COMPETING VISIONS OF LIBRARY SERVICE

by France Bouthillier

Long ago before the service revolution, often presented as the cornerstone of the post-industrial society, there was a service profession: librarianship. The service revolution means that nowadays, most of us are now involved directly or indirectly in the production and consumption of services. Librarians have been involved in service delivery for quite a long time. Today, we are told that we are in the midst of another revolution: the spreading of information technology in our lives. The development of information technology and the service sector are now closely tied. The introduction of new technology is shaping and transforming the delivery of various types of services and the nature of the work of service providers.

One could argue that the most important service that librarians are providing is to play a role in the distribution of information and knowledge in society. A concomitant dimension of this role is librarians' concern for intellectual freedom. Indeed, providing and preserving access to various types of information and knowledge is an everyday challenge for librarians. The service ideal of librarians can be easily found in the professional literature. For example, the role of academic librarians "consists of assessment, advanced information provision, resource identification and development, collection development, knowledge management and education. All of these should be done in the context of the educational role, rather than the reference or collection development role. The education role predominates because education is the overarching library activity" (Stoftle 1995: 9). However, what is less known is the service ideal of other library service providers such as clerical and technical workers. In a workplace which is dominated by professionals such as a library, can they really express their service ideals and values? What exactly are those ideals and values?
Moreover, assuming that in order to achieve an ideal, individuals must access some types of knowledge, can service providers easily access the types of knowledge they need?

According to Barbara Gutke (1995), a management specialist, there are two main social mechanisms for delivering services: relationships and encounters. Relationships imply repeated contact between service providers and customers. This contact leads to the construction of a history of shared interaction and shared knowledge, and this facilitates transactions. This is the type of interaction that we can have with our hairdresser, travel agent or lawyer. Encounters, in contrast, are interactions in which providers and customers are strangers and each provider is expected to be functionally equivalent. For instance, we have encounters with the hotel employee at the reception desk or with the airline employee at the airport. Which type of mechanisms do we value in libraries: do we try to deliver services through relationships or encounters?

To provide some answers to those questions, a portion of the findings of a study undertaken in a Quebec public library is briefly presented, and is followed by a discussion of the implications for the management of library services.

The Study

The main objective of the study was to understand the role of the public library in a society where this institution had difficulty evolving. Public libraries are a relatively recent phenomenon in the province of Quebec in Canada, the majority established within the last thirty years. Their role has never been explicitly defined in legislation, and their resources have always been minimal in comparison to libraries in other Canadian provinces. Because libraries should be considered as connected to larger social, political and economic phenomena, to understand their role in society, an ethnographic study seeking to investigate the systems of meanings developed by library employees was designed and conducted in 1994 as a case study.

The conceptual framework for this case study consists of (among others) Bourdieu's theory focussing on the role of culture in the reproduction of social structures and Giddens' structuration theory. According to Bourdieu, culture plays a critical role in the reproduction of social structures. Unequal power relations are embedded in the production, diffusion and consumption of art, literature, etc. There is a struggle to determine which cultural products are legitimate. Within this struggle, individuals are competing for the control of certain resources. Those resources can be material (economic capital) or symbolic (forms of knowledge, prestige and recognition) and this leads to the construction of symbolic power. Individuals, struggling over valued resources, are actually engaged, consciously or not, in the construction of symbolic power, which consists of imposing systems of meanings and classifications upon social groups in such a way that these systems are perceived as legitimate.

Bourdieu views the field of cultural production as an economy of cultural exchanges involving a specific division of labour: the production of cultural goods by creators who seek to accumulate symbolic capital (prestige, celebrity); the diffusion of cultural goods sustained by an industrial and institutional framework (editors, bookstores, libraries, museums, galleries, schools, etc.); and the consumption of symbolic goods by individuals, who have acquired specific types of knowledge or cultural capital through family, school and social education, to appreciate cultural goods. Hence, libraries participate in this economy by giving access to what constitutes legitimate cultural products. On the other hand, library decisions and practices are developed by individuals who have various stocks of knowledge or cultural capital. Bourdieu's theory suggests, for example, that within a library individuals use various kinds of resources and are engaged in an economy of cultural exchanges where those resources are negotiated and gained. For instance, library employees need to have and gain knowledge for doing their work and for gaining and maintaining their status.

Giddens' theory on structuration also seeks to explain the reproduction of social structures by the use of various resources (allocative or material and authoritative such as authority, knowledge) and rules. However, for Giddens, individuals are knowledgeable and give meanings to their actions on the basis of the intended consequences or intended impact of those actions from which meanings are derived. To understand individuals' actions, it is then necessary to discover the meanings they give to the resources and rules they use to conduct their actions.

With this conceptual framework in mind, I wanted to identify the meanings given by library employees to the various resources that they use to do their work and to the issues related to their environment.
When the study was undertaken, there were 43 employees working in the library. The majority of them were paraprofessional and clerical workers. Only two employees were professional librarians. The methodology, an ethnographic approach, involved 200 hours of participant observation, 36 interviews in which 28 employees participated as well as municipal representatives, and the analysis of various library documents.

Findings

The data revealed two basic visions of service or service ideologies comprising different set of values. Those visions and values are presented in the table below.

For most employees, the two visions are the extreme ends of a spectrum involving different types of service interactions. Although some employees expressed a preference, they all acknowledged that both visions guided their everyday activities at work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visions of Service/Service Ideologies from Service Provider’s Perspective</th>
<th>Service for Education</th>
<th>Service for Popularization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vision of provider’s role</td>
<td>“I have to educate.”</td>
<td>“I have to give people what they want.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valued services</td>
<td>Directed services: readers’ advisory, reference</td>
<td>Self-directed: reservations, suggestions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valued resources</td>
<td>written texts</td>
<td>multimedia texts: videos, cassettes, CDs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valued service approach</td>
<td>personalized and warm</td>
<td>efficient, rapid</td>
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<td>Vision of programming</td>
<td>essential to promote reading</td>
<td>essential to entice people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision of users</td>
<td>dependent/need help</td>
<td>autonomous/know what they want</td>
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</tbody>
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The ideology of service for education assumes that most users are dependent and need help. Therefore, services such as reference and readers’ advisory are highly valued. In terms of library resources, books are valued because they are viewed as the most important resource of the library while other multimedia resources are seen as secondary. Within this perspective, the service approach should be personalized and warm because developing a meaningful relationship with users is a condition for being able to educate them and to guide them in the library. Programming is then perceived as an important means for promoting reading and books in general. Within this ideology of service, service providers see themselves as guardians, missionaries, or militants for the library. They are also engaged in the preservation of a particular culture. In the context of Québec where the dominant language is French, preserving the French language and promoting Québec culture and authors are clearly identified as critical roles to be played by the library and its employees. However, regarding intellectual freedom, employees are aware that there is a fine line between the promotion of a culture and propaganda, and this is why the ideology of popularization is seen as a means to counterbalance the ideology of education.

The ideology of popularization suggests that the basic role of service providers is to give people what they want, assuming that library users know what they want. Therefore, the services that allow users to be autonomous and to express their cultural tastes are valued such as reservation systems, best-seller sections, suggestion boxes, etc. Within this perspective, popular resources such as videos, cassettes, compact discs, and light fiction are crucial library materials. The book is not seen as meaningful as it is the case within the ideology of education, in fact a multitude of resources are considered important as long as they meet popular requests. Regarding the interaction with users, an efficient and rapid approach is valued because it is believed that the only thing that matters for people is to avoid waiting. Talking to users or recognizing them can take up too much time and employees will tend to avoid such interactions. Programming is perceived only as a means to entice people to come to the library and not as a means of critical education. Programming activities can then vary and do not have to be related to library resources. The ideology of popularization, from a management perspective, is considered as essential for the survival of the library. Indeed, if statistics do not show that library resources are well used (for example lending videos of popular films were presented as a good means to obtain interesting statistics and to show how library resources are well used), the library will face an image problem. Service providers are
perfectly aware of this issue, and this is why several employees expressed their disappointment regarding their position because they felt that their “real” role was education but that they had to behave in a “popularization mode.”

The popularization ideology in the context of Québec can raise conflicting goals because it can mean giving access to popular materials which are not necessarily produced in Québec. In fact, cultural products in high demand are very often those which receive significant attention in the media. American and French products, for example (especially movies, music and best-sellers), are very well advertised in the media because cultural industries in both countries (United States and France) are much larger than the one in Québec, and consequently often generate higher demand than local products.

The coexistence of these ideologies generates tensions and a number of ambiguities for service providers when they have to deliver services. For instance, structural ambiguities arise when occupational boundaries are unclear. Although the responsibilities of professional, technical and clerical staff are broadly defined, the division of labor does not take into account the necessary shifts in service priorities that need to be done in the course of day-to-day operations. Boundaries regarding the work of part-time and full-time staff are also an important source of confusion, because when part-time and full-time employees work together there is a certain division of labor, but part-time employees work alone at certain hours (during evenings and week-ends), and then they inherit most of the responsibilities of full-time staff.

There are also occupational ambiguities which are related to the question “how and when should it be done?” For instance, problems can arise when different employees (part-time, full-time, professional, para-, temporary, clerical, etc.) are faced with deciding which service approach to take (personalized or efficient?), how to assist users in their searches (educating or giving them what they want?), or how to apply library rules (being flexible or inflexible?).

Finally, there are ideological ambiguities which relate to the function of the library and raise the question “what should be done?” There is no consensus regarding the library mission and the roles of individuals. Service providers experience frustrations when they are not sure whether they are doing the right thing, but they also face tensions because they might disagree with their colleagues as to what they should be doing. Negotiating values and meanings is then a constant activity, and clearly employees having more experience and knowledge (full-time and senior) will tend to impose their values over those who have less experience (junior and part-time).

Access to knowledge is problematic because it is related to the division of labor, and, as suggested before, this division implies ambiguities. Unclear occupational boundaries create the need for most service providers to possess a large stock of knowledge because they might need it in certain circumstances. But the fact that junior employees are in the process of gaining knowledge and part-time employees might have limited access to knowledge given that they work only a few hours per week creates a situation in which the library becomes a setting where people have unequal stocks of knowledge. The difficulty is that when interacting with users, employees will tend to deliver the service even though they do not possess all the necessary knowledge and skills, because delivering the service is also a means to gain new knowledge. As a result, service delivery might vary from one employee to another, and this might in turn affect user expectations and service quality. In addition, the division of labor creates a vicious circle where people who have fewer skills and knowledge, will have more difficulty in gaining new skills and knowledge.

Discussion

These research data reveal that the service interaction involves a set of organizational processes, themselves linked to social processes, and that it is an arena where meanings, service ideologies, and service practices are negotiated. Obviously, one could argue that the ideologies of education and popularization are two sides of the same coin, and that it is impossible to select only one mission for a public library. If this is true then what can be done to alleviate the problems they raise and to foster their expression?

Interestingly, these ideologies reflect a basic dilemma in librarianship and especially in public librarianship: the tension between educating and responding to patrons’ requests has been, and is still, well documented in the professional literature. This study shows that non-professional employees do experience the same dilemma. They have not, however, the same means (professional journals, annual conferences, professional associations) to express it. In fact, they are rarely considered as having something to say
about the library mission or library resources and practices.

The two service ideologies identified are closely related to Gutek's typology of service interactions. Indeed, library service providers seem to be torn between developing encounters (popularization) and relationships (education) with library patrons. Unfortunately, the administration offers little help in making the decision simply because the final decision depends on the employee's analysis of the situation and judgement.

Therefore, the administration can only recognize that a basic dilemma exists, and encourage discussions and identification of relating problems. There is, however, a need to clarify the library mission and to make sure that everyone understands its implications and, perhaps, its contradictions. In fact, it is necessary to develop skills among employees to enable them to manage ambiguities. This implies encouraging people to talk about the problems they encounter in delivering services and to facilitate discussions about the solutions they use. Another important issue for the administration is to realize the need for the staff to access various types of knowledge about library procedures and tasks, and approaches to take when interacting with users. It is clearly inappropriate to assume that all employees will naturally share what they know with other workers. This knowledge transfer is far from being straightforward in a hierarchical environment. Sharing knowledge is difficult because it means that someone has to express his/her lack of knowledge, and this might have as a consequence a questioning of his/her status and ability to do the work. Hence, developing an organizational ethos where sharing knowledge for improving service should be seen as an important challenge for library managers.

Another area of concern regarding the management of library services, is to recognize that the introduction of information technology in a library has the potential to facilitate the development of encounters instead of relationships with users (for instance at the circulation, reference and information desks). Then the question is: what do we really seek to achieve with that technology? This tool is useful to achieve which service ideal? If libraries, librarians and other service providers are expected to play a critical role in the distribution of knowledge and information in society, it should be essential before introducing new technology to discuss how this role can be achieved from a service perspective. Unfortunately, it seems that in many instances, we let the technology shape our service ideal rather than promote a vision of service (or two) through technology and other means. Perhaps this is a way to avoid confrontation between differing visions of service but this is certainly not the best way to facilitate the work of library service providers who are left with the management of conflicting goals.

WORKS CITED