What We Talk About When We Talk About Public Libraries: The Impact of the Urban Reform Movement on the Toronto Public Library

Jennifer Hann, M.A. Candidate
Adult Education and Community Development
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto

Abstract

The Toronto Public Library (TPL) is the largest public library system in Canada. Its highly visible, accessible, and dynamic local branches promote social inclusion and community engagement. This paper will explore the impact of Toronto's urban reform movement on the TPL in the 1970s. Public participation in the library planning process through citizens' advisory groups resulted in the "equalization" of the city's library services, a renewal of local branches, and the restructuring of programs and services to meet community needs. The role of civic engagement in the recent struggle to prevent cuts to the TPL's budget will also be explored.

Introduction

As highly visible and accessible public institutions, public libraries "evoke consistent, extraordinary public trust among diverse adult users" (Griffiths and King, 2008, p. 3). Perhaps more than any other publicly-funded institution in Canada, the library seeks to demonstrate its value by opening its doors to all members of the community. Toronto's public libraries are no exception. As fixtures of the urban landscape, they play a vital, multifaceted role in Toronto's civic life. The Toronto Public Library (TPL) is the largest public library system in Canada, with 99 branches located in neighbourhoods across the city. The TPL supports lifelong learning through the provision of a wide range of programs, services, and courses. Many of these initiatives, such as adult literacy and ESL programs, early childhood education programs, and programs for youth and seniors, also promote social and economic inclusion in communities. Libraries are also primary points of contact for many newcomers across the GTA and provide unique windows into the communities they serve. As City Librarian Jane Pyper has noted, local libraries are likely to be "the first civic institutions" many new Canadians encounter upon arrival in Toronto.[1]

Many of the TPL's distinctive features—the ongoing expansion of multilingual resources and services, the commitment to community programs and initiatives, the extensive branch system, and the receptivity to patron participation—came into existence as a direct result of citizen involvement in library planning in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, Toronto residents took an unprecedented interest in planning for the future of their library system. Public participation in the library planning process during this period resulted in the reassessment of budgetary priorities, the "equalization" of library services across the city, a renewal of the local

[1] Remarkably, local branches are so well-used that TPL staff can accurately predict emerging demographic trends based on demands for new multilingual materials in advance of the release of census data (Pyper, 2009).

branch system, and the restructuring of programs and services to better meet community needs as defined by the communities themselves. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the library activists was the creation of a "constituency of library supporters" who would be prepared to advocate for the TPL and ensure its continued existence and expansion (Marshall, 1984c, p. 279). In 2011, Toronto's libraries became one of the municipal services targeted for extensive budget cuts. A remarkable number of Toronto residents rallied in opposition to the proposed cuts, realizing Marshall's vision of an organized and influential "constituency of library supporters."

The Impact of the Urban Reform Movement on the TPL

As Lemon (1984) notes, the 1970s urban reform movement emerged during a "heady time" in Canadian politics. Popular dissatisfaction with all levels of government found expression in a variety of countercultural and social movements, as well as demands for more accountable and responsive governments and institutions. The movement developed out of popular opposition at the local level to large-scale real-estate redevelopment and transportation projects, such as the Spadina Expressway (p. 3). Public anger over these redevelopment projects ushered in a new era of urban activism marked by the demand for greater citizen involvement in municipal planning and governance. The growing influence of citizens' groups such as the Confederation of Resident and Ratepayer Associations provided a popular platform for a new group of reform-oriented politicians, such as John Sewell, to enter municipal politics (pp. 9-10).

There is some debate over the cohesiveness of the urban reform movement. It did not necessarily represent a unified political perspective; however, as Caulfield (1974) argues, it resonated with "the real feelings of people who believed that their civic government was, at best, grossly unresponsive and irresponsible, or worse, a pawn in the hands of the land development industry" (p. 4). Higgins (1981) argues that "it seems to me to be claiming too much for what

happened to city politics in Canada in the late Sixties and early Seventies to call it a political movement." However, he does acknowledge that the "influx of new groups of people into the civic arena" had important implications for municipal politics (p. 87). As this new group of city politicians familiarized themselves with the inner workings of City Hall, many city agencies and boards, including the Library Board, came under close public scrutiny for the first time.

During this period, the future direction of Toronto's public library system seemed uncertain. Reform-minded Library Board appointees, such as James Lorimer and Dorothy Thomas, began to examine TPL policies and planning issues from a reform perspective. The TPL argued that it would improve its services by embarking on an ambitious building plan that involved the construction of large-scale "district libraries." Marshall (1984a) places the district library plan in the context of other municipal redevelopment projects from the period, with its emphasis on the ascendancy of the automobile in the urban environment, suburbanization, and the abandonment of existing neighbourhood identities and infrastructures (p. 117). Some communities feared these libraries would supplant existing local neighbourhood branches in the circulation of materials and provision of services. For many of the reform-era activists, the proposal was reminiscent of other massive redevelopment projects. However, unlike the private developers, Thomas (1984) explains, the TPL, a municipally-funded organization, "was using the taxpayers' own money to block-bust the neighbourhood" (p. 62).

The popular opposition to the Spadina Expressway occupies a central place in many accounts of Toronto's urban reform movement. However, the changes that occurred within the TPL during this period are equally significant. Public scrutiny of the district library plan forced Toronto residents to reflect on the role of local libraries in their communities and to imagine an alternative course of action for the TPL. In 1974, an East End Advisory Group (comprised of

Library Board members as well as community members) was formed to examine the district library proposal for the east end of Toronto, setting a precedent for the formation of subsequent advisory groups in other parts of the city. Charged with the task of reviewing the suitability of the district library proposal, commissioning reports, and providing recommendations, these groups, along with the Library Board, began to uncover other pressing issues, such as the unequal distribution of library resources and outdated and "elitist" collection development policies (Marshall, 1984b, p. 193). As Thomas explains, "once the community got its collective foot in the door, the door was pushed wide open, and the whole library system was fair game for comment and criticism" (pp. 65-66).

The push for the equalization of library resources, Thomas (1984) argues, "became a motherhood issue with dazzling speed" (p. 67). The Forrester Report on Branch-Community Statistics (1975) provided the TPL's critics with quantitative proof that library services were being unequally distributed across Toronto, with branches in higher income neighbourhoods in the northern parts of the city receiving a disproportionately larger share of funding than their counterparts in other areas, particularly in the east end. This unequal distribution was reinforced by the fact that usage determined funding priorities for each subsequent year. As library collections and services were largely geared towards middle-class, English-speaking patrons, the usage of libraries in areas populated by these patrons remained constant. Inherent in this two-tier system was an indifference to community needs and a failure to connect with "non-users." Marshall describes this resistance within the library profession to engage in "outreach" initiatives as the belief that "once the public knows we're there, we have done our part; it's up to them to come to us" (Marshall, 1984c, p. 292).

The conservative nature of the TPL's collection policies emerged as another, equally contentious, issue. The ensuing debate over the acquisition of library materials occurred within the context of a burgeoning Canadian nationalism, an awareness and respect for multiculturalism, and a growing expectation that publicly-funded institutions should be accessible and accountable to communities. Canadian authors such as Marian Engel (1984), a member of the Library Board from 1975–1977, argued that the absence of Canadian books within the public library system denied "Canadians of a chance of knowing what their literature is" (p. 204). As Sousa (1984) argues, the TPL's unresponsiveness to the demand for multilingual materials and services exposed the library's tacit view that "immigrants were poor potential for library use." He notes that "[t]he corollary of this argument was that the Toronto Public Library system should wait until the new arrivals had learned sufficient English and that service would consequently follow with integration" (p. 212).

Once the wider public became aware of this bias in collection development policies, community groups began to demand their rights as taxpayers and to access reading materials in other languages (Sousa, 1984, p. 215). The acquisition of "popular" materials with a broad appeal (as opposed to materials that catered exclusively to "middle-class" tastes, as selected by librarians) reflected a similar movement towards accessibility (Marshall, 1984b, p. 193-194). The shift within the TPL towards greater inclusion and accessibility reflected several currents in the political culture of the period: a growing awareness of and respect for multiculturalism and

minority rights, a burgeoning Canadian nationalism, and a demand for more inclusive, accountable, and accessible public institutions.[2]

Local proximity occupies a central place within this narrative. One of the key findings of the East End Citizen's Advisory Group was that "people were attached to their neighbourhood libraries and liked to be able to walk to them" (p. McMullen, 142). The library system that emerged out of this period of community involvement and organizational change is perhaps the most tangible legacy of Toronto's urban reform movement. It represents a vision of a city comprised of walkable neighbourhoods with strong identities and local opportunities for learning, leisure, and engagement.

Current Context

When I embarked on this research in 2009, library systems in some American cities were turning to outsourcing and privatization initiatives to cope with budgetary pressures in the wake of the financial crisis. Private companies, such as Library Systems & Services (LSSI), challenged the view that public libraries should remain exclusively "public" institutions. While there has been some public outcry against privatizing the management of public libraries, this has become a reality for library systems in several American cities (Streitfeld, 2010).

In contrast, the TPL appeared to be resisting these pressures. It remained firmly entrenched in the public realm and seemed to be able to secure adequate government support and investment, even in troubled economic times (Hurst, 2009). I intended to explore how public engagement in library planning that began with Toronto's urban reform movement in the 1970s

[2] The changes occurring within the TPL also mirrored changes occurring within the information science profession, as a new generation of librarians struggled to come to terms with their role in a rapidly changing world. The social movements of the 1960s—including the antiwar movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the gay liberation movement, and the student movement—led many librarians and library students to critically examine the middle-class bias inherent in library services to communities. The social movements of the 1960s also ushered in a new receptivity to public participation in library planning and governance.

and 1980s had transformed the TPL into an enduring, reflective and adaptive library system open to community involvement. This period of profound organizational change, it seemed, had ensured that the TPL would always remain deeply embedded within the fabric of city life in Toronto.

Toronto's municipal election in the fall of 2010 marked a palpable change in the city's political climate. Mayor Rob Ford's campaign promises to "Stop the Gravy Train" and restore "Respect for Taxpayers" resonated with voters, and Don Cherry's controversial address at the Mayor's inauguration, in which he mocked the "pinkos out there that ride bicycles and everything," set a new, divisive tone for City Council (The Toronto Star, 2010). In December 2010, in response to a proposed $2.2 million cut to the City's library budget, the TPL suggested that the Board consider closing the Urban Affairs Library at Metro Hall (Keung, 2011). The Board ultimately rejected the TPL's recommendation, making other budgetary adjustments in order to keep the Urban Affairs branch open. Unfortunately, this victory proved to be short-lived. City Council voted with the mayor to close the Urban Affairs Library, and more potential service cuts loomed on the horizon. Public libraries became one of the City's services targeted for extensive cuts in the 2012 municipal budget.

The accessibility and high visibility of the TPL had always been a point of pride for the organization; in the city's new political climate, it was becoming a political liability. The Toronto Public Library Workers Union (TPLWU Local 4948) launched a high-profile campaign and online petition (at OurPublicLibrary.to) to draw public attention to the proposed branch closures and cuts to library services. In spite of the public outcry against the proposed cuts, Mayor Ford and his supporters on City Council appeared to view the TPL's expansive branch system as a prime example of wasteful spending and an easy target for timely budget cuts. "Why

do we need another little library in the middle of nowhere that no one uses?" Councillor Ford stated. "My constituents, it wouldn't bother them because you have another library two miles one way and two miles the other way" (quoted in Maloney, July 6, 2011). Other Councillors focused their attention on specific policies, programs, and services. Councillor Michael Del Grande questioned the value of providing multilingual library materials to library patrons (because "our common language is English") and suggested that the library reduce spending on the acquisition of feature films.[3]

Public support for library funding remained steadfast throughout the 2012 budget process, as Toronto residents gave deputations, signed petitions, and wrote letters to TPL Board Members and City Councillors. Based on feedback from their constituents, several of the Mayor's key allies on City Council reversed their position on cuts to libraries. The strong public reaction to the proposed cuts suggests that Councillor Ford and the Mayor's allies on City Council underestimated the power of Marshall's "constituency of library supporters."

Conclusion

The TPL will inevitably continue to face financial and political pressures in the near future. In many ways, this appears to be an ideal time to explore the legacy of Toronto's urban reform movement and its impact on the TPL. The strong "constituency of library supporters" will likely continue to play a key role in allowing the TPL to maintain its status as an adequately-funded public institution. In many ways, the TPL is well-positioned to create new opportunities for patron participation. Creating a truly "participatory" library system could benefit "socially excluded" populations (Working Together Project, 2008), and create new inroads for researchers,

[3] "An argument can be made that this is what makes the city great, but I would dare say our common language is English, we're spending tons of money for ESL, should we not have a discussion of how much of the library budget should go for non-English resources?" (CBC, 2011).

institutions and grassroots organizations interested in adult education, community development, citizenship learning and participatory democracy.

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam describes the impact of the decline of civic life in the United States, and argues that we "can and should look for ways to recreate the best of our civic past in new forms suited to a renewed democratic future" (p. 506). Libraries are uniquely inclusive and accessible public institutions with a strong commitment to citizenship learning and lifelong learning. Throughout their history, public libraries have had strong symbolic ties to notions of democracy, free speech, human rights, citizenship, and civic life. By revisiting this moment in the history of the TPL, I hope to draw attention to the immense potential of public libraries to "recreate the best of our civic past in new forms," in Toronto, and beyond.

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