Participatory Projects: Icelandic Libraries

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Abstract

In their call for proposals, for the 2016 International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) World Library and Information Congress (WLIC) and the Library Theory and Research Section (LTRS) set a theme of participatory projects in libraries: Connecting Collaborative Communities, specifically asking how libraries are reconnecting with the public and demonstrating their value and relevance in contemporary life. This study reports the results of investigating how public libraries in Iceland are meeting this challenge. The study attempts to look at new projects or programs that have been introduced to help with this reconnection and how these were decided upon and then introduced to library constituencies. Examples of participatory programs engaging public libraries collaboratively with community programs, leaders, other libraries, and public schools are discussed through interview material. The study also looks at ways in which librarianship training and in-service programs can assist public libraries to meet the demands of sustaining a vibrant library service program in the e-connected world of the Internet.

Introduction

When the 2016 IFLA Congress sent a call for proposals to address the connectivity of libraries to their communities, the timing seemed providential to return to Iceland and revisit earlier research I had conducted through surveys and interviews on Icelandic public libraries and with librarians. In an earlier study, I had surveyed and interviewed approximately 70 librarians and subsequently written about the results (Wyman, 2008). What I wanted to accomplish with this new research would then address concerns related

to *if* and then *how* Icelandic libraries believed they needed to reconnect with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life.

Further, new questions surrounding the Internet and social media, especially the impact of "networked individualism" (Pew, 2016). When individuals are so interconnected, how could they then be connected to public institutions? This question was beginning to haunt libraries and was surfacing and then, furthermore, how are Icelandic libraries realizing their place as a public activity in the field of this e-cultural change and information change, including access to information, reading and literacy and the preservation of cultural heritage and cultural programming that had so long been the heart of public library service. (LRTS 2015).

Historical Background

Early reading societies and a culture of storytelling have been the foundation of Icelandic libraries (Juliusdottir 2013). Aimed toward improving the common people, Iceland's early reading societies were established to educate and civilize its people due to sparse population, primitive early transportation systems and rugged terrain With the establishment of the first reading society for the common people by the common people in 1843 came the access to material that could be shared by families for the long dark winter days and the practice of family readings during the evening wakes (Byock 1988) .

For Icelanders, first and foremost a nation of readers, the book is the number one choice for a Christmas present (Marta Richter, 2002, personal communication) and with reading being described as a desirable activity in a study conducted by Weingand (1992) after interviewing librarians, library science students, educators, publishers, community leaders, factory workers, and ninth graders. Then, take into consideration Iceland's boast of publishing more books- approximately one in 10 Icelandic citizens will publish at least one book (Goldsmith, 2013) and more books are read per person than anywhere else in the world according to a BBC report (2013). In early years, books were not only loaned to ordinary citizens on horse carts ridden from village to village but made available to fishermen at sea through the lending of wooden book boxes offering an assortment of reading material, primarily fiction rather than non-fiction (Jonassdottir, personal communication, 2002).

As for storytelling being an integral part of Icelandic cultural heritage, writer Solvi Bjorn Siggurdsson put it this way:

"We are a nation of storytellers. When it was dark and cold we had nothing else to do. Thanks to the poetic eddas and medieval sagas, we have always been surrounded by stories. After independence from Denmark in 1944, literature helped define our identity." (Goldsmith 2013).

In many ways, the early storytelling of the Sagas provided a social memory of Icelandic people and their differences from mainland Scandinavia, helping them to

establish an ethnic identity all their own (Byock 2004). When the Sagas were eventually written down in the early 13th century (Urschel 2000), so came with them the documentation of every day life scenes and also a way of sharing Icelandic law. The Sagas are a written demonstration of the high value Icelandic society placed on home and independence and identified a people ready to share their literacy through a larger venue, eventually the public library.

Objectives of the Study

The main goal of this study was to determine if libraries in Iceland believe they need to reconnect with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life. The specific objectives were:

- To identify examples of new projects or programs that have been introduced to help with "reconnecting"
- To discern what metrics were being used to measure the success or failure of these projects or programs
- To identify social media being used to promote or announce programs
- To identify any collaborative efforts that have taken place for public libraries with other libraries, community leaders or programs or public schools
- To explore the impact on public librarianship and the training of librarians and staff

With the arrival of the Internet, Iceland was at once connected with the larger world through submarine cables FARICE-1, DANICE, and Greenland Connect (Freedom House 2013). Iceland has one of the highest rates of Internet and social media use in the world, according to the World Economic Forum (2014). Statistics from the 2014 Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook,* indicate 316,300 Icelanders are Internet users in a country with a population of 331,918 individuals at 96 per cent (Central Intelligence Agency (2014). That public libraries are connected is apparent as well. The larger question, however, is one asked by LRTS: "How have the libraries kept up with the change in electronic connectivity between individuals that has also impacted how individuals are staying in touch with their libraries and their libraries staying in touch with their patrons?"(2016)

Review of Literature

The body of research literature written in English related to public libraries in Iceland is scant. What is more prevalent are popular articles mentioning the early reading societies, the commitment of libraries and literature, local authors and the importance of the Sagas throughout Iceland and in Icelandic culture. A discussion in English of the importance of reading and books to Icelanders and Icelandic culture describes the importance of the extended family as being influential in early reading patterns; grandparents reading to grandchildren with the oral reading of stories beginning as young as age three (Weingand 1997). The author went on to discuss the types of reading

materials preferred, library atmosphere and reading proficiency. A later research study reported on job satisfaction for public librarians and included approximately 70 libraries and librarians. An outstanding fact from the study was the high level of job satisfaction that was present supported by job flexibility and the value placed on working with the community (Wyman 2008).

More recently, popular articles have described the importance of reading, literacy and the celebration of literature that is so popular in Iceland. In a 2015 article, Nancy Pike noted that Reykjavik was selected as the fifth UNESCO International City of Literature in part because of the city library's efforts to focus programs on books and authors, establish literary walks, landmarks and retreats (Pike 2015). The article also described literary scholars and others in the arts taking individuals on historic and literary background tours of various locations throughout Reykjavik. Excerpted material read at each historic point came from from novels, sagas or poems that involved the specific place. Other library venues are providing opportunities for evenings of hearing renewed praise about the Sagas through book discussions of current authors from South African (Nobel Prize recipient J.M. Coetzee) or Indian writer Kiran Nagarkar extolling the benefits of the Sagas and their influence on world literature (Schaaf 2011). A final article describes the notion that librarianship is thriving in Iceland through sophisticated and ambitious projects "belying the country's tiny population." Author Davidson-Arnott comments that worker satisfaction is a serious commitment for librarians and that Icelandic library practices could serve as models for other libraries. (2005).

Methodology

The study on which this paper is based was carried out from January to May 2016. Figures for the numbers of public libraries in Iceland varies primarily due to the classification of some public libraries sharing space with school libraries. An e-mail was sent to approximately 45 public libraries throughout the country using a list posted by the Landskerfi bokasafna (2014). Follow-up e-mails were sent to all the librarians attending the spring Vorfundur meeting of public library directors in Egilsstadir in April of 2016.

Among the 32 attendees, three were males (9 per cent) and 29 female (90 per cent). Both e-mails contained a link to an electronic survey with questions specifically reflecting the LTRS call for responses on how social webs have ushered in a dizzying set of tools and design patterns making participation with public institutions more fractured (2016). Additionally, informal interviews were conducted with public library directors at the same April meeting. Regarding age, library directors ranged from on-the-verge of mandatory retirement at age 67 to freshly-minted directors from library science programs.

Thirty-two public librarians were in attendance at the meeting and service populations for the libraries varied from the City Library in Reykjavik, approximate service population of 119,000, to a small public/school library in Reydarfjordur-population of 110 school children and town of population of 1100 (Erla Kristin Jonasdottir, 2016, personal conversation).

Re-Connecting with the Public

When asked whether or not libraries in Iceland were experiencing a need to "reconnect" with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary society, 92 percent responded Yes, while one person commented "there is definitely a need for the library to become a stronger partner within the community than it is at the moment."

Examples of New Projects or Programs to Help Reconnect

When asked if they could present examples of new projects or programs that have been introduced to help reconnect, 80 per cent were increasing programming inside and outside the normal library venue and 45 percent were incorporating multi-cultural programming to help make the connection. With regard to social media being used to promote or announce programs, 100 percent of the respondents indicated using Facebook with Instagram, Pinterest and Twitter occasionally being used as well as some libraries relying on postings on their library's web page or announcements made in the local papers.

Use of Metrics to Measure Success or Failure

Asked if metrics were being used to measure the success or failure of these projects, 90 percent of the respondents indicated that background research consisted of consulting librarians and staff and 57 percent said they relied on usage statistics such as gate counts and/or program attendance. Only 6 percent of the responders said that they relied on patron surveys and one new library director commented that "it was still too early to be able to speak of success or failure."

Plans for "Next Steps" or "Evolving" Programs

Only three out of 16 (less than 2 percent) of the respondents stated that *no, they had no plans for next steps.* The other respondents fell into three general categories: describing how they were going to move forward; patron feedback, or specifically describing new ideas and approaches. For those describing how they would be moving forward, budget was an overriding factor.

Impact on Public Librarianship and Training of Librarians and Staff

A degree in Library and Information Science (LIS) was first offered in 1956 with a formal Master of Library and Information Science(MLIS) program launch in 2004. (Gunnlaugsdottir 2011). Since then, however, the master's program has been changed in name to a Master of Information Science(MIS). The name change in programs has also meant a shift in course content with more emphasis on data management, information systems and less on public libraries (Gunnlaugsdottir, personal communication, 2016).

Anecdotal Responses

Informal interviews were conducted with numerous directors during the conference or over meals and coffee breaks. When asked for some examples of new projects or programs that have been introduced to help with "reconnecting," the library directors responded with specific projects. What was telling from one interview was when a library directory noted that the success of one popular program resulted in other programs boosting higher attendance.

A reception table for a community gathering and art show.

An example was a director who described their Evenings in April events that were offered as cultural "visits" to a particular country or region of the world. The first program was successful but by the second event, the word had spread and the attendance for the next event was nearly doubled. The Evenings in April programs involved music, food, dance, art, costumes, readings and photography all about the country or region. Of course, it did not hurt that for the second program, the director had called and spoken to that particular country's embassy and a representative arrived at the event with cases of exquisite vodka that were then shared with the attendees.

This library is over a popular grocery store in a shopping mall.

Three different library directors described the importance of having libraries in locales where the people would be going anyway. One library in West Iceland is over a popular Haugkup grocery store. That library director also explained that the library is close to the school so that students can stop over on their way home. Her newest addition to the space was a teen area, something she believed needed to be completely separate and not a space connected to a children's area. She called in a local graphic design artist and had "reading cubes built" so that students could lounge in the area but also "see and be seen" (Kristin Arnthorsdottir, personal communication, 2016). The graphic design artist was also offered a "gallery opening" where her work was displayed and the public could come.

New teen space in Seltjarness.

Other directors mentioned adding either a coffee bar, restaurant or small eatery on the premises that was now attracting people to linger over library materials, in particular magazines and newspapers. Many directors also mentioned that while their library space might not be as large as they would like, their shelving was moveable and when space was needed, books on mobile shelving was simply moved out of an area to create event space.

When one library was moved from the second floor to the first in a shopping mall for easier access, the new facilities proved large enough to have a separate gallery space for shows and performances. At a recent gallery opening for a popular fiction writer who is also an artist, almost 500 people were in attendance. (Marta Richter, 2016, personal communication).

Brochure from art exhibit opening.

The City Library of Reyijavik took the art experience one step further and began displaying artwork from local artists that could be loaned out. The pieces circulate for one month with a fee that can eventually accrue toward the purchase price. As the director described their programs, she mentioned that she was always thinking toward other libraries, "We look toward Helsinki for inspiration and new ideas. We saw what they were doing there and now we're trying some of their ideas here." (Erla Kristin Jonasdottir, personal communication, 2016).

Loanable art collection a City Library of Reykjavik.

Directors described piggy-backing their library programming to national and international celebrations such as the Dark Days or Polar Nights Events practiced in November by Scandinavian countries, the director explaining how her library was candlelit on certain nights and storytellers were brought in to replicate the longhouse evenings of read-alouds and storytelling that were the family entertainment in the Icelandic turf houses of long ago.   Another library picked up the theme of "Move Week" a European event showcasing the benefits of being active and participating regularly in sport and physical activity. Within the community, swimming pools offered free admission and guided walks. The library's program included inviting two well-known long-distance runners to come to the library for a program. That same director also talked about ways she wanted to encourage library use and how she wrote to all the teens between the ages of 16 and 18 in her community explaining that their library cards would now be free. Across the board, Icelandic library directors spoke to talked about of their need to reach out to teens by providing appropriate material and "space." Over and over again, they mentioned the need to connect with this generation of readers as their parents were less connected and the directors felt this teen generation could potentially bringing the next generation of readers to the library.

In another collaborative participation example, one of the directors from a larger library described his experiences partnering with local organizations. In his case, he had arranged for a second-hand clothes market to set up their wares one day a week and another group came to the library once a week to work with new immigrants to the area to help them improve their conversational and written Icelandic.

This director also believed that the work of David Lankes (2011) was going to be essential for the future health and well-being of his particular library. He had hung a poster showing the new "vision" for library service in the coffee break room and a sign stating The Mission of Librarians is to Improve Society. He also encouraged his staff to work with the notion that patrons needed to feel that this is "my" library (Holmkell Hreinsson, personal communication, 2016). Another retired director also described one of her finest moments when she was on the sidewalk in front of her building going to lunch but when a little girl grabbed her mother's hand and declared, "Come along, Mommy, I want to take you to *MY* library!"

But the changes that brought these patrons closer to library ownership evolved because of a number of innovative goals; one of which is to get away from the trends put forward by Lankes (2011); thinking more of the library Thus, the shift from the handling or warehousing of books and classic collections would require shifts in staff training and one director noted that this would involve retraining her staff to stand up more to promote themselves and their knowledge and culture; the shift of moving from collections to communications.

After reading articles by Fister (2009) and others addressing the notion of "doing away with Dewey" and adopting new shelving schemes of arranging the books by theme rather than numbers, two directors were going to re-think the configuration of their collections. They believed this was especially important since the outcome from the article showed a marked increase in circulation. (Andrea Aevarsdottir and Heidrun Eyvindardottir, personal communication, 2016).

When asked how libraries are actively engaging as cultural participants, a retired director provided numerous examples of events and programs. After being told her library was earmarked to receive a substantial collection of titles in German, she embraced the gift and began planning German cultural events such as a St. Martin's Day Celebration and a May Day malbaum, the events including special cakes and hot chocolate along with a craft of making lanterns, game tables of tambola, and walks around the town garden. She called the local police and asked to have the street in front of the library blocked off , and she hired a person go provide horse and pony cart rides. Her ultimate suggestion: "Every time you do something – get a pony!" (Anna Sigga Einarsdottir, personal communication, 2016).

At the end of one of the conference presentations, the presenter asked the audience of library directors what types of skills and new initiatives should be put forward for training staff and especially librarians moving from library science programs. Hands shot up all around the room and a quick list was typed in to a PowerPoint and then displayed on the screen with numerous suggestions such as more training with emerging technologies and apps, event managing, how to create displays, teamwork skills, how to negotiate, managing change, marketing techniques along with graphic design for web displays, annual report writing, and how to collaborate with other employees of the municipality. The directors also concurred that these types of skills needing to be taught

as on-the-job training skills rather than skills tha taught to students going through library science programs at the university level.

As one director put it, "Librarians want to be needed, and they need to be wanted" (Stefania Njalsdottir, personal communication, 2016). What was also apparent after attending one of the twice-yearly meetings of library directors was that the librarians were sharing their ideas – everything from circulation practices to clever new patron book marks. The health of the profession was apparent as directors sat over coffee and talked about programs they were trying or programs that had not worked.

Conclusion

Innovation and change are synonymous with public libraries in Iceland. In part this has to do with the size of the country and the independence of the directors and their willingness to work with their patrons in a community atmosphere. Their history as an independent nation has also played an important historical role in the forward thinking of many Icelanders.

Results from the survey indicate that public libraries in Iceland are staying connected to their constituencies through a variety of cultural programming events and incorporating national and international program themes for library celebrations as well. The events are then publicized through social media such as Facebook and library web pages. Successes and failures are measured through attendance and circulation statistics but also shared at the twice-yearly library director meetings, an example of this being the upcoming fall meeting's theme focused on the notion of new ways of marketing the library. Larger public libraries have been able to collaborate with community leaders or programs and for smaller libraries the economic downturn made the decision of moving some of the small libraries into public school thus helping to maintain a connection to the community. The vibrancy of these programs was apparent after talking with the library directors in informal interviews and conversations.

Many of the librarian directors also expressed the opinion that the reconnecting process had been ongoing well before Iceland's systemic banking collapse, leading to a severe economic depression from 2008 to 2011 (Boyes 2009). For libraries all across the country, the direct effects included the loss or cuts made to many budgets and library positions. One director who kept her job further explained that her position had been reduced to 70% and as of 2016, the position had yet to be returned to full status (Sunna Njalsdottir, personal communication, 2016). Another director noted that she believed that libraries across the country experienced a resurgence in use during this time because of the economy and people's conservative use of personal finances (Sigmundsdottir 2013).

As library directors in Iceland shift their focus away from the warehousing of books to communication and conversations with patrons and expand cultural programs that involve the whole community through participatory projects, the evolution of Iceland's

public libraries will continue to thrive and certainly provide examples for other libraries to emulate.

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