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Civic Values and Civic Librarianship: A Brief Reflection on John Carlo Bertot and the Development of Government Information Librarianship

John A. Shuler

When asked to write a brief essay about the impact of John Bertot's research, work, and teaching on the several aspects of government information librarianship, one word quickly comes to mind: "anticipation." Bertot's contributions to scholarship, teaching, and community building clearly underscore how much librarians need to change perspectives and practices in order to anticipate the information technology information revolutions unleashed on governments in the early 1990s. Just as shifting concepts of digital government continue to upend how public authorities manage their information resources, many librarians must continue to anticipate how these digital changes seriously affect their own institutions and communities, sometimes with no clear evidence about what will/might happen. The way forward, Bertot argues, is not illuminated through centuries of paper and print bibliographic tradition derived from Gutenberg's invention. Rather, his anticipatory librarian is an activist, and positivist, engaged in the new digital techniques, practices, and ideas, and constant flux will always be part of these calculations. Through his individual work, as well as through collaboration with colleagues, Bertot clearly shows how critical tools of analysis, assessment, and deliberative planning enable librarians to take on the intended and unintended consequences of the technological and organizational changes unfolding at all levels of governance.

Prior to the World Wide Web, librarian practice and planning remained firmly grounded in the traditions of paper and print technologies. Managing library services and collections from a local perspective enabled comparable, and interchangeable, tactical pragmatic choices shared among the different kinds of libraries: academic, public, special, school, or government/institutional. Based on conservative estimates and economic reasoning, this kind of limited

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planning sought to sustain existing resources as sunk costs, with growth opportunities expected to be low, steady, and somewhat predictable. Strategic library planning for these obligations expected a modicum of change and innovation from future events. The biggest triggers for possible institutional change came from increased costs of material, services, and personnel, as well as general population growth within targeted communities. Libraries employed standard budget practices, and they effectively planned for fixed space and physical resources, along with traditional reference and information service components that assumed a widespread literacy among the communities served. Inputs and outputs remained relatively static between 1920 and 1970. The mutual economic and institutional relationships shared between librarians and publishers changed little before the late 1960s, and library planning choices were buttressed by comparable economics that were in evidence in the international private market publishing industry as it churned out thousands of books, periodicals, and other kinds of specialized publications. Scale, scope, and speed certainly changed, but the fundamental quality of the format did not: it was still paper and print.

We could find a comparable détente in the world of government publications. By the late 1960s, the model for widespread distribution and availability of government information stemmed from the nearly a half century of traditions and accepted practice of national service. This was the US Government Printing Office (GPO) and its nearly 1,300 local libraries that were part of its Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). It allowed depository libraries to select publications produced by GPO on behalf of federal agencies without cost. GPO provided national standards for bibliographic structure, indexing, and specialized cataloging records that enabled local libraries to focus their limited resources on the management of the material put on deposit in their collections (sometimes as part of a separate collection and department), as well as train librarians and other staff with the specific skills and knowledge of how to find, explain, and preserve this "free" government information for the local community. Versions of this government/library partnership were found at the state and local levels of government as well.

By the end of the 1970s, all this would change significantly for librarians and private and government publishers. Years weathered through an inflationary economy devastated many of the library and publisher budget models alike, forcing mangers to expect a future in which one could no longer assume steady predictable growth. These disturbances, combined with the rapid succession of information technology and digital telecommunication innovations that streamlined work processes and products in nearly every sector of the national economy, forced many library organizations to struggle to respond effectively to the changing information needs within their communities, as well as long-term economic uncertainty (Bell 1973). Many other studies and analyses anticipated other utopian possibilities for this postwar society by opening up social and political opportunities through the expansion of opportunities to access education, scientific discoveries, political representations, and social customs. This

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radical shift would also address several long-standing social and economic disparities advocated by the countercultures of the late 1960s and early 1970s (Toffler 1970).

Librarians were no less affected by this debate about necessary radical change. They created special interest groups as part of the American Library Association and other national groups that focused on open advocacy to support freedom of information, progressive economic policies, and open records and meetings for government agencies, as well as direct engagement with government agencies on how to manage their information resources and publications (Adkinson 1978). The arrival of the first generation of mass-market, and relatively affordable, personal computers introduced another way that communities could link into the burgeoning international system of distributed computers and possibly displace the library's central role in the community as the communal broker for affordable public and private knowledge. These innovations represented the vanguard of the explosion of possible personal communication and communication revolution choices that would be fully engaged by the late 1990s.

These social and economic changes encouraged libraries, along with their professional associations, to reconsider what a library of the future might look like, along with how and when the planning frameworks will need to change. At the root of the shift in understanding how to plan was the recognition that consistent and sustainable data about the organization and community served will be critical to the success of any of these anticipated changes.

The financial and management strategic choices for a library could no longer be considered as an isolated budgetary or management solution without the context of these systemic changes in the knowledge economy. Planning for further disruptions in the technological, political, social, and economic resources of a larger community must now be considered as part of the decision-making process. In the United States, this more systematic thinking about managing critical public information sources led to the enactment of the Paperwork Reduction Act in 1980. Through its subsequent regulations over the next thirty years, this legislation would have a profound influence on the strategic planning for government information by treating it as a limited, and valuable, resource. Government policies fully engaged the intellectual framework that planning for information resources was a kind of "life cycle" from its creation to its disposition. Each step would be determined by a clear declaration that the need and purpose of the information resource was both obvious and necessary. There would be other management tools that would assess the necessity of creating the information in the first place or allowing the private market to produce and distribute the data instead of the government. This was the first declaration of the idea that government information was no long bound by the expectations of a public good. If it were at all possible, the private market should be allowed to produce the necessary information resources that might then be sold back to the government and/or the public.

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By the early 1980s, much of Bell's "post-industrial" economic template changed into a new conceptual structure called the "knowledge economy," where the primary engines of national economies were driven less by the production of goods and more from the creation and rapid diffusion of knowledge. The United Nations, recognizing the disruptive nature of this economic reordering, issued its *McBride Report*. It argued that these rapid shifts in technological and economic resources demanded a "new world information order" that would attempt to rebalance the growing communication divide among the developed, developing, and underdeveloped nations (McBride Commission 1980).

These series of policies and legislative imperatives reinvigorated the library community's sense of strong advocacy. By late 1988, after a series of congressional studies and advocacy from several national library associations, a report produced by the now defunct Congressional Office of Technology Assessment gave the first clear assessment of how these changes in economic policies, technological innovations, and choice of markets might affect the creation, organization, and distribution of government information (US Congress 1988).

Bertot's early research around this time incorporated this new perspective on library practice through the use of empirical evidence from research studies, explanations based on case studies of how organizations could make better strategic choices based on decision-making systems that used data analyses, deliberation, and assessment tools to measure the impact of the decisions. Bertot's early work in the areas of state and federal government information policies, in early collaborations with Peter Hernon and Chuck McClure, offered the library-based government information specialists new insights on how to understand the ways the burgeoning information technologies unleashed by the computational revolutions would affect both libraries and government agencies.

By the mid-1990s, these series of political, policy, and technological revolutions caused many to reconsider the name, purpose, and scope of government documents librarianship, and they began to argue for a direction that focused less on the development of local physical collections and more on a model that suggests a greater level of digital cooperation of shared collections and services among libraries of all kinds across the nation. The policy and process analysis evident in Bertot's research during this time led some to suggest a new kind of advocacy and management that came to be called "civic librarianship." This mirrored the comparable developments going on in journalism, as the journalists sorted through their community's responses to these same changes, eventually settling on "community-based journalism" as the way forward (Shuler 1996).

Along with other disciplines that studied the impacts of policy choices, research, and management strategies, Bertot contributed to the growing body of empirical evidence that showed how assessment and data analyses (and not relying on past traditions and practices) could enable librarians to take a more direct approach to sustaining effective management

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techniques and effective long-term planning. Given these tools of analysis, the profession enjoyed an explosion of narrative and literacy in their journals, books, and conferences that began to mirror the analytical discussions of other academic disciplines. This began to build a solid record of research that librarians could use to work with other academic, social, professional, and political organizations into the new century (Jaeger, Bertot, and Gorham 2013; Jaeger, Gorham, et al. 2013). The reference Jaeger, Gorham, et al. (2013), for example, has an impact factor of 0.79.

Bertot's work offers both clear and substantial support of how this kind of empirical research can help all types of libraries cope with the expansion of digital government resources and services. It also indicates a more direct impact on the education of e-government librarians, enabling future students to gain direct experience about what is happening in government and library institutions through internships and research projects that directly engage governments and libraries in shared e-government initiatives and defining future needs of the research agenda. These suggestions to engage a program of active policy research enable government information librarians to find a proper place in this new world information order (Bertot 2012; note: this reference has an impact factor of 1.42).

These anticipatory challenges are organized into four distinct challenges that librarians must consider to change the traditional contexts of government information services within the library so as to continue to stay relevant within the new dynamics of the global information infrastructure:

The local versus the national imperative: How would local institutional funding need to be changed in order to build models of resource allocation that could take advantage of multi-institutional shared reference expertise and cooperatives? Since information resources are no longer exclusively local, why should information services be considered exempt from this trend?

Problems of consistency to common government information questions: Is there a "golden mean" of librarian responses to queries? Can government information librarians use social software and technology to build a national database of questions about government information resources and services common among all types of institutions? Does every library question have to start from scratch?

The conundrum of timeliness, tone, and level of response: This is associated with the challenge of consistency. Is there a particular "official" narrative that allows digital responses to the public that allows for individuality in the tone of the librarian's response? How do we know when a response answers the "government" aspects of the question(s) asked? How do we make sure it is a timely response? And what do we do when the response fails in any of these ways?

Bedevilment of accuracy and consistency: What assessment tools and measurements will enable government information librarians to monitor for accuracy and clarity in their responses? How should one implement the monitoring for quality and accuracy, and who should do this? As

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there are in other professions and communities of expertise, should there be benchmarks of accuracy and consistency that are tied to permissions to practice? In other words, if government information librarians consistently fail to answer correctly, what mechanisms of mediation ought to be implemented either at the local, regional, or national level?

In his more recent work, Bertot suggests that government information librarians take on the challenges of nonpartisan advocacy techniques to properly engage their community within this highly fluid and information rich environment (Shuler, Jaeger, and Bertot 2014):

- They ought to support nonpartisan classes, lectures, and other public opportunities for a community exchange.
- They ought to demand a clear role in preserving the appropriate public digital archives and records of all public and government entities that serve the community.
- Their libraries ought to sustain a culture of service and intervention that seeks to make direct connections between those individuals with particular economic, social, and health needs with the government programs and services specifically designed to assist in those efforts;
- These librarians ought to focus on the significant challenges of developing life-long skills in information and technological literacy.

If one follows these suggestions to their next natural levels of consideration, a government information librarian might reflect these qualities (Shuler 2014):

- Becomes an information specialist who combines expertise/knowledge about government policy, programs, and services with associated information resources;
- Builds sustainable web resources and consistent, user-centered, and dynamic service points;
- Considers the World Wide Web's information resources on par with traditional collections, especially when it comes to government web resources;
- Adds further value to this knowledge of public information resources through guidance, context, organization, and deliberate preservation of public data;
- Creates learning opportunities for individuals to gain better knowledge and information literacy skills.

Bertot's long legacy of service to the profession, as well as his long-time role as the editor of *Library Quarterly*, leaves the next generation of government librarians in an excellent position to take advantage of the anticipated consequences stemming from the complex systems of digital knowledge exchange and storage. This strength of innovation does not depend on the information's format, although that is still important, but rather on what the librarian can do

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with the government information, regardless of where it is or how it is stored, so that it is accessible and understandable to the communities in a sustainable fashion. To paraphrase Hillel, the rest is only explanation of this essential permanent anticipation of digital change and flux—go and study it!

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