws. Recall the excitement that early promoters felt for the civic and educating functions that television might play in American life and compare those early dreams with the sweet pablum that flows through the airwaves and cables into our homes. Libraries, if they are allowed to take their place as important contributors and participants in the information revolution, will help ensure that Americans have choices, that serious debate and hard intellectual work can be found for those who seek it.

Who Will Be Hurt If We Fail to Support Public Libraries? We need to understand who will suffer if the nation fails to move its public library system into the information age. They will include the children, the poor, and those seeking work. Consider these facts:
• **Children as Library Users.** Today, children are one of the major user groups of most libraries. A survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education reported that 37 percent of library users were children fourteen years or younger.\(^1\) Over the past ten years, circulation of juvenile materials is up by 54 percent. A recent survey of fourth graders by the National Center for Education Statistics showed that more than three-fourths of the children interviewed reported taking books out of community libraries on a weekly basis, more than reported watching three or more hours of television per day.

• **The Poor.** Many people in the middle class no longer think of libraries as their primary source of books. Paperbacks and mass marketers have increased book sales enormously in the past decade. Yet for the poor the public library remains the source of choice for information, for recreation, and for assistance. Close the libraries — or starve them so they can’t be full partners in the electronic age of information — and you close the doors to the “people’s university.”

• **The Job-Seeker and the Small Business Person.** Libraries, particularly libraries with specialized business collections, serve a special need for those out of work, who can find information about companies where they are seeking employment, names and addresses of corporate headquarters, and information on the health of particular industries. For the small business person — traditionally the engine of economic growth in this country — the library can be the tap into the wealth of economic data collected by government, to survey advantages of particular locations, and to learn from the experience of others. Increasingly, these data are being distributed on-line or in formats (such as CD-ROM) that can only be accessed with computers.

In short, when we cut off libraries, we hurt both the most vulnerable in our society and those who are developing new businesses that will fuel future growth.

*The Citizen-Participant as an “Interest Group.”* There is another “interest group” that will suffer if we fail to make libraries full participants in the electronic information age. This group is harder to define, has few lobbyists, and, in a cynical age, sounds almost naïve to mention: This group includes all Americans who need and want places (both physical and electronic) that promote lively civic discourse, that enhance a sense of community in an increasingly polarized society, that inform and delight the mind and the soul of being an American. Libraries truly serve as civic integrators: places where community meetings may be held in an
atmosphere that encourages serious discussion; places where the young and the old meet naturally in a setting where adults can naturally be rôle models to children. To the extent that libraries become less useful, less attractive in an electronic age, less able to provide the wealth and variety of services to their patrons, these essential functions of community building will die with them. The loss, although hard to estimate in dollars and cents, is real. It is one that every person who has read books to his daughter on a Saturday morning in the public library or who has studied the local school budget with her League of Women Voters group in the library’s community room will recognize.

For each of these groups of users, for the economic health of the nation, and for the liberating, civilizing, community-building effects of the local public library, we need to be sure that we keep libraries at the forefront of the information age.

Needs of the Libraries and the Librarians. We start, as we must, with the needs of the libraries and of the professional librarians. If users go to their libraries and find that they are not connected to electronic databases or if the librarians can offer no more than instructions on how to turn on the computer, the promise of the information age will be frustrated.

Librarians themselves can talk more knowledgeable about the best ways for training librarians in the new technologies and how to keep them up-to-date with changes. I will make only a few observations.

New Search Paradigms. First, experience has shown that searching for information using the new technologies is powerfully different from looking in traditional bound reference volumes, running one’s eyes along a shelf of books, or thumbing quickly through a card catalog. Although computers can process prodigious amounts of data quickly, they do it without subtlety or intelligence. A recent article in The New Yorker lamented the passing of the card catalog, with its generations of notations, “See also-s” and other subtle guideposts to the informed patron. Many new full text search programs require the user to guess what words or word patterns authors might be likely to use to describe the information sought. Who, looking for essays on being young and in love in Paris before World War II would think to look for the words “mandarin sections drying on the radiator”? And, having missed those words, would fail to find M.F.K. Fisher’s essays on living with her husband, young and in love and in Paris.

What is needed is clear thinking and hard work on how we train librarians to search for information in a world that will no longer be described by Melville Dewey and whose search techniques are fundamentally different as an intellectual exercise.
than the old systems of catalogs and books. Increasingly, the librarian of the future will have to be a Renaissance woman or man, comfortable with a variety of subjects and aware of the possibilities of connections and analogies. A worthy Federally-funded project would be to ask some gifted teachers of library science to develop hints, strategies, and methodologies that can be taught to librarians generally for working with these new electronic finding aids.

Courses in Library Schools. Second, schools of library and information science need to be certain that they are training tomorrow’s librarians to be literate in the new electronic world in which they will work. As noted above, even as they learn these new skills, librarians must not lose sight of their humanistic origins. In addition to their knowledge of hardware, they must be able to help their patrons select and synthesize knowledge from the flood of data that electronics will produce. Many schools have met this challenge; no library school worthy of the name can ignore the need.

On-the-Job, Continuing Education Courses. Third, librarians and other library personnel who are working on a day-to-day basis need to find the time and the courses organized to help them keep up-to-date on new technologies and new search strategies. A system of on-the-job training should be a part of every public library system, to the extent such a system is not now in place. Like physicians, business people, lawyers, and accountants, a continuing education requirement would make sure that our information navigators know how to use the new compasses that technology will provide to them.

Training Today’s Working Librarian. Finally, the large group of existing librarians need to receive basic training in using the new technologies. Librarians who have been on the job for ten, twenty, thirty or more years, represent an enormous resource. Much of the funding for this massive re-training will and should come from local or state budgets, but pilot training materials and course outlines would be another worthy Federal project.

Training the User Community. The community of users of America’s public libraries is not homogeneous. Thus, the training that users must have also needs to be targeted. Let me deal with three groups who need special attention: young, adult, and non-English speaking or reading users.

Young Library Users in the Computer Age. Popular folklore is full of stories of children taking to computers as naturally as earlier generations took to the telephone or the VCR. Whether for the word processing capabilities of the
computer or the ability to surf the Internet, many young people are superbly training themselves to be citizens of the new electronic age.

But millions more are being left behind. For some, it is a matter of natural inclination or ability. Unlike their computer-literate friends, they need extra attention or some task or goal that will hook their attention and open up the possibilities of the information age to these slower or more reluctant users. Yet who is going to undertake this job? It is unlikely to be the parents who are themselves uncertain about using the computer. Hard-pressed schools can help, but the burdens placed on the schools already have overwhelmed many teachers, and many of those most at need have already failed in school and are unlikely to turn there for success. Libraries and librarians are an important source of training. How many among us first got our love of reading and learning from story hours at the library? How many among us memorized the Dewey Decimal System, mastered the author and subject catalogues in order to find books that captured our imagination? And, in addition to our parents, who stood beside us while we searched and learned: it was our children's librarian. In exactly the same way, librarians equipped with the training, the equipment, and the access will stand beside a new generation who must learn to use distant data bases, search paradigms, and interactive searches.

Not all children come from homes that provide computers. For these children especially, the public library can provide a pathway out of a circle of poverty and lack of opportunity. If these children become comfortable at an early age with the electronic world of information (and the physical world of books as well), they will be better equipped to move into the mainstream economy.

*Adult Users of Library Services.* In many ways, the adult population is even more difficult to reach than the children. Children accept the computer and what lies behind it as naturally as we accepted what our parents considered the miracle of television. Adults are afraid of failure, afraid of appearing foolish, caught in grooves of habit and comfort. Libraries need to develop programs that will beguile reluctant adult users onto the information superhighway.

For this purpose, libraries and their suppliers need to develop “soft” curriculum devices that instruct just enough and that allow adult users to experiment, fail privately and not disastrously, and have early successes that encourage further exploration. Whether this soft curriculum comes in the form of intelligent help screens on terminals, posters, peer guides, or classes and lectures organized by the library but conducted in the community, its development will require thinking, creativity and resources.
Non-English Speaking/Reading Users. America is becoming more culturally diverse; old assumptions about language and literacy no longer hold true. Yet among this group may be found those most in need of help from their public library.

Electronics is admirably suited to help smooth the transition into the mainstream society for non-English speaking/reading adults and children. Whether using tutoring programs, which are infinitely patient (and, sadly, often infinitely dull) or information resources available through the network in the user's native language, the information revolution can provide resources to these users, no matter where they are located.

Libraries, if they are going to serve these populations, cannot afford to rely on electronics alone. LFF work in San Francisco indicates that at least some young recent Asian immigrant mothers thought that the library was a part of the police state, organized to collect information about the users to go into permanent files! Many libraries have been community leaders in dealing with a multi-cultural society, with collections in many languages and librarians able to communicate with patrons. Likewise, libraries have been a vital resource in the fight for adult literacy (a fight we are losing, incidentally). We can't be simply dazzled by the offerings of hardware and software without also investing in the "flesh and bone software" of librarians trained in and sensitive to the cultures of the patrons they serve.

Other User Communities That Need Special Assistance. There are other large groups that are worthy of special attention from the library community; the following are only examples:

• Disabled Americans. Libraries have been leaders in using electronic information technologies to assist patrons with special needs. CD-ROM players coupled with Braille-translating software can open up reference works available in that format to the blind; voice cards or special software can read the screen of a computer. Technology can and must be the doorway through which these Americans can move to become full and equal participants in civic and economic life.

• Persons Seeking Preventative Health Care Information. Throughout the nation, people are looking to their public library as a source of accurate, confidential information about health. Librarians in some places have responded to this interest with imaginative, electronically-based systems. For example, the HIV Information Center in the West Hollywood (CA) Public Library provides up-to-the-minute informa-
tion through the AIDS Information Network, a database that connects to leading research centers and the Centers for Disease Control.

- **Citizens Seeking Information on Governmental Actions.** At the federal level, information is daunting to locate; at the state and local level, it can be nearly impossible to find out what is planned or has occurred. Yet electronics can make a difference. The Pasadena (CA) Public Library Public Access Library System (PALS) includes a community calendar of events, directories of local elected officials, community organizations and school facilities, and local statistics relating to population, education, health, housing, and businesses. Pasadena residents can access these databases using computer terminals located in each of Pasadena’s nine library facilities and through personal computers from homes, offices and community centers. The Iowa State Library is leading a project that will link all libraries, educational facilities, and businesses on a massive fiber optic network. When completed, 2,800 miles of fiber optic cable will connect the State’s 99 counties. Along with its use for communications, the network is being considered for voter registration and other governmental services.

It is fair to say, in summary, that at this point we can hardly conceive of the uses of the electronic superhighway. In his book on the introduction of the telephone into different societies from its invention until today, Peter Young observes that at first the telephone was considered simply a novelty; the once mighty Western Union Telegraph Company refused an offer to buy the patent at a bargain price on the grounds that it had little or no commercial value. Users didn’t know how they would accept the device into their daily lives; for many years, it was thought to be principally a broadcast device to allow the homebound to hear Sunday sermons or notable concerts. Who, bound by those limited visions, would have imagined the facsimile machine, voice mail, the Internet, and cable television? In just the same way, the information revolution has ramifications that are nearly impossible to predict from where we stand. Yet we know that the sooner that more and more people are freed to roam through the groves of data and wisdom that this revolution will make accessible, the faster users will invent uses beyond the dreams of the system’s inventors.

Libraries provide a test bed, a training ground, and a place for those who are timid, inexperienced, young, or face special challenges to be part of that revolution.
The Federal Rôle for Libraries in the Information Age. Despite the fact that libraries are considered an almost uniquely local institution in America, there is an important Federal rôle that has been overlooked in the past. This oversight at the Federal level begins with financial support. Over 80 percent of library funding comes from locally-raised tax dollars; out of a total annual revenue from all sources of around $5 billion, Federal dollars account for only about $140 million. (Unfortunately, the flow of Federal dollars has been declining during the past two decades; compared to the 1960s and corrected for inflation, the Federal commitment to libraries is less than half of what it once was.)

America’s system of public libraries, taken together, constitutes an irreplaceable national resource. Although we like to talk about a new National Information Infrastructure, in fact America’s library system amounts to an existing infrastructure. Its national value can be seen from at least two different angles.

• First, at the heart of a self-governed, democratic society is an informed citizenry, active in their own communities. Libraries can and do provide that physical place that allows people to meet and discuss and the information resources to make that discussion productive and grounded in facts. Moreover, they have the resources of information and serve as powerful reminders of the wisdom of the past and the opportunities of the future. The nation benefits when citizens take part.

• Second, local libraries will increasingly become a national resource in an electronic age when, for example, the resources of Cleveland’s superb collection are instantly available (perhaps even in full text form) to library users in the Florida Keys and the North Slope of Alaska. In a way that is difficult to imagine, libraries will increasingly become producers of information, suppliers into the web as well as takers from the well. The strength of the system will be increased enormously as its parts become strong.

At an earlier point in the nation’s history, we collectively engaged in a major program of building a library infrastructure. Although we usually only remember Andrew Carnegie’s individual philanthropy in building over 1,600 libraries, less well known was the commitment he exacted from those receiving a Carnegie Library that they provide a stream of public funds to maintain and improve on the original gift. In other periods, the country has put resources into its tangible and intangible capital assets. At Libraries for the Future, we believe that there should be a national commitment to the new electronic infrastructure, a commitment that
puts libraries at the heart of a national training and education program. The existing infrastructure of libraries must not be discarded: It is too valuable; the resources it represents will continue to be useful in the future. Electronics are additive in their value; books and particularly librarians will never be obsolete.

This new commitment also needs to be carried out in a public/private partnership. We see five components of Federal action that should be a part of any plan for America’s libraries in the next century.

• First, there needs to be a single place within the Federal government and within Congress where library interests are represented. The current non-system, which spreads funding and responsibility among Cabinet agencies and (to some extent) among Congressional committees obscures the value of libraries and makes it easy to shave funding and programs in a piecemeal fashion.

• Second, we believe that libraries need to continue to receive direct Federal funding, whether through the Library Services and Construction Act (which the Administration has proposed cutting), or though some new vehicle that continues to encourage innovation and cooperation among the nation’s libraries.

• Third, we believe that libraries (and certain other institutions serving the public interest) deserve preferential rates for electronic service, including both preferences on access and usage charges. These lower rates would recognize that the public asset of bandwidth and use of streets and airwaves need to be paid for in part by money dedicated to the public good.

• Fourth, we believe that — in addition to preferential rates — libraries of all types should be eligible for subsidies to be drawn from an expanded Universal Service Fund. This is a concept taken from the world of telephone regulation that should be extended to services in public spaces for those who cannot afford them otherwise or who need training and guidance in their use.

• Finally, we believe that in addition to the Universal Service Fund, there should be established a national Public Telecommunications or Public Networking Fund to support local non-commercial information infrastructure, including the local public libraries. Eligible uses should include purchasing of telecommunications services, building
capacity of intermediary institutions (schools, libraries, and community access centers), and filling reserved electronic greenspace by funding civic and community networks, non-commercial programming, and educational programming.

Taken together, these specific proposals would ensure that libraries continue to receive the "traditional" Federal funding and would add to the mix preferred rates and money for training, program production, and other public uses.

Conclusion. Libraries for the Future and the users of America's public libraries whom it represents are honored to have been asked to contribute our thoughts to this important hearing. We look forward to working toward the goal of an electronic future that increases both wealth and wisdom in an equitable society.

Thank you.
Notes on Sources

