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## The Benton Report: A Response

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### ABSTRACT

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE W. K. Kellogg Foundation's HRISM initiative provides a context for understanding the Benton Foundation's study and their methodological choices. The author argues that findings from the Benton study regarding the traditional way the public views public libraries support earlier studies of D'Elia and Rodgers and the Library Research Center at the University of Illinois. The Benton Report is, in turn, supported by more recent evidence, in particular a study of librarians and municipal officials, also conducted by the Library Research Center at the University of Illinois.

### INTRODUCTION

These *Library Trends* articles approach the Benton Report from a variety of useful perspectives. Most critical are those which find fault with the research methodology or research questions. The study has its limits. It was exploratory, the focus group was only one group of white middle-class users, and the report—written for a popular audience—does not present as much detail about the methods or findings as it would were it presented in a scholarly paper. At the same time, its findings are powerful.

Over 20,000 copies of the Benton Foundation's report have been distributed with much discussion resulting from people's reading of it.

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\* This article is based on a presentation to the New Jersey Library Association, May 1, 1997.

When I speak or write about the findings, I have found intense interest from librarians, many of whom comment that the findings mirror issues they are confronting on their jobs. What do the findings mean? To what extent are they valid? Do they suggest we need to alter public perceptions of the library in the digital era? Or do libraries need to change their services? Perhaps it is the thinking of library leaders, as defined in this report, who are out of sync with the field or the public?

Before trying to answer these questions, it seems helpful to begin with some background about the report—why did the Benton Foundation conduct this study? Some of the criticisms seem to come from a misunderstanding of its purpose and potential use.

## BACKGROUND

Three years ago the W.K. Kellogg Foundation began what it has called the HRISM (Human Resources for Information Systems and Management) initiative. Driven initially by the vision of Dan Atkins, dean of the School of Information at the University of Michigan, this initiative expanded to include at least three other schools of library and information science (including the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), the American Library Association, the Urban Libraries Council, Libraries for the Future, the Council on Library Resources, Harvard University, a school for disabled children, the Library of Congress, and the New York Public Library, among others.

The Kellogg Foundation's mission is to help people help themselves, and they have become convinced that information services are critical to achieving that mission. The Kellogg Foundation strongly believes in libraries and has been willing to support them as institutions, but the foundation's commitment is not to libraries. It is to services for which they believe libraries are central—i.e., making sure that communities, social service agencies, and people have access to the rich information resources of this "digital era." The Kellogg Foundation has invested in libraries and library associations in the hope that these will play a central role in our changing society, but I have heard at least one foundation spokesperson say that if libraries fail to take up that role, they will look to other ways of carrying out this initiative. In other words, if libraries are not responsive or do not move quickly enough to assert leadership in providing access to, and increased use of, digital information, Kellogg will fund other agencies that will.

Several years into this initiative, the Kellogg Foundation brought together all the HRISM grantees to see how the different organizations could work together, particularly in building a common and united focus. Included in this meeting were representatives from the Benton Foundation. A major strength of this foundation is creating public messages for public causes.

It was a difficult and frustrating meeting. As one might expect, given the diversity of the group of grantees and their significantly different foci, it was difficult for us to discern how we might work together in any formal sense. Moreover, during that meeting, it became apparent that many of us differed in our thinking about what role libraries, in particular public libraries, should play at this time of rapid technological change. We could not reach consensus on what a public message might say that succinctly and clearly captures the essence of the role that libraries play. This is what led to the Benton study, funded by the Kellogg Foundation. (It also drives a follow-up grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to the Benton Foundation to expand on this initial project. Among the activities included in that grant is a set of additional focus groups.)

The study sought to accomplish what a meeting of HRISM grantees and other library leaders could not: first, to understand the shared beliefs of library leaders about the future of libraries in a digital era as represented by the HRISM grantees; and second, to understand how the American public views libraries in a digital era. These were in the context of saying, "if we were going to try a national public relations campaign—which requires a common voice—for libraries, what should it look like?"

The methodology of the study began by looking to see if the written grant proposals of HRISM grantees revealed any shared vision. Then, drawing on the themes of the written proposals, it sought to explore further the vision of these leaders of the public library in the digital era.

I concede that the group of HRISM grantees is not necessarily the best group from which to derive a professional view of public libraries and the future. I conducted the interviews of HRISM grantees for the Benton Foundation and quickly discovered that the knowledge about public libraries of many of those to whom I was talking extended only to their personal encounters as a user. These interviews did provide valuable insights into the types of roles libraries may play in the digital era, and they guided in part the questions for the national survey.

The more important part of the study was that designed to understand how the public views public libraries today. This included a focus group of white middle-class heavy users of libraries and a national poll representative of the American population. The focus group was attended—behind a one way mirror—by the HRISM grantees and by political pollsters from the two major parties. Findings from the focus group were used not as a statement of national opinion but to expose both the viewing grantees and the readers of the report to some sobering opinions, albeit opinions of a small group. Of greatest interest is the national opinion poll conducted with adults 18 years of age and over. As noted on page 24 of the Benton Report, questions for the national poll drew on a

number of previous studies, including the U.S. Department of Education funded survey conducted by George D'Elia and Eleanor Jo Rodgers and the 1991 poll by the University of Illinois' Library Research Center of public opinion and librarians' attitudes.

The library leaders did not represent a random sample of directors, deans, or association heads. They were selected by virtue of their having received one of the Kellogg Foundation's HRISM grants. Nonetheless, these interviews revealed important dynamics and concerns that are echoed in the field's literature. What is most striking is the lack of consensus from these individuals, the real contradictions in their statements, and the palpable uncertainty and concern that emerges. These leaders envision public libraries in a digital era to be much like they are today: institutions with collections (in both digital and print form), with buildings as a center for community life, as an essentially middle-class institution (several expressed the fear of libraries becoming the information safety net for the poor, lest they become marginalized into that role), and with staff who help users navigate new information tools.

At the same time, many expressed fears that our profession does not have the leadership capable of transforming libraries the way they need to be. How can we develop the leadership capacity of those already in our field? How can we teach our students to think of themselves as assuming leadership roles? Several talked about competition with book stores (and this is not surprising, given the way in which the Borders, Barnes and Noble, and other stores have become centers for programming as well as browsing and coffee along with books to buy). Even more telling is what was *not* said in the interviews I conducted. Few individuals talked about the broader political climate of libraries, the economics of support for all public and cultural services. The roles they envisioned are essentially the roles libraries play today.

The national poll of public opinion about public libraries are in many ways consistent with the leaders' supporting the notion that public libraries can stay the course and are not being asked to change roles dramatically. This study agreed with others that indicated that almost 70 percent of the public have visited a public library in the past year (this compares to almost 80 percent who say they have visited a bookstore). Over half the sample said that it is very important for the library to serve as a neighborhood or community activity center. Fully 40 percent said that "as more and more information becomes available through computers," that libraries will become more important (19 percent said less important and 38 percent thought there would be no change). Of concern, however, is the fact that people who own computers are more likely to say that libraries will become *less* important.

Also of concern is the way the role of the librarian is envisioned. The most important roles envisioned by the respondents in the Benton

study were: (1) providing reading hours and other programs for children; (2) purchasing new books and other printed materials; (3) maintaining and building library buildings; (4) providing computers and on-line services to children and adults who lack them; and (5) providing a place where librarians help people find information through computers and online services. The role of professional librarians is obviously seen as less important because the primary service they provide is ranked fifth in the above list. Only 10 percent indicated that if they wanted to learn more about computers, they would go to a library.

It is in this context that the findings of the focus group that was also held are examined. Led and observed by experts in public opinion polling, the group included a dozen or so middle-class, mostly middle-age, white library users.

When asked what they remember about their public libraries, their stories are about closing and having shorter hours. Among the key points made by the focus group participants were the following:

1. Libraries should depend on charity and corporate support. These individuals did not want increased taxes. They are committed to the institution but do not want to go to their pocketbooks to pay for it.
2. They believe that libraries' biggest commitment is to children and education. They see the library as a safe space, particularly for women.
3. They believe that libraries are a source of information, but the needs of the information have-nots will not hold up against a need for more money. What is central to a democracy is equality of access to information, not the quality of information. Although they do not dispute that libraries will move into the computer world, they do not want libraries to do this aggressively.
4. The group members have given little thought about a standard of excellence for libraries. It is all right for libraries to be behind the curve in technology or to use volunteers as librarians.
5. The fundamental value is access to information, not equality; libraries are preservers of information, not preservers of quality.

These comments were elaborated on by the political strategists who viewed the focus group. Republican pollster Brian Tringali noted that citizens will support services until they have to pay for them. There is strong citizen interest in finding alternative funding sources.

It is easy for those of us in academia to dismiss the thinking of such a focus group, but subsequent groups, also held by the Benton Foundation and with participants divided by race and education, not only support these findings but also those from the national survey.

#### OTHER INDICATORS OF CONCERN

The Benton Report is only one of a number of indicators of public

perceptions that suggests that libraries must rethink what they are doing. Several weeks ago I received a telephone call from a trustee of a public library. She was concerned about her library director who, in response to a Board question about whether the library was affected by the recently revealed Baker and Taylor pricing scandal, responded that she would wait until *Library Journal* "told her." As a follow-up, this trustee wrote me the following:

I have been thinking I was wrong to support higher salary ranges for our director and staff. We do not seem to expect management behavior from any of them, and indeed they don't generate it on their own and respond ineffectively to specific requests. They work merely as caretakers of public assets, and as such, any salary higher than clerical is inappropriate, even at the director level. (Personal communication to Estabrook, February 11, 1997)

I recently completed another revealing study: a comparison of municipal officials and public librarians on the perceived effectiveness of the public library. The CEO and chief financial officers of communities were matched with the head public librarian in their communities and asked some of the following questions:

- A. *Please think about the local public library in comparison to other tax-supported services in your community such as police, fire, streets, mass transportation, public health, and parks and recreation. On such features below, how does the public library in your community rate in comparison to other tax-supported services?"*

The answers of the library directors and public officials differed markedly. For example, 72 percent of the library directors rated the library as higher or much higher than the other mentioned public services compared to only 43 percent of the public officials. Of the library directors surveyed, 65 percent rated the library as higher or much higher in responsiveness to the needs of citizens. Only 43 percent of the public officials did. In serving special groups such as minorities, the aging, and others, 61 percent of the library directors compared to only 45 percent of the public officials rated the library as higher or much higher than other community services.

Despite these differences, library directors and public officials are in close agreement concerning the performance of the local library compared to "an ideal public library for this community" on such factors as responsiveness to the needs of citizens, contribution of the library to individual or community well being, and quality/relevance of library materials. But in comparing their library to an ideal library, only 55 percent of the public officials rated their library's level of understanding of community politics as high or very high. In other words, only about half the officials felt the public library was doing as well as it ideally might in

understanding community politics. In contrast, 74 percent of the officials felt the police had a high or very high understanding of the political process in the community, and 71 percent thought that schools were also doing well.

Even more striking are responses to a question about how well different agencies are able to compete with other public services for an equitable share of the tax dollar. The police are rated highly by 80 percent of the officials; public schools by 76 percent of the officials; and the public library is rated as doing well by only 39 percent of the officials.

These studies reveal a public that thinks libraries are important and good but seems to be satisfied with average and quite traditional service. They reveal public and professional perceptions that librarians are not as political or integrated into the community as they might be. Although there are many communities in which both municipal officials and the general public see ways the library can be a vital force in bringing new information resources to their communities, many do not. I was startled recently by a conversation with a local community (computer) network manager during which he said he really saw no connection between what he was doing with local computer-based community information and his local public library—he did not foresee ways they could cooperate or connect services.

But why worry? In a recent U.S. Department of Education study, 65 percent of the public indicated they had used the public library in the past year and 44 percent had used it in the past month. In households with children under 18, an impressive 82 percent indicated they had used a public library in the past year. We need to worry because in most communities those same individuals who are our strongest supporters are also those who most easily can “substitute” for many of our core services—either through buying books or going online, as the Benton Report points out. Indications that this may already be happening are the declining circulation statistics of a number of libraries, the reshaping of bookstores to become centers for both children’s and adult programming, and strong evidence that many students are going first (and often last) to the Internet—through home or school computers—for reference and research.

Other trends in our economy and political climate are bound to impact libraries. The recent summit on volunteerism can only put enormous pressure on institutions to substitute volunteer labor for paid staff. It was only one voice of one focus group participant in the Benton Report that remarked that libraries under funding pressure could restaff with volunteers—but many of us know that it is a feeling shared by others. We face an anti-tax political climate. We face a public that is increasingly suspicious of “professionals.”

Simultaneously, libraries undergoing change often have a hard time

doing so. The recent storm surrounding the design of the new San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) leading to high profile media coverage like Nicholson Baker's article on the destruction of the card catalog and Sally Tisdale's yearning for the quiet library of her youth is a caution to any librarian who seeks to integrate new information technologies more fully into his or her library. The headline of the January 26, 1997, *New York Times* article catches the flavor of the dispute: "A High-Tech Library Ignites Dispute Over Computers vs. Books." Whatever the merits or problems with how Ken Dowlin dealt with the SFPL developments, the media commentary demonstrates the depth of issues all libraries face.

We are caught in an extraordinarily difficult situation. We have foundations like Kellogg encouraging us to change, encouraging us to make sure that we are leaders in making new technologies and new information resources accessible. We have a vocal public that wants libraries to hold onto their nineteenth-century roots and is suspicious of our involvement with computers. We have funders—municipal officials—who are satisfied with mediocre performance. What do we do?

#### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR LIBRARIANS—HOW SHOULD THEY RESPOND?

Findings from the Benton Report and other studies suggest that libraries are very much in the position library schools were a decade or so ago when a number of them were closed by their colleges or universities. Some of the schools closed had both students and faculty of high quality. They were closed by university administrators who felt that the schools did not meet their standards of quality, centrality, and demand—i.e., they were not perceived as meeting the standards of quality to which other departments were held, they were not central to the mission of the university, and there was insufficient demand—either for students or for employment after graduate school. The schools were left alone until such time as university budgets became tighter and universities became more concerned about justifying themselves. The schools that were closed were ones that were seen as marginal to the university's work. We see similar signs of concern in libraries.

In the survey of municipal officials reported earlier, we sought to identify those factors that predicted whether libraries had experienced any financial difficulties that resulted in a cutback of holdings or services. Of those surveyed, 26.8 percent indicated that they had had financial difficulties in the past year, but none of the expected measures were correlated with those cutbacks. We looked at total operating expenses, total circulation, number of volumes held, number of library visits, and population of legal service area—none of these factors was significant. What was significant was the extent to which the librarian and municipal officials in a community agreed on key factors of the library: the goals the

public library should pursue, the importance of the public library compared to other public services, the quality and relevance of library holdings, the importance of the library to the well being of the community, and the need for the public library to take an active part in community activities. Those libraries which had financial difficulties in the past year were the ones in which the librarian and the municipal officials indicated they did not agree.

And the poor will get poorer. When librarians were asked, "During the next two years, do you think that local tax support for your public library (in real dollars) will increase, decrease, or stay the same as it is now?" and also, "What about the outlook for local tax support over the next five years?" it is the libraries who have experienced cutbacks in the previous year who were most likely to say they expected resources to decrease.

The Benton Report issues a strong call for librarians to become more political, not just at the local level, but also in taking up issues surrounding universal service and access, intellectual property rights, and funding. The second approach suggested by the Benton Report is to build new kinds of community institutions—not just coalitions. As the Benton Report says:

This research suggests that libraries have their work cut out for them if they do not want to reside on the margins of the revolutionary new digital information marketplace. This battle is not the libraries' battle alone. At issue is the very notion of a public culture—that nexus of schools, hospitals, libraries, parks, museums, public television and radio stations, community computer networks, local public access, education, and government channels of cable television, and the growing universe of nonprofit information providers on the Internet. This public opinion research affirms the need for alliances among these institutions to define their relative and collective roles in an expanding marketplace of information. (p. 3)

The Kellogg Foundation has invested in libraries, in the Benton study, and in other initiatives because it believes that libraries have a unique opportunity at this point in history to assert leadership in how new information technologies are used by regular not-rich ordinary human beings. They believe we are the ones who can shape public policy and who should be shaping public policy, but they feel if we do not take the initiative, they cannot afford to wait. Too many changes are happening too fast and too much money is being bandied about by people hoping to get rich.

Librarians can look at many of the findings from the national Benton poll—and other recent surveys—and say, "We are well regarded by the public." Scholars can dispute the quality of the research, and they can readily say of significant parts of the study, "Why should I take seriously the concerns of a rogue group of library leaders and a bunch of white

folk from Montgomery County, Maryland?" It is easy to be dismissive of the Benton Report. That so many people are not willing to dismiss the findings and that the findings are supported by other types of data, including some of the research reported in this issue of *Library Trends*, indicates how significant the work of the Benton Foundation is for public libraries as they seek to chart a future in difficult and uncertain times.