LIS: INVESTIGATIONS

LIS: Investigations

Where ALIA's Research Committee brings you news from the world of library and information services research.

Understanding how our political masters view library mission

Since the public library mission needs to be defined in collaboration with elected councillors, the author of the doctoral study summarised in this paper sought to understand councillors' views of library mission and to compare these with library practice. Her most startling finding is the fact that most councillors have a passive image of the library, with buildings and collections being all-important and staff largely invisible. Indeed, Gazo found no acknowledgement of the specific skills of librarians and notes councillors' lack of knowledge of reference services and their doubt about whether such a service would be useful!

The values councillors saw in libraries were similar to those expressed by professionals and library users. They saw the library's main role as educational, followed by others such as socialisation, information search, and literacy. Councillors expressed satisfaction with their libraries, but this must be qualified by Gazo's other finding – that they generally know no other libraries and are concerned only with local context. One of her main conclusions is that councillors see the mission of public libraries in traditional terms and seem unaware of the impact of "Information Society".

In terms of understanding how councillors arrive at their understanding of library mission, Gazo concludes that there is no homogenous view among the councillors and that their understandings grow out of personal experience as an individual, the image they have of library users, and their political role in the management of a municipality. Public library directors need to use this model when trying to persuade councillors to promote/improve library services. As with many other research reports, there are recommendations for further research, in this case, how councillors use or could use their power, with questions such as how decision-making relating to libraries is managed and how councillors and librarians communicate.

Gazo's approach to this study was, first, to interview twelve city councillors, each representing a public library at council, collect cultural policies for the preceding ten years, then analyse both data sources, looking, for instance, at the themes and language used by the councillors. Second, she interviewed library directors and conducted a thematic analysis of both interviews and library websites. Third, she compared the results of both analyses. Finally, she re-interviewed the councillors to tell them the results of their cases and give them the chance to add further comments. Such an approach has potential application both within and beyond the public library sector.

For years we have discussed new roles for public libraries in "The Information Society"

but, despite high-sounding rhetoric , these roles are not well defined and, indeed, some professional statements are intentionally generic, pluralistic, and adaptable. Gazo's study is valuable for the concrete findings, which can be of use to public librarians, and for the research approach outlined, but also because of the relative dearth of research into the political environment in which librarians operate.

Dr Stuart Ferguson
Assistant Professor, Knowledge and Information Studies
University of Canberra
stuart.ferguson@canberra.edu.au.