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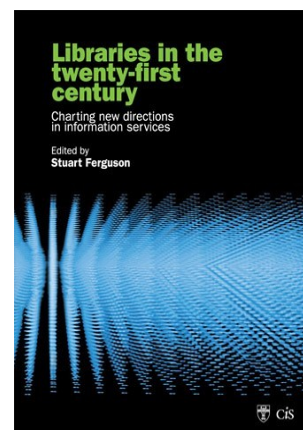
**Abstract** This chapter provides an overview of the social, political and cultural context within which libraries operate. This context is evolving and requires reconceptualisation within a postmodern framework as advanced Western societies undergo a period of intense social change.

## Library and Information Science

### Libraries in the Twenty-First Century: Charting Directions in Information Services

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This book brings together library educators and practitioners to provide a scholarly yet accessible overview of library and information management and the challenges that the twenty-first century offers the information profession. The papers in this collection illustrate the changing nature of the library as it evolves into its twenty-first century manifestation. The national libraries of Australia and New Zealand, for instance, have harnessed information and communication technologies to create institutions that are far more national, even democratic, in terms of delivery of service and sheer presence than their print-based predecessors.



Aimed at practitioners and students alike, this publication covers specific types of library and information agencies, discusses specific aspects of library and information management and places developments in library and information services in a number of broad contexts: socio-economic, ethico-legal, historical and educational.

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## **Chapter 15: Social and political perspective**

Jake Wallis, School of Information Studies, Charles Sturt University

### **The social, political and cultural context of libraries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

What is the role of libraries in the networked society, the knowledge economy, within the culture of the virtual? Previous chapters have provided valuable discussion of the continuing relevance of libraries to society. How can we conceptualise the cultural environment within which libraries operate? Libraries have always been situated within a broad social and political context. The latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period of intense social change, with the pace seemingly increasing as we hurtled towards the end of the century. What is the impact of this period of change on the role of the library within society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What factors are significant in re-envisaging the place of the library in an evolving social and political context? This chapter will address these questions. Our discussion will draw upon a number of themes; the role of knowledge, learning and technology in society; changes in lifestyle, in work and entertainment; competition and service culture.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie began investing the fortune he had amassed over a lifetime of commerce. He was no longer investing in the railroads, or the steel industry, rather he poured his wealth into the construction of public libraries throughout his adopted home, the United States of America, the country from which his riches had grown, as well as across Scotland, the homeland he had left in debt as a boy. The Carnegie libraries are a significant legacy in the history and tradition of the public library. Carnegie was a man formed by his own working class background in Scotland and the new life, the land of opportunity, that he had found in America. He recognised the value of opportunity, of betterment. He knew from his own experience that people want, people need, the chance to develop, to strive, to achieve. Carnegie saw the wealth (in every sense) that education could provide. In an age of low levels of literacy, a time when the cost of books, of education, was prohibitive for many of the population in both the old world and the new, Carnegie aimed to make them available to working class people, to people like the man he himself had once been.

Carnegie lived at a time when education was part of an elite culture, available to only those whose families could afford to have them at study rather than at work. The world has changed significantly since Carnegie's lifetime. Education and knowledge are widely recognised as powerful factors in enabling social mobility and economic success. Access to education as a fundamental human right is enshrined in Article 26 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations 1948).

### **From post-industrial to knowledge societies**

Research into the changing nature of the US economy in the postwar period identified an increase in knowledge work; those occupations which deal explicitly with the production, processing or manipulation of information

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(Machlup 1962). This shift in the economic activity of many advanced nations has been described as “*The coming of post-industrial society*” (Bell 1973). Bell’s assertion was that this change was a significant transformation in the nature of society, that the raw driving force of the post-industrial society was no longer energy, as it had been during the industrial period, but information.

The work of researchers such as Machlup and Bell has provided the foundations for the theory of the Information Society; the idea that we have moved into a new form of social organisation which is based around the production, processing and manipulation of information as central activities. The proliferation and ubiquity of networked information and communication technologies are significant factors in conceptualising the Information Society. Manuel Castells, a prominent proponent of the theory, prefers the term “the network society” (Castells 1996). Whilst there is significant debate in academic circles as to the validity of various conceptualisations of the Information Society (Webster 1995; Robins and Webster 1999), the notion that information, knowledge and the tools to enable their possession, manipulation and communication are of heightened significance has permeated modern thought and policy. For anyone living and working in one of the modern world’s advanced nations it would be hard to deny the significance of information and technology in one’s daily life, other than that their ubiquity may conceal their very presence and impact.

The terminology has morphed over the past three decades; from post-industrial or information to networked or knowledge society, with related descriptions of the knowledge, new, even the weightless economy. What are the features of this networked, information intensive society? With her conception of the “informed organisation” Soshana Zuboff (1988) describes the impact of this social and economic environment on business corporations, yet her comments might be applied across all organisations;

“The informed organisation is a learning institution, and one of its principal purposes is the expansion of knowledge – not knowledge for its own sake (as in academic pursuit), but knowledge that comes to reside at the core of what it means to be productive. [...] To put it simply, learning is the new form of labor.”

In the post-industrial society that Bell and others describe, education, skills and professional accreditation are important determinants of social success. Castells emphasises changes in our perceptions of time and space, the globalising of our outlook that is encouraged by the speed at which flows of information collapse geographical distance. Urry (2000) tries to encapsulate this complex global flow by talking about “mobilities”; of people, commercial products, information, images, technologies. What is common to all is the idea of change; rapid, constant, intense.

### **Cultural diversity in a networked world**

The opportunities and threats of this globally interconnected world have been recognised at both international and national levels. Current disparities in

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wealth, well-being and opportunity may be reinforced by a digital divide between those with access to information technologies, global communications networks and the skills to utilise and capitalise upon their capacities. This inequality at an international level may be reproduced within global regions or within nations themselves. One of the United Nations Educational, Scientific Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) major fields of action is its communication and information programme. The specific aims of the programme are to:

- Promote the free flow of ideas and universal access to information
- Promote the expression of pluralism and cultural diversity in the media and world information networks
- Promote access for all to information and communication technologies (UNESCO 2006)

In this mission UNESCO is striving to preserve the relevance of fundamental principles on access to information and freedom of expression, within the evolving context of globalisation and the development of the networked society, such as Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*;

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. (United Nations 1948)

UNESCO uses the term “knowledge societies” to describe the technologically enabled yet culturally diverse communities that its programmes aspire to develop (UNESCO 2005). The emphasis is primarily on encouraging the free flow of ideas and cultural expression within global information networks. This will, of course, be dependent upon infrastructure development (telecommunications networks, diffusion of technologies within societies). Through another of its subsidiary organisations, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations is attempting to encourage and stimulate the development of global connectivity, by bringing together stakeholders from government, industry, international and civil society organisations (ITU 2006).

### **Australia as an information economy**

Advanced nations are, by definition, ahead in the rest in terms of infrastructure development. Nevertheless, the social impacts of technology and global communications networks remain significant. The Australian government has recognised that the cycle of change will be an ongoing challenge for long-term economic and social development, and has identified what it sees as the shared features of successful information societies:

- A growing dependence on sharing knowledge and information between individuals, communities and organisations to coordinate economic and social relationships

- The institutionalisation of continuous innovation, productivity improvement, and education and skills formation
- An openness to the global economy through trade, investment and exchanges of information, knowledge and skills (Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts 2004)

The emphasis is on knowledge, education and global interconnection. It is the effective use of knowledge that is a key feature of the Australian government's strategy; as a foundation for effective social interactions, for innovation and productivity. In its policy statement, *Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004-2006*, the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts describes four objectives for Australia as an information economy:

- To promote social cohesion by ensuring that particular sectors, groups of Australians and regions are not left behind
- To secure Australia's information economy against external and internal threats and to promote Australia's interests in the emerging global information economy
- To remove barriers to information economy development
- To make government an exemplar in the use of ICT to improve citizen engagement, efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery.

The government as champion, as exemplar in the delivery of online services, is explicitly stated and represents an evolution in its role, from accountable authority to transparent service provider. The policy of modernising government, or more specifically, modernising the way that citizens interact or transact with their government is, similarly, a key plank in the United Kingdom government's strategy for the use of information and communication technologies (UK Cabinet Office 2004; Wallis 2005). Efficiently administered government is vital for aspiring knowledge economies, where governance must support and encourage both information flow and innovation.

### **The citizen of the information society**

What of the citizen? What demands does the evolution of the knowledge economy place on us as individuals? As with governments, citizens must adapt themselves into effective participants in this process of ongoing transformation. The proportion of our social interactions that take place online will continue to grow, as we use networked technologies to undertake a range of daily activities; to learn and to work, to communicate with others, to interact with government, to shop, to entertain ourselves.

Marginalisation within the information society may result not simply from a digital divide but from a divide between those with the range of literacies required to navigate through encounters (communications, transactions, information seeking, informal and formal education) in digital environments and those without (Bundy 2004; Martin 2005). The key skills for successful interaction within networked societies will be generic abilities; lifelong learning and information literacy. The importance of lifelong learning in producing the



highly skilled workforce required by the knowledge economy, as well as in alleviating social exclusion, is stressed by the Australian government (Department of Education, Science and Training 2003).

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) sees the development of information literacy amongst the population as vital not just for the economy but for democracy itself. ALIA views information literacy as crucial in that it overarches a number of social, economic and democratic goals;

- Participative citizenship
- Social inclusion
- The acquisition of skills
- Innovation and enterprise
- The creation of new knowledge
- Personal, vocational, corporate and organisational empowerment
- Learning for life (ALIA 2003)

These global and national environmental trends signify an emphasis on access to education for all, based on both democratic and economic imperatives. Learning is presented as the primary driver in the development of social capital. Andrew Carnegie's view of the significance of education for all members of society is today a key strand of government policy in those developed nations who aspire to compete in a global knowledge economy.

Libraries, in every sector, are crucial to such aspirations. The emphasis on the creative use of knowledge, a continuous cycle of innovation, career flexibility, upskilling, retraining and lifelong learning; all features of social policy in the information society, necessitates access to information resources of quality for work, education and leisure. In Australia this policy is clearly iterated; "participation in learning should be universal" (Department of Education, Science and Training 2003). Libraries play an integral and essential part in learning at all levels. The universality of this process reinforces the importance of the role that libraries play in ensuring that their clients and communities have access to the resources that they require to participate in the information society.

### **Knowledge and the culture of global information**

Our understanding of knowledge has changed significantly, however, since Carnegie's time, libraries are changing in the way that they deliver their services to reflect this. As the world has become ever more interdependent and interconnected, libraries have evolved from repositories of knowledge into gateways to a plethora of networked resources. From a public library in Australia, a client may access a local history collection or explore the treasures of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, USA.

Modern tastes and sensibilities blur the boundaries between elite and popular knowledge and culture. The public library may stock Shakespeare and Grand Theft Auto. The growth of flexible, student-centred, often electronically

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mediated learning raises questions as to what constitutes a learning experience. A traditionally homogenous view of culture is less appropriate to an interconnected world of satellite television, global travel and migration, websites and networked communications, the mobilities that Urry (2000) describes. Modern societies are awash with diverse cultural values, with difference and plurality. One need simply to turn on the television to glimpse the global flow of cultural values as it washes by. The predominance of American cultural content on television networks is readily apparent. The imbalance in transborder data flows (the movement of informational content across national boundaries), from developed to the developing countries, has long been an issue of debate at international level (Brown-Syed 1993).

We have already noted the role that UNESCO plays in encouraging cultural and linguistic diversity in the digital information environment. UNESCO's aim in this context is to facilitate the development of culturally diverse information societies where local knowledge, culture and traditions take their place within global communications networks in order that they may be strong enough to withstand a flood of non-indigenous cultural and linguistic content and values. Standardised global consumer brands and services, whose operations use international networks of people and technology, represent a "McWorld" (Barber's (1996) term, quoted in Urry 2000), a unified global culture and economy. UNESCO's projects are a response to the threat that this process of globalisation poses to existing indigenous forms of culture and social organisation. Popular grassroots responses come from within the developed world in the form of anti-globalisation protests which have been vocal, and at times violent, at international meetings of the World Trade Organisation and the G8 group of governments (Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Italy, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, USA). Similar protest and dissent is reflected in the developing world in the activities of indigenous movements on local issues.

The intersection between the local and the global is underlined by such conflicts. A prominent example of this can be seen in the activities of the Zapatista movement. A political and paramilitary organisation located in the Chiapas region of Mexico, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (to give the group its official title) draws its support from the indigenous population of the region, and campaigns against the Mexican government on issues of local sovereignty. Through its subversive (and ironic) appropriation of the Internet as a medium of communication, the Zapatista movement has been able to bypass the traditional media to communicate with wider Mexico and the world at large. The movement has used this communications strategy, and the words of its eloquent and enigmatic leader Subcomandante Marcos, to highlight the local impact of globalisation in developing countries whilst linking into an international network of anti-globalisation protest.

### **The postmodern information environment**

The range of information channels currently available to individual citizens in advanced societies is diverse (books, newspapers and other publications, satellite and digital broadcasting, the Web, mobile phone, text message, e-

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mail), and almost so numerous and constantly engaging as to threaten our capacity to process the information that we receive. Information comes in disaggregated chunks, decontextualised, appropriated and commodified. An increasingly visual culture (of brands and logos, websites, advertisements and sound bites) presents a constant array of images whose meaning, without depth and context, is consumed without time to process, to reflect, thus becoming fleeting, artificial, insubstantial.

How does this culture of the visual, of fleeting informational significance, impact upon debate and understanding within democratic society? Here we are drawing on the concept of a public sphere, an idea closely associated with the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas. The public sphere is an arena within civil society within which lies the essence of democracy; discussion, debate, the formation of opinion and consensus (Habermas 1974). The globalisation and commodification of information and communication, the superficiality of a visual culture, the power of the market, the decline of public service culture and the growth of consumerism, these factors may be seen as threats to the quality of information informing the public sphere, and in turn to the democratic process itself.

Debate is concerned as much with image, meaning and emotion, as it is with written texts, cognition and science. The global economy of signs, of globally circulating information and images, is transforming the public sphere into an increasingly denationalized, visual and emotional public stage. (Urry 2000).

### **A global public sphere and collective intelligence**

An alternate perspective might be to suggest that this trend constitutes a broadening of the frame of debate and the growth of a global public sphere, in which individuals are free to select the individual information sources that they feel define, shape and reflect their own experience. We have discussed how the global networking of communications technology facilitates this individual selection of information channel, be it an online newspaper, celebrity gossip web site or the latest communiqué from the leader of an obscure indigenous rebel group in Mexico.

Alternative social and protest movements are able to use the global connectivity of the Internet to promote their interests and link within similar groups worldwide. This connectivity is comparatively cheap and allows these groups to compete for attention with more established interests within society (such as governments or corporations) whose communications hierarchies may not be as responsive to interaction with the prevailing social mood. Norris (2000) notes the potential of this connectivity for protest groups (such as environmentalists, human rights, anti-war or anti-globalisation movements) in challenging authority, and encouraging pluralism and engagement within civic society. Yet this potential is also available to groups whose interests do not align with the values of pluralism and democracy such as the far right, extreme nationalist organisations and fundamentalist religious terror groups. Non-democratic groups can use the medium to great effect using visual

imagery and multimedia to deliver powerful emotional impact (Wallis 2005). In Iraq insurgent groups have distributed video in digital format of hostages being beheaded.

Established cultural authority is diluted as the information environment broadens and fragments. Trust in collective intelligence, branding and ease of access become preferred criteria in the selection of information channels, surpassing traditional notions of what constitutes objective and authoritative sources (Morville 2005). One need only think of developments in the online environment as illustrations; take, for example, the growing usage of the collaboratively created online encyclopedia Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)), end-user and community tagging of self-published digital content such as photographs on sites such as flickr (<http://www.flickr.com/>) and collections of favourite links on de.licio.us (<http://del.icio.us/>), or the range of alternative media sources such as the international Independent Media Centre network (<http://www.indymedia.org/>).

### **The library as postmodern institution**

Libraries operate within this postmodern cultural context and, like many institutions, must evolve to retain their relevance. The American media commentator and academic Herbert Schiller describes the overarching and fundamental impact on society of the changing environment in which information is produced, disseminated and consumed;

“The spectacularly improved means of producing, organising, and disseminating information has transformed industrial, political, and cultural practices and processes.” (Schiller 1996)

Yet many facets of the social and cultural context in which libraries sit, themselves underline the continuing importance of the role of the library for society at large. Given the growing fragmentation of the media and information environment it may be all the more important for civil society to have institutions which stand for learning about that which is unknown to us from our own experience, about accepting difference as enriching, about plurality and cultural diversity. Libraries serve this function and in this sense provide for society overarching, unifying values of tolerance, of the acceptance of alternative points of view, of the willingness to engage with differences of perspective.

Libraries are evolving from warehouses of books into publishers and disseminators of digital information. They play a role in the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage through an increasing number of initiatives to digitise significant local collections. Conservation activity is evolving to respond to the challenge presented by the “born digital” resources which now form a significant component of our cultural heritage. The National Library of Australia has been archiving Australian digital content from the Web since 1996 through the Pandora project (chapter 5 provides a detailed description of the national strategy to collaboratively collect and preserve Australia’s digital heritage). Through its Community Heritage Grants Scheme the National

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Library is taking steps to preserve and provide access to local heritage collections of national significance.

The empowerment of direct access to online information has stimulated a process of disintermediation across a number of industries (travel is a notable example). Direct access to information can be sought using networked technologies, arrangements and transactions can be carried out online. Mediating agents can effectively be bypassed. This process still requires access points to the information environment, advice on the use of technology to connect to, navigate through, and effectively use the digital information available. The competition that libraries face with book and coffee shops, video rental stores and home entertainment has intensified (as discussed by Chris Jones in chapter 1), yet Carnegie's vision and legacy of the library as empowering force within the community remains relevant.

As we spend ever greater amounts of our time in virtual environments, the library as place, as community space, takes on renewed significance. Castells (2001) notes the major challenge faced by the Information Society in fostering social inclusion and shared cultural values;

“A society of individualism is a society which is extraordinarily dynamic, but at the same time a society of potential isolation in terms of the cultural meaning that could be shared by society”

Public libraries can combat urban alienation and technological isolation by standing as space (both physical and virtual) in which all are welcome to enter, where one can become part of a community. In more tangible terms, the networking of the public library system and provision of community access to, not just computers and networks but also the skills with which to operate effectively and creatively in using both communications technology and digital information, are essential components of policies to combat the digital divide, to facilitate lifelong learning and, ultimately, to encourage social inclusion. Libraries across all sectors are valuable in purely economic terms because of their skills in managing the raw material of the knowledge economy, information; they are environments in which creativity, learning and the expression of ideas are stimulated. The public library in the networked society will be multifaceted, driving economic growth through the facilitation of learning whilst fulfilling essential social policy functions. Generating social capital through inclusion, access and sense of community, public libraries also embody the cultural values of openness and diversity necessary for civil society.

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