PERCEPTIONS OF EDUCATION, LEARNING AND ACCESS: PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THE INTERNET IN SINGAPORE

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Introduction. This study investigates the discourses surrounding the provision of Internet access in Singapore through the public library system and considers what the government, librarians and members of the public consider to be the legitimate uses of the Internet in Singapore's public libraries, how these compare with what the librarians see as their role in facilitating access and to what extent the Internet features as an educational tool in public libraries according to users.

Method. Analysis of public documents. Semi-structured interviews with 10 senior librarians and library managers representing all the major branches of the national libraries in Singapore along with 40 members of the public from the four regional libraries. Questions were loosely structured around perceptions of the library and its provision of access, Internet policies and compliance. Observation was also conducted of library users and of their usage at the computer terminals in the library.

Results. Although the government, librarians and library users all profess to leverage the Internet as a tool for learning and education, findings from the study throw up very different definitions of what constitutes learning through the Internet within the context of a public library.

Conclusion. This reinforces conclusions from previous studies that what is termed learning through the Internet is variously constructed and understood in multiple ways. The Internet is not a 'unitary technology' that can be simply slotted into new contexts without consideration that its meanings are more often than not culturally defined. This defies what is often presented of the Internet as a technical quick fix of policy makers to help its population leap frog into the future.

Introduction

Over the previous decade, public libraries around the world have increasingly seen the provision of Internet access and accompanying skills become a core part of their mandate to serve the needs of their communities.

This development is a product of both supply and demand forces. Governments and private organizations having invested in the Internet's almost miraculous power for social and economic development (Gadrey, 2003) and they have been keen on extending this technology to as many as possible. The library, being a public institution easily accessible like few others in society, has reaped the benefit of this image in terms of the availability of funds for Internet access programs. On the other hand, demand can also be seen as a key factor responsible for the growth of Internet capabilities in public libraries. Users predominantly from the middle class increasingly use the Internet in their everyday lives and expect the library to keep up as uncovered in a large scale study in the UK (Hand, 2005). Librarians caught between these forces and concerned for their continuing relevance in the "digital age" have generally accepted the need for accommodation.

But are the meanings attached to Internet access for each of these groups (government, users, and librarians) the same or different? And in what ways do they differ or agree? In an insightful study of the discourses surrounding Internet access in libraries, Martin Hand (2005) argues that in the UK case they appear to be different. He demonstrates that the government views the access and the funding made

possible as a means for forging a new relationship between the state and its citizens. In contrast, librarians had multiple perspectives on Internet access. For some, it was seen as a threat to libraries and their values, while others saw it as a potentially revitalizing force. Internet access for the latter group was seen as complementing older missions of the library, namely, information seeking and self-directed learning, as well as enabling new institutional roles for the library in the community. Users also had developed their own notions about Internet access. Although aware of and able to deploy the library and government's discourse of the Internet, they defined Internet access more in terms of communication, rather than empowerment, information retrieval or learning.

Hand's study suggests that although the disparate forces of government, librarians, and users have worked to get the library connected, the nature of that accomplishment remains contested and so the future development of the medium in the library remains uncertain. This unresolved situation and differing perspectives of Internet utility becomes an interesting area for investigation to find out if users are merely receptors of the dominant discourse or if they actively resist the dominant discourse prescribed by the government and librarians.

Unfortunately, as Hand acknowledges, little research has been done on the various discourses that surround this important technology in North America and Europe. In the case of Singapore, whose government and people have seemingly embrace the Internet wholeheartedly and despite the libraries being at the forefront of technological adoption over the past decade, no such study exists to provide an example of an Asian perspective on the matter. This is unfortunate as the interaction between the Internet and the libraries could shed light on the dynamics between the two and throw up interesting leads for investigation such as what users consider as constituting legitimate uses of the Internet in Singapore's public libraries? Would such a view be aligned to or differ from the expressed objectives of the government and the library? From the perspective of the Library and Information Science (LIS) profession itself, how do the discourses of librarianship as articulated in Singapore accommodate the Internet and to what extent do users share and practice what is preached by the librarians and the government. Using Hand's model as a reference, this study contextualizes the conflict in the Singaporean setting and uncovers the different discourses as expressed by the government, the librarians and the users of library on Internet use in the libraries.

Method

Public documents from statutory boards were examined to form an understanding of the official discourse generated by the government. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with ten senior librarians and library managers, selected on the basis of their scope of work involving the Internet, their length of service (average about ten years) and seniority in order that we might capture their opinions on the library, its operations and policies. Librarians were asked what they perceive to be the uses and contributions of the Internet in their institution. From this, the context in which librarians operate and the discourse they employ to describe their work with regards to the Internet in the library was developed. Each librarian was assigned a number to help identify them when their quotes were used. Their interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed to facilitate analysis. Themes were drawn from each set of responses and highlighted. Forty library users were also interviewed to glean their opinions on the same topic. Furthermore, they were asked whether they would consult a librarian over the information they found on the web. Discourse analysis was performed on the transcripts with the focus being not just on the language of the text but also on how the language engages social theoretical issues and practices through the documents being examined. The texts examined we believe are part of social events which have causal effects; an example is how women are influenced negatively by sustained advertising of the ideal body image (Choi, Leshner and Choi, 2008). Such changes can in turn affect one's knowledge, beliefs and attitudes (Fairclough, 2003). In our case, users have adopted the government's rhetoric of Internet being an educational tool used for research. We share Van Dijk's (1998) assumption that text used by sources of socio and political power has the potential of inculcating or sustaining ideologies and his consideration of text as an expression of power relations in society. While care is taken in examining explicit text, much interpretation is required in coming up with plausible explanations of implicit meanings. By employing interpretation, this paper subscribes to a moderate

version of social constructivism where limits are acknowledged on the extent of the world being socially constructed (Sayer, 2000). Therefore as the texts are examined, patterns emerged across the various transcripts when the majority of the people interviewed exhibits the use of similar vocabulary or described a phenomenon using the same imagery or metaphors, a close reading of the text identified was made and conclusions drawn. Such textual analysis focuses on power and the unequal relationship between those who have it and those who don't. In fact, it highlights and makes visible the discourse of the people without power, as these are not usually reflected or circulated in society. It does not aim to be statistically significant because its main objective is to show the different range of views that are at play with regards to this topic. The study seeks to uncover the ways of representation used by different actors in presenting their opinions of Internet usage in a library setting. Taking a discourse analytic approach is more an orientation than a tight methodology as described by Carspecken (1996), the focus is always geared towards looking at social structures, power, culture and human agency.

Besides analysis of the discourse of the different groups, observations were also carried out at the public computer terminals to check on the types of websites being accessed. However, great care was taken not to disturb the users who pay for their time at the terminal. Because these casual observations were done only at times when interviews were being conducted with users and librarians who coincided with the office hours, we believe this choice of time might have impact on the kind of people who use the terminals – the majority of them at these times were students. This imbalance might also be attributed to the fact that the interviews were done in the community lending libraries rather than in the reference libraries where potentially more research work by adults would be carried out. In total 12 visits were made to the different libraries.

The Official Discourse

We begin our survey at the very top of the government hierarchy and from the very outset when the government strategized the nation's blueprint for the development of the Internet industry in Singapore with the IT2000 plan. This plan was a landmark report that chronicled Singapore's first experience in setting up and providing access to the Internet. It outlined a strategic vision to develop a National Information Infrastructure (NII) which aimed to link every home, office, and government ministry by 2005. The National Computer Board (NCB) was the statutory board tasked to initiate the IT2000 Study in January 1991 with a two-fold aim of examining how information technology (IT) can carve out new economic niches to sharpen the nation's competitive advantage and second to improve the quality of life in Singapore. The organization of the committee that looked into the study was divided into eleven sectoral study groups that reflected various industrial sectors of the Singapore's economy. The committee was made up of 200 senior executives and academics from both the private and public sectors supported by more than 50 NCB IT specialists who researched into the potential applications that IT could be leveraged in each of these sectors. It is not difficult to see from such an arrangement of the steering committee, how the economy looms as a primary focus in the national blueprint. From construction and real estate to transportation, technological breakthroughs in IT or new applications for its use were conceived as keys to unlock new areas for economic growth. Even the Government was positioned as an industry ready to be exploited by IT and make its contribution to the nation's economy by reaping substantial cost savings and improving productivity. As the vanguard sector, it would point the way towards a "vision of a world-leading new age for Singapore" (National Computer Board, 1992, p.x).

Although the word Internet was never really used in the report, descriptions of what were to be achieved made it very clear that was what the Government had in its mind from the start. The report lamented the fact that although one quarter of households in the country had a personal computer (PC), they were mostly used in isolation and only 10% of those with PCs were connected to modems for communication purposes. It envisioned "an infrastructure of network services for electronic transactions and the exchange of information through these computers" (NCB, 1992, p.10) which would eventually become as common as kitchen appliances but can amalgamate "the functions of the telephone, computer, TV and more." (NCB, 1992, p.19).

Such an infrastructure was to serve the economy as IT was considered to be the "locomotive" industry of the new century. Singapore could not afford to be left out of the race. There was a palpable

sense of urgency that could not be shaken as readers of the report were buffeted by images of Singapore's vulnerability, of it being a "small player" and "compelled to be 'open' in order to flourish", how it was subjected to the "full blast of the 'new information order'" (National Computer Board, 1992, p. 11). It was not just economics but the country's survival that was made out to be at stake.

The then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's endorsement of the blueprint came with an admonition, when he remarked that the country was forced "to run on the fast track of economic development… or face being left behind…It is our lot in life that we continue running in the fast lane to keep up with changes in the new world economy" (Straits Times, 1991). Singapore's saviors appear to be the high priests in this new world economy, the IT specialists and business who have the requisite "understanding of the forces at work… (to) help (Singapore) chart an optimal course" (National Computer Board, 1992, p. 11). The rest of the population, unfamiliar to the new global technological and business network, would have to adhere to the directions of these captains as they navigated the nation through the turbulent and highly competitive times. The crisis imagery provided a means to lend legitimacy to the plans and the platform to showcase these experts of technology (IT specialists), the business and political leaders to guide the country to the future.

A closer look at the articulated goals in the report also reveals that the economy has been the real focus of IT development with a presumed corollary that the lives of Singapore's people will get better when the economy does well. The NII was envisioned as "an important source of competitive advantage. The potential benefits of the NII to the economy are immense, generating greater productivity and new business opportunities" (NCB, 1992, p. 22). The articulation of economic and social welfare seen in this report is congruent with other studies. Selvaraj Velayutham (2007), an Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Research Fellow for the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion in Macquarie University had observed that the idea of economic survival is tied very much, in both the public and the government's mind, to the stability of the incumbent government and its choice of the most capable leaders. The discourse is one that perpetuates a kind of 'siege mentality', according to another Singaporean politics scholar - Kenneth Paul Tan (2007), the Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs and Assistant Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore who explains the term as one where citizens of the island republic continually cower under a sense of foreboding and reminded repeatedly of their own vulnerability so much so that a sense of crisis pervades the nation's psyche.

Seventeen years after the PM's remark was made, the current Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts echoed the same pressing need to keep the economy on par if not ahead of the world's competition in his foreword to the Intelligent Nation 2015 (iN2015), Singapore's 10-year masterplan to realise the potential of infocomm over the next decade, when he said "Infocomm is one of our strategic advantages in economic competition. Our strong standing in international competitiveness rankings year after year reflects this. However other countries are also recognizing the strategic significance of infocomm. We cannot afford to slow down or we will be overtaken. The challenge now is to raise our infocomm competencies by several notches so as to stay ahead of competition… how we can raise the bar to benefit and enrich Singapore's economy and our lives"(IDA, 2008b). Once again, the economy was presented as being the life blood of the country, ever in competition with external rivals, so when the economy is doing well, then all is well with Singapore (Velayutham, 2007). Yet apart from the businesses, how does the individual citizen feature in the iN2015 master plan, what is their role?

The answer lies in their ability to equip themselves to manage change on a continual basis and this would involve developing "strong analytical, communication and interpersonal skills... be more risk taking, entrepreneurial and be able to tolerate greater ambiguity. Most importantly, it is essential that people have the attitudes and skills to learn, re-learn and unlearn, in order to thrive in the face of an unpredictable future" (IDA, 2008b, p.70). Great stress is placed on the individual to live up to a standard that appears almost impossible to achieve if one was not predisposed to such leanings. How does one mould oneself to tolerate ambiguity or be more risk taking? It is as if the very nature of Singaporeans who do not conform to these values have to change or resign themselves to a very bleak future. The way to prevent that it seems is to embark on a life of constant and cyclical learning and unlearning. Singaporeans school leavers are encouraged to be prepared for life-long learning; workers to be pre-

pared "to be retrained and re-skilled many time during their working lives" (NCB, 1992, p.26). To help them, the government has set up the Infocomm structure, of which we are told is the "key enabler that can help us enrich the learning experience for the individual and to expand the nation's capacity" (IDA, 2008b, p.70).

The chief architects of the master plan envision the country as an intelligent island and a global city populated by equally intelligent citizens. Six other national plans were conceived in close alignment to the iN2015 each with a different sectoral focus to equip the country for the future. The two that support the area of education and learning are – IT in Education Masterplan and Library 2010. We limit our study to the latter, for this blueprint draws our focus onto the subject of the library whose strategic objective was "to bring the world's knowledge to Singapore and to create a positive social and economic impact" (National Library Board, 2005). This document builds upon the earlier Library 2000 Report (MICA 1994) which was commissioned by the Government and accepted by the then Minister for Information and the Arts, Mr George Yeo back in 1994. The Library 2010 Report (NLB, 2005) can be seen as the public declaration of the statutory board's (NLB) support of its parent Ministry's mission as the current Permanent Secretary states in the opening message.

In this report (NLB, 2005), ideal learners are presented as independent users of the facilities provided, especially the pervasive wireless access to ultra-high speed broadband networks to learn anytime, anywhere. Even after formal education, learners would access the latest learning resources with personalized learning devices and upgrade their knowledge and skills. To facilitate this process of continual education, public libraries according to the report, must be made ready to assist users to gain access to information and knowledge resources at an affordable rate, stimulate lifelong learning and encourage independent enquiry. This was the task they set themselves up for: "In a Knowledge-Based Society everyone needs to be learning constantly. Educational levels keep rising, workers continually acquire new knowledge and skills, people are self-motivated to learn, people know how to manage their own learning" (NLB, 2005, p.3).

In the blueprint the country's libraries and information centres are linked electronically through a network to "deepen our information research services and specialist collections in key growth areas for Singapore…provide an access framework for Singapore's research community by developing a single reference gateway to resources on intellectual property, patents and designs, technology management, commercialization and new value creation…We can coordinate resource sharing…and build strengths in areas designated as high priority for Singapore's economy" (National Library Board, 2005, p.7). The idea of the economy and IT are once again fused together in the metaphor of the knowledge-based economy. In order to contribute to the well being of the economy, a citizen must be skilled in IT and because IT is ever in a state of evolution and progression, one must continually struggle to keep up or be left high and dry in the rapidly changing economic landscape.

Yet how much of this discourse actually percolates to the masses? We now look first at the discourse expressed by librarians in the country, to whom are charged these very missions.

Librarians' Discourse

The government's policy to educate the nation has been taken up by the librarians. One librarian claimed enthusiastically, that the vision statement is "providing a beacon of lifelong learning" (L8) and all ten librarians interviewed were unanimous in their support to help facilitate Internet access, especially those who cannot afford it at home. Access to them does not mean the mere provision of computer hardware and databases at a cheaper rate but also the skills needed to surf and navigate the World Wide Web. The librarians feel that people without the requisite web surfing skills will be "deprived compared to those who are information savvy" (L9). The image of an unsuspecting user confronted with useless data online is something that the librarians are concerned about as they feel for users who are not able to navigate the complicated web, nor able to assess the credibility and reliability of information found there. L4 cautioned, "I am not sure the importance about citation and also authenticity of the information is very much a concern for them… this becomes a concern for me as a librarian". All the librarians expressed hope to realign this misconception through conducting courses on information literacy in the schools and libraries.

The sense of mission is not difficult to discern and it is echoed and shared by many of their colleagues. This need to "educate the public" (L8) is something that comes across very strongly amongst the librarians we interviewed as they all exhibit a very earnest need to somehow "level the playfield" because "not everybody has equal opportunity to access the Internet" (L1). So pressing is the need to serve that many programmes are initiated to "help them get the basic stuff" (L10) and this translates into not just the "physical access to the equipment… but the ability to look for information... being able to evaluate the information and decide whether they are authoritative or not and making use of them" (L9).

To achieve such objectives, the library works "directly with the schools on the basic skills" (L9) and the general public to introduce hands on programmes that teach them information literacy, assessment of resources, checking for credibility, reliability and accuracy. These outreach programmes "educate the public" (L8) on what is available in the library and how to access them. "Each of the libraries would take care of the schools around their areas…we would take care of them and ensure that they don't' miss the services in our libraries" (L6). Of note is the kind of care taken to provide assistance to those who for one reason or another cannot gain access to the Internet -"we can reach out to these people because most of these libraries are located in the heartlands[1] so it's easier for us to reach out to them who may not be so well connected to the digital world" (L2). To facilitate access, librarians have mentioned a few changes to policies in the past. More branches were set up and conveniently located in the major housing estates where most Singaporeans live. Staff is also on hand inside the library to help users overcome technical problems of logging on to the Internet, coach them individually if necessary on how to navigate the Internet sites and basically teach them how to use the Internet to obtain information. The nurturing aspect extends beyond all these hand holding examples to provide an environment to learn and an impetus to encourage self study. It was as if the burden to uplift the whole nation from the digital backwaters fell on the library and its staff.

It appears that the librarians too share and adopt a view that reflects the government's perception of most Singaporeans, what Tan (2007, p73) terms the "conservative majority" when he describes this imaginary collection of people that make up the greater part of Singapore's citizens as being in need of guidance. It is not surprising that with such a caricature of Singaporeans amongst policy makers, librarians too may have this image of its users in their minds when they justify the placing of firewalls around pornographic, gambling and games sites to prevent users from accessing these while in their premises and using their equipment, for these are perceived to be unedifying to the users. This means users using the library's multimedia terminals to gain access to the Internet have their boundaries restricted. Librarians have the "authority to tell them to stop" (L10). Offenders would be asked to keep quiet, refrain from accessing those sites or be asked to leave. "Sometimes they like to play games, but over here we would actually advise them that the resources here are to encourage them to use them for project work… and not for playing games unless they are educational games… otherwise we will actually advise them not to do so in the library" (L9). But how does one evaluate what is educational? We see the librarians reflecting the government's authoritarian personality (Singh, 2007), in the setting up of strict criterion for Internet educational use – this may only involve applications that do not excite its players too much and cause them to make too much noise.

Yet not everyone is shoring up defenses against such an outlook as some resistance can be discerned. One librarian interviewed in particular spouts a very liberal discourse. This discourse begins with seeing the Internet as another resource waiting to be exploited. Yet what purpose it is used for or even whether the materials are inherently 'harmful', it is believed that as librarians, they must remain non-judgmental, "neutral" and "objective"(L1). Their primary role first and foremost is to open avenues for the user to gain access to as much information available as possible. As the librarian puts it, the Internet

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[1] Heartland (as opposed to "Cosmopolitan") refers to the housing estate area where most Singaporeans live away from work. It is characterized by close proximity and high density urban dwelling. The people living in them are termed Heartlanders and are usually contrasted with the Cosmopolitans who have a more global perspective on political, economic and cultural issues. It was a term coined by the Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong then to describe the majority of Singaporeans who are generally poorer, less educated, living in a working class or lower-middle class environment and speaks only Singlish, a distinct variety of local pidgin English.

is just "another book on the shelf... Don't talk about good or bad types. You have to give them the access to that book regardless of whether they are good or bad" (L1). This rubs against what the Government intended the Internet to be, an educational medium that facilitates lifelong learning by providing easy access to learning materials. This librarian in particular without taking a moral stance on materials, seems to cast a more liberal view on what constitutes usefulness or whether material is considered educational (definitely seen as good by the government). As L1 justifies "I do agree that sometimes (users) may access the Internet and not do academic work or information searching… (some) even go on facebook… I think they are learning…So long as you read something, and get your brain going, you are learning something…whether or not you are using it in the wrong way or good way, it is really up to the individual, it's your choice".

Access to information is painted very broadly and in liberal terms by L1 who opined that librarians should not have the right to peek over the shoulders of users to check what materials they were accessing. It is the pejorative of the user and his privacy is paramount. "As long as he does not make a nuisance of himself to other users, he must remain free to explore what is on the web" (L1). Such a view recalls Mill's (1863) "harm principle" that "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others". But harm in this sense is interpreted by most of the other librarians to mean "public nuisance", so in cases where another library user's peace is ruptured or his equilibrium upset, that is the time for the librarian to exercise his authority and make the culprit cease what he is doing.

Although not all the other librarians share such a liberal view on privacy as L1, they all nevertheless concur on the definition of what constitutes public nuisance and work towards restricting access to "unedifying sites" and minimizing noise in the library. L3 explains, "children coming in… like to play games and they get excited and it's a bit noisy. They may hog the stations and other users who need to access their information may not get to use it... Some people accessing porn sites… but we can boot them out. Sometimes the manager would have to speak to the user because it is not so much as we are trying to control our websites as this is a public place and we have to make sure it is safe for everyone". Such pragmatism pervades the response of the librarians as they work towards improving the processes that would lead to an environment that is conducive for users to learn. The efficiency is clear which attests as well as reflects the culture of the incumbent government, once a solution has been made to problems identified, they are effectively implemented and enforced (Velayutham, 2007, Tan, 2007).

The sense of paternalistic concern continues with the idea of librarians "as a sort of gate keeper to information on the Internet.... There is a lot of information on the World Wide Web but these are not necessarily true; anyone can pose anything on the Internet" (L2). The librarian's job then is to filter this information or teach users how to differentiate sources and sieve out the authoritative from those that are not. This is an exclusive kind of mentality towards information, one that seeks to cut out instead of facilitate access to diverse views. In the end, any liberalism expressed by librarians is countered by prudence, expedience and pragmatism with the mindset of users being seen as charges that need protection. One sees then the tension between holding a liberal view on the one hand and pitting it against a fixed idea of how learners learn and what constitutes education on the other.

However vague the term 'educational' may be perceived, it seems to be manifested in the eyes of the librarians as the act of the users not making a nuisance of him/herself, be buried in thought, not surfing pornography, playing games or accessing gambling sites, and librarians would work towards creating a place for learning. Then the librarians would go about their work with a single minded pursuit of ensuring a quiet environment conducive to self study. This is perhaps reflective of the type of pragmatism that typifies the Singapore government (Tan, 2007) and it is being manifested by the agency that is tasked to facilitate life-long learning in the nation. It narrowly focuses on the appearance and actions of the users, because really how else can one enforce any rules or measure any form of tangible benefits in relations to learning with regards to library users? The doggedness with which such a policy is enforced in the library is quite real. It is not to say that librarians do so with ill intentions but really it is a manifestation of the government's pragmatic mode of administration that appears to pervade all government agencies. Efficiency in a resolute pursuit of an objective, however conceived, once drawn up is relentlessly adhered to because this is perceived to be good governance (Tan, 2007).

But in spite of the ostensible tenacity and hold the government's rhetoric of efficiency and pragmatism might have over the mindset of librarians, many of them still manage to exhibit a very different yet commonsensical pragmatism that comes not from top down conditioning but a worldly wise introspection over the whole issue of Internet use in the libraries. Someone like L8 can muse "actually if you take a step back, having Internet access is not like having access to drinking water – that one is the basic necessity. Internet is a so called man-made necessity for the digitally connected societies like Singapore... To those who do not have it – the farmers in Borneo and Sarawak... it is not a great loss… they don't need the Internet". This realization comes in the face of the government's public rhetoric which creates a raison d'être for economic survival but L8 has identified a segment of Singapore's society that don't really need the Internet – "65 and above aunties (elderly women) – not talking about those educated aunties, but the less educated, they don't know what the Internet is all about." It almost reeks of ageism from a misogynist if one had not realize that the point he was really trying to make was that "to those that need it, it will be a necessity. To those who don't need it or are aware of it, it's okay". This is echoed by L3 who feels that not knowing or able to access the Internet "in Singapore is not really a barrier – I don't feel it is a barrier. It's a personal choice because there are other resources available for those not so good at using the Internet. It is whether they want to or don't want or maybe they don't have the time ... I feel that there are avenues available for them in Singapore". We learn that despite all the discussion surrounding the Internet by the Government and the library's management of bringing everyone along the digital revolution, librarians know that there is really more to life than just plugging ourselves into the Internet and many people, 65 and above aunties included, can lead very fruitful lives without it and they choose not to lose sleep if this segment of the population decide not to engage the Internet.

So what do the users themselves have to say about their use of the Internet in the library?

Users' Discourse

Most users seem to co-opt the official discourse to say that they use the Internet mainly for research. However when probed on which software or tools they use, email was the first and most ready response, after which Google was the other most common application they used. Many said that they use the World Wide Web instead of the electronic database of journals the library provides for research purposes and Google as their search tool to locate materials on the web. One wonders if research in the traditional sense is being carried out in the library or rather communication with friends or for various other purposes as Hand (2005) points out in his article.

When queried on what they were currently working on, most users said that they were checking emails, a few stated they were conducting job searches and preparing resumes, others were looking at the stock market and researching companies and their stock performances for potential investment, yet others said they were surfing the net for information using search engines like Google. Very few were doing research and these consisted mainly of undergraduates or professionals working on their projects. There was an elderly gentleman (P9), 70 years old, from Indonesia who was verifying materials in his work because he "cannot tolerate mistakes…as a writer…(he) only writes something which is a fact… so (he) checks the websites all the wordings and all materials" and he was one of the few who came close to what one traditionally associates with research – a systematic intellectual investigation to establish facts. One wonders if casual browsing as expressed by the action of most users can be considered "research". "For us, we are using our own laptop, we are just roaming the Internet, for them… they are actually accessing the library" (P7). This "library" refers to the library's terminal, and appears to the laptop users as the gateway to the databases which the library has purchased for those doing "serious" research as opposed to the users who use their own laptops for surfing purposes. Yet a check across all the Internet terminals provided by the library saw users playing games, using emails, chat and instant messaging functions, looking at search results and participating in discussion boards. A few subsequent visits to the library also revealed most users using the terminals for chat, discussion board sessions and games. One might question at this point if such activities constitute learning let alone research.

Users who were conducting web searches, clicked in and out of websites with no support materials like a note pad with writing instruments to jot down relevant observations, thoughts or findings, and no

piles of notes to suggest ongoing intent to check or verify materials. This we take to be informal surfing and would not consider as research. However we have to add that these observations were made only at the times I was in the library which is usually during office hours from 9am to 6pm. It is possible that after these times the likelihood of working adults or professionals carrying out research work might be more. Also, interviews and observations were conducted in the public lending section of the community libraries and not at the main central reference library where there is a higher chance of more researchers being found. However, we did encounter one researcher with a traditional method of uncovering answers through the search of prior knowledge and building upon these to produce new findings. She was a sport specialist (P18) who had obviously went through the database of online journals provided by the library and lamented the lack of materials in her specialization. She has even checked out the other libraries in the two local universities in vain. She was doing a master degree in sports science and seems to fit into what one would traditionally associate with learning and research and possibly fits most closely to the archetypal user that the government envisioned when it claimed that the library would provide the resources for the generation of new ideas and provision of that cutting edge knowledge that would give the nation that extra mileage to edge out competitors in different fields. The rest of the users seem just content to email friends, surf the net and conclude that they too are doing "research".

Most of us would associate a researcher and a librarian as having one of the closest collaborative relationships. Yet users whom we came across in this study when asked if they would enlist the help of librarians to search for materials on the web or get their expertise to verify materials found, answered that they would rather conduct searches on their own. They did so because they thought the librarians cannot possibly know much about their area of interest, expertise, or that they are not in a position to evaluate the materials found. "I mean what can we find out from them?... I don't think they can help in my research" (P12). Confident almost to the point of arrogance, one user replied "Usually not, I know what I am looking for" (P31). Some of the users may not know what they are after as yet, or have difficulty articulating their needs, and even then would refuse the apparent intrusion of the librarian into their intellectual space, as if embarrassed by their inability to craft a query or just too decidedly proud to acknowledge assistance: "No idea, just that I won't ask them because I am not sure whether they are equipped with the knowledge or not"(P25). "No because one thing, I am not sure that they know what I am finding and I am quite confident of accessing the internet on my own"(P17). "Actually after reading the contents I could tell …whether what they say is true or not… I wouldn't ask the librarian, I don't think they are good enough" (P10).

It is rather unfortunate that users should take such a stance with respect to the librarians, who have nothing but the user's best interest at heart. A sense of mistrust whether misguided or misplaced should be rectified of the image of librarians in Singapore before they can even begin to engage users with regards to the Internet. Before implementing any policy to equip the nation with access to knowledge, they must first gain trust from users that they are competent and able to satisfy their needs. Librarians' expertise in searching for information seems eroded by the Internet when users think they cannot be of any assistance because knowledge is now so freely and easily available. It is perhaps the pervasiveness of access to the Internet and the relative ease of use that one can identify with the users on why any help to gain information is not necessary and simply buys into the government's assumption that access to the Internet and provision of knowledge equals also to the ability to imbibe this new information.

Conclusion

We realize at the end that whilst the government's intent is to allow every citizen access to knowledge and information through Internet access in the hope of sharpening its economic edge, the reality maybe that the Internet is little more than just another communication medium that facilitates its users to connect with each other as suggested by Hand (2005). His article concludes with the UK government perceiving the Internet as a 'democratic feedback too', its libraries seeing it as an 'information retrieval tool and their users as a 'communicative medium'. In Singapore, users share the same perception of the Internet as their UK counterpart but co-opt its own government's rhetoric that it should be used as a

research tool. The public library discourse in Singapore echoes the official discourse in wanting to equip users with the skills and hardware to contribute to the economy. Following Hand's (2005) lead in exploring the contesting discourses of the librarians and the users further, we also find out that both reflect a unique understanding of the Internet and portray each other as being novice not just to its use but also to being ignorant in assessing the contents within it. This conflict in perception is brought to the fore because the two groups are not engaged with each other. The relationship with which the librarians hope to engender appears to be one that resembles that of a parent and child, or a master guiding his/her apprentice. It is paternalistic as opposed to egalitarian or fraternal in nature. It is an unequal relationship, one that is almost uni-directional and top-down, where the expert imparts knowledge to the novice rather than one that is more service oriented. With the preconception that users are unable to assess web content and the users themselves thinking that the librarians are incompetent or unnecessary when it comes to Internet materials, they have not bothered to work with each other to correct this misconception.

Had the users known more about what the librarians can do to help them with regards to the Internet they might be more forthcoming with queries. If the librarians had known about this gulf that existed between them and their users in relation to Internet use, they might be able to tailor their services to better serve the needs of the users. Whether this brings about the kind of blossoming of ideas that the government hopes for is moot as the increased interaction between users and librarians will inevitably work to the benefit of both groups in terms of greater understanding and interaction. For all the euphoric images of the library presented by official discourse, the use of the Internet in the library is actually quite mundane and pedestrian, with little cutting edge research being done in the library by the majority of users. In understanding that the term learning and research is variously constructed by the different groups, more must be done to arrest the spiral of mistrust between users and librarians with regards to each other's competency in dealing with the Internet. We have traced how each views the term learning and research: a) the official discourse reveals a hope that learning would end in providing the country with an economic edge, b) the librarians believe facilitating access to the vast repository of information in the form of books, databases and journals both online and off are the keys to knowledge and in order for the users to access them, a quiet environment is necessary, c) while the users themselves decide that surfing through the Internet's vast collection of websites could provide them with any information required.

However noble the official aims are, and for all its efficiency in implementing and building structures to equip its citizen to learn, the government and librarian should understand that such phenomenal changes though impressive in themselves cannot be as easily mirrored in the development of its citizens' mindset. Real change must come from the users themselves and at present, they are quite content to surf, email and chat over the Internet.

*Interviewees are identified by a name and number. L1- refers to Librarian 1 and P1- refers to Members of the Public no. 1.

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