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Imagining the internet: learning and access to information in Singapore's public libraries

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to investigate the discourses surrounding the provision of internet access in Singapore through the public library system and to consider what the government, librarians and members of the public consider are 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 as an educational tool features in public libraries according to users.

Design/methodology/approach – A discourse analysis of public documents and semi-structured interviews with ten senior librarians, managers, and 40 members of the public were conducted. Observation was also conducted of library users and of their usage at the computer terminals in the library.

Findings – Findings from the study throw up very different definitions of what constitutes learning through the internet within the context of a public library. This reinforces conclusions from previous studies that what is termed learning through the internet is variously constructed, and understood in multiple ways. 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.

Research limitations/implications – While the study provided a glimpse into the discourse surrounding the internet in one country, similar work should be carried in more Asian countries to provide a more comprehensive survey of the region and compare this with findings conducted in an Occidental setting.

Originality/value – The study provides an Asian perspective that complements findings on the various discourses that had surrounded internet technology in the USA and Europe. It also calls for a new spirit of awareness on the part of librarians to the views of library users with regard to internet access.

Keywords Public libraries, Singapore, Internet, Government, Librarians, Library users

Paper type Research paper

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.

The authors would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their encouraging comments and suggestions for improvements, and also to the librarians and members of the public who shared unreservedly about their work and views on the subject. Special thanks go to the National Library Board who supported the study without which access to both the librarians and the public would not be so easily realised.

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. 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 perceptions 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 nature of the situation and differing perspective of internet utility becomes an interesting area for investigation to find out if users have a different discourse from the professional and government, and if so what are the implications.

The research agenda

Unfortunately, as Hand (2005) 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 embraced the internet wholeheartedly and despite the libraries being at the forefront of technological adoption over the past decade, no such study exists. 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. What do users consider as legitimate uses of the internet in Singapore's public libraries? Are these views aligned with or different 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? And, finally, what are the implications

for a truly user-centric library science perspective? Using Hand's model as a reference, this study aims to provide some tentative answers to these questions.

Method

Discourse analysis, which this paper employs as its approach to the data is based on a social constructivist epistemology. Social constructivism posits that it is in the mind of individuals that reality is created. Each individual perceives reality uniquely because of the diverse context in which they were raised and the myriad experiences that mould them (Gergen, 1994). Specifically in the field of information studies, Tuominen *et al.* (2005) explains that social constructionism[1] focuses "on talk, interaction and language use in various contexts ... (providing) a dialogic viewpoint to study the assumptions and implicit theories that people draw on when they engage in information practices and produce accounts of them" (p. 1). Holland (2005) offers a working definition that draws the focus "on dialogue and discourse as the essential elements in people describing and producing their experiences"(p. 92). Discourse is understood as a particular way of talking about and making sense of the world and these can be evidenced in written or spoken statements about a subject, issue, theme, or phenomenon. The main aim is to uncover the assumptions on which these discourse are built and not the veracity of the claims or statements (Hedmark *et al.*, 2005).

In this sense, the public documents from statutory boards were examined to form an understanding of the official discourse generated by the government. Access to the top level bureaucrats who draft the agency's strategies are difficult to obtain but the publications produced by the agency provide insight into their mindset or assumptions, and may legitimately be used as evidence of their public position on issues and ideas. 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 total, 40 library users were also interviewed to glean their opinions on the same topic. Each librarian, was assigned a number, to help identify them, when their quotes appear in the article. Their interviews were recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed to facilitate analysis. These records then form the basis for our investigation. A close reading of the transcripts was made and conclusions drawn. Themes were drawn from each set of responses and highlighted. As patterns emerged across the various transcripts, when the majority of the officers exhibited the use of similar vocabulary or described a phenomenon using the same imagery or metaphors. In this way, the study seeks to uncover the discourse used by different actors in presenting the ideal of internet usage in a library setting. It is more an orientation than a tight methodology focusing on social structure, power, culture and human agency. Similarly, getting answers to these questions from the library users would help us explore the role and impact the internet had played in their lives and possibly provide policy makers with a different perspective of the current situation as they chart the developments of the library's growth in the years to come.

Observations in the tradition of naturalistic inquiry (McKenzie and Stooke, 2007) were also performed at the public computer terminals to check on the types of web sites being accessed, but these were done casually so as not to disturb the users who pay for their time at the terminal. It was done only at times when interviews were being conducted with users and librarians, which happened to be during office hours so that

the choice of time might have some impact on the kind of people who use the terminals. Most of the users at the terminals at these times were school children and mothers with their children. Among these are a peppering of adults who have with them their pile of printed materials and accompanying writing instruments. In total 12 visits were made to the different libraries at different times of the day but always during office hours from 8.30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Not merely incidental, these observations complement and support the findings we obtained with regards to the materials accessed by users of the library during most of the institutions' opening hours. It is highly improbable that the three hours would make any difference in research as the library closes at 9 p.m. each day. Working adults are likely to get dinner or be stuck in traffic getting away from work, leaving even less time for them once they get into the library to do research. Several attempts to engage some of these terminal users when they had finished with the machines were also in vain as they all cited excuses like being pressed for time or did not wished to be interviewed.

In assessing the reliability of a method like this, Talja (2005) explicates that the findings would depend very much on the verifiability of its interpretations and conclusions. Although the data were collected in different form, whether from formal documentary evidence or transcripts of informal interviews, they were nevertheless analyzed in a consistent manner and the textual evidence quoted verbatim to allow readers to draw their own assessments of the robustness of our analysis and conclusions. As Potter and Wetherell (1987) advanced in their concept of discourse analysis, the analyzed texts (spoken or written) offer themselves as proofs of the investigator's interpretations and inferences as they are the very objects being interrogated. Johnstone (2008) provides an even wider concept of discourse analysis as the study of language in the everyday sense. Whether descriptive (as what we obtained from librarians and users of their perceptions) or prescriptive (as culled from the official public documents on the strategies the government employed) it is always the assumptions that underlie the language that are of interest here.

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 published in 1992. 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 first how information technology (IT) can carve out niches in the new economy 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 11 sectoral study groups that reflected various industrial sectors of the Singapore's economy, namely:

- (1) Construction and real estate.
- (2) Education and training.
- (3) Financial services.

- (4) Government.
- (5) Healthcare.
- (6) IT industry.
- (7) Manufacturing.
- (8) Media, publishing, and information services.
- (9) Retail, wholesale, and distribution.
- (10) Tourist and leisure services.
- (11) Transportation.

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 potential applications that IT could leverage in each of these sectors. It is not difficult to see from such an arrangement of the steering committee, how the economy looms, and towers 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 treasure chests 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 networked computers were important. 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 percent 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 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 involved, the country's survival 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, mere mortals and ignorant of

the new global technological and business network, would have to adhere to the directions and commands of these captains as they navigate the nation through the turbulent and highly competitive future. The crisis imagery provided a means to give legitimacy to the plans and the platform to showcase these experts of technology (IT specialists), the business and political leaders as newly crowned masters capable of leading the country to a new dawn.

A closer look at the articulated goals 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. Velayutham (2007) has observed of Singapore 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 Tan (2007) in which citizens of the island republic continually cower under a sense of foreboding, 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 ten-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" (Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore, 2008b). Once again, the economy is presented as being the lifeblood 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 the government suggests lies in the ability to equip oneself to manage change on a continual basis and this would involve "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). Again 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 they must resign themselves to a very bleak future. The way forward 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 prepared "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, 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 in our case is “to bring the world’s knowledge to Singapore and to create a positive social and economic impact” (National Library Board, 2005).

In this plan, 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. It presents how intimately the two are linked such that 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, who are charged with these very missions.

Librarians’ discourse

By and large, the librarians seem to uphold the ideological views of the state (Luyt, 2006). Their response belies a consciousness saturated with the ideal that learning is to equip the nation with the manpower to serve the economy. Yet this ideological dominance is not overtly coercive, it is rather subtle and more clearly played out in the authoritarian personality of the state, lucidly described by Singh (2007). In his article, he explains that the idea of what constitutes words like “diversity”, “information”,

“openness” and “culture” are so strictly defined in the mind of the rulers and its attendant bureaucratic machinery – ministries, statutory boards and other government linked agencies - that any deviance to this constructed essence is vehemently resisted and opposition openly challenged. In the context of the library, we want to examine the word ‘learning’, for the mission of the library is “to expand the learning capacity of the nation so as to enhance national competitiveness” (NLB, 2005, p. 1). Even here, it is not hard to see how learning has become an appendage to achieving national competitiveness.

The government’s policy to educate the nation has been taken up by the librarians. One of them claimed enthusiastically, that the vision statement is “providing a beacon of lifelong learning” (L8)[2] and all ten librarians interviewed were unanimous in their support to help facilitate internet access, especially to those who cannot afford it at home. But, access 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 perceive users as unable to navigate the complicated web, and unable to assess the credibility and reliability of information found on the internet thoroughly. 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”. The librarians hope to right this by conducting courses on information literacy in the schools and library.

The sense of mission is not difficult to discern and it is echoed and shared by many of her colleagues. This need to “educate the public” (L8) is something that comes across very strongly among the librarians we interviewed as they want very much 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[3] 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 handholding 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 Kenneth Tan terms the "conservative majority" as he describes this imaginary collection of people that make up the greater part of Singapore's citizens as "ignorant, closed-minded, prudish, self-righteous, repressive, intolerant, oppressive, parochial, xenophobic, incapable of learning, resistant to change, and even boorish" (Tan, 2007, p. 73). It is not surprising, that with such a caricature of Singaporeans in circulation, librarians may share 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. None of the librarians had problems enforcing these rules as IT policies are in place to prevent the downloading of software, access to instant messaging or chat software, gambling, hacking, pornographic and games sites in the library premises by blocking the URLs of these sites from the server in the library. This means users using the library's multimedia stations 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? In the vein of the government's authoritarian personality (Singh, 2007), transcripts of the respondents revealed that the library sets up its own strict defining criterion that internet educational use may only involve applications that are non-violent (which rules out most role playing and strategic war games or games that encourage conflict), and which does not excite its players enough to make them yell in triumph or moan in defeat, but leave them suitably sober in order to complete school projects or "research work".

Yet, pockets of resistance can be discerned across the respondents as well. One librarian interviewed in particular spouts a very liberal discourse. This discourse begins with seeing the internet as another resource waiting to be exploited. Whatever 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). Librarians' primary role first and foremost is to open avenues for the user to gain access to as much information available as possible. As the same librarian put it, the internet 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 without taking a moral stance on materials, seem to cast a more liberal view on what constitutes usefulness or whether material is considered educational. As she argues "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 their 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, the librarian should exercise their authority and make the culprit stop. Although not all the other librarians share such a liberal view on privacy as L1, they 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 web sites 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.

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 did 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 not 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 that 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 worldwide 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 web sites 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 Google search results and participating in discussion boards. A few subsequent visits to the library also revealed a greater preponderance of 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, as many users who were conducting web searches, clicked in and out of web sites, with no support materials, like a note pad or 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 we were in the library, which is usually during office hours from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. It is possible, that working adults, or professionals might choose to do their research after office hours. We did encounter one researcher with a traditional method of uncovering answers through the search of prior

knowledge and building on these to produce new findings. She was a sport specialist (P18) who had obviously gone through the database of online journals provided by the library and was lamenting the lack of materials in her specialization. She had 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 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 a close collaborative relationship. Yet users who 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. Their 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 buy in to 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 while 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 is that the internet is no more than just another

communication medium that facilitates its users to connect with each other as suggested by Hand (2005). Following his lead in exploring the discourses of the librarians and the users, we are led to believe that both reflects 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. This construction of the user as being ignorant, puerile, or ill (in dire need of the right diagnosis) is echoed in a recent study done by Olsson (2009) in which he cites prior work from Frohmann (1992), Talja (1997) and Julien (1999) who criticize such a negative portrayal of users. Julien (1999) elaborates that the recipient of help is generally associated with "inferiority, dependency and inadequacy" (p. 586). 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 rendering assistance, with regards 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 the 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 the 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. 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. The official discourse hopes that learning will provide the country with an economic edge, 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, while the users themselves decide that surfing through the internet's vast collection of web sites, when not communicating with friends, could provide them with any information required.

In many ways, Singapore's experience resembles those of the few other studies on internet discourse in libraries around the world. Apart from substantiating Hand's claims of the disjoint between the various stakeholders in the UK, two Swedish studies (Talja, 2005; Hedmark *et al.*, 2005) also provided more substantial critique of the type of discourse employed by the elites in society. Hedmark *et al.* (2005) cites Torstensson's (1995) tracing of the political and ideological origins of the public library as a working class movement to invest in education. They continue charting the evolution by

revealing how such a socialist and democratic ideal can be co-opted by the authorities in politically rooted visions as evidenced in the reference to users as categories. In Singapore's case, individuals become "members of the public", "citizens" or worse, constituents of "the economy". This dehumanizing aspect, where the dignity of an individual is subsumed under a prosaic collective term, is taken up by Talja (2005) and elaborated as she argued that the democratic ideal of the library as an educational or learning institution is very much an illusion. She helps us see how the whole process of asking a country's citizens to participate in the culture of change to equip and adapt themselves for the new economy is itself a type of coercion.

Talja's reminder reinforces the notion that however noble official aims are, and for all its efficiency in implementing and building structures to equip its citizens to learn, governments and librarians should understand that such phenomenal changes though impressive in themselves cannot be as easily mirrored in the development of the mindset of users. Real change must come from the users themselves and at present, unfortunately, they are quite content to surf, email and chat over the internet.

Notes

1. See Holland (2005) for the interchangeability of the terms "social constructionism" and "social constructivism". He cites Raskin (2002) as reference for a more in depth discussion.
2. Interviewees are identified by a name and number. L1 refers to Librarian 1 and P1 refers to Members of the Public 1.
3. 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 speak only Singlish, a distinct variety of local pidgin English.

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