How Firm a Foundation?

DOUGLAS L. ZWEIZIG

ABSTRACT

THE BENTON FOUNDATION REPORT, *Buildings, Books, and Bytes: Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age*, bases its conclusions on three separate data collections: a gathering of insights from Kellogg Foundation grantees, a telephone survey, and a focus group interview. In order to judge the weight that can be placed on the report, the quality of the information obtained through these investigations is assessed in terms of the methods used. A concluding discussion raises ignored issues in the determination of the role of the public library.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of a new medium of communication is often seen as a threat to public libraries—as competition for the customer base of public libraries that will result in a decline in their use. This concern was expressed widely with the introduction of both paperback books and television. At a surface level, this expectation seems reasonable and, perhaps it may even, on occasion, be correct. Today, however, both paperback books and television are highly popular, and usage of public libraries is as high or higher than ever. Nevertheless, with the advent of personal computers in a significant number of homes and with the rapid expansion of the use of the Internet to seek information, this fear of the irrelevance of public libraries in the near future arose again to produce a cluster of investigations conducted for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation by the Benton Foundation.

The publication *Buildings, Books, and Bytes: Libraries and Communities in the Digital Age* is simultaneously a report, discussion, and expansion of the results of these investigations. The publication has been widely distributed through extensive mailings and publication on the Internet.

It is difficult from this slim and repetitious volume to determine the nature of the investigations carried out and, in some cases, the basis for observations offered, but it appears that there were three studies conducted:

1. A type of "key informant" study for which the informants were the grantees for Kellogg Foundation funds and who are designated as "library leaders" throughout the discussion. The grantees were asked individually to generate vision statements for the future of libraries. One of the grantees reviewed the written vision statements and interviewed the other grantees by telephone, following up on themes, probing for areas of agreement and divergence, and pursuing additional questions.
2. A telephone survey conducted in April 1996 of a stratified sample of adults (18 years and older) to pursue questions on computer usage, book purchasing, public library use, expectations of the library's future, valuation of library services, and opinions on funding options. Results of survey questions are reported in the appendix to the report in terms of percentages of responses.
3. One focus group interview in the spring of 1996 with eleven adult public library users who reside in Montgomery County, Maryland. The group was homogeneous—white and with at least some college education—although of "mixed gender."

The results of these studies were discussed in a conference of grantees in May 1996. Because these studies are the foundation for the report's observations and conclusions, this article will follow the practice of the building inspector and "spend most of the time in the basement" assessing the quality of the evidence offered in support of the report's many statements on the state of public libraries.

THE QUALITY OF THE EVIDENCE

The Key Informant Study

There are eighteen Kellogg Foundation grantees listed inside the back cover of the report. They are characterized as "span[ning] the library and information science world," but they do not appear to be representative of libraries in the United States, of library education, or of any other easily recognizable collection of library agencies. Of course, they were not selected as grantees because they were in the mainstream of library practice but because the foundation believed that they were

atypically able and likely to make a unique contribution through their supported efforts. The rationale for selecting them as grantees is sound enough, but attempting to have them simultaneously serve as "library leaders" whose observations on libraries and predictions for the future should receive special attention is less sensible.

A key consideration whenever soliciting information from respondents is whether they have the capability of answering the questions asked. In this case, presumably, each of the grantees could produce an individual library vision statement, but what the report really sought was a collective vision for the future of libraries, and it is not at all clear that the summing of individual vision statements would produce a useful collective vision, nor that these individuals were the correct group to attempt to generate a vision statement that would serve for public libraries across the United States.

The Benton Report gives too little information about this phase of the study to be able to place much confidence on necessary controls being employed. For example, the reader is not told about the instructions grantees were given for preparing their vision statements. In addition, examples of the vision statements produced are not given, so the reader's idea of these vision statements must remain vague. No information is given about the interview schedule used to follow up with an unreported number of individual grantees after the vision statements had been "distilled" or about the form in which the results of these interviews was shared with the grantee conference participants. From the presentation of method, it seems as if this phase of the study was used to produce a form of discussion guide for the conference, but observations from the interviews are presented throughout the report as if they are findings.

The Telephone Interview

The purpose of the telephone survey was "to test public support for libraries in the digital age." Some of the details of the survey are reported, such as the number of completed interviews and the margin of error for questions asked of all respondents. But not reported were the number of unanswered, refused, or uncompleted interviews so the response rate is unknown. Other standard pieces of information about the quality of the data are also missing, such as the probability of the margin of error, the margin of error (and probability) for those questions (over half of the survey) that were asked of split samples, or the number of responses on which reported percentages are based. It is important to be continually aware that the reported percentages are estimates with a probability of being wrong but, in the Benton Report, that awareness is blunted by the reporting of the results as if they were the outcome of a national referendum: "Americans support..." "Americans want..." "Americans are evenly divided..." and so on throughout.

Some review of previous work on public use of, and support for, public libraries is provided in a box on pages 28 and 29 of the report, but this summary does not provide general observations derived from a collection of studies; rather it selects individual, headline-type findings from individual studies, presented in bullet form. Such a listing lends no conceptual or theoretical underpinning for the present survey, and no rationale is given for the questions asked in the survey nor are any expectations or hypotheses stated for the results.

Although some advanced data collection methods were used, the survey study is a relatively unsophisticated effort to obtain descriptive data about behaviors, such as computer use and library use, and about perceptions, such as respondents' thoughts about the future of libraries or the importance of library services. Many of the variables on which information is sought appear to be measured for the first time in this study, and the constructs which they are intended to tap are not discussed or defined. Since the report does not reveal what was intended to be measured, it is not possible to know whether the questions asked were the appropriate ones nor to interpret findings.

Question 8 asks: "As more and more information becomes available through computers, some people say that public libraries will change. Thinking about the future, as the use of computers continues to grow, do you think public libraries will become more important than they are now, less important, or that their importance will not change much?"

This is a classic example of a question that the respondent does not have the capacity to answer. Surely, if library professionals (and "library leaders") are uncertain about the future course of libraries—whether libraries will respond successfully to the challenge of electronic information or not—asking clients to make such a prediction makes little sense. And, if the respondent can have no clear idea of the nature of libraries in the future, then the respondent can make no judgment of whether they will grow or lessen in importance. Therefore, the results of such a question are uninterpretable. For example, what does it mean that 38 percent of respondents think that there will be no change? (This same question was asked of focus group participants with similarly confused results.)

Further, assuming that the authors believe the results of the survey to be sound, too little is made of the data. Results are presented in simple descriptive form in the appendix to the report and cry out for some comparison with the demographics or other characteristics of the respondents (descriptive statistics on the demographics of the respondents are not provided). For example, the reader is told that 32 percent of the respondents did not go to a public library in the past year. Since statements are made throughout the report about how young Americans differ from older Americans (and therefore the profession should worry about the future of public libraries), the reader wants to know whether

these persons not going to public libraries are disproportionately younger. This reader also wants to know if the people who have access to computers at home or work (p. 21) are the same people who went to bookstores and public libraries. Similarly, it could add much to our understanding to know the library and computer use characteristics that relate with ratings of the importance of different library services, opinions regarding funding for libraries, and so on. In the absence of such analysis, there is no explanation for the findings of the survey. There are occasional indications that such analyses were performed, but there seems to be no systematic examination of these key relationships, and the comparisons are not provided for the reader in tables or in the appendix.

In summary, the reader is given no information to allow a judgment of whether the questions used do measure the constructs intended or whether they measure them with adequate reliability (the margin of error reported assumes perfect reliability in measurement). These difficulties are to some degree present in any data collection, and they call for a more qualified presentation than "Americans support."

The telephone survey, then, is a naïve investigation that, like the vision statements and subsequent interviews, was intended to support discussion among the grantees regarding the future of public libraries. It is questionable whether it would serve well for that purpose, but it is clear that it is not suitable to frame a national discussion of the desired direction for public libraries. It has not approached its overall study questions (which are largely unexpressed) with any conceptual rigor, and the confidence with which it can support insight into public perceptions is unestablished.

The Focus Group

Little information is provided about the focus group other than its size and composition. Its purpose, the guiding questions, the degree of structure to the interview, and the rationale for using a single group and selecting such an atypical one remain unknown. The reader is warned to remember that the findings from this group should be interpreted "with some caution," but the authors of the report often forget that caution themselves. At the end of the executive summary (p. 7), there is the startling statement: "And many Americans would just as soon turn their local libraries into museums and recruit retirees to staff them."

This did not come from "many Americans" but from the focus group as described on pages 30 and 31. On page 39, these observations are attributed to "pollsters" as if they resulted from polling: "Americans are ready to turn librarians into volunteers" and "the public perception that libraries are museums of old information."

And the caution about interpretation should be stated even more strongly. Experience with Montgomery County and its libraries would

show that it is a particular library environment. Its residents are remark-
ably well educated and take libraries as a natural part of life—i.e., to be
taken for granted, and even to be berated and, at the same time, to be
used heavily. These users are willing to "wait in line forever" even though
they complain about it; they place heavy demand on books of current
interest and assume convenient availability. In its intensity, this profile
matches only a few fortunate communities in America, and the repeated
reference to this single and particular focus group as "these Americans"
is misleading at best.

Focus groups have become a popular means of obtaining the per-
ceptions of various groups of interest. They need to have carefully de-
fined questions of interest, need to contain within their membership a
full range of responses to those questions, and need to be repeated with
a number of different groups before any confidence can be placed on
the insights obtained. This investigation fails on all three conditions.
The questions of interest are not stated and cannot be inferred; the selec-
tion of participants as frequent library users from Mongomery County,
Maryland, guarantees that the range of responses to the presumed ques-
tions of interest would be restricted; the study conducted a single focus
group.

Finally, the focus group study is misused in a way that betrays a funda-
mental misunderstanding of its capabilities. Focus groups can alert the
researcher to the kinds of responses people may have but cannot tell the
researcher how many people might have that response. If the results of
survey studies can be seen as elections, the results of focus groups should
be seen as nominations. This report intermixes the results from the fo-
cus group, findings from the telephone interview, and opinions from the
key informant study as if they provide the same quality of information.

In summary, the foundations of the report are extremely weak. The
vision statements are a questionable basis for any generalizations about
the condition or future state of public libraries. They were never in-
tended as such. The telephone interview may have been well conducted,
but there can be little confidence that it asked the right questions or that
the report makes sufficient use of what was found. The focus group is so
flawed that it would have been better left out of the report entirely; no
weight can rest on it. The rest of the report is discussion and conjecture
on topics of concern to those interested in the institution of the public
library.

POLICY ISSUES

Having spent most of the time checking over the foundations for the
Benton Report, at least a word should be said about some of its policy
implications. Briefly, the report's authors do not appear to understand
that the tax-supported provision of public library services is based upon

the contradiction of market forces. Of course, market forces represent the basis of our economy, and an unrestricted market is held to be the ideal. But there are instances where the market does not function well or has undesirable effects, and in those instances society works to counter its functioning. Of all the possible instances, this article will discuss two that the report overlooks—externalities and diversity of information.

Externalities

The basic assumption of the market is that each individual makes economic decisions independently and that the consequences of an eco-nomic decision are enjoyed or suffered by the individual. In this way, the demand by individuals for a good or service is regulated by the costs to those individuals. However, in some cases, this self-regulating system does not work. One such case is where "spillovers" or externalities occur. In this case, other parties enjoy or suffer from the economic decisions of others. An example would be the decision by a utility to use high sulphur coal. This decision would be economically sensible for the utility be-cause high sulphur coal is cheaper, but others would suffer from the con-sequences of this decision through poor air quality. So the results of the decision by one party spill over to affect others. It has long been held that education of a child not only benefits that child but also the society in which that child resides. So spillovers can be positive as well as nega-tive, depending on the effects.

The related economic principle is that if a good or service has nega-tive externalities, buyers will overconsume that good since they are not paying the full costs (others are paying part of the costs). And if a good or service has positive externalities, buyers will underconsume that good since they do not receive the full benefits. When the self-regulating mecha-nisms of the market do not work (that is, in this case, where the societally optimal amounts of a good or service are not consumed), a government needs to intervene to contradict the market's undesirable consequences.

In the case of air pollution, the federal and state governments im-pose penalities or regulations that raise the costs to make them equal the benefits. In the case of educating children, the state and local govern-ments provide education through tax support and require attendance so that the positive spillovers of education will not be lost to the society.

An argument can be made that the consumption of information pos-sesses strong positive externalities. While the externalities may be great-est for the young, the uneducated, or the poor, the use of high quality, relatively unbiased information can be seen to have general positive con-sequences beyond the benefits received by the individual. Therefore, the consumption of quality information would be undesirably low if its provision were left to the marketplace. The Benton Foundation report gives no recognition to this important basis for public funding of public

library services. Both the survey and the focus group asked respondents whether they would be willing to pay fees for services or willing to pay increased taxes. Asking individuals what they would do in their individual interest is to replicate the market. Each person will repond based on individual perceptions of costs and benefits; spillover effects will be ignored. The concept is also ignored in the discussion of fee-for-service on page 36. The report cites the problem of low-income persons being deprived of services when fees are charged but overlooks the positive externalities that will be lost with the imposition of a fee. Since more library services will be used at a lower cost, the price has been set as low as possible in order that use would be maximized. Increasing the cost of use will result directly in a reduction in use for all users, not just those who cannot afford the fees.

Diversity of Information

Marketplace forces work toward concentration of ownership and standardization of products. In the information industry, recent and continuing mergers lead to an ownership of information sources and channels in a limited number of hands. Examination of television content finds a remarkable homogeneity of content; publishers seek to duplicate past successes by publishing more of the same.

Yet there is a societal interest in the availability of a wide diversity of information. Because it cannot be determined that any answer is the final answer, society has a strong interest in promoting access to the broad range of possible answers, since the one needed may not be the one prevalent. The public library has served as a counter to the market forces of concentration and standardization by collecting widely and by not simply duplicating the Best Sellers List in its collecting. Along with the information published for the market, the library collects government documents, publications not distributed in the commercial sector (such as the Benton Foundation Report), pamphlets, back copies of magazines, and so on. Further, the library retains this diversity of information long after it is no longer in print. The library user can review a range of information on a question, not just what is available in the local bookstore at the moment. (This provision of diversity of information may help explain the continued high use of public libraries along with the growth of the relatively homogeneous information sources of paperback books and television.) Ironically, with the exponential growth of information on the Internet and enthusiasm for this new and potentially diverse information source, there is some concern that use of the Internet will be by those pursuing specific interests intently and will not foster interaction with the diversity of information available. This effect is likely to become stronger as the Internet becomes ever more populated and complex and as searching tools become more sophisticated. Further, the commercial effects on the

Internet in terms of information diversity are just beginning to be felt. So the questions go far beyond what the costs of using the Internet will be and who will have access, to what information will be made available, what will be lost if the mandate for public libraries is removed, and what functions will need to be performed if society is to make optimal use of this potential.

These aspects of public policy—the provision of positive externalities for society and the preservation and promotion of diversity of information sources—seem central to the discussion of the future role and function of the public library. While the publication of this perhaps over-distributed report has performed a service by stimulating discussions of the role of the public library, such as the discussions in this issue of *Library Trends*, it will be unfortunate if the limited and distorted lenses of the Benton Report define the terms and scope of those discussions.