The modern public library: the very best investment your community can make

An information, issues and discussion paper for Friends of Libraries groups in Australia

Dr Alan Bundy
President
Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA)
alan.bundy@auslib.com.au

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Introduction

Public libraries have a unique multidimensional 'cradle to grave' user range, diversity of demand, actual and potential educational, informational, cultural, technological, social capital and democratic impact. They are the most heavily used public buildings in Australia and the most valued local and state government community service. They can never be overused, cost only 7c per Australian per day, and are used by about 12 million Australians, far more than any other community provision.

Consistent with international experience, trend indicators for Australian public libraries are, overall, very positive. They are being recognised as the best investment a community can make. One indicator is that about 250 new or redeveloped libraries are being built between 2000-2007. However if public libraries are to achieve their full potential and help build social and educational capital and better communities, many need more and better buildings, improved hours, more programs and services, more professional staffing and better funding. This requires well informed advocacy for them by Friends of Libraries, in partnership with public librarians.

Friends of Libraries may also need to make informed responses to proposals to change library services, resources, staffing, locations and opening hours which may restrict use, rather than increase it.

This paper provides information to assist existing and potential Friends of Libraries groups in advocacy for better libraries for their communities

Background

Australia came late, large parts of it very late, to a recognition of the importance of investing in free local public libraries. One reason was the continued existence of the subscription libraries in mechanics' institutes or schools of arts until as late as the 1980s. This was long after those 19th century institutions had slid into terminal decline and had been largely discarded in the US, UK and New Zealand. Another reason was the weakness and narrowness of vision of local government. A third reason was lack of leadership by state governments, content to invest—often poorly—in the capital city state libraries, and to provide small subsidies to the mechanics' institute libraries.

As a consequence the 1934 Munn-Pitt survey of Australian libraries, funded by the US Carnegie Corporation, famously stated

> As a whole Australia was better provided with local libraries in 1880 than it is today. Almost every city and large town contains a decadent institute or school of arts, many of which give evidence of having had a former period of usefulness.

> It is pathetic to observe the pride and complacency with which local committees exhibit wretched little institutes which have long since become 'cemeteries of old and forgotten books'.[1]

Although most states had enacted legislation to address this situation within a few years of the Munn-Pitt report, in 1946 another surveyor of the Australian library scene, British librarian Lionel McColvin could see little progress. He felt it necessary to assert that 'Better library services for Australians won't just happen'. His next observation was that 'The few must lead, must fight, must persist'.[2]

It is because relatively few laypersons and professionals did lead, fight and persist that Australia now ranks in the top 10 public library nations, a status it did not have in 1956 when the US, UK, Denmark and New Zealand were identified as the leading public library nations.[3] *Those laypersons were Friends of Libraries in a very meaningful way—they made the difference at critical times*. It is their legacy of active lay advocacy for better libraries which has been bequeathed to today's local Friends of Libraries, and Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA).

The importance of partnership

The national reach, accessibility, usage, resources, services, technology, programs and return on investment of Australia's public libraries provides the basis for that claim about Australia's world ranking. Yet there are no grounds for complacency. Local government, primarily, must increase its low investment in what is by far its most heavily used and valued provision if the public library is to achieve its full potential.

However it cannot do so alone. Most state governments also need to reinstate, and improve, their funding and infrastructure partnership with local government in the provision of public libraries. State governments have tended to use the sophistry that it is local government unilaterally increasing its funding to improve libraries, rather than state governments not increasing their funding, which has seen the ratio between state and local government funding reduce significantly over the last 20 years in several states. In general, state government funding of public libraries does not recognise that the modern public library is of a very different dimension, with greater overall state and community impacts, than the largely book lending agencies they committed to funding in partnership with local government over 50 years ago.

State and local governments may contest their relative contributions to the decent funding of this nation's largest and most heavily used and valued educational, informational, cultural and recreational resource. Notwithstanding this, the reality is that the achievement of free public libraries for nearly all Australians derives since the 1950s from their partnership. It is the threat of loss of state government subsidy which has helped to stifle those who occasionally and shortsightedly raise the direct user pays issue. The only outcome of a subscription charge to borrow from a library is that it will be used less, when every effort should be made to ensure that a library is used more, because a library is one of the very few agencies in society which cannot be overused. That partnership is a symbolic, infrastructure and funding partnership which largely explains why 99 per cent of Australians now have access to a public library and through that to the nation's total library resources, and beyond. It is a partnership which also explains why Australia, with its large area and small and often sparsely distributed population has a greater evenness of provision, access and statewide library cooperation than, for example, the USA which still has rural areas in some states such as Iowa with no public libraries, and quite poor libraries in others.

Using a very apposite analogy for Australia, McColvin asserted in his 1946 survey report

> Nowhere else in the English speaking world will books have to be taken so far for so few—and nowhere will they mean so much.. But it must be done and it can be done… All that is needed is a book distributing scheme as efficient as, say the beer distributing organisation.

It is one of the little recognised achievements of Australia that through public libraries, rural school housed public libraries, mobile libraries, and outback and other outreach services, virtually every person in its vast island continent now has free and increasingly fast access to the total print and electronic resources of Australia's libraries. They also now have free internet access in most public and joint use libraries. Much remains to be done to improve buildings, resources, access, programs,

services, marketing and particularly professional staffing, but much progress has indeed been made in only the last 30 years. However a wealthy country like Australia should be doing much better and aiming to double its investment in public libraries, from 7c per Australian per day to — allowing for inflation — at least 20c per Australian per day by 2010.

The return on investment

It is therefore salutary to consider the outcome of the current small investment by local and state governments in public libraries

- 547 independent services with 1,560 service points including mobile libraries, but not their stops—there are more public library outlets than McDonalds
- 9% of the static service points are joint use public libraries shared with educational institutions—the second highest percentage worldwide after Sweden with 40%. South Australia also has 40%
- the active public library membership represents a 56% median average of the population, although it is estimated that 60% (12 million) use them. This is broadly comparable with other developed countries, the highest being Finland with 80% membership. Some public libraries in Australia also report memberships at this level
- 95% of Australians think public libraries should be publicly funded
- over 100 million visits a year—their buildings, including the state libraries, are *by far the most trafficked public buildings in Australia*. If a public library is open for the long hours including Sundays—as it should be—it will be by far the most heavily used public building in a local authority area
- generally free public access to over 5,000 internet terminals
- largely through its public libraries local government *is by far the largest educational and cultural provider in Australia*—something few in local government, and even fewer in formal education and the cultural community, recognise
- from research, the return on public investment in public libraries is likely to be between $2.50 and $6.50 for every dollar invested. No public investment demonstrably returns a higher dividend

The level of investment

- the total local and state government investment in local public libraries is $550 million pa—about 7c per Australian per day, or the cost of just one book or CD or DVD pa. This is about 60% of the annual expenditure of just one large Australian university with 35,000 students, such as the University of Melbourne. It is equivalent to only 1.6% of the total $40 billion pa expenditure on formal education in Australia

- the individual local government annual investment ranges from less than 1% pa of rate revenue to over 7% in some parts of Australia (at least one service in NZ—Christchurch—receives 10% of rates). Percentages of total annual local government expenditure would be even less

- percentages of rate revenue allocated to their libraries by country local authorities are generally less, sometimes much less, than in urban areas. Those authorities which are smaller members of regional libraries tend to contribute less than those maintaining separate services, as do those involved in joint use libraries. They are often getting their libraries very cheaply

- the subsidy investment by state governments as a percentage of state expenditure is highly variable. NSW is by far the worst, followed by Victoria. There are no historical or demographic factors which convincingly justify these differences between the states, except in Tasmania where the state government provides almost 99% of the funding for its integrated statewide library system. The question must be asked by Friends of Libraries and others advocating for better public libraries for

all Australians, why is it so, and what is required to bring the worst performing local government authorities and states to the level of the best?

Percentage of state government expenditure on public libraries

New South Wales	0.039%
Queensland	0.173%
South Australia	0.261%
Tasmania	0.308%
Victoria	0.112%
Western Australia	0.130%

The NSW government now only contributes about 8%, a risory $20 million pa, of the cost of local public libraries in NSW compared with 32% in 1980 — not exactly a partnership. The other states, Tasmania excepted, range from about 14% to 28%.

The local government perspective

The fact that some enlightened local governments already invest over 7% of their rates in their libraries, also begs the question if some can, and choose to do so, *why do not the others?* They are questions which demand a response because a *minimum of 10% of rates* should surely be the target investment by any local authority in its most important and valued service. This is because the difference between a poorly staffed, housed, resourced and reactive library service providing little more than a book lending service, to one that is proactive contributor to community development, engagement and social capital, may be as little a shift in rate revenue expenditure of 2% by a local authority, and a shift in state government expenditure of 0.25%. A doubling of national investment in local public libraries would still only result in about $1100 million pa being spent on them. In national and state budgetary terms, this is insignificant. However public libraries and their many supporters tend to do little individual and collective analysis of their funding, funding which usually has no basis other than historical. *Too often they accept without question the political mantra that more funds are not available for their development.* The reality is that governments of all complexions find money for what they can be convinced is important, and libraries *are* important, very important. Recognition of this is manifest in the increased funding and new buildings which some Australian public libraries have been achieving in recent years.

However very few public librarians and Friends of Libraries know what percentage of rate revenue and other council outlays they receive, or what is the rationale and basis for what they do receive. They therefore have no basis on which to argue for a progressive and strategic funding adjustment to enable them to deliver better for the community. This argument is not easy, particularly if a local authority's main aspiration is low rates, good roads and mediocrity in all other things, but a few facts, figures and benchmarks can help sustain it. It is true that local government around Australia faces constant pressure to provide new and better services, and to accept cost shifts from the other tiers of government. That is no excuse, however, for its library service not to be given the very highest funding priority, for the community and social and educational capital return on investment and other reasons now explored in this paper.

Libraries rate very highly

It still seems to come as a surprise to local authorities which engage in surveys of client satisfaction, just how highly libraries typically rate. Therein lies one of the challenges facing public librarians and Friends of Libraries—to ensure that all Australians, and especially those who make decisions on their behalf, are aware of what constitutes a good modern public library service (see appended checklist). Public libraries tend to be well used regardless of their quality, although they are always used more if they are good, as the opening of every new library building demonstrates. People often do not know what constitutes a good public library, even if they have a sense that the library on which they depend is deficient. *They thus do not know when they are being denied one.* They certainly do not know how

little, that meagre 7c per Australian per day, they pay for them. Even when users are dissatisfied with their libraries, they are notoriously difficult to persuade to complain to their local authority out of deference to the feelings of library staff who typically work hard to cope with poor funding and buildings, or for fear that the local authority might actually *reduce* library services and resources.

Good local libraries are no longer a privilege. They are a requirement for a literate, educated, civilized and connected society. Yet at present the only part of Australia where local government is *required* to support public libraries is Tasmania.

It is, in fact, remarkable that virtually every mainland local government authority in Australia, ultimately voluntarily, now supports a public library service.

Increasing the investment

So what are the factors which must, to use Lionel McColvin's words, be fought and persisted against to increase Australia's still small investment in its public libraries? They vary, of course, from the ideological to the plain ignorant, but all are ultimately political.

The selling of a vision: better libraries for a better Australia

The major challenge for public librarians and lay advocates of better libraries for all, particularly Friends of Libraries Australia and local Friends groups, is just how to convey to decision makers the breadth, depth and potential impact on the whole community of the modern public library.

It is a rare challenge. No other public agency in society has the multidimensional role, 'cradle to grave' user range, diversity of demand, and potential educational, informational and cultural impact. In an age of specialisation and community silos, public libraries are unique. They are also important for the sustenance of a democracy.

To paraphrase words contained in a 1953 letter by President Eisenhower to the American Library Association's conference

> The public libraries of Australia are, and must remain in the twenty first century, the home of free, enquiring minds. To them, people of all ages and origins, of all religions and personal circumstance must be able to turn with confidence that there they can freely seek the whole truth, unwarped by fashion and uncompromised by expediency.

And as Vigdor Schreibman has stated

> Libraries serve democracy not the pursuit of wealth. The constituency for democracy is the people, who have the fundamental constitutional right to exercise exclusive control over the election of our government. That is where the power of libraries also lies if they are wise enough to marshall that unique resource.[4]

Or as Chicago Mayor Richard Daley said when interviewed about his strong support for the revitalisation of his city's public library system

> Libraries and schools are on a par with each other in terms of what we are trying to accomplish—which is to better educate society. But the library scope extends even further than that of schools… A library is an innovator and should play an integral and active role in that effort in every community.

Terms which have used recently in international and Australian literature to describe the multidimensional role of public libraries include

A cornerstone of democracy *A home for free, enquiring minds*
A cultural café *A hub for information and ideas*
A friend to the lonely *A must have element in town planning*
A haven of creativity and escape *A nation's best educational investment*

A part of family life
A place full of presents waiting to be opened
A place to light up lives
A public living room
A safe place to go
A sanctuary
A secure, electronic safe haven
A sign of a well functioning government
A telescope into the rest of the world
A vibrant hub of the community
A way to connect with others
An electronic post restante
An environmental save
An oasis of sanity in a desert of madnessr
An open learning centre
Anchor scheme for urban regeneration
Australia's largest educational provider
Beacons of learning
Cathedral of human knowledge
Centres of enlightenment
Community anchors
Community catalysts
Community focal points
Content foundry
Cradle to grave institutions
Crucial to a well functioning society
Digital nerve ends
Empowerment supermarkets
Equity building blocks
For all the people, all the time
Fueling citizenship, progress and ideas
Hangouts at the heart of the community
Ideas centres
Imagination's stronghold
Infomocracy's place
Investment magnets
Key communications centres for mobile populations
Knowledge integrators
Knowledge networks

Knowledge warehouses
Learning channels
Libraries shape communities
Lifelong learning vanguard
Living room of the city
Local gateway to knowledge
Local government's shop window
People's network
Places of connection
Places than can never be overused
Places to meet, learn and grow
Reading promoters
Serving democracy
Social capital developers
Social inclusion agencies
Social weapon against information poverty
Streetcorner universities
Tax dollars hard at work
The community's best investment
The community's information switchboard
The community's knowledge centre
The community's marketplace
The community's success story
The info gas station
The moral anchor of the community
The most used public buildings
The neighbourhood of knowledge
The new village green
The original information superhighway
Umbrella institution of the learning society
Unique testbed of civic values
Urban regenerators
Vital link to the digital future
Vital part of a civilized society
Vital to early reading experiences
Window to the world

The key elements in that vision of better public libraries lighting up lives are comprehended in the list *Twelve ways libraries are good for the community*.

- Libraries inform citizens—the public library is the only institution … whose purpose is to guard against the tyrannies of ignorance and conformity, and its existence indicates the extent to which a democratic society values knowledge, truth, justice, books, and culture
- Libraries break down boundaries
- Libraries level the playing field
- Libraries value the individual
- Libraries nourish creativity
- Libraries open kids' minds
- Libraries return high dividends
- Libraries build communities
- Libraries make families friendlier
- Libraries offend everyone—every library in the country ought to have a sign on the door reading *This library has something offensive to everyone. If you are not offended by something we own, please complain.*

- Libraries offer sanctuary
- Libraries preserve the past[5]

The internet

One of the issues still raised to justify poor library funding is that the internet has diminished the need for libraries. The opposite, worldwide and in Australia, has occurred because the internet and related technological advances have fueled interest in public libraries, and enabled them to improve their resources and services.[6] This has, inevitably, increased and diversified staff workloads. Instead of making libraries redundant, the web is enhancing their value as people turn to them for help in getting online and finding what they want, relying on librarians able to navigate and link an increasingly complex world of information. Public libraries also now provide users with access, in the library or from home, to their catalogues and large and costly databases and research tools which are just not available to individuals. They have an important role in minimizing the digital divide in society.

The importance of the mission statement

A starting point in conveying what a modern public library represents should be a vision and mission statement to comprehend values, educational and societal role in lifelong learning, helping to develop information literate citizens, and community connection.

Evidence based advocacy

There are now some useful tools to help public librarians and FOL groups engage in persuasive argument about the mission and benefits of a public library, and to help convince a local authority of that small percentage shift in its expenditure which may represent the difference between a mediocre and reactive library, and one which can proactively fulfill its potential for your community.

One tool is *The library's contribution to your community: a resource manual for libraries to document their social and economic contribution to the local community*.[7] This is a Canadian manual which has been reprinted for sale in Australia and New Zealand. Many libraries and FOL groups in both countries are now using it. To develop the manual the researchers interviewed elected members and administrators, reviewed the literature and sought input from librarians of different sized public libraries.

It is useful because it

- identifies hard data to demonstrate your library's benefits—the type of information that decision makers want to evaluate the value of library services
- can be used by libraries of all sizes
- deals with all library services
- addresses a broad range of social and economic benefits
- includes a number of survey institutions
- has an extensive bibliography

Another useful Canadian publication is *Dividends: the value of public libraries in Canada*, which was reprinted in the journal *Australasian public libraries and information services* in 1999.[8]

A major UK research project *The economic value of public libraries* was completed in 2000. This is described in full in the September 2001 issue of the above journal.[9]

At the September 2001 conference of the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa, Dr Glen Holt from the St Louis Public Library in the US, who has consulted in Australia, gave a presentation about the *Public library benefits valuation study* in which he is involved.[10] The purpose of the study is to develop a practical, transportable, conservative methodology to calculate the direct return from taxpayer investment in, initially, large urban libraries.

Points made by Dr Holt in his presentation were

> Imagine you are
> - a corporate CEO active in a major civic organisation
> - accustomed to accountability and quantitative performance measures
> - sceptical of government bureaucrats and warm, fuzzy anecdotes
> - about to listen to a presentation by the local library director
> - your attitude—'libraries are invaluable'—*prove it*

In the rest of his presentation Dr Holt gave numerous examples of the dollar return on investment in public libraries demonstrating that they are a 'high yield blue chip investment' *providing a greater capital return than the Dow-Jones industrial average*, ranging from at least $2.50 to over $5.00.

The study has involved asking people how much money as cash payment or reduced taxes they would accept to vote to *close* their public library. *Over 80 per cent refused to answer the question*, and many gave very strong responses as to why they would not accept money to close the library, including

- they are a community resource
- extremely important for students
- needed for education
- people can't afford books
- not everyone can afford computers
- provides information unavailable otherwise
- I wouldn't be in business if it closed
- libraries are essential to democracy
- because I am civilized

More recently in 2004 public libraries in Florida found that

- Florida's public libraries return $6.54 for every dollar invested in them
- for every $6,448 spent on them from public funding, one new job is created
- for every public dollar spent on them, gross regional product increases by $9.08
- for every public dollar spent on them income increases by $12.66[11]

Another study released in 2005 in South Carolina (SC) found that

- the direct impact of all SC public library expenditures is $80 million
- SC public libraries bring to the state from federal and other sources about $5 million that it would not otherwise have
- the value of loans and use of library resources is $102 million pa
- the value of reference services is $26 million pa
- the total direct impact of public library expenditures on South Carolina's economy(salaries, supplies, resources, construction etc) is $126million. For every $1 spent, the state receives $1.62 of indirect economic impact
- the total direct and indirect return on investment for every $1 spent on public libraries by the state and local governments is $4.48 – a return of 350%[12]

Two other substantial research reports published in 2005, one from the UK and one from Australia, provide further evidence about the roles and value of public libraries.

The UK study *Libraries impact study* was undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers to establish measures to enable public libraries to measure their impact on any of four shared priorities between central and local government. These priorities are children, education, health and older people. The research found that

> …book borrowing indicators should not be used as the prime measure of how libraries contribute to local and national prorities.
> The quantative and qualitative data…highlight a significant contribution, in line with government priorities, to the development of adult skills and child literacy in the education and children shared priority areas. The data demonstrated a clear contribution to government objectives on patient and public involvement in health. For older people, the data show an impact in a range of themes around quality of life and general well being, as well as national priorities on strengthening independent living.[13]

The major Australian study is *Libraries building communities: the vital contribution of Victoria's public libraries.*[14] It is the first comprehensive Australian study of the value that public libraries add to their communities, and collected the views of 10,000 people.This research positioned itself within the Victorian government's policy framework of *Growing Victoria together*, in which the main driver is nurturing resilient, active and confident communities. *Libraries building communities* concludes that the public library system is indeed a major community asset and strength but also that public libraries, for funding, buildings staffing and other reasons are often not able to realise their full potential to build and strengthen their communities.

The rates debate

It may be said by local government administrators and elected members that 'we know we need a new or a better library but rates would have to go up, and that would not be acceptable to ratepayers'. Such statements must always be questioned. They may be being made by people who do not use the library directly themselves and who have no sense of how important it is to the majority of ratepayers and residents. The reality is that local government usually has the capacity to borrow without increasing rates significantly. Experience also shows even if some rate increase is necessary, ratepayers will generally endorse it for such an

outstanding community asset as a good public library. *A new library is very much more acceptable to ratepayers than a new civic or council administration centre, for example*. This can be a reason why local authorities may bundle a new library in with their major objective, a new administration centre. Few people ever go near their civic or administration centre; most do use, anticipate a need to use or family members use, their public library. Those ratepayers will certainly vote with their feet when the new library is opened.

A local government also needs to listen to the voice of the total community, not just ratepayers. This includes residents, and users of its libraries from outside of its boundaries, all of whom indirectly contribute to local business and retailing income, local rates and state taxes. How many local authorities, however, have a library advisory committee at all, or one with other than token community representation? Very few, is the answer. Local government seems curiously disinclined to establish such committees. This reinforces the importance of Friends of Libraries as the voice of the community about the library.

Public library beneficiaries

Advocacy for better public libraries for all Australians therefore has increasing international and Australian evidence to substantiate the following assertions about public libraries

- *established network* libraries are part of an established network, and often a number of established networks. They have partners and are experienced networkers
- *public places* libraries are safe public places, freely accessible to all the community and should be open long hours including evenings, weekends and most public holidays
- *staffed by library professionals* libraries are staffed by people who are educated in the people and information business
- *existing infrastructure* libraries reside in buildings which provide the entire infrastructure required for them to perform their functions
- *highly valued and very well used* libraries have strong community links
- *part of a broader organisation* libraries are financially supported by their local councils and communities. There is potentially considerable strength and many resources to be drawn from this association
- *community focal points* libraries are a focal point for the communities which they serve. People already use libraries for a broad variety of purposes
- *wide geographical distribution* libraries enjoy a wide geographical distribution. There is access to a public library almost everywhere in Australia
- *cooperation between different levels of government* public libraries are jointly funded by local and state government
- *multifocused service providers* libraries have expanding roles
- *most heavily used and valued service provided by local and state governments*

Public libraries as social capital

From the above list, one aspect which now warrants greater emphasis is the public library as a community focal point, or the 'new village green' as Australian social researcher Hugh McKay describes it.

In the growing literature on community building there is much discussion about the concept of social capital. As first defined by Coleman, Bordieu and others, it 'is essentially the network of linkages, trust and bonds within a society that allow an individual to operate within that society that accrues advantages to that individual'. The idea has been extended by writers and researchers such as Putnam and Cox, 'to mean the advantages that accrue to a society from the aggregated networks of individual trust'.[15]

The World Bank defines social capital as

> … the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions… Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions that underpin a society—it is the glue that holds them together.[16]

Researchers have identified that social capital, and its underpinning of trust, has been declining for the last 30 years in developed countries such as the US, UK and Australia. This was cogently argued by Robert Putnam, professor of public policy at Harvard University in his 2000 best seller *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*.

In the book he identifies that Americans used to ten pin bowl in leagues in very large numbers, often after work. They no longer do so, and this symbolises a significant social change. He shows that Americans — and this is true of Australians — have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and social structures, whether the P&C, church, recreation clubs, political parties, or bowling leagues. The shrinking access to the social capital that is the reward of communal activity and community sharing is a serious threat to civic and personal health.

Putnam's work shows how social bonds are the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction. For example, he reports that getting married is the equivalent of quadrupling your income. Attending a club meeting regularly is the equivalent of doubling your income—a very good reason to belong to a Friends of Libraries group. The loss of social capital is felt in critical ways. Communities with less social capital have lower educational performance and more teen pregnancy, child suicide, low birth weight, and prenatal mortality. Social capital is also a strong predicator of crime rates and other measures of neighborhood quality of life, as it is of our health. In quantitative terms, if you both smoke and belong to no groups, it is a close call as to which is the riskier behavior.

He also observes that a hundred years ago American's stock of social capital was at an ebb, reduced by urbanisation, industrialisation, and vast immigration that uprooted Americans from their friends, social institutions, and families. Faced with this challenge, social capital was rebuilt through cooperation and linkages. He contends that a similar challenge faces 21st century society in rebuilding eroded social capital.

A very insightful library article about this issue is 'America's front porch—the public library' by Michael Cart.[17] That article reflects on Putnam's conclusion that social capital requires that we transcend our social, political and professional identities to connect with people unlike ourselves. It also reflects on the examples he provides.

The importance of library as place

Re:source: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries in the UK published in 2003 a major study aimed to assess the impact of a new library building on local communities, questioning the institution as a physical space and the role it plays in the wider community. *Libraries must also be buildings?*[18] examines a series of questions, one of which is 'the extent to which new library buildings can help ameliorate the breakdown in the social connections of British society?' Its chapter seven focuses on social capital, and concludes that social capital *is indeed* being created in the exciting new libraries in the UK. The same would be true of the burgeoning number of excellent new and enlarged library buildings in Australia and New Zealand. As *Libraries must also be buildings?* points out

> The library is at any one time a meeting place, a learning resource, and a comfortable and relaxing public space. The buildings that are well designed and managed offer an array of resources that enable people and groups to establish relationships, carry on conversations, exchange ideas, and engage the life of the mind.[19]

Also pointed out is the notion of the third place, a place standing beside work and home and providing a vital role the other two cannot. The ingredients of success for that third place are

- they must be free or relatively inexpensive to enter and purchase food or drinks
- they must be highly accessible, ideally one should be able to get there by foot from one's own home
- a number of people can be expected to be there on a daily basis
- all people should feel welcome; it should be easy to get into a conversation. A person who goes there should be able to find both old and new friends each time they visit.

The role of, and implications for, the public library as that third place are explored well in an article published in the UK. In it Kevin Harris argues that libraries

> …have an under appreciated role in providing local support and generating trust

and that

> understanding the range of third places and their different social roles could be the basis for action by agencies…Taking a lead in this respect would help place libraries appropriately in the local social capital agenda.[20]

A major challenge for public librarians is therefore to establish their work as contributing to, and leading in, building communities and social capital. Realistically they cannot do so alone. They need their *Friends* to help persuade local, state and the national government to recognise that public libraries are much more than book lending agencies.

The marketing conundrum

Public librarians sometimes get tired of being urged to market their wonderfully multifocused 'cradle to grave' role and potential more effectively. Therein lies the conundrum. Its public library is a local authority's shop window to the community, and is the one thing a local authority should want to see used to the maximum—*a public library can never be overused*.

It is a magnifying glass revealing more of the local community to us. It is also a telescope, from wherever we stand, into the rest of the world. It can be a private refuge or a way to connect with others. It should be comforting in its familiarity, yet full of surprises—and it should be easy to find.

As Lionel McColvin said so well in 1947

> The more I see of libraries, the more I think about them, the more I observe the world in which the library has to function, the more I realize that we have a contribution to make to the civilization of today and tomorrow that no other social agency can perform. We can help people to be their own individual selves.[21]

However, from poor locations, unattractive buildings, lack of space, lack of resources, lack of professional staff, poor hours, petty and restrictive policies, and poor marketing, one could conclude that some local authorities are more concerned to restrain use of their libraries and thus, perhaps, their need for funds.

How many local authorities would be willing, for example, to place a conspicuous sign at the entrance to their libraries saying 'This library is proudly brought to you 7 days a week by the City of…?' If a library does not have marketing expertise on its staff, does not have a marketing budget, and is reluctant to market for fear of being overwhelmed by even heavier demand, this is a reflection on the local authority, its managers and elected members more than it is on the library manager. All council services need quality assurance. Most do not

need, however, community 'cradle to grave' marketing to achieve optimal use. Their libraries need both if the return on investment is to be maximised.

You can't blow an uncertain trumpet

Theodore Hesburg, the highly successful president of the US Notre Dame University, once observed that

> The very essence of leadership is that you have to have a vision. It's got to be a vision you articulate profoundly on every occasion. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet.

This is an important message for public librarians and Friends of Libraries because, despite the great and often unsung work of public libraries across Australia, too few national, state and local government decision makers recognise that in the age of information, lifelong learning, and social capital deficit, strong investment in public libraries is fundamental—**not** a soft option to be put aside when other fiscal needs loom.

Public libraries at the vanguard: lifelong learning

There is much more to education and lifelong learning than institutional education and certification. The following, often quoted, observation by Michael Caine makes the point well

> I educated myself in the library, which means I found out for myself what I wanted to know. School taught me what I didn't know and what I should find out when I left school. School should really teach you how ignorant you are and what you want to find out.
>
> – Michael Caine, actor

NO, I DON'T KNOW WHICH BOOKS MICHAEL CAINE BORROWED.

LIBRARIAN

As people like Chris Batt in the UK have asserted, the lifelong learning agenda is not, and should not, be owned by formal institutional education, although many in formal education have difficulty in seeing it as anything else.

A comprehensive *re:*source report from the UK[22] identifies that those in formal institutional education have limited awareness of what the public library offers and does to support learners. The same is true in Australia.

Batt observes

> There is a vision of lifelong learning as an extension of more formal learning structures… There is nothing wrong with that but it is my firm belief that the public library can and does address a broader agenda which is about learning for life rather than lifelong learning.
>
> Learning is not simply about following accredited courses to obtain qualifications. It is about gaining knowledge to lead better, more fulfilling lives. *Such learning comes frequently in very small quanta …* Public libraries are unique in the way that they can allow those tiny portions of learning to invisibly change people's lives.[23]

In the UK the outcome has been the much needed renaissance of interest in, funding of, and quality assurance of, the UK public library system. Evidence of this is the commitment to the

£100 million *People's network*, the report on new library buildings in the UK, and the funding of public library research, research which is largely lacking in Australia.

Local government is already *by far* the largest 'cradle to grave' educational provider in Australia—touching 12 million Australians regularly—and through its libraries has the potential to be even more so. As suggested earlier it is doubtful, however, if many in local or state government are aware of this, or yet envision public libraries as the central catalysts and underpinnings for   learning cities and communities.

This is despite the fact that typically already at least 30 per cent of public library users are school, Tafe or university students, and around Australia a stronger engagement is being made between school and public libraries, in part as an outcome of a 2001 survey of both.[24]

From cradle to grave

If we start at the beginning, there are still relatively few preschool children receiving BookStart or Books for Babies packs through their public libraries, to connect them with books and reading at the earliest possible age. In the UK every baby receives a pack through its public library at 7 months. And there are still many children who cannot be professionally assisted in their critical preschool literacy development by their local public library because that library does not have a children's/young adult librarian. And too few public libraries are able to develop teacher staffed homework centres or are able to work in constant partnership with their local schools and their teacher librarians, because of their lack of professional staff. Many also do not provide welcoming spaces for teenagers or good access for seniors and people with disabilities—and something as simple as poor or complex hours of opening and shelving which is too high, too low, or too close together can be real barriers to both.

Although Australian public libraries often now provide a home library service to people who are homebound, frequently it is not promoted by them because they lack the staffing and funds to provide other than a limited service to a small number of people. Many homebound people in Australia are therefore still not able to access something of demonstrable value to their quality of life and well being.

Public libraries: where to?

At the beginning of this paper it was stated that Australia ranks, from being nowhere in the 1950s, in the first 10 public library nations. Australia now has some excellent public libraries, and outstanding library buildings. This is a significant compliment to local and state governments. It is also a compliment to those Friends of Libraries and library professionals who, to reflect Lionel McColvin's 1947 admonition, led, fought and persisted.

A question is, given the increasing attention internationally to the reality and potential of the public library, will Australia's ranking be maintained?

In 2002 Nerida Clifford, then library manager of the City of Joondalup in Western Australia, undertook a council funded study tour of libraries in Singapore, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, UK, Canada and the US. This is what she concluded

> *There is a sense of excitement internationally about the future of public libraries. Based on my observations, the most notable trends are*
> - libraries are a growth industry
> - libraries have redefined where their role in lifelong learning begins
> - libraries are playing a much more dynamic role in community development
> - some libraries are experiencing unprecedented memberships estimated at around 80 per cent of the population

- usage of traditional lending services is generally continuing to increase at a steady pace often around 4-8 per cent annually
- in person visits to libraries are increasing often at around 10-20 per cent annually
- community demand for direct delivery of programs aligned to community learning and development of new skills is increasing rapidly
- there is an increasing library staff role as teacher particularly in relation to information technology
- libraries are an integral partner in the lifelong learning process not a competitor with other learning providers
- there is an unprecedented demand for libraries to develop and facilitate access to online services and information
- purpose built technology/learning centres are being incorporated into library design
- governments are identifying libraries as key access points to ensure equitable access to information
- libraries are taking a much more professional approach to marketing
- human resource requirements to service the global increases in loans, in person visits, program development and delivery and online services is partially being offset by empowering the user through self service facilities and automating materials handling
- there is growing concern over an ageing workforce
- opening hours increases are focusing on weekends rather than earlier opening and later closing[25]

That overall very positive conclusion is largely mirrored by what is occurring in Australia and New Zealand. A scan of the detailed information in the 2003 sixth edition of the *Directory of Australian public libraries*[26] indicates, for example, the large number of new and extended library buildings, new mobile libraries and new joint use libraries; slowly increasing staffing but the need for more professional staff in many libraries; electronic resource developments; greatly increased internet access and increased weekend opening hours.

The Australian public lending library system: trend indicators 1986-2002

Year	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002
Number of services	470	523	533	534	547
Number of branches	820	847	857	973	1 403
Total service points	1 406	1 470	1 500	1 597	1 479
Number of bookmobiles	116	100	110	90	76
Number of joint use libraries	NA	NA	NA	110	130
Total bookstock	24 793 116	26 956 439	31 379 744	30 403 004	34 123 659
Magazine titles	42 086	46 907	59 981	55 436	50 383
Audiotapes/talking books/ CDs	1 267 275	1 118 908	1 186 559	1 111 707	1 334 627
Videotapes/DVDs	27 266	68 700	241 400	437 698	923 191
Public internet terminals	NA	NA	NA	1 335	4 045
Total loans	97 793 116	110 077 112	141 984 430	138 730 792	172 205 840
Staff – EFT positions	4 554.39	4 709.39	5 660.66	5 438.5	6 203.51
Average membership as % of population served	40.6%	40.26%	43.9%	45.8%	49.2%

Source: second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth editions of *Directory of Australian public libraries*

However it is also clear that, as in society generally, the library rich are getting richer and the library poor are, relatively, getting poorer. And the library poor remain substantially in regional and rural areas of Australia, and lower socioeconomic suburbs of the large cities. This should be an equity concern for all state governments and the national government. *It is a primary reason why state governments need to strengthen, not resile from, their partnership*

with local government in funding and improving public libraries for all. It is also a primary reason why the national government should interest itself more in monitoring the development of public *and* school libraries, the latter of which are not well staffed or resourced in many public primary and some secondary schools, thus increasing the demand on public libraries.

The positives

There are negatives in the current Australian public library scene, but there are many more positives.

Public Libraries Australia (PLA) now exists to provide a national professional advocacy focus for public libraries. With over 120 groups, there is a growth of Friends of Libraries as local trumpet blowers, and Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) as a national trumpet blower.

If a public library does not already have a Friends group, what are the reasons?[27] In considering one important role for a Friends Group, every public librarian tired of advocating the library cause alone should remember the legal axiom that 'he or she who pleads their own cause has a fool for a lawyer'. Public librarians and their professional associations have thus only had limited success in pleading for better public library buildings and funding because decision makers may too easily dismiss their efforts as yet another 'industry bleat'. Less easy to ignore are informed and organised Friends of Libraries representing a very large part of the community.

And the evidence is accumulating that FOL groups can achieve outcomes for their communities beyond their actual numbers and resources, because they are often recognised as the voice of the community about the library.

Setting a target to 2010

The challenge for Friends of Library groups everywhere, and for FOLA as their national body, is to help public libraries tell their very positive stories, and to persuade local and state governments to that small shift in funding which represents the difference between a mediocre and an excellent library. An additional $550 million pa is all that is required to enable Australia's public libraries to get much closer to their full potential. There is a good case for some of that amount to be contributed by the national government, as it is a major funder of formal education in Australia. However that is unlikely to occur, at least directly.

That target increase, a doubling in real terms of investment in public libraries from 7c per Australian per day to 20c per day by 2010, therefore has to be the aggregation of what focused advocacy can achieve at the local and state government levels. The price of good libraries for all remains eternal vigilance and informed advocacy.

The lay focus for that vigilance and advocacy has to be Friends of Libraries. They are the inheritors of that mantle of responsibility accepted by the few who led, fought and persisted in the 1930s,1940s,1950s and even later—those few to whom we are indebted for the public library infrastructure which already provides by far the best return on public investment made in Australia.

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Alan Bundy AM BA DipEd MLitt MLib PhD FALIA was foundation university librarian and director of the Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library of the University of South Australia 1992-2005. His experience includes senior positions in public and academic libraries in three Australian states. He is founder and editorial director of Auslib Press, Australia's largest publisher of library and information science. Alan has consulted and published widely in Australia and overseas, and edits the quarterly journal *Australasian public libraries and information services (APLIS)* which he initiated in 1988. During 1988 and again in 2002 he was national president of the Australian Library and Information Association, and in April 1998 was awarded the HCL Anderson Award of the Association, its premier professional award. Alan became president of Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) and was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2005. Address: PO Box 622 Blackwood SA 5051 telephone 08 82784363 fax 08 82784000 email alan.bundy@auslib.com.au

Appendix 1

How well do you know *your* library service? How does it compare?

1	Does the library service have vision and mission statements? Yes ❑ No ❑
2	Do those statements reflect the full scope, role and contribution of the modern public library described in the paper? Yes ❑ No ❑
3	Library's percentage of council rates? %
4	State government's percentage of cost of local public libraries? %

5   For each branch of the service

	Very poor	Poor	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
Parking	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Hours	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Space	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Attractiveness	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Lighting	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Computerised catalogue	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Height of shelving	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Aisle widths	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Display facilities	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Print resources	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
CD/DVD/video resources	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Electronic resources	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Range of services	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Study facilities	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Disability access and services	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Public internet access	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Electronic training programs	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Professional staffing levels	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑
Overall staffing levels	❑	❑	❑	❑	❑

6   'Cradle to grave', modern public libraries provide a unique range of resources and services to meet the needs of their local communities… Does your public library provide?

	Yes	No
A Bookstart or Books for Babies program	❑	❑
A good range of general print, audiovisual and electronic resource	❑	❑

Professional staff whenever it is open	☐	☐
Readers advisory service	☐	☐
Reference and information service	☐	☐
Ask a Librarian internet reference service	☐	☐
Small business information service	☐	☐
Council information service	☐	☐
Health information	☐	☐
Legal information	☐	☐
Justice of the Peace service	☐	☐
Children's and young adult services	☐	☐
Storytelling	☐	☐
Local history resources and services	☐	☐
Provision for Indigenous people	☐	☐
Special space for teenagers	☐	☐
Long hours seven days a week	☐	☐
Some public holiday opening	☐	☐
Access to the catalog and resources through the internet	☐	☐
Large print books	☐	☐
Talking books	☐	☐
Interlibrary loans	☐	☐
Kindergarten support	☐	☐
Close school support	☐	☐
A homework centre/service	☐	☐
School holiday programs	☐	☐
LOTE (languages other than English)	☐	☐
Migrant and nonEnglish speaking background community support	☐	☐
Toy library	☐	☐
Assistive/adaptive technology for those with disabilities	☐	☐
Parenting collections	☐	☐
Special support for the unemployed	☐	☐
Home library service for housebound users	☐	☐
Hospital, nursing home, prison and other outreach services	☐	☐
Drive through pickup/return	☐	☐
Adult literacy support	☐	☐
Family literacy programs	☐	☐
English conversation classes	☐	☐
Community information	☐	☐
Tourist information	☐	☐
Study carrels	☐	☐

Research facilities	❑	❑
Free internet access	❑	❑
Internet/electronic training facilities and programs	❑	❑
A website	❑	❑
Meeting rooms	❑	❑
Photocopiers and scanners	❑	❑
Word processing facilities	❑	❑
Public lecture programs	❑	❑
Community and topical displays and exhibitions	❑	❑
Reading groups	❑	❑
Support for a Friends of Library group	❑	❑
A Friends of the Library room	❑	❑
Volunteers program	❑	❑
A coffee shop	❑	❑
An advisory committee with community membership	❑	❑
A suggestions/compliments facility	❑	❑

The importance of public libraries

Libraries and schools are on par with each other in terms of what we're trying to accomplish — which is to better educate society. But the libraryscope extends even further than that of schools… A library is an innovator and should play an integral and active role in that effort in every community.

Mayor Richard Daley *speaking about his leadership of the revitalisation of Chicago's public library system*

———

I educated myself in the library, which means I found out for myself what I wanted to know. School taught me what I didn't know and what I should find out when I left school. School should really teach you how ignorant you are and what you want to find out.

Sir Michael Caine

———

Public libraries, schools and a freely accessible health system are crucial to a well functioning society and the funding thereof a sign of a well functioning government.

Stuart Patterson *Western Australian GP*

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Learning is not simply about following accredited courses to obtain qualifications. It is about gaining knowledge to lead to better, more fulfilling lives. Such learning comes frequently in very small quanta… Public libraries are unique in the way that they can allow those timely portions of learning to invisibly change people's lives.

Chris Batt *MBE*

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The wonderful thing about a library is that it's one of the most public institutions we have in our society, where people can gather together as citizens rather than just customers. Libraries are social, community and meeting places, as well as learning centres.

Timothy Hill *Qld architect*

———

The data suggest that where a public library works best is when it is supported and driven by the overall strategic agenda of the local authority.
The political climate of the 21st century is one that is aware of benefits on the information-literate citizenry. Libraries are well positioned to adopt a leading role in the provision of information resources, and through partnering with training services, educational and other organisations, they are able to multiply the benefits to even large numbers them were previously possible.

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———

Libraries serve democracy not the pursuit of wealth. The constituency democracy is the People, who have a fundamental constitutional right to exercise exclusive control over the election of our government. That is where the power of libraries also lies if they are wise enough to marshal that unique resource.

Vigdor Schreibman

———

Libraries are like five star travel. They'll take you anywhere in the world, at any time, in any history, with any one you want— and all they ask in return is a little shoosh. Bargain!

Andrew Denton *Australian TV personality*