

# Suicide Prevention

## Safeguarding the Future of the Professional Librarian

Bill Crowley

*Note: This article is based on a presentation delivered September 30, 2004, at the 2004 Ohio Library Council Annual Conference in Cincinnati. A more popular consideration, also drawn from the presentation but aimed at a more general audience, was published in the September 2005 Library Journal (LJ) as "Save Professionalism." The author considers the information versus library divide in more depth in his *Spanning the Theory-Practice Divide in Library & Information Science* (Scarecrow, 2005).*

The author, both singularly and in conjunction with Deborah Ginsberg has addressed the potential for the professional survival of academic librarians, corporate librarians, information specialists, knowledge managers, and school library media specialists.<sup>1</sup> Each subsector of "librarianship" or "information science" is addressing contextually unique issues. For example, the academic library community has recently undertaken efforts to prepare humanities Ph.D. holders for employment in college and university libraries without requiring the established professional credential of a master's degree from an American Library Association (ALA)-accredited program.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, despite such transformations being taken by the academic library community, it is arguable that the tenuous nature of professionalism in public library contexts, where many states still lack regulations requiring relevant education as a requirement for appointment to librarian positions, makes the public library community particularly vulnerable to creeping deprofessionalization.

This article addresses fundamental threats to the survival of the professional public librarian. Such threats, frequently self-generated, include decisions by directors and boards to:

- Position the public library as a for-profit business clone instead of a community educational resource;
- Play numbers games in order to achieve high national rankings at the expense of local responsiveness; and
- Manage the library in ways that force talented personnel out of public service and into administration.

Also included in these pages are a number of remedies to counter such suicidal tendencies and their negative effects on librarian relevance. Here, it should be stressed that such detrimental transformations, at base, erroneously

assume that the survival of the public library requires the sacrifice of the *professional librarian*.

### Reaping What You Sow, or the Public Library in the Information Age

According to the October 1, 2002, issue of the *Tacoma Washington News Tribune*, local City Councilman Kevin Phelps, to help reduce an \$18 million city budget deficit, proposed a radical change in public library service as a way of avoiding a looming financial disaster. It was a plan praised by other members of the council as "forward-thinking and progressive," particularly since public libraries were "somewhat of a dinosaur."

As summarized by the *News Tribune's* Peter Callaghan: "To [Councilman] Phelps, the growth of the Internet and the home computer means libraries needn't be places but systems. Fewer libraries could manage data and deliver books via the mail. Poor people who want to visit could be given bus passes. He envisions just one library—a fancy new model downtown that might even attract tourists."<sup>3</sup>

In countering these arguments, Callaghan wrote that Councilman Phelps's plans for drastically restructuring the city's public library were based on two fundamentally flawed assumptions, the first being the idea that the concept of library as physical space is obsolete; and the second one being that the library is limited as simply a storehouse of information. To address these misunderstandings, Callaghan wrote about Tacoma's "10 libraries" as the "living rooms of 10 neighborhoods," offering safe places for latchkey kids after school; rooms for community meetings; the ability for seniors "to read papers and stay current;" Internet service for those without home access; and sites where "parents can give their children the gift of reading." Callaghan thought it particularly important to note in his column that "museum and library visits are a predictor of later school performance."<sup>4</sup> By definition, "school performance" is a component of education.

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## Values in Conflict

From a business perspective, information is less a profession and more a commodity. As long ago as the year 2000—close to an eternity in “Information Age” years—Mary Corcoran, Lynn Dagar, and Anthea Stratigos published the results of a in-depth study of information provision for the corporate sector in a small article entitled “The Changing Roles of Information Professionals: Excerpts from an Outsell, Inc. Study.”<sup>5</sup> Here, the authors explored the developing competition to corporate information professionals, represented by the Internet and even by the vendors who compile and lease the very databases that can be used from desktops by corporate employees without the immediate assistance of “information professionals.”

In particular, the authors asserted: “Information professionals are working within an industry that is moving toward the commodity stage. Standard procedure for commodity businesses is to lower their operational costs as the price point is driven down.”<sup>6</sup>

Note the phrases “commodity stage” and “as the price point is driven down.” Today, public libraries purchase or lease a range of commodities, including cell or land-line telephone service, Internet access, printer cartridges, pencils, and pens—products all seen by the market as being more or less standardized. In the new world of information as commodity, suppliers of information, including public libraries, must increasingly distribute their product on the basis of price and convenience. It is an issue worth thinking about. Is the public library’s information service cheaper or more convenient for people, particularly voters, than Google?

For years, the librarian’s professional rhetoric has been telling local communities that the public library’s value lies in being a community information center in the corporate mode. People are beginning to take the library community at its word. Local elected officials and trustees are starting to advocate changes in public library service based on the same corporate information model that is often discussed at annual library conferences. In such a model, is it even possible to justify employing professionally educated librarians in an information-as-commodity world demanding lower price and greater convenience? The short answer is “no.” The business model of library service works against it.

## Modeling Businesses and Numbers Games, or How Did We Get into This Mess?

In the late twentieth century, the business model took hold in much of the American library community. In a fundamentally important development, ALA-accredited programs

changed from educating librarians to educating “information professionals.” In part, this was an understandable move. Business generally ignores librarians but embraces information specialists, knowledge managers, and competitive data analysts. Also, the market for electronic information products has been booming for years. In this environment, universities could make a lot of money teaching and researching the creation, collection, analysis, dissemination, and use of electronic information, even before the rise of the World Wide Web offered new opportunities for attracting students, grants, and new faculty positions.<sup>7</sup> If readers are sufficiently new to the profession, it was probably the professors in their ALA-accredited program education that first set them on the information thoroughfare while working on their master’s degree. Many professors still believe it is the way to go. Slightly more experienced readers, who may have been in the field as long as the author, may have first heard about the business model of the public library during presentations at ALA, PLA, or state conferences from corporate consultants, business leaders, and library and information educators.

Such conference presenters offered the library profession advice on “branding” the public library as a preeminent information provider based on the corporate mode. Usually, such branding involved cost-saving and deprofessionalizing steps such as those implemented by the so-called “Jonestown Public Library” described in the author’s 2003 *LJ* article entitled “The Suicide of the Public Librarian.”<sup>8</sup> More recently these same or other presenters, out of the best of intentions, are telling the library community about the need to *really* cut costs so the public library can compete as an information provider in a globalized environment. Competitors to the nation’s public libraries are now seen to consist of well-educated and low-paid resi-

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dents of the Indian subcontinent who can provide quality professional services, including information services, at a mere fraction, perhaps as low as one-eighth, of domestic American costs.<sup>9</sup>

From their perspectives, many educators, consultants, and corporate leaders speaking at conference and other podiums were and are providing their best advice in arguing the need to reshape the public library along market lines. They like the public library and want to help ensure its survival. This is so even if adopting the business model means hiring professional librarians only as managers; centralizing all collection development; firing full-time reference librarians

ians while hiring library assistants to provide a human presence at the information desk; and, in the very near future, offshoring the real professional reference work, including maintenance of Web sites, to Bangalore, India.

Disagreement with using a business model for public librarianship should not be construed as being opposed to proper accounting and planning principles unlike, for example, Arthur Andersen, Enron, or many similar business examples of a lack of stockholder, stakeholder, and public responsibility. Many opponents of the so-called business model, the author included, really believe in both organizational responsiveness and the admirable goal of keeping financial records so well that state or local auditors can never, ever document an audit exception. The twin ideals of program effectiveness and honest bookkeeping can also be a part of the educational and recreational models of public librarianship.

### **The Marketplace Versus the Public Library**

Whenever librarians adopt the business-specific mindset and language of information educators, business consultants, corporate information specialists, and knowledge managers, they overlook a critical reality of contemporary life—the logic of the marketplace provides a very limited role for the professional librarian and, at times, even the public library itself. It leads, whether one wills it or not, to the so-called “forward-thinking and progressive” ideas of Tacoma Councilman Kevin Phelps. As was discussed, Phelps grabbed the public librarian’s own “library as information center” rhetoric and took it quite a bit further, to the point where he was advocating one centralized source of library-provided information in a city that hitherto supported ten neighborhood branches. He did offer to build a new central library as a tourist destination and have the city provide bus passes for those too poor to own a computer or pay for a ride to the new central library after all the branches had been closed down. To him, those were probably was a substantial concession. After all, library leaders were not arguing the value of the library’s educational and recreational roles. They were too busy providing Phelps with the “library as information center” arguments that he embraced for budget-cutting purposes.

If following the corporate, for-profit model represents a road that seems likely to lead to the demise or severe diminution of the American public library, is there an alternative that offers more hope? Fortunately, there is such an alternative. And best of all, it is a realistic option based on a philosophy that is supported by some of the strongest values of American culture.

### **The “Old” Public Library 101**

If one is old enough, the first course taken in the information programs that used to be library schools described

the public library as having educational, informational, and recreational roles for its service community. Following the end of World War II, the American public library profession began privileging its informational function and diminishing its philosophical commitment to its educational and recreational responsibilities. A major symbol of this conceptual transformation was the post-war *Public Library Inquiry*, a massive study of America’s public libraries funded by a then-substantial \$200,000 grant from the Carnegie Corporation (nearly \$1.8 million in 2006 dollars) and carried out by the Social Science Research Council under the direction of political scientist Robert D. Leigh.<sup>10</sup> In the report’s summary volume, entitled *The Public Library in the United States*, Leigh and the other project staff emphasized that a mainstream professional ideology existed within the public library community supporting the commitment “to serve the community as general center of reliable information and to provide opportunity and encouragement for people of all ages to educate themselves continuously.”<sup>11</sup> This thrust clearly favored information provision and relegated educational activities to a secondary place. The inquiry also dismissed the importance the public library’s *recreational* role or “giving people what they want” as a distinct negative. It further asserted that librarians who viewed the public library as a “free, miscellaneous book service supported by the public for that purpose” were cleaving to a course of action that would diminish or even doom the institution in the new communications age.<sup>12</sup>

In the philosophy of public librarianship of the last half of the twentieth century, information ruled; lifelong education was, at most, a bit player; and the ever-popular recreational role of the library was an embarrassment and ignored whenever possible.

### **The “New” Public Library 101**

As is so often the case these days, the Internet and the changes in access it has brought about have revolutionized the provision of information. In the first half of the twenty-first century, it is becoming increasingly clear that the public library’s informational role, a role increasingly identified with the delivery of what the business model defines as a commodity, has to be rethought. Library Web pages are potentially quite useful to local taxpayers—one thinks about all those licensed and other sources of information provided 24/7 that have been identified and validated by librarians. However, one must then consider the competition from Google and other Internet-facilitated sources of information. Can the public library—and professional public librarian—really compete with the other providers of information as business commodity in this Google-ized world? If not, what can the public library and the professional public librarian do to meet critical public needs and thereby safeguard their future?

## Embracing the Educational Model of the American Public Library

It might be a little embarrassing for the public library community to look within its history of professional statements and record of state statutes encouraging the formation of public libraries to rediscover that it has always had a viable alternative to what can increasingly be viewed as a less than competitive information allegiance. In Ohio, the Web site of the Ohio Library Council has a page dealing with “Library Funding History.” After the obligatory quote from Andrew Carnegie, the first sentence of the first section—the one subtitled “The Funding History of Public Libraries”—briefly says it all: “The history of public library funding in Ohio traces the growing commitment of its citizens to the importance of life-long learning.”<sup>13</sup>

That sentence doesn’t say the citizens of Ohio are willing to pay a lot of money to make public libraries a more expensive alternative to Google or the next Microsoft browser update. It states that Buckeye taxpayers have a commitment to the public library as a vital source of essential learning and have seen—and if so encouraged may well continue to see—the public library as a vehicle for insuring that ongoing learning opportunities and resources are made available when needed. Legally, the legislature of the State of Ohio seems to agree; the statute dealing with public libraries is placed in Title XXXIII Education in the *Ohio Revised Code*.<sup>14</sup>

Ohio is not alone in this regard, the State of Idaho creates public libraries “as a part of the provisions for public education.”<sup>15</sup> Indiana proclaims, “the state shall encourage the establishment, maintenance, and development of public libraries throughout Indiana as part of its provision for public education.”<sup>16</sup> Illinois, the “Land of Lincoln,” the ultimate autodidact, may describe the purpose of public libraries most poetically. In Illinois, public libraries may be established “to provide local public institutions of general education for citizens.”<sup>17</sup>

## A Twenty-First Century Local Public Institution of General Education

Critical to the survival of professional librarianship in the twenty-first century is the acceptance of the reality that long-ago legislators, trustees, and librarians were correct in deeming the public library to be fundamentally an educational agency. In the words of Boston’s famed 1852 City Document No. 37, the public library should be seen as a publicly supported continuation of the “great work” of “the school and even the college and university.”<sup>18</sup>

This educational obligation has been fundamental to professional librarianship. It is why the profession should avoid implementing a model of the public library that is grounded in contemporary corporate practices and forces talented personnel out of public service and into admin-

istration as a condition of their employment as professional librarians.

## An Agenda for the Survival of the Public Librarian

Before offering details of an agenda for the survival of the professional public librarian it is important to stress that the author is not advocating a pale imitation of a classroom instruction that even as long as seventy years ago was seen as providing “too much teaching and too little encouragement of learning.”<sup>19</sup> Rather, the agenda addresses creating a learning environment for voluntary educational activities—not mandated preschool through twelfth grade (P-12) instruction. In this conception of the public library, professional librarians are educated and employed for the primary purpose of facilitating the ongoing self-education, defined in the broadest possible terms, of a spectrum of community residents ranging from preschool children to senior citizens.

## Tentative Components of the Twenty-First Century Public Library Educational Agenda

1. *Understanding that the heavy tax support accorded American public schools indicates a general willingness of the culture to support programs that are seen as educationally beneficial to voters and their families.*

Relevant library action:

State and national associations should take a collaborative leadership role in examining professional librarian duties for their educational components. The traditional and emerging spectrums of such duties, such as instructing the public in Internet use, conducting preschool story hours, and guiding adult book discussions, should be analyzed. Due to their immediate impact with the various public library “publics,” particular attention should be paid to scrutinizing professional librarian educational responsibilities in public service sectors.

2. *Recognition that privileging the master’s degree from a program accredited by the ALA, by hiring whenever possible staff who possess the traditional educational gold standard of the library profession, may be the only viable method of avoiding ongoing librarian deprofessionalization as dictated through use of the corporate business model in public libraries.*

Relevant library action:

Educationally relevant library job descriptions should be compared for commonalities with those of community college librarian positions and P-12 school

library media specialists, and the results should be used to sustain or enhance public librarian salaries. Similar analyses should be done to capture educationally relevant duties of public library support staff.

3. *Awareness that a unionized professional librarian workforce represents a potentially valuable ally in resisting the imposition of the business model within public libraries by trustees and other government officials willing to accept a lower level of professionalism in return for reduced cost. By working to maintain the numbers of professionally educated librarians, such unions provide a contemporary countervailing force to the imperatives of deprofessionalization and help ensure that the future ranks of library administrators are filled with professionally educated librarians.*

Relevant library action:

State and national associations should invite union leaders to present at yearly conferences to discuss the value of unionization in support of librarian professionalism. Where feasible and of value in a given context, formal statements recognizing the value of unionization should be considered and adopted by appropriate library organizations.

4. *Leadership by national and state public library associations in identifying the knowledge, understanding, and skill needed by professional librarians in the educational model and in ensuring that present or alternative ALA-accredited programs offer courses and degrees that embody and convey such requirements.*

Relevant library action:

State and national associations should build on the analyses described under the first component to identify the specific instruction necessary to carrying out the public librarian's educational roles. If appropriate, such organizations should work with interested ALA-accredited programs to develop and disseminate "model" course syllabi.

5. *Comprehension that "recreational" activities of the public library, when analyzed, often support priority educational objectives. Examples of this phenomenon include the advancement of learning through entertaining preschool programs, the facilitation of youth writing abilities through challenging teen poetry slams, and maintenance of adult reading abilities through appealing book discussion groups.*

Relevant library action:

State and national associations should encourage programs on the professional librarian as educator at national, state, and other conferences.

6. *Understanding that the learning-centered model of the American public libraries requires a particularly strong librarian presence in children, young adult, and reader's advisory services.*

Relevant library action:

State and national associations should advocate for educating professional youth services librarians to ensure both their professional expertise and their ability to convey the value of that expertise to parents, caretakers, and voters.

7. *Realization that the educational model of the public library requires facilities designed or renovated to emphasize such learning spaces as small and large learning rooms, computer labs, art galleries, and performance spaces or meeting rooms with portable stages.*

Relevant library action:

State and national associations should take a leadership role in developing guidelines for library construction and renovation that advance the educational conception of the public library.

8. *Knowledge that, in an Internet-facilitated world, the public library's role in making possible effective information use is primarily educational and lies in the (a) provision of instruction, frequently via workshops, in employing effective information tools and techniques to validate the information acquired through various means; and (b) acquisition or identification of useful information resources and facilitating their use in Internet-facilitated environments.*

Relevant library action:

ALA divisions should take the lead in developing policy statements and continuing education opportunities to provide guidance to public libraries seeking to defend their information roles in an Internet-facilitated, more competitive information world.

9. *Discernment by state and national associations of the need to study the effects of the Hennen's American Public Library Ratings (HAPLR) rating system and to explore developing alternative procedures that better measure public library quality.*

Relevant library action:

State and national associations should secure grant funding to analyze the impact of HAPLR ratings on (a) the adoption of the business model of the public library; (b) the composition of the public library workforce; and (c) the allocation of public library budget dollars to achieving or maintaining national rankings. Such analysis might include evaluating whether this rating system undermines or supports public librarian professionalism.

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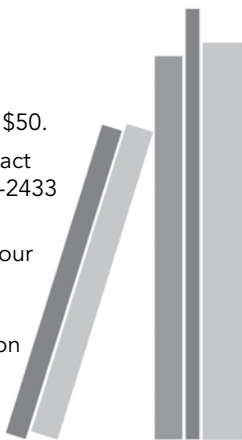
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## Conclusion

In the early twenty-first century, support for the business model of the public library represents an orientation that emphasizes a market-driven focus on containing or reducing cost of operations at the expense of librarian professionalism and expertise. This article, and the presentation out of which it was developed, represent an attempt to provide library managers, line librarians, and trustees with an alternative, educational model of the public library that is grounded in library history and law. It is an approach that has the potential to replace a no-win competition with Google and the possibility of international outsourcing with a focus on the library as a valuable foundation for individual and community lifelong learning.

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