

“More Libraries than Tim Hortons and McDonald’s”: Capturing the Cultural and Economic Impact of Libraries on Canada

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This article reports on the results of the 1999 survey by the National Core Library Statistics Program (NCLSP). All figures refer to 1999 unless otherwise stated.

Canadians as library users

One key indicator in information delivery by librarians across Canada is question answering services. While many library services are organized for unassisted self-service, Canadian library users also seek staff assistance on a regular basis. They asked library staff more than 110,000 questions per day every day of the year – an average of 1.3 questions per person for every woman, man and child in the country.

Another major benchmark is library collection use. When external borrowing and on-site use of library holdings are combined, it is evident that Canadians are voracious consumers of the cultural materials collected by librarians. Altogether, Canadian library users are estimated to have consulted well over a million library publications per day every day of the year – on average more than 13 items per person for every woman, man and child.

There are more libraries in Canada than Tim Hortons and McDonald’s restaurants combined – 22,000 compared to 2,049 “Tim’s” and more than 1,200 McDonald’s. And for every three donuts sold by Tim Hortons in 1999, one book or other item was accessed by someone in a library somewhere in the country.

In 1999 twice as many Canadians went to libraries as to movie theatres.

Libraries as economic incubators

An important indicator of the economic impact of libraries on Canadian society is employment. More than 38,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff were employed by libraries across Canada in all sectors. This amounted to 73 million hours of library services. Librarians accounted for 22 per cent of all staff FTEs, and technicians for 19 per cent. Expenditures on staffing totalled \$1.4 billion. Although actual staff headcount numbers were not captured in the NCLSP, Canadian workers employed in libraries both full- and part-time were estimated to total 50,000 individuals.

In addition to paid staff, Canadians volunteered thousands of hours to public and school libraries across

Canada. It is estimated that 9,000 to 10,000 volunteer trustees served on municipal and regional public library boards and advisory committees that year. Public libraries also relied on volunteer staffing – 7,500 in Ontario public libraries alone.¹ In addition, 41 per cent of school libraries were reported to have relied on volunteer staffing in 1998-99.² In total, volunteer public library trustees and volunteer library workers in public and school libraries numbered at least 35,000.

Library expenditures on goods and services are also a measure of economic impact. Librarians spent \$2.5 billion to provide library services across the country in all sectors, of which 57 per cent went to staffing and 22 per cent to collection development. When capital expenditures,

in public and academic libraries, for both multi-purpose and purpose-built building projects are taken into account, it is reasonable to factor in \$500 million to \$1 billion per year of additional disbursements that typically do not show up in library accounts. As well, some electronic resource expenditures are not included, instead forming part of institutional program allocations.

Equally notable is the determined investment by Canadian librarians in library collection infrastructure. More than \$550 million went to expanding library collection holdings already totalling 465 million items. Such economic investment and cultural infrastructure are not only substantial, they are also virtually impossible to appraise, particularly when value-added services of selecting, organizing, displaying, storing, preserving and retrieving collections are factored in.

Altogether, then, library expenditures were \$3 billion to \$3.5 billion or more. Conservative estimates suggest that 60 to 65 per cent of expenditures are local, meaning that Canadian libraries add well over \$2 billion to local economies through direct purchases of goods and services, and the multiplier effect magnifies this investment far beyond this amount.

Canadian libraries are economic incubators, stimulating career and business opportunities, education and literacy improvement, and the local economy. Policy makers would be well advised to take note of the significant economic purchasing power of Canadian librarians and their impact on the Canadian economy.

NCLSP – An Overview

Canada's National Core Library Statistics Program was established as a partnership venture to capture and analyse key statistical indicators and measures of the overall broad impact on the people of Canada of the facilities and services provided by libraries and library staff across the nation. These key indicators are question answering services, collection use, collection infrastructure, staffing, service points, and expenditures. Library service impacts are broadly conceived as cultural impacts and economic impacts.

Data have now been collected and analysed for 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1999. In the future, rather than annual surveys, a three-year cycle is envisaged if stable funding can be secured. To date, the types of libraries included in the program fall into three sectors: public, including provincial and territorial libraries; academic, consisting of university and college libraries; and special, consisting of government, not-for-profit and for-profit libraries. So far, it has not been possible to include school libraries in the program. The 1999 survey covered 1,490 libraries in the three sectors: 60 per cent public, 15 per cent academic, and 25 per cent special libraries.

When libraries in all four sectors, including school libraries, are counted together and estimates made for institutions and values missing from the 1999 NCLSP, the data show that libraries and their staff provide impressive cultural and economic benefits to the people of Canada. It is also clear that total library usage far exceeds the levels represented in the National Core Library Statistics Program itself:

- 40 million questions answered by library staff
- 403 million publications (print and other materials) borrowed by library users or consulted on site
- 465 million publications in library collections in print and other formats
- 19,000 libraries and 38,000 FTE staff delivered services to Canadian library users through 22,000 service points across the country
- \$3 billion to \$3.5 billion in expenditures to provide library services, including staffing at \$1.4 billion and capital expenditures on the order of \$500 million to \$1 billion for multi-purpose and purpose-built building projects in the public and academic library sectors.

Ongoing commitment to the NCLSP statistics gathering program is urgently required so that, ultimately, the Canadian library publics in each of the four major library sectors will reap the biggest benefit from knowing who we are and how we help the people of Canada every day of the year. The library community will be stronger too for articulating its vision and promise.

Valued-added contributions to Canadians' quality of life

The research undertaken for the NCLSP makes it evident that the people of Canada are eager consumers of library expertise, services and collections. Library staff in all four major sectors – public, academic, special and school – contribute to Canadian quality of life on a daily basis by making the records of human culture available to a wide range of the general public; to post-secondary students and faculty; to employers, employees and other primary clientele in the government, not-for-profit and corporate sectors; and to children of all ages from pre-school to high school as well as their teachers.

In Canada's goal to become a knowledge-based society, it is difficult to imagine what this country would look like without librarians at the forefront. They add substantial value to an ever-expanding universe of cultural, educational, literary, artistic and business information and publications in formats ranging from pamphlets and photographs to web sites and e-books.

Libraries and library staff make a vital contribution to Canadian society as places for the construction of community, whether it is the community of the general public in towns and cities and rural areas across the country, the community of post-secondary students and faculty, the community of workers employed in government, industry and the not-for-profit sector, or the community of elementary and secondary school students and their teachers.

In short, the research from the NCLSP reveals the profound impact that libraries and library staff have on the cultural fabric and economic infrastructure of Canadian society. Together, these institutions and people add both measurable and immeasurable value to the cultural and economic life of Canadians.

No price tag

Several important dimensions of library service are not captured at present in the NCLSP – in particular, unassisted use of electronic information in networked environments. Given the complex nature of library services and impacts, the challenge in the future will be to move beyond traditional measures and indicators to articulate a conception of library value that is at once multidimensional and yet also standardized and universal.

We should remember, nonetheless, in the quest for quantitative description and generators of economic activity, that every library transaction – whether it is a reference question, on-site consultation of material, borrowing for off-site use, or remote access – represents a “moment of truth” in the lives of Canadian library users. Each interaction is an opportunity for librarians and their staff to contribute to the personal and professional satisfaction of clients of every age and walk of life, every day of the year in every corner of the nation. Every outcome of library service is an individual's story.

As a result, an important dimension of the achievement of librarians does not have a price tag. Libraries

and library staff meet a multitude of cultural and economic needs, but their characteristic mode of operation is individualized. That is what a service orientation means.

Hence, both qualitative and quantitative contributions to Canada's emerging knowledge-based economy need to be acknowledged and valued.

The *Citizens First* report echoes these conclusions.³ Of 24 public and private services rated by a random sample of 2,900 Canadians in the spring of 1998, public libraries ranked second in service quality after fire departments. They ranked ahead of police, telephone companies, public transit, the public education system and hospitals (p. 3). Citizen assessments of service quality rested on five factors: timeliness, knowledge and competence of staff, courtesy and comfort, fair treatment, and outcome (pp. 2, 10-11).

What do libraries and librarians mean to Canadians?

This surprisingly complex question can be answered in as many ways as there are types of services provided by library staff.

For one thing, virtually 100 per cent of Canadians over the age of three recognize a library regardless of whether it is a company library, a school library, an academic library, a government library or a public library. Perhaps this is because there are so many libraries in Canada: 22,000 of them, forming a vast network of library staff finding answers and publications for clients. The general public may not always be

A Modest Manifesto

The library sector is enormously complex. Library staff serve a plethora of needs, with multiple types of services and clienteles spread across the entire fabric of Canada's economic, social and cultural life. The organizational infrastructure of libraries is multi-varied and multilevel within both public and private sectors. Professional associations are highly specialized, uncoordinated and almost literally too numerous to count. And the relationships of libraries with government departments at all levels are complex, confusing and fragmented.

In spite of concerted efforts to create a national visibility, the library sector still speaks with not one but rather many voices, to not one but rather many audiences of policy makers, funders, and politicians. Few messages seem to be heard above the din. The following suggests a framework – a modest Canadian-style manifesto – for visioning a stronger role for libraries and librarians both in formulating information policy at all levels of government and in organizing and delivering information and expressive content to Canadians:

- Libraries have power. They are the brain of the nation. Librarians are user centred. They are the interface in a knowledge-based society. They support imagination and creativity.
- Libraries have content. Librarians create access. They organize content for anticipated use. They select and manage collections, real and virtual, and they acquire access to alternative collections around the world.
- Libraries foster freedom of choice. Librarians are advocates for access as the foundation of all human rights — freedom of expression and the freedom to receive expressive content.
- Libraries are a network 22,000 strong. Librarians are multi-sector. They are connected to each other across the country, to the lives of those living in their communities, and to Canadian society at large.
- Libraries provide multiple services to multiple communities of users. They are collections of users in competition among themselves for scarce resources. Librarians mediate this competition.
- Libraries make a difference in the quality of life enjoyed by Canadians in both the personal and social realms. Librarians change lives. They strengthen communities. They promote and sustain literacy and reading.
- Libraries have a key role to play in information infrastructure, in government e-learning strategy, and in government information e-communication initiatives. Librarians manage a preferred venue for Internet access.
- Libraries are economic incubators. Librarians benefit local businesses. They are economic multipliers stimulating local economies through direct purchases of goods and services.
- Libraries are socially responsive and fiscally accountable organizations and institutions. They generate goodwill and other intangible assets that do not appear on the balance sheet. Librarians are dedicated to a service ethic of both individual care and community. They enrich all of humanity.
- Libraries support the economic, social and cultural life of Canadian society, Canadian business and Canadian democracy. Librarians create cultural and social space. They create intellectual capital.
- Libraries and librarians are worthy of social and economic policy support by government officials and elected politicians at all levels of Canadian society. Librarians shape and implement information policy. Libraries and librarians make a difference in the lives of the people of Canada.



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able to recognize a library from the outside. But from the inside, libraries are instantly recognizable. Library users and non-users alike know when something is a library – even if it is mostly computer workstations. Canadians have a high awareness of libraries.

Another way of answering the question is in terms of Canadians making choices. Think of libraries as library services, and then think of libraries as the many individual and personal choices made by Canadians of every age and every walk of life, every day, everywhere. These choices are about where to look for answers to questions and where to look for publications. While there are lots of places that the individual might choose to try, the surest place is a

library. It might be a library at work, a library at school, a library at college or university, a library in a government department, a library in a not-for-profit agency, or a local public library.

Millions of Canadians are making library choices every year. In 1999, Canadians asked library staff a staggering 40 million questions – 40 million choices. Every one of their questions represents an answer to the

question of what libraries mean to Canadians.

And there is also the enormous use of the vast collections of publications and other materials that library staff make available for on-site and off-site consultation. In 1999, it was 400 million uses. That means 400 million individual library user choices.

But there is more. Question answering and collection services are by no means the only services provided by library staff. Depending on the clientele, many other services are offered to meet user-centred needs and interests. The *National Core Library Statistics Program: Statistical Report, 1999*⁴ represents only a partial response to the cultural and economic information gap about

the activities and benefits of the library sector to Canadian society. 🍁

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Notes

1. Ontario Public Libraries Strategic Directions Council, 1999, p. 7.
2. People for Education, 2002, p. 3.
3. Erin Research Inc., *Citizens First: Summary Report* (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, 1998).
4. The authors of the study are Dr. Alvin M. Schrader, Professor and former Director, School of Library and Information Studies, and Michael R. Brundin, Research Associate and currently Reference/Instruction Librarian in the Science and Technology Library, University of Alberta. The English-language version of the full 1999 report, as well as earlier ones, can be found at www.nlc-bnc.ca/8/3/r3-203-e.html.

