A "New Deal" for Libraries in the Digital Age?

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ABSTRACT
This article maintains that the challenge to the American public library is not information technology but the ideology of information technology. This ideology is a coalescence of technological determinism, free market values, and neo-conservative politics that advocates radical government deregulation and the withdrawal of support for public services. In the face of this challenge, the article proposes a role for libraries in a learning economy and for librarians as political activists in the arena of telecommunications public policy.

INTRODUCTION
Social institutions with long continuity of essential structure and with professionally organized personnel are sensitive to the values of tradition and tend to stress awareness of the past. They serve as conservators of the classical and permanently valuable in knowledge, morals, and taste. Contemporary culture is characterized, however, by a wealth of invention and experiment which impose steady pressures on institutions for alterations in their structure and habits. The changes are often far-reaching, at times even involving the shift of functions from one institution to another. This is especially true of the impact of technological inventions, which seem to possess a highly volatile character compared with nonmaterial elements in culture. (Leigh, 1950, pp. 10-11)

This quote could easily be from the Benton Foundation report, Buildings, Books, and Bytes: Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age, a study undertaken to ascertain what the public library can contribute to Ameri-
can society during a time of technological change (Benton Foundation, 1996). But the quote is not from the Benton Report. It is from an earlier study that was undertaken a half-century ago, the Public Library Inquiry (Leigh, 1950). This major study by a group of prominent social scientists, initiated by the American Library Association, was also an effort to determine the public library’s contribution to American society during a time of dramatic change. Librarians were anxious to assess what the role of the public library should be in the post-war society. The Public Library Inquiry serves as a benchmark for subsequent efforts to assess the role of the public library. Interestingly, despite the explicit reference to technological change, there is actually little discussion in the Public Library Inquiry’s various reports about technological developments. Nevertheless, the report was certainly correct in noting the challenge of technology to such traditional institutions as the library.

As librarians coped with rapid post-war change, they continued to explore the role of the public library and to test the public’s views. A recent example that directly foreshadows the Benton volume is the Fall 1996 issue of Daedalus, “Books, Bricks, & Bytes,” and in particular the essay by Deanna B. Marcum (1996). Like the Public Library Inquiry, the Benton Report acknowledges the proud heritage of the library as place, but it also reveals that, over the past fifty years, public librarians, as well as the general public, are acutely aware of the challenge to libraries of technological developments. In contrast to the Public Library Inquiry’s sparse attention to technology, technology is the central concern of the Benton Report.

When the Public Library Inquiry was undertaken, it revealed the extent to which the public library as a civic institution and central component of community was firmly embedded in the imagination of the American public. It declared that: “It takes its place along with the courthouse, the school, the church, and the town hall as an integral part of the American scene” (Leigh, 1950, p. vii). The Benton Report reveals that there remains strong remnants of this vision. Indeed, the very rhetoric of the Public Library Inquiry is repeated when the Benton Report states that the library leaders surveyed were “nearly unanimous in their belief that libraries, along with schools and the courts, are among our fundamental civic institutions” (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 10). It also acknowledges that libraries “occupy an almost sacred place in the American community psyche...” (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 15).

The Benton Report suggests that there is a reservoir of goodwill that libraries should draw upon, but it also warns that this place in the American imagination is threatened. According to those surveyed, libraries are in some respects invisible to the public, are not seen as central to the digital revolution, can be run by retired volunteers, are not supported by younger Americans, and are expected to be little more than museums in
thirty years. Clearly, a message of the Benton Report is that librarians must forge a vision that will ensure that the public library continues to be a vivid element in the American civic imagination.

The challenge to libraries, according to the Benton Report, is information technology. The report does not entirely ignore accompanying social, economic, and political change; nevertheless, there is a strong element of technological determinism suffusing the document. There is no denying the importance of technological developments, but the report's focus is askew in the centrality it gives to technology as the primary challenge to libraries. The acceptance of information media—telegraph, telephone, radio, movies, television, computers, etc.—is not just a technical consequence but is due to economic, cultural, and political factors as well (Lubar, 1993; Winner, 1977). In my view, the greater challenge to the public library is not from change driven by information technology but rather from what can be characterized as the ideology of information technology. Giving attention to this ideology helps to consider various findings of the Benton Report as they relate to libraries, community, and telecommunications public policy.

What is the ideology of information technology? (Birdsall, 1996). It is an ideology that evolved over the past twenty years or so that is a conjunction of neo-conservative politics, laissez-faire free market economic values, and technological determinism.

Elements of the ideology of information technology became evident in the 1970s when U.S. federal science and technology policy began to emphasize research and development in the private and public sectors that would contribute directly to economic productivity (Dickson & Noble, 1981; Manchak, 1991; Schiller, 1984). This public policy strategy was reinforced by scholars, management gurus, and popular futurists who asserted that technology is driving us from a second wave industrial society into a high-tech, post-industrial, third wave, information economy. The convergence of free market values and information technology was accelerated by the success of the new Right in advancing a political agenda advocating less government through the privatization of traditional public services. It became the accepted ideology of information technology that the increasing use of information, more sophisticated technologies for manipulating and distributing it, and the privatization of all means of its production and distribution were crucial to increase productivity in a global information economy.

Because the ideology of information technology envisions the use of information technology conjoined with the adoption of free market values, it does not embody a public policy role for the nation state in a global economy. This ideology favors a public policy of radical deregulation. It asserts that, not only will the implementation of free market values assure economic development, the application of these values should
also be applied to social and cultural issues that might currently be addressed by government or subject to its regulation. A totally unregulated free market demands that all cultural and social issues be subordinated to, and resolved by, the marketplace. Consequently, knowledge as a public good is reconceptualized into information as a commodity to be sold on the open competitive market. Indeed, distinctions among data, information, and knowledge are collapsed into a vague all-encompassing concept of "information," a commodity that can be packaged into electronic bits and marketed directly to consumers through electronic networks. Thus, tax supported services such as libraries should be replaced by private initiatives. As knowledge is reduced to the commodity called information, so the informed citizen is distilled into the info-tainment consumer.

By turning the citizen into a consumer, this ideology has no concern for community, a concept that is linked to libraries in the Benton Report title itself. Any individual's commitments, activities, values, or concerns beyond economic ones are superfluous; indeed, they may actually hinder the efficient operation of the market. Allegiances to family, union, local culture, institution or organization, neighborhood, or church are of value only to the extent that they contribute to the individual as an economic consumer.

This lack of commitment to the local community and its institutions is characteristic of the workers favored by the ideology of information technology, the symbolic analysts so trenchantly described by Robert B. Reich in his book, *The Work of Nations*. Symbolic analysts "solve, identify, and broker problems by manipulating symbols" (Reich, 1991, pp. 178-79). With their skills, for which they are well rewarded financially, they can easily move from one culture, company, or economy to another. They are global cosmopolitans who have little or no commitment to local community. Reich observes that: "While symbolic analysts pledge national allegiance with as much sincerity and resolve as ever, the new global sources of their economic well being have subtly altered how they understand their economic roles and responsibilities in society" (p. 253). Thus, while their ability to pay for public services is greater than the rest of the working force, their commitment to doing so is diminishing while more of the tax burden shifts to those less able to pay. Because of their free-floating cosmopolitan orientation, symbolic analysts make the ideal worker for the global entrenchment of the ideology of information technology; however, the result is a potential decline in support of public services among the educated and economically elite of society. Political scientist Benjamin R. Barber clearly captures the essence of the ideology of information technology's personal ethos when he states that: "Markets preclude 'we' thinking and 'we' action of any kind at all, trusting in the power of aggregated individual choices (the invisible hand) to somehow secure
the public good. Consumers speak the elementary rhetoric of 'me,' citizens invent the common language of 'we'" (Barber, 1995, p. 243). When we think of citizenship, we think of those assertive opening words of the preamble to the U. S. Constitution: "We, the people...."

What is the technology of choice in the ideology of information technology? When considering such critical issues as universal service and the information highway, the earlier regulatory and technological developments of the telephone systems are the model. The general framework was a trade-off of a regulated monopoly for universal access, at least until the breakup of the Bell System in the 1980s. This strategy was successful in achieving widespread accessibility to telephone service. The Benton Report itself references the telephony model when it points out that traditionally universal service meant "person-to-person voice communications through telephones to all Americans at prices made affordable through a system of subsidies." Now, the convergence of communications technologies forces a reconsideration of the concept of universal service beyond "plain old telephone service" (Benton Foundation, 1996, p. 34). However, I would argue that the model technology for the ideology of information technology is not the telephone but another media that is as much if not more ubiquitous—television.

In addition to its almost universal presence in every household (as well as schools, bars, airports, and other public spaces), television is the largest electronic market, largely free of regulation, primarily privately owned, consumer oriented, and driven by market forces—i.e., advertising revenues aimed at promoting consumer needs. In the world of commodified information, television provides the model for the information highway. Microsoft corporate management claims that the personal computer is about to become the next mass medium with penetration rates of over 90 percent. Their feedback from consumers is that the PC should be as easy to use as the television set ("Expect More Computers," 1997, p. 31).

Television is the technology of choice for the ideology of information technology because it is itself a form of consumption and thus promotes the conversion of citizen to consumer. Not surprisingly, technologically the electronic industry is pushing the rapid development of PC TV. As for its programming, television is predominately commercials, especially as programming and commercials merge as in the case of MTV. When consumers can buy what they watch, "you have united television and mall-dom..." (Barber, 1995, p. 146). In my own province, the telephone company provides a vivid example of this television mall-dom in a glossy publication it distributed on the advantages of the information highway. It includes the following brief scenario to illustrate the virtues of the information highway: "A child shops for an appropriate Father's
Day gift at an electronic mall, safe at home in front of the TV" (Maritime Telephone and Telegraph, 1994, p. 6).

Does this conjunction of politics, free market capitalism, and information technology, entwined in the ideology of information technology, represent a historical turning point as those committed to the ideology of information technology claim? I think not. What we are witnessing is a recurring manifestation of the dynamics of the free market. Economist Robert Heilbroner observes in his brilliant series of Massey Lectures on Twenty-First Century Capitalism that: “Certainly capitalism’s most striking historical characteristic is its extraordinary propensity for self-generated change” (Heilbroner, 1992, p. 25). Capitalism has always required bursts of technological innovation, many of which have related to communication technologies, such as telegraphy, railroads, telephony, radio, television, movies, and the automobile, to name a few. While these technological developments have had major impacts on social and cultural life, it is not technological innovation that is the fundamental force for change. The change arises out of the need to generate and accumulate capital through a free market economy. The free market requires technological change to perpetuate a thriving economy.

Information technology is only the latest in a long cyclical history of technological developments required of a free market economy rather than being a totally unique force for fundamental change. The building of an information infrastructure, the demand for sophisticated software, and the potential consumer markets for information services and hardware represent vast opportunities for investment and profits involving billions of dollars, but they are not the total break from the past as is so often claimed. Nor can they be divorced from politics. Information technology, then, is not the dominant force for change. A more profound cause is the ideology of information technology. Thus, the defining issue is not technological but political.

Some would argue that values attributed to the ideology of information technology are well entrenched in the American psyche. Jorge Schement and Terry Curtis claim that Americans will choose one information policy direction over another within a set of underlying assumptions. They assert that Americans expect that information policies will conform to at least most of these assumptions. If we look at these assumptions, we can certainly see values of the ideology of information technology (Schement & Curtis, 1995):

- the public's needs as consumers rather than as citizens should determine policy choices,
- the private sector is more efficient than the public sector, therefore, the government should only intervene in the marketplace in exceptional cases,
- the marketplace itself is most efficient under conditions of maximum competition,
when government intervention is required, it should be through oversight bodies rather than through direct government provision of the service.

• Americans have greater faith in their judicial system for resolving disputes between the public and private sector than through government agencies.

• when government does intervene or provide a service, its value is judged in terms of costs and benefits rather than on some social goal or value. (pp. 164-65)

It is not difficult to find elements of the ideology of information technology among the assumptions just noted: the preference for the private sector over the public, the emphasis on productivity over social goals, the citizen perceived as consumer, and competition in the marketplace as the preferred mode of allocating services. And the consequences are evident in the pressures for public library fees for services, increased costs for government publications and data, copyright legislation favoring creators over users, corporate sponsorships in libraries, and the emerging battle over who will build, own, and provide access to the information highway.

In the political arena, left and right vie for leadership in fulfilling the goals of the ideology of information technology. The likes of Alvin and Heidi Toffler and Newt Gingrich call for a Third Wave political ideology in the Toffler’s book, Creating a New Civilization: The Politics of the Third Wave, with a foreword by Gingrich (Toffler, 1995). To counter the “lowbrow” ideologies of the Second Wave mass industrial society, the Tofflers urge the “highbrow” knowledge elites to develop their own Third Wave political ideology appropriate to a global free market information society. For the Tofflers, the Democratic Party, with the possible exception of Albert Gore, is too wedded to a nostalgic allegiance to the industrial second wave and its workers. It is the Republican Party that has the opportunity “to seize the future—lock, stock, and barrel.” They claim that: “This is the message that Newt Gingrich...has been trying...to deliver to his own party. If Gingrich succeeds,” according to the Tofflers, “and the Democrats remain chained to their pre-computer ideology, they could, for good or ill, be trampled in the political dust” (pp. 77-78).

The Tofflers want a Third Wave political ideology; it already exists in the ideology of information technology, an ideology that is basically accepted by both political parties. Indeed, in early 1997, there is considerable irony around the question of who has seized the future “lock, stock, and barrel” and who is “trampled in the political dust.” The Clinton Administration, under Vice President Gore’s guidance, has captured the initiative on this issue. The administration makes much of its drive to promote a national and global information infrastructure while pointing with pride to its efforts to ensure universal service and that public libraries have affordable access to the information highway. These are wel-
come initiatives, but the core thrust of their strategy does not deviate far from that of the ideology of information as well. Gore's initial advocacy for an information infrastructure was a key component of an Economic Leadership Strategy (my emphasis) announced by him and other senators in the early 1990s (Gore, 1992). And the objectives of the Telecommunications Act reform is to accelerate deregulation and to promote greater competition. Thus, Benjamin Barber, who does not doubt Gore's sincerity, nevertheless cautions that the claims of universal service are: "Pretty thoughts, but about as unlikely as any thing imaginable in the hostile climate of antigovernment sentiment and transnational markets that dominates our times" (p. 149). Indeed, it is well to keep in mind that, ever since Vice President Gore launched the Economic Leadership Strategy as a senator, the underlying idea has always been the need to promote economic renewal through technological initiatives and free market competition.

In addition to the politicians, business leaders, and futurists, there are some librarians who would embrace the ideology of information technology. They are ready to abandon the library as place to become freelance information brokers providing their services for a fee in the electronic library (Birdsall, 1994, pp. 123-34). In language reminiscent of that of the ideology of information technology, library leaders interviewed for the Benton Report are concerned about the library's "competitive niche in a marketplace of exploding information resources." One leader, as reported by the Benton Report, maintained that the library can no longer be a "gateway for everyone"; instead the library's role must be evaluated like "a business sizing up the competition and carving out niches" (p. 15).

Library leaders are especially concerned that the use of computers at home and the emergence of the super bookstores would create severe competition for libraries. However, it is perhaps noteworthy that young adults between the ages of 25 and 34 were particularly supportive, a group in which we might expect to find many of Reich's disinterested cosmopolitan symbolic analyzers. The study also found that those who use bookstores and computers—again symbolic analyzers?—also support libraries. In my own visits to super bookstores I was immediately struck by how much they resemble libraries with their periodical collections, large stocks of books, audio-visual materials, casual seating, and check-out counters arranged like a circulation desk. Indeed, the public may actually be confusing the bookstores with libraries. One person interviewed for the Benton Report related the story of how she observed someone coming into one of the super stores with an armful of library books and asking "Where do I return these?" Elsewhere, a Canadian bookstore manager reports that people feel they can spend several hours in the store be-
cause: "It's almost like a library atmosphere" (Ross, 1996, p. C3). This imitation can be interpreted as a form of flattery and evidence of the public's need for public spaces and, in particular, the library as place.

So, then, how pervasive is the ideology of information technology? Are Schement and Curtis correct that Americans want less government involvement with information policy? There is encouraging evidence in the Benton Report that the American public is not prepared to accept either the narrow consumer role for themselves or the restricted role of government called for in the ideology of information technology. According to the Benton Report: "Despite fears voiced by library leaders that current anti-government sentiment will hamper libraries' ability to raise money to support digital and traditional collections, the public says it is willing to pay additional taxes and fees for these services" (p. 18). Americans consider the public library an important institution in the digital age and are willing to support it financially through taxation. Furthermore, they see digitized information as a public good rather than a commodity and, again, are willing to support libraries to ensure access to it.

There is other evidence to support this view. In another Benton study based on a representative sample of 1,000 potential voters on "What People Think About New Communications Technologies," it was found that: "A strong majority of Americans support government's taking an active role in addressing issues of access, knowledge, and cost to make these services universal" (Lake, n.d., p. 1). Those surveyed do not want a wide gap to emerge between information have and have-nots. They support the idea of government providing grants to libraries to assist them in making information technology available. In short: "There is broad, consistent support for an activist government in the arena of communications technologies" (Lake, n.d., p. 4).

Those who advocate the free market and deregulation maintain that unfettered competition will promote universal and equitable service. But, as we observe the frantic mergers, alliances, and acquisitions going on among the various information hardware and software providers, telecommunications companies, broadcasters, movie studios, cable companies, and so forth, are we not really just giving up a regulated monopoly for an unregulated monopoly? Before we give ourselves over to the laissez-faire advocates of the ideology of information technology, it is worth considering further the relationship between the economy and the state.

As we noted, those who assert that the development of telecommunications services will be most efficiently accomplished in the arena of a competitive free market want government to step aside and adopt free market values as a public policy framework. My position is that there always has been and will continue to be some degree of government intervention. The critical issue is finding the appropriate balance between intervention and competition.
Proponents of the unfettered free market often cast the working of Adam Smith's invisible hand as natural law. There is, of course, no such natural law. As Reich observes: "The idea of a 'free market' apart from the laws and political decisions that create it is pure fantasy anyway. The market was not created by God on any of the first six days (at least, not directly), nor is it maintained by divine will. It is a human artifact, the shifting sum of a set of judgments about individual rights and responsibilities" (p. 186). Not only is the economic free market a human creation, it is a fairly recent one at that. I think it is important to have some understanding of these developments in recent history. There is the danger that the public and librarians will assume they must abandon the field to those who see the free market as a pervasive divine law that should be strictly applied to all economic, cultural, and political issues. Neoliberal conservatives would have us return to the classical economic liberalism of the nineteenth century; therefore, it is important to see what that means.

In England, where the free market first emerged, until the nineteenth century the economy was closely regulated by government. This system collapsed. The apparent failure of state intervention in the closing decades of the eighteenth century is the backdrop to the nineteenth century's liberal commitment to laissez-faire economics. Liberals at the time promoted the idea of a free market in opposition to the feudal ties that bound English economy and politics. These constraints were largely eliminated with the Poor Law Reform Act of 1834. However, as economic historian Karl Polanyi (1944) observes, a market economy, to be totally self-regulating, requires a market society: society must be subordinated to the needs of the market.

As soon as England moved more toward the liberal ideal of free market economics, there was a spontaneous countermovement to the market's harshest impacts. This countermovement was evident in a whole range of ways including government regulations relating to public health, factory conditions, public utilities, municipal affairs, and educational institutions. As well, there were countermovements outside government, including trade unions and other types of voluntary collective efforts. By the 1880s there had evolved such an array of government and other measures to moderate the free market that die-hard liberals became alarmed. Herbert Spencer (1965), noted liberal thinker of the time and a founder of modern sociology, in an essay attacking "over-legislation," was appalled by measures enacted to administer charity, to inspect passenger ships and coal mines, to set hours of labor, to promote vaccination, and to provide tax supported public libraries (p. 162). It was at this time that classical liberals, who in the twentieth century would be characterized as conservatives, began to incorporate into their ideology the idea that whatever failures arose out of the free market were due not to the market but to government interference.
This would become a common theme down through the years which in itself attests to the continued involvement of the state in the economy. The state and economy have always been mutually supportive. The market has needed the physical and educational infrastructure and other benefits provided by the state. The state, in turn, has needed a prosperous economy to meet the needs of its citizens. Consequently, as Heilbroner (1992) observes: "Far from 'crowding out' the private sector, the government has made way for it to move in" (p. 56).

The extent of the inter-relationship between state and economy has waxed and waned over time. Nevertheless, there has always been an inherent link between economy and state. As McGill University management expert Henry Mintzberg (1996) warns, the current insistent enthusiasm for free market values threatens to create an imbalance between the private over the public sector. He urges that we recognize that public institutions are necessary to meet certain needs while other needs can best be served through the private sector market. If we take this position with regard to telecommunications policy specifically and the role of the library, it means that we should not get bogged down in an ideological war of words about deregulation versus regulation, more government versus less government, but instead focus on achieving, through the political process, an equitable balance of intervention.

If librarians accept that there will always be a need for government intervention to modify the working of the market in telecommunications, and that there is public support for such an interventionist strategy, then it is the role of librarians to participate in the political process to find the appropriate balance of intervention. The Benton Report stresses that it is the responsibility of librarians to articulate what that intervention might be and to engage in the public policy debate necessary to achieve it. However, library leaders were not sure that the profession was ready to "step up to the plate." Many of those interviewed felt librarians at the local and national level were reluctant to embark on such an endeavor. Yet, it is rightly pointed out in the Benton Report that it is critical that librarians embark on an active political role assessing the policy implications of the recently passed Telecommunications Act of 1996. The critical issues identified are not new to librarians—e.g., universal service and access, freedom of speech, intellectual property, and funding for services.

While communication technologies contribute to the complexity surrounding these issues, it is the political and cultural context that is crucial to their resolution. It may appear that recent communications developments are a new phenomenon impinging on libraries but, in fact, libraries and telecommunications both have their roots in the late nineteenth century and thus have a shared history. After all, 1876 was not only a seminal year in the history of modern librarianship but also the
year that Alexander Graham Bell uttered his historical sentence: "Mr. Watson—come here—I want to see you."

Those who are currently on the front lines of public policy formulation reinforce the need for such activism. The American Library Association foresees the need for librarians to become more engaged in the telecommunications public debate. Fred W. Weingarten (1996), ALA senior policy advisor, claims that the communications policy is no longer the sleepy backwater that it once was. He foresees an extended period of public policy debate and negotiation requiring new alliances among stakeholders. He warns that "libraries had better be prepared to engage in the debate for a long time, on many fronts, and at many levels of policy making" (p. 47).

How do librarians prepare for and participate in such debates? Karen Adams, executive director of the Canadian Library Association, asserts that the spheres of librarianship—public policy and telecommunications—each of which have their own set of values, have reached a point of intersection that requires greater attention by librarians. She maintains that students entering the profession must learn telecommunications issues; that continuing education on these issues is required for practitioners; that more research needs to be undertaken from the library and information studies point of view; and that there is a need to develop advocates from both within and without the library community to support affordable, equitable, and universal access to information (Adams, 1996).

Pursuing Adams's agenda of teaching, continuing education, research, and advocacy requires librarians to contribute to the development of a political economy of communication. Developing a political economy of communication means returning to dimensions that have been increasingly neglected by librarians. These dimensions, as delineated by Vincent Mosco (1992), include, "a commitment to history, to the analysis of the social totality, and to moral philosophy" (p. 43). This is frightening territory avoided by those librarians longing for the neutrality of an "information science." Within the context of these dimensions, the formulation of a political economy of communication "requires...the scrutiny of decision-making processes, the identification of the participants as far as it is possible to do so, the weighting of their relative influences, and the factoring in of fiscal, administrative, and technical acts of commission and omission" (Schiller, 1984, p. 83).

Confronted with the ideology of information technology, what role can be advocated for the public library? We noted that one of the fundamental concepts of the ideology of information technology is the notion of the information economy, an economy where information is a commodity to be sold on the open market through the use of communication technologies. Such an economy has no real role for the public library. But other conceptualizations of the economy are possible. Rather than
adopting uncritically the idea of the information economy, it is more productive to give consideration, as more economists are doing, to the concept of the "learning economy." By doing so we will find a traditional but central role for the public library.

The ideology of information technology advocates the application of information technologies to promote economic growth and productivity. However, economists have been baffled by what is known as the information technology "productivity paradox." This is the dilemma that, since the 1970s, productivity growth has slowed in industrialized countries despite the increasing use of information technologies. Studies comparing investment in information technology, whether by country, industry, firm, or various economic indicators, have not established strong correlations between technological investment and productivity growth (OECD, 1991; Landauer, 1995; Soete, 1996). It is not necessary to delve into the debate among economists and policy makers surrounding this issue. What is important to us is that they have been forced to look beyond the simple introduction of technology as a panacea for stagnant economies.

Increasingly economists are moving beyond focusing on technological innovation alone to generate, manipulate, and distribute information as a means of promoting economic growth. While we can acknowledge that our current economy is more concerned with the production and use of knowledge than before, it is also necessary to recognize that human skills and competencies are necessary to the development of any economy; perhaps more so now than ever before (Foray & Lundvall, 1996, p. 12). As important as technological innovation is, a critical element in long-term economic growth is the investment in human capital. As Foray and Lundvall stress, "knowledge and learning have become extremely important in determining the economic fate of individuals, firms and national economies" (p. 25).

Concerned about the lack of productivity and job growth despite the increased use of information technologies, the G-7 countries requested the OECD to undertake a comprehensive examination of this issue. After two years of study, the OECD issued its report on Technology, Productivity and Job Creation (Soete, 1996). Among a variety of public policy initiatives, the report calls upon firms and governments to promote investment in human capital to ensure that individuals have the appropriate qualifications to enter the workforce and to undertake lifelong learning. In addition, there is a need for closer coordination and balance between technological and human resource development. The report notes that technology has always been recognized as a critical physical embodiment of capital. What is new is the recognition of its embodiment in human capital and the need to ensure that there is adequate investment by the
private and public sectors in developing the skills required to use, adapt, and maintain physical technologies.

While the competitive free market values embodied in the ideology of information technology and the narrow focus on information technology can undermine community, it can also devalue the worth of the individual and erode the support of public institutions. In contrast, the OECD report expresses the need for government to adopt public policies that will encourage the development of learning economies that contribute to social cohesion in the face of global forces that are leading to a deterioration in the living standards of the underskilled. Foray and Lundvall (1996) stress that: “Promoting broad access to skills and competencies, and especially the capability to learn, is the key element in any strategy aiming at limiting the degree of social exclusion.” They warn that: “There is a growing risk that IT [information technology] become an acronym for Intellectual Tribalism. A ‘New New Deal’ is called for, focusing on the uneven distribution of knowledge and information” (p. 29).

When the Public Library Inquiry was initiated in the late 1940s, the United States had only recently experienced the New Deal era. If a “New New Deal” is called for in the learning economy, the public library is in an excellent position to contribute to that objective. Lifelong learning, skill development, literacy, and adapting to social change, all of which are called for in the learning economy, are well established roles of the public library. These roles will have to be shaped to the new environment to be sure, but the public library can continue to enhance individual life chances and community bonds (Birdsall, 1994, pp. 135-50). Such a role was confirmed by the Benton consultations, a role “in which libraries team with other public service information providers to form community education and information networks open and available to all” (p. 39).

To achieve “community education and information networks,” the library will have to form alliances with others, as the report asserts. This should not be a problem as others are ready for an alliance as well. For example, in a book that should be read by every librarian, Civilizing Cyber-space: Policy, Power, and the Information Superhighway, computer expert and activist Steven Miller recognizes the public library as among those institutions that can help ensure universal access, contribute to the training necessary to access electronic sources, and serve as one of the building blocks of community (Miller, 1996). Prominent educator Ernest L. Boyer (1991) laments the loss of community and promotes the need to create “neighborhoods for learning.” Such neighborhoods should consist of “learning stations” such as museums and libraries. He feels libraries can play an especially important role in preparing children for school, a role for which the Benton Report found considerable support. These are only two examples of those outside of librarianship who look to libraries
as an important part of the social fabric and who suggest the possibility of effective allies.

In this article it is suggested that the Benton Report is a worthy addition to a long history within librarianship of examining the role of the public library through various reports, surveys, and studies. It is an encouraging report in that it does not opt for either the library as place or the electronic library but foresees a role for a "hybrid" library that preserves the best of the past while meeting the challenge of the digital age. The report rightly emphasizes the need for librarians to address the public policy implications of the new telecommunications environment. While the Benton Report focuses on libraries, it claims that: “It uses libraries as an exemplar of what can happen to even our most cherished public institutions when they face the onset of the digital revolution, a seismic societal shift” (p. 3).

The report is correct in focusing on libraries for they can serve not only as a barometer of the health of public institutions but of civilization itself (Wallerstein & Stephens, 1978). On this point I have argued that the critical element is not the technology of the digital revolution but the values in which it is enveloped, the ideology of information technology, an ideology that devalues the role of government, of public institutions, and of citizens. The challenges of the values embodied in that ideology requires librarians to become more knowledgeable about telecommunications issues and public policy processes. As well, they will have to become even greater political activists at the local, national, and international levels.

A 1978 report prepared for the New York Governor’s Conference on Libraries concluded that “it is when our political and economic institutions are on a sound basis, when they reflect collective energy, needs, and will, that our culture is resplendent. Our libraries are central to such flourishing, as its instrument and its evidence. We make of our civilization what we wish to make of it. We preserve and enhance it, or we do not” (Wallerstein & Stephens, 1978, p. 45). The Benton Report makes clear that, over a quarter century later, the challenge to preserve and enhance our civilization still confronts not only librarians but “We, the people....”

REFERENCES


