

From “a great counter attraction to the ale-house and low music hall” to “the one place everybody goes”: the public library in *The Globe and Mail*, 1860-2016.

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Background & Methods

Canadian public libraries espouse a generally consistent set of high-level values and associated purposes. Previous research has shown that these are not entirely congruent (McKenzie 2019), and that conflict, tension, or social exclusion can result when different stakeholders prioritize different values and purposes (McKenzie & Stooke 2012). As constrained budgets increasingly require public libraries to justify their value, it is crucial to attend to the values and purposes emphasized by external stakeholders including the general public and the mass media. This poster presents emerging findings from a study of the representation of public libraries in *The Globe and Mail* since 1860.

We analyzed a sample of 144 items, including articles, editorials, and letters to the editor. We coded for the overall discursive responses (Nelson & Irwin 2014) of items from 1860 to the present. For this poster, we highlight two overall responses that we observed across the time period, using the visual metaphor of a road to illustrate both continuity and twists and turns over time.

Findings

The public library is a place for community. This discursive response appears in descriptions of a library as a showcase building that signals a city's status or serves as a community living room. It represents the library as a place for people in times of trouble (e.g., economic downturn); a haven for those who have no other place (immigrants and newcomers, the unemployed, those without secure housing, etc.); and a place of respite and leisure where all tastes are represented.

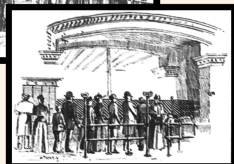
The library is a place for quality. This discursive response appears in early debates on the appropriateness of fiction in the library and in discussions of the place of the library in educating the working class. It represents the library as a place that supports individual self-improvement and community education, but maintains high standards for library workers and users (in intellectual, cultural, aesthetic, spiritual, and/or moral quality of resources and behavioural expectations).

2003 For “Competitive” Intelligence

“Those of us who are already regular users of our public library services know them to be wonderful resources for news, entertainment, research and competitive intelligence.”

2012 For Trustworthy Content

“more authenticity, more verification of content. Public libraries have a lot of public trust.”



1925 For “Great” Literature

“we have a library that is a source of pride to the citizens of our progressive city, while to those who truly love the great things of literature it has become, not merely a building of brick and stone, but a veritable wonderland of all the adventure, romance and beauty of the ages and as such we treasure it.”

1935 For World Renown

“The citizens of Toronto are entitled to no small degree of pride in their Public Library—now one of the great libraries of the continent”



A PLACE FOR QUALITY

1877

For “Quality” Literature

“... there is such an overwhelming demand for light literature, it behoves its opponents to see that the better class only of novels should be read rather than the highly sensational, impossible trash which is served up for our young people in the shape of Dime Novels and other vile literature.”

1883

For Quality Childrens’ Books

“Some children take to books, and to grave books, as naturally as ducklings take to water. But all children do not, and I would never leave a taste for reading to the chances of their doing so. I have no such respect for the free will of children; but I am willing—as Coleridge said—to prejudice my garden in favour of roses and strawberries.”

1907

For Quality Reading

“We can do little to influence the adult reader, but we can and must do much for the child. Let us make the children’s library the training school for readers.”

A PLACE FOR COMMUNITY

1890

For Those Experiencing Homelessness

“Among the number who frequent the room it is not difficult to pick out the industrious workmen from the habitual loafers who, it must be regretfully acknowledged, use the building simply as a place of shelter from the elements, when the weather outside is not in harmony with their bases [...] they squatted on the chairs and furrows, lounging in a half-drunken state, and sometimes sleeping for hours, to the general annoyance and disgust of the general body of readers.”



1919

For Children

“Anyone visiting the circulating libraries must be struck with the kindness and care shown to children and the efforts made to promote a love of books among them.”

1928

For the Working Class

“The books and pictures at the library satisfy the great hunger for beautiful things which some of these little strangers possess and of which there is such a dearth in their poor and crowded homes.”

Do Ontario’s people
really want
good public libraries?



Rockin’ out in the stacks

1946 For “All Classes and Sexes and Ages”

“The wonderful opportunity offered to all classes and sexes and ages of the community in the circulating and references libraries under the Toronto Public Library Board have to be studied to be appreciated.”

1968 For All Citizens

“Public libraries belong to the people, to all the citizens.”



Kitchener Public Library joins a growing number of facilities being renovated to better align with modern lifestyles. As demand for libraries grows in Canada, existing buildings, which usually date back to the public-building boom of the 1950s and ‘60s, are being redesigned with a more active service model that includes better access to technology and increased cultural programming of all kinds.

Conclusion

These responses parallel Talja’s (2001) findings and reflect a fundamental tension in public library values: is the library a place that serves users *as they are* or one that seeks to improve individuals and the broader community and society? The answer to these questions is, of course, not unitary and exclusive, and these two discourses do not represent a persistent binary. Rather, the articulation of these discourses have developed, adapted, disappeared and reappeared, persisted; and the relationship between them has conflicted and interwoven, in newspaper representations of the public library over the past 150 years.

References

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