Newspaper Coverage of Library Internet Access: Singapore and Toronto Compared[1]

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Abstract

This conference paper compares the newspaper coverage of Internet access in public libraries across two countries, Canada and Singapore. The aim is to discover some of the main concerns and themes that the press identifies with libraries, noting the differences between the two countries in this regard, and then to provisionally link these differences to certain structural characteristics of their respective societies and states. To achieve these aims I compare press coverage produced in terms of dates of publication, discourse producers, and discourse content. Implications of the findings for libraries and librarians are discussed.

Keywords: Internet access; Journalism; Librarianship; Singapore; Canada; Toronto

1. Introduction

The rapid spread of Internet technologies has had a profound impact on the operation of libraries around the world. It has been a force libraries have had to come to terms with. In so doing, the changes wrought by librarians have also affected how society views their institutions. Given the importance of public perception and the increasing need of libraries to justify their existence, examination of these views is warranted. Here I focus on one influential agent of public opinion, the press, and its coverage of the Internet in public libraries.

If my institutional focus is the press, my geographical focus is twofold: Toronto and Singapore. Such a comparative approach is valuable given the increasing ease with which people and ideas connect around the world. It is also valuable in and of itself for the insights that the differences and similarities two separate systems of library provision can provide when examined comparatively. This is especially the case for Singapore, a nation-state that stands as an exemplar of successful economic development and which has devoted considerable resources for the past decade and half to improving its library services. Toronto is the largest city in Canada, a country that, although suffering economic setbacks in the 1980s and early 1990s, is now among the top ranking countries in the United Nation's human development index (UNDP 2005) is also a valuable case to examine.

My overall aim is to discover some of the main concerns and themes that the press identifies with libraries, noting the differences between the two cities in this regard, and then to link these differences to certain structural characteristics of their respective societies and states. To achieve these aims I will compare press coverage in terms of

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dates of publication, discourse producers, and discourse content.

2. Method of Investigation

The major English language papers were examined for each city. In the case of Toronto these were the Toronto Star and the Globe and Mail. For Singapore, the major papers are the Straits Times and the Singapore Business Times. Using online databases, all available articles dealing with the subject of the Internet in libraries were collected, yielding 56 Canadian and 44 Singaporean articles. These articles were analyzed for three kinds of data: date of publication, discourse content, and discourse producers (that is, the people cited in the article).

3. Dates of Publication

For Toronto, the earliest coverage dates back to 1992. Succeeding years did not herald much change with just five articles appearing by the end of 1996. Then, in 1997, the coverage soared to twelve articles. The following years, while not at the same level, are still much larger than the totals for the pre-1997 period. This is not surprising given the intense excitement surrounding all things Internet. But attention to the Internet in libraries remained at reasonably high levels even after the end of the bubble. The years between 2000 and 2003 saw a total of twenty-six articles published. Only after 2003, well after the collapse, do we see a marked decline in the number of articles, perhaps reflecting the current ubiquity of the Internet in mainstream Canadian society.

The amount of coverage of library Internet services in Singapore assumes the aspect of a much more gradual buildup and decline. The Internet is first mentioned in 1993. Growth gradually brings the numbers to a high point of seven articles in 1998. Not surprisingly, these years also were the time when the Library 2000 report was being implemented. And, as in Canada, these were years of intense Internet speculation. Growth continues at a heightened level till 2001. Thereafter, the drop is gradual and made even more so by the fact that two of the articles published in 2004 are actually letters to the editor.

4. Discourse Producers

By discourse producers I mean those individuals who are quoted in the press. There are a number of interesting differences between the two countries. First, are the far larger number of front-line library staff quoted in the Toronto press. In the Singapore case, only two instances could be found were "ordinary" librarians were quoted, whereas for Toronto there were ten. The Singapore press seems to rely on, or is granted access to, only deputy directors and above (it should be noted that both library jurisdictions require staff to seek permission before talking to the press). Another interesting difference is found in the coverage of politicians. The voices of politicians are to be found in both the Singapore and Canadian press, but Singapore leads in the total number of instances. Twelve Singaporean stories quoted politicians; only nine stories did the same in Canada. As we shall see, this likely reflects the importance attached to library Internet services by the Singaporean state. Finally, it is interesting to note that although six stories quoted Canadian Library Association representatives, none of the Singaporean stories did the same for the Library Association of Singapore. The significance of this will be discussed in more depth later.

5. Discourse Content

The content of the press coverage was examined and a number of themes identified. Four of the most common are presented here. They are: the digital divide, library and librarian values, pornography and intellectual freedom, and innovation.

a) Digital Divide

In both the Canadian and Singaporean press mention is made of the digital divide, that is, the gap between those with access to the Internet and those without. However, in Singapore's case the total number of referencing articles (7 or 15.9% of the total) is considerably less than in the Toronto papers (17 or 30.3% of the total). Is this because the digital divide is not a problem in wealthy Singapore? Studies of the digital divide are nearly unanimous in noting that a key predictor of Internet access at an individual or family level is economic wealth (NTIA 1999; Norris 2001; Servon 2002). The GDP/capita is roughly equal between the two countries. In Canada, there has been extensive documentation of a digital divide despite such high levels of prosperity (Sciadas 2002; Rideout 1997; Reddick 2002) suggesting that Singapore likely also has a gap in access equity. Furthermore, a comparison of Gini index values (a measure of economic inequality), suggests that Singapore's income distribution is much more concentrated which would tend to amplify disparities in access. Thus the lack of a digital divide is likely not the best explanation for its sparse coverage in the Singapore press. A better explanation lies in the different attitudes of Canadian and Singaporean society and state towards communication policy. In the case of Canada, there is a strong public policy norm that sees access to communication services as a right. Concern over access to communication was born in Canada out of the need of the state to create a collective identity in a vast and sparsely populated land. Given its small size, Singapore has not had to face this particular challenge with the result that neither state nor society has had to think about the access of citizens to communication infrastructure as a priority issue.

b) Library and Librarian Values

In the pages of the Canadian newspapers the values that libraries and/or librarians are perceived to embody in connection with Internet service are numerous: lifelong learning, free access to information, literacy, intellectual freedom, privacy, and service to under-served groups. They are also seen as binding society together, providing a public space and protecting children. These values are viewed as rooted in the past functions of libraries and attitude of librarians, as well as being applicable in the age of the Internet. In the Singaporean press, the values ascribed to libraries and librarians are of a more general nature. They are associated with a willingness to reach out to the population, making it convenient for them to use whatever the library offers. They are also limited in that they exist without any historical foundation. In fact, the library of the past is usually described negatively as a "dank" or "dark" place with long queues standing in the way of people and their reading. The past appears more as something to be broken with rather than used as basis upon which to build new technological services that continue to reflect traditional library values or ideals. A partial explanation for the limited and historical perception of library values in the press lies in the relative youth of Singapore's public library service and library profession.

c) Pornography, Intellectual Freedom, and Children

In Singapore Internet pornography and the related issue of censorship is not an issue in the press as pornography of all forms is tightly limited by the state. The Canadian case is much different. Pornography and its censorship occupy a large portion of this coverage with anti-censorship views prevailing. Intellectual freedom is a theme closely tied to the issue of viewing pornographic Internet materials in the library. In fact, the only time intellectual freedom appears as an issue in the Canadian press is in connection with

pornography. In a few cases it is the right to view pornography that is defended through an appeal to intellectual freedom. But in most cases what is defended is the right to view educational materials that deal with subjects such as homosexuality that might be construed as pornography by an over-zealous censor or machine algorithm.

Viewing pornography on the Internet in Canadian libraries generates attention because of the tension it creates between two important elements of political and social life: the individual and the community. Canada is a liberal democracy which means that the legitimacy of the government is thought to rest on the support of the people as a collective. Yet liberal democracies, at least in the Anglo-American tradition, have also valued individual rights. Ideally the liberty of the individual balances the tyranny of the majority (Skinner in Axtmann 1996). However, problems arise when the rights of society and the individual collide and this is the case with pornography. Most people in Canada find pornography distasteful. Yet few would seek to ban its sale or make its possession illegal. However, the boundary lines are not so clear when it comes to the public viewing of pornography in institutions such as the library. Here, the right of society not to be subjected to pornography comes into play, but to secure this right, how far does one go to impose on individuals, especially adult individuals? There is no clear answer and it makes the issue of Internet pornography in Canadian libraries the focus of incessant debate.

d) Innovation

The Internet and information technology in general is viewed both in the Singaporean and Canadian press as examples of library innovation. In the Singapore case, chronological as well as geographical comparisons are used to emphasize this innovativeness. Chronologically, the wonderful new world of Internet-equipped libraries is juxtaposed to a dismal past. The Internet is seen as the salvation of the library, enabling it not only to gain status as a place where new technology is prominently featured, but also in the library's more fundamental reason for being, to reach out to people and encourage them to read. But the Singaporean press not only compares past and present. It also provides cross-country comparisons to illustrate innovativeness. Of course, given Singapore's dimensions, the only relevant geographical comparisons are international, but it is also not surprising when one considers the importance placed by the state on catching up and surpassing the developed world (Mauzy and Milne, 2002).

Turning to Canada we also find evidence of a link between the notion of library innovation and Internet access. Here though, geographical comparisons are limited to the domestic scene. Unlike the Singapore case comparisons between a dismal past and a bright future are not a prominent feature of the coverage. Highlighted instead are the revolutionary implications of the new technology. The changes that Internet access brings to Canadian libraries does not result in a deepening polarization between a bad past library system and a good present one.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to uncover some of the main themes that the Canadian (Toronto) and Singaporean press associates with the Internet in libraries, and relate these to the structure of their respective states and societies. Most of the coverage falls from the mid-1990s onwards with the amount in decline since the turn of the century. This is likely a result of the current ubiquity of the Internet in both societies. There are also clear differences in who gets to speak in these articles with the press in Singapore relying on high-level personages much more than its Canadian counterpart.

The bulk of this article has focused on content, where four main themes were discussed: the digital divide, library and librarian values, pornography, and innovation. Differences

were found in the handling of each of these themes. The digital divide was generally given a great deal of attention in the Canadian press, likely due to the importance of communication issues to a geographically dispersed country. Much more attention was paid to the relationship between library Internet access and pornography in the Canadian press which may be traced back to the tensions of liberal democracy. In terms of the other two themes, the coverage was more even, but still different. The Canadian press associated librarians and libraries with a host of values and gave these values a historical base. This was not the case for the Singaporean press and likely reflects the young age of the country's library profession. In terms of innovation, whereas the Singaporean press clearly demarcated a boundary between past and present libraries, this was not so for the Canadian papers. These papers tended to view the introduction of the Internet as a continuation of a "good thing"; being more of a quantitative rather than qualitative change.

There are a number of implications of this study for library management. Firstly, librarians need to be aware of the role of the press in selectively highlighting certain elements of library service over others. The issue of pornography in Canada is one example. Only in connection with pornography is the key librarian value of intellectual freedom raised in the press. It is not an issue at all in Singapore. On the other hand, the Internet in Singaporean libraries is very much associated with better physical facilities, rather than just being a communication or information-seeking tool. Secondly, librarians need to be aware that behind the press lie the broader structural forces of state and society. The significant coverage of the digital divide in Canada is likely a product of historical concern over communication in a large, sparsely populated country. In Singapore, the lack of a highly articulated sense of library values in the press is likely a product of that country's developmental state and its relations with society. And finally, flowing from the first two implications is a further one: that in order to work effectively with the press, account needs to be taken of the particular nuances surrounding the state-society forces that comprise an integral part of the library environment.

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