Politics and Advocacy: The Role of Networking in Selling the Library to Your Community

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the Library to Your Community

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SUMMARY. Current research conducted by the Information Use Management and Policy Institute, Florida State University, identifies the characteristics of the successfully networked public library (SNPL) and in particular explores the impact of technology on both library advocacy and networking in the political system. This paper identifies the factors that are critical to a public library's success in advocacy, community support, government relations, and ultimately the perceived importance of the library in the community. This perspective on the SNPL is reinforced by the examination of Cuyahoga County Public Library's program to use the strategies of the SNPL. doi:10.1300/J118v25n01_10 *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service:*

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INTRODUCTION

The laundry list of factors that can determine the overall success of today's public library is daunting. Public library directors have such a long list of factors to address that it is often difficult to know which should be priorities. Clearly, however, one of the key factors to address is working the local political system as a means of advocating for the library. Two key phrases in the previous sentence, "working the local political system" and "advocating for the library" are the key to this paper.

Local public policy decision-making and the role of the library in that process may vary from community to community due to local and state laws and the local personalities involved in the process. Public policy making is essentially a socially agreeable way or collaborative process used to make decisions. *Stakeholders*, the people affected by a social problem or *issue*, recognize that policies and decisions may be developed to deal with a particular library issue. Stakeholders often have conflicting value systems and differing objectives in the resolution of an issue. Public policy decisions and issues are usually the subject of ongoing discussions. Politics, and working the local political system, is the process by which public policy decisions and policies are made.

Recent research by Bertot, McClure, Jaeger, and Ryan (2006) suggests that working the local political system is essential for advocacy and for becoming a successfully networked public library (SNPL). Public libraries now exist in a complex and ever-evolving electronic networked environment in which services and resources are often provided via a national, state, regional, or local networked environment (Courtney, 2006). Local governing boards and residents may not understand the extent to which information technology and the networking environment are now the backbone of public library services and the basis for being "successful." Without a high quality technology information infrastructure and network, public libraries simply cannot compete in the information marketplace.

Advocacy has many meanings and uses. Generally, as used in public librarianship, the term suggests organizing community residents and others to promote the library, its services, and its overall importance in the community. Often the goal of such advocacy is to obtain additional resources to support public library services. *Library Advocate's Handbook* (ALA) is a good example of this type of advocacy. Indeed, the American Library Association offers a broad range of resources and tools in support of such advocacy.[1]

While such advocacy clearly is essential for public libraries, this paper agues that a better linking of working the local political process and advocating for the library–orchestrated by library managers–may also pay significant benefits for the library. Indeed, this paper argues that advocacy without working the local political system may have less impact than desired by library managers and local community members. More specifically, key themes in this paper include:

- Library directors must be able to work the local political process to successfully advocate for the public library.
- A picture or vision of what constitutes a successfully networked public library in a particular community is essential for local politicians, governing boards, and residents to then advocate to reach that vision.
- Local situational factors have to be identified, understood, and considered in the advocacy plan for the library to reach a vision of being successful.

Advocacy and working the political process have to be done in the context of accomplishing specific goals and working toward a vision of what a successfully networked public library in a particular community would be. But if there is no clear vision of what a successful library should be in a particular community, it will be impossible to reach such a vision.

In a recent study, *Long Overdue: A Fresh Look at Public and Leadership Attitudes about Libraries in the 21st Century*, (2006), key findings included the following:

- Community Soldiers Could Fight for Libraries: These champions for libraries may not be aware of the financial vulnerability of the library and need to be educated;

- Computers and Internet Access Are Priorities: While traditional services are still needed, community residents expect better and more information technology from their library; and
- A Public Unaware of What Could be Lost: Although the local community values its public library, libraries must proactively start to orchestrate financial support for the library.

These and other findings support findings from the Bertot, McClure, Jaeger, and Ryan study, *Public Libraries and the Internet 2006: Survey and Site Visit Results and Findings* (2006) in terms of the importance of having a successfully networked public library.

   This paper provides a perspective on politics and advocacy and how the concept of a successful library can serve as a vehicle to promote advocacy. Moreover, the paper stresses that advocacy and aspects of a successful public library can be important tools that can be used to obtain additional resources and support for the library. In addition, the paper offers one example of successfully working the political environment for local advocacy. The paper is not intended to be a literature review of topics such as advocacy, planning, technology deployment, etc. Rather, it offers one perspective on how the concept of a successful public library can assist library managers to better engage in the local political and advocacy environment.

SUCCESSFULLY NETWORKED LIBRARIES

   Becoming Successfully Networked Public Libraries is a portion of the *2006 Public Libraries and the Internet* national, biennial study[2] conducted by Florida State University, College of Information, Information Use Management and Policy Institute.[3] The 2006 study is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation[4] and the American Library Association.[5] The phrase "successfully networked" is used broadly to include public library computing, Internet, networks, telecommunications, integrated library systems and other related electronic resources, services, and support. The findings go beyond networked aspects of the library and covered a much broader scope–as it turned out. The study included five state visits in the winter and spring of 2006. Five State Library agencies, nineteen public libraries, and 84 library managers were interviewed. Details on the study method can be found in the final study report (Bertot, McClure, Jaeger, and Ryan, 2006).

KEY FINDINGS

In 2006, a successfully networked public library provides high quality *traditional* library services as well as networked services. Library managers may find it helpful to focus on three service areas: networked services offered within the library; the library's virtual branch, meaning Web-based external services; and the infrastructure needed to support both. In brief, factors describing these libraries in 2006 include:

Networked Services Within the Library

- SNPLs offer public access copiers, fax, printers, scanners, public access computing workstations, and may lend a variety of equipment including digital cameras, GPS equipment, ipods, MP3 players, and even telescopes. Often, SNPLs provide the first introduction to new information technology (IT) and serve as the access point of first and last resort for their communities and visitors.
- SNPLs offer an integrated library system (ILS) including an online public access catalog (OPAC) of library materials.

Library's Virtual Branch

- SNPLs view their Website as an additional branch, or a virtual branch.
- They seek to offer the same or equivalent services as those offered within the library in addition to those only available virtually.
- Provision of virtual branch management, staff, resources, and budget equivalent to a traditional branch may not yet be in place.
- Virtual branch evaluation is done, but data are not integrated with physical branch results.

Network Infrastructure

- SNPLs have addressed the IT staff issue: having dedicated IT staff who may make certain types of networked library services possible and can save the library money. They conduct extensive, continuous, formal and informal network service planning.
- SNPLs have enough bandwidth and offer or plan to offer wireless connectivity, but anticipate future need for additional bandwidth as video, music, and large file transfers become more common.

- SNPLs have enough public workstations but know they may never meet peak demand.
- SNPLs provide enough IT (including software) and training so that all staff members are proficient at their jobs.
- SNPLs have built, or are considering building, facilities better tailored to the networked environment.
- SNPLs recognize and capitalize on the potential of the Internet as a shared information infrastructure where hardware, software, resources, and services and staff expertise may be shared.

Advocacy

SNPLs engage in a wide range of advocacy strategies for continued public library and networked services support. The following is a summary of SNPL advocacy efforts:

- Proactive: A distinguishing characteristic of all of the SNPLs visited when compared to other public libraries is their proactive approach. SNPLs proactively partner with local and state governments and non-profits for mutual benefit. SNPLs actively look for opportunities to show what the library was already doing to address local, state, and regional issues, and actively seek partners and funding to address these issues. SNPLs do not wait to be invited to the table.
- Leadership: The public library director is a leader both in the library and in the local community. The director, while not wanting to be on the "bleeding edge" of innovation, is on the leading edge.
- Opportunistic: The SNPL managers are masters at perceiving an opportunity to make the library's worth visible to others and to obtain funding or support, particularly when the source doesn't mention libraries but doesn't exclude them either. SNPL managers all recognize that financial support is only one of many types of support that successful libraries need.
- Prepared: SNPLs are often, but not always, better prepared than peer government agencies to make their potential contribution known and to make their funding case. Part of the preparation includes assembling relevant evidence and arguments based on the evidence.
- Relationships: SNPL managers have a year-round positive relationship with elected and appointed officials and government agency and nonprofit leaders as well as community opinion makers. SNPL managers are not meeting strangers when they go to the annual library budget hearing.

In Search of Sustainable Support

What types of support do these libraries need? Have public libraries found ways to generate new, sustaining revenue due to their success in providing network services to their communities? The research revealed several interesting approaches to obtain sustainable support:

- Stable funding is key. Stability is a prerequisite to becoming a successful library because it enables realistic multi-year planning.
- The library conducts continuous, semi-systematic environmental scans seeking to match need, information technology, and funding opportunity.
- Most libraries are transitioning to increased local support of networked services.
- Support for library services is not limited to money–shared hardware, resources, staff and staff training, and other benefits are equally important.

Next Steps

Successful public library directors recognize and celebrate the significant achievement of connecting most public librarians in the U.S. to the Internet. Many librarians believe it is now time to focus attention on two areas:

- Network public library brand: Develop a convenient, easy-to-use collection of content, resources, and services that the public highly values, that most public libraries offer, and that the public recognizes as coming from public libraries. One element of such a public library brand now in place is that the public knows to look for a public library if it needs access to the Internet. One element not in place is convenient, easy-to-access public library content. Existing potential elements of public library-branded content such as OPACs and subscription databases are too cumbersome and time consuming when compared to free, commercial equivalents such as Google.
- Network efficiencies: Successful libraries recognize the potential to improve public library efficiency using a network and extending a range of public access computing services such as the rapid development of virtual reference services. But the use of networks is still new with many unanswered questions. Will local public library users accept remotely delivered services? How will content,

resources, and services be jointly developed, coordinated, funded, and evaluated?

All libraries visited recognized that a connection is not enough. All are looking for library branded content and services that will establish the library in the networked world and as a leader in the local community.

LINKING SUCCESSFUL LIBRARIES
TO POLITICS AND ADVOCACY

The above description of a successfully networked library in 2006 also identified that the libraries visited had a vision and set of goals that they could "sell" to local government officials, the governing board, and community residents. To some extent this description of the library served as a base from which a range of other library services (both traditional and networked) can be provided. But without this vision, the technology infrastructure, and perceived importance of that vision, the library could not be a leader in the provision of information services and resources in the community.

Library directors were actively engaged in the local political environment and advocacy through a number of activities. First, they proactively promoted external relationships with units of local government, state government, local civic organizations, other libraries, and members of the private sector. These relationships often take years to build but are essential if library managers are to be visible and demonstrably involved in local civic activities and be knowledgeable about the local political environment.

Second, All of the libraries visited were aware of the findings of the OCLC Environmental Scan (OCLC, 2003) and the Perceptions study in the fall of 2005 (OCLC, 2005) and the need for branding of the library within the local community. The study suggested that today's Internet users rarely thought of the library when meeting their information needs. The most successful (both in traditional and network service provision) of the successful public libraries agreed on the following points:

• There is a need for public library branded, Internet based content and services on par with the best Internet content and services currently offered. The goal: when people (young and old) use the Internet, that they will be aware of and use the high quality and probably free content and services offered by the public library;

- At present, the principal, networked public library content consists of digitized local special collections (audio, video, photographs, maps, historic documents). Local public libraries are very interested in making more local digital content available. Often the material is made available without attention to national standards and cataloging, thus making statewide, national aggregation difficult. Branding such material may be difficult in any case;
- At present, the principal networked public library service is virtual reference, which is in its infancy–particularly in usage; and
- In general, the libraries were disappointed with licensed, subscription, vendor offerings particularly when compared to such free Internet services as Google <http://www.google.com/>. Many of the libraries are paying for some of these services such as *Discovering Collection* using local funds. Google's search engine is far superior to anything offered by subscription services *or* by OPAC vendors. Federated search engines are only a partial solution at best. Enough library users (as well as non library users) prefer convenience and speed (Google) over peer-reviewed quality (subscription databases) to make the library quality argument moot.

In short, there is a need to both brand the local public library as the place for information services and to educate members of the local political environment as to the changing nature of libraries in a networked environment. There is also a need to find competitive equivalents to Google which also offer the quality associated with library services.

Third, traditional methods of advocacy are still important, but . . . The library manager must rally local residents, organizations, and government in support of the library and that rallying cry must include the importance of traditional library services and how the library can meet those information needs. But the message must now also address the role of the public library in a networked, high-speed, technologically sophisticated environment and offer a vision (an exciting vision!) of goals for how the library can operate in that environment yet still provide high quality traditional services. Thus, advocacy goals to support the public library must go beyond the importance of reading, literacy, and circulation of mystery books.

Fourth, any strategy that incorporates the concept of a successful library to promote working the political system and advocacy must take into consideration a host of local situations and conditions. Clearly, one size does not fit all communities when it comes to developing an advocacy

plan. Prior to implementing such a plan the authors recommend a quick political audit that asks:

- Who are the most important players in the local political environment, what type of power do they have, and to what degree can they influence others in the community?
- Who are the supporters of the library and to what degree are they part of the political process in the community? Can they become more active and successful in that political process?
- How is the library director perceived by key players in the local political environment and by library supporters?
- To what degree is the public library seen as a solver of community problems and a player in the local political process? How can the library become more involved?

These are but a few of the key questions that one can consider in conducting a political audit of a local community. The audit is best done informally by developing a set of questions and probes and administering them via informal interviews to key leaders and stakeholders. Additional questions and factors, depending on that community, its history, its form of government, and the nature of individuals involved in that community (among other factors) will also need to be considered.

Finally, the library manager who is successful in the local political process does so with subtlety, informality, persistence, and perhaps most importantly with current and accurate information about who the players are, what they believe, how they might be persuaded to better support the library, and the current hot issues in the community and how the library can assist in solving those issues. The last point is especially important; the library must be positioned as an organization that can be a problem solver–not problem maker–in the local community. Increasingly, a number of community issues and problems that can be solved *could* include the library.

ONE EXAMPLE OF A SUCCESSFULLY NETWORKED PUBLIC LIBRARY

Cuyahoga County Public Library (CCPL) serves 47 suburban communities outside the City of Cleveland.[6] The population of approximately 630,000 is economically, ethnically, educationally, and racially diverse. The Library is consistently ranked as one of the ten best, according to

the Hennen's American Public Library Ratings (Hennen, 2006), and ten busiest, according to the Public Library Association statistics ranking libraries in the United States serving over 500,000 in population. Dedicated state funding through personal income tax combined with a local property tax has ensured Cuyahoga County Public Library one of the highest per capita spending thresholds in the United States.

This strong support is typical in the State of Ohio but recent state level threats to the Library and Local Government Support Fund and proposed Tax Expenditure Limination (TEL) amendment, coupled with local property tax payer fatigue, brings recognition to the need for advocacy and "working the political system" in order to sustain the current level of services constituents have come to expect.

There are some issues for Cuyahoga County to consider in some of the traditional advocacy efforts typically in use:

- Meet and greet events with government officials, board members, and citizens are an effective method to gain recognition; however, with 16 state legislators, 3 county commissioners, 45 mayors and councils, and 2 township trustees and clerks, this becomes a daunting task.
- Education programs such as PLA's "The Smartest Card," conducted as a sole advocacy effort, may reach only traditional library supporters without touching non-users and impacting government relations.
- Attending political fund raisers, having a library presence at community days, and providing library meeting space to non-partisan government meetings will increase visibility of the library, but may not make a real impact on decision makers.

These, and other traditional efforts–such as marshalling local support into political action–may still be useful strategies; other strategies and approaches, however, can also be considered.

BECOMING A SUCCESSFULLY NETWORKED PUBLIC LIBRARY

The findings from the Bertot, McClure, Jaeger, and Ryan (2006) research suggest additional approaches to public library advocacy and government relationships or working the political system. By developing quality, visible, networked services, the Library achieves a significant

place in community development and growth. Cuyahoga County Public Library exemplifies such quality services.

Networked Services Within Cuyahoga County Public Library (CCPL)

- Offering public access to public access copiers, fax, printers, computer workstations, and making available individual and group instruction to support customers in the community. Even with approximately 80% of the Library's constituents having a personal PC and Internet connection available either at home or work, the quality and speed of the Library's bandwidth attracts people at all economic levels to public library branches.
- Offering wireless access at all branches has increased the number of non-traditional library users including home-based business owners in the branches.
- Offering an integrated library system (ILS) including an online public access catalog (OPAC) of library materials. CCPL also provides direct customer access to the OhioLINK collections, a consortium of over 85 colleges, universities, and the State Library of Ohio. In 2006, CCPL worked with others to establish SearchOhio, direct access to the collections of four other large public libraries in the state. Daily delivery brings materials directly to branches for customers from both resource sharing programs.

Library's Virtual Branch

- Recently the CCPL's Website was completely redone in a content management system to improve maintenance, navigation, and customer satisfaction.
- Through the new Website, CCPL has attempted to maximize the customer's ability to receive full service in a virtual place by offering the online library card application, holds, renewals, e-commerce, eBooks, audio eBooks, and downloadable music, reference, program registration, and Web casting.
- CCPL continues to seek new opportunities for online services, realizing that customer convenience is critical to the Library's survival. In May 2006, the Library began text messages as a means of library-to-customer communication.
- The IT division has been reorganized to provide stronger support and leadership for the Website and virtual services.

Networked Infrastructure

- CCPL has dedicated IT staff, a T-3 line to Library headquarters, and a T-1 line to each branch.
- There is extensive, continuous, formal and informal network service planning. IT staff receive support for training and skill development.
- CCPL currently has enough bandwidth but is well aware of its future bandwidth needs and cost implications. CCPL has been an early adopter of the regional OneCommunity project (formerly OneCleveland) that is making a high-speed fiber network available to not-for-profit organizations. Through an IMLS grant and a distance learning project with The Cleveland Museum of Art, CCPL has been able to connect two branches to the OneCommunity network.
- While there are never enough workstations to satisfy public demand, wireless access has enabled the branches to supplement desk top PCs with tablet devices, increasing the number of access points per building. Wireless service and laptops or tablets allow for any and every meeting room space to be converted to a computer instruction lab without dedicating valuable building real estate.
- A partnership with Cuyahoga Community College increased the amount of on-going software training for all staff. This is a continuing training contract with qualified instructors.

Advocacy

- Proactive: CCPL has served on the County Invest in Children (early childhood) planning committee, Blue Ribbon Task Force on Economic Development, and Universal Pre-K project. CCPL took a leadership role with the County, Cities, and Libraries during the 2005 state budget process.
- Leadership: CCPL is a founding member of OneCommunity, a spokesperson for the project, and has membership on the board. CCPL worked with Cleveland Public Library to provide training and education on the new electronic voting prior to the May 2006 primary. CCPL worked with My Medicare Matters to support older adults with online support services to select a prescription drug plan.
- Opportunistic: CCPL has received County Funding for its "new baby kit," a kindergarten kit, computer labs, homework centers, and special summer programming for children and teens as part of

the County's initiatives on early education and quality out-of-school time for youth.

- Prepared: CCPL is continuously updating data and is well positioned to communicate evidence on customer need and use of services. CCPL takes its communication program seriously and has a dedicated and professional marketing department that includes public relations and graphics.
- Relationships: CCPL managers work to establish and maintain relationships with mayors and township trustees. They actively work within their communities and are visible at community events. CCPL administration and board members communicate with mayors on system-wide issues and as needed to support regional efforts. CCPL administration and board members are deliberate in their efforts to reach out to County Commissioners and State Legislators. CCPL has offered available bandwidth to local communities to expand wireless access beyond the library walls. To date, two cities have made community space wireless in partnership with the Library.

Next Steps

The above suggests a number of areas that CCPL targets for being involved in the political process and working the political system. But some of the next steps include:

- Build buildings designed to use wireless service and maximize customer convenience. CCPL has just concluded a series of meetings with a community advisory group of government, business, education and civic leadership to recommend "best practice" in capital projects to the Library's board.
- Increase the number of branches on the OneCommunity network, build the brand of high speed access, and use the broadband for distance learning and kiosk downloads of audio and video on demand.
- Convert the Library's Intranet to a content management system to improve communication and resources for staff.
- Introduce a PC management system to maximize community access to computer services.
- Continue collaborations with public libraries in Ohio and nationally to increase resource sharing, virtual reference services, new software applications for improved customer service, and e-learning opportunities for staff and customers.

- Continue proactive leadership that positions CCPL as a community change agent and decision maker. Examples include: developing a project with City and County workforce development to develop a "virtual gateway" to public, private, and library services that supports job seekers and links directly to County and State goals and collaborating with Cleveland Public Library and Cleveland State University's Maxine Goodman Levin College of Urban Affairs to host the Urban Libraries Council's 2007 Partners for Successful Cities Conference.
- Strengthening the Library's Foundation and seeking other unique funding to reduce dependency on state funding.
- Ensuring that Trustees and Friends members are active in new models of advocacy.

As funding pressure increases in the State of Ohio, Cuyahoga County Public Library will continue to position itself as a networked public library, using both its virtual network resources to build community and its new network of collaborators and partners to build service models that support community priorities.

BEING MORE SUCCESSFUL IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS AND IN ADVOCACY

The degree to which public libraries are successful in the local and state political process and accomplish a range of advocacy goals will have a direct relationship to the overall success of the public library. There are a number of practical steps that the library director and staff can take to increase the library's involvement in the political process and in advocacy.

A key beginning point is to understand first that there are many factors that contribute to the success of the public library. Traditional measures of outputs, outcomes, and a range of performance measures can help keep the library on track and provide excellent diagnostics to monitor various library services, programs, resource use, and electronic services. But all libraries, ultimately, are local. That is, the personal strengths of the director, staff, trustees, friends, the make-up of local government and its personalities, community demographics, and a host of other factors make each library's situation different.

The library administration will need to become informed and knowledgeable about political activism, the details of how local government

works–both formally and informally–and also about what areas in the local community have the best opportunities for the library administration and staff to get involved. The same holds true with advocacy, why it is important, how to do it, and how to set specific strategies for successful advocacy. The findings reported above provide a beginning point for becoming knowledgeable, plus there are many excellent sources with detailed information about working the political process and advocacy.

Earlier, the paper suggested the importance and need to conduct a political audit in the local library community. Other types of audits are also useful–such as determining the strengths and weaknesses of staff, identifying the degree to which local leaders can become strong supporters of the library, assessing the success with which local resources (including private sources) have been tapped for the library, and understanding what library services, programs, and resources can be best "sold" in the local community. Taking stock of the library's strengths in working the political system and promoting advocacy is an important first activity. Determining what will be a SNPL in *your* situation and articulating that vision is essential.

These various audits then provide input for the library's planning process. There are numerous planning approaches available to support the library, but it may be less important *which* process is used than that *some* process is in place. Regardless of the planning process in use (see, for example, McClure et al., 1987; and Himmel and Wilson, 1997), the library will need to develop goals, objectives, action steps, and performance indicators related to the success with which the library is involved in and works the political process, the degree to which advocacy is accomplished, and the degree to which factors related to becoming a successfully networked library are being accomplished.

Another key step for the library administrators to take is to educate the staff, the trustees, the friends, and other key stakeholders associated with the library about the importance of being involved and working the political process and how ongoing and successful advocacy can significantly improve the overall quality of the library. These can be done formally through workshops and training, and informally, by example. Educating key stakeholder groups about these topics is ongoing and will be a constant effort on the part of the library administrators (and staff).

Investing in a clear and consistent message that tells the library story is critical for all library communication. As key stakeholders develop relationships to build political capital for the library, it is essential that the library values and offerings are a "brand," distinguishing the institution in the community as well as in the virtual community. When the local

library comes to mind, there should be a key message or picture of the library that residents recall.

Building relationships with other libraries, government, business, and other organizations to strengthen service and to identify efficiencies is an important element for the successfully networked public library. Library administrators, trustees, etc., need to foster collaboration and partnerships with policy makers and politicians for efficient service and libraries can bring excellent examples to their attention. The local library can be especially "successful" if it is seen as solving community problems. Such an approach may bring both tangible results and political capital.

Working the political system and improved advocacy, in and of itself, will not be a cure-all for improving the success of the library. Multiple other factors and strategies also certainly play a part in being a successfully networked public library. But findings from recent research conducted by the authors, and real-life activities at CCPL make it clear that these two factors–working the political system and improved advocacy–are key components to becoming a successful public library.

NOTES

1. See, for example <http://www.ala.org/ala/issues/issuesadvocacy.htm>.
2. *Public libraries and the Internet studies* <http://www.ii.fsu.edu/plinternet.cfm>.
3. Florida State University, College of Information, Information Use Management and Policy Institute <http://www.ii.fsu.edu/>.
4. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Libraries/>.
5. American Library Association <http://www.ala.org/>.
6. For additional background information see <http://www.cuyahogalibrary.org/>.

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