

A Librarians' Conversation for SFU Public Square's Community Summit

By Phil Hall, Janis McKenzie, Christina Neigel, Kevin Stranack, Jenny Wile, Maryann Kempthorne.

If you walked into a local community group and presented yourself as a librarian, what could you offer them? Do you think they would find you useful? Do you have any value to add to their struggles to define their community's political, economic, and cultural future? Could you do this without a physical collection? Without a building? Even without an institution? Since September 2013, the authors, a group of Metro Vancouver librarians, has been struggling with these questions and we don't have all the answers but we do have lots of ideas and more questions and we thank SFU Public Square for starting the conversation.

Members of the group held a "Community Conversation" on Sept. 9, 2013; part of the SFU Public Square "100 Community Conversations"¹ program. We called it a "Librarian's Conversation" and discussed how we can help communities determine and achieve their future goals. In particular we talked about what librarians' roles are to support communities that wish to inform themselves about the economic and cultural changes within their own region, the province, and, ultimately, the world. The group reported back to SFU Public Square and participated at the SFU Community Summit on B.C.'s Economic Future.

A Discussion Guide² authored for the SFU Public Square seeded the Community Conversations. Although the report was somewhat narrow and top-down in its outlook, it succeeded in giving us fodder for our conversation. Christina Neigel commented, the Discussion Guide "...frankly, reduces a number of complex phenomenon to an eerily government-like agenda." [and] "it shelves social issues under the broader notion of the 'economy'". With that kind of colouring-outside-the-lines, our conversation was spirited, wide-ranging and energizing.

The SFU Public Square asked us to submit a "Note Takers Report" back to them using a highly-structured online form with sections titled: "Hopes and Concerns for BC's Economic Future", "Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats" [for the BC Economy], "Top Actions for BC's Economic Future" and "Additional Actions to Address Social Equity". Because of the complexity of the issues, the

documentation process and the short time frame, we felt that we have more questions than answers about BC's economic future.

We tried to record the results of our conversation more or less under the headings they requested (with some omissions). What follows is substantially as we reported back to SFU Public Square (with some additions based on our further conversations). We want to say again that this is not a complete discussion, nor a complete recommendation, but represents merely the beginning of a discussion. We hope for feedback and further participation.

Hopes and Concerns (for BC's Economic Future)

Hopes

We hope that all British Columbians have equal access to resources that help inform their economic choices and the choices of their respective communities. Having access to a range of useful, respectful information sources that take advantage of the speed, breadth, and socializing effect of networked resources assists in informed decision making. In addition, all British Columbians, in all socio-economic situations, require access to public spaces and opportunities to connect with their communities in a range of physical and online arenas.

Both resources and forums help counteract the effects of the "filter bubble" and "echo chambers", caused by the algorithms and practices that exist in social media and news media sites which suggest or promote like-minded information. Echo chambers that limit our results lists to what an algorithm decides we want to see contribute to reduced community understanding and participation by reducing the variety of viewpoints and open dialogues. The effects of such bubbles and chambers have been observed in BC politics and discourse as tangibly as weak voter participation and a profound shift in household spending and debt management. Librarians can help British Columbians facilitate the free flow of political discourse and action and through a community driven selection of educational tools. Through providing tools for individuals and collectives to have an informed participation in our communities

British Columbians can more easily lay claim to their economy. Using a breadth of tools and expertise, librarians help communities make effective informed decisions and take action. We hope that British Columbians will continue to have access to diverse information sources and will continue to use it in ways that foster their own education and creativity.

Concerns

Information seekers are increasingly given fewer and less interactive information sources. As mentioned above, Google, Facebook and other social media and searching software purposely narrow the focus of searches and enforce similar interests thereby cutting down on the range opinions and viewpoints. In addition, the range of information sources regularly used differs with age, education, and socio-economic status. Community responsibility and success depends on informed and engaged constituents who can make meaningful and relevant choices about their role in the broader spheres of governance. However, those who access fewer information sources are likely to receive a less rounded perspective on the subjects that affect BC's future.

There is a broad-based assumption that the deluge of online and traditional media is a) easily available to all and b) used meaningfully and effectively by all. However, it has been observed by this professional group that many continue to restrict their sources to mainstream "old-media", receiving limited, if any, news and discussion about their local communities especially if they do not live in the urban areas. Increasingly, B.C.'s citizens, especially those with less free time to seek out sources, even if they use online interactive media for information sources, may fall into the trap of only receiving information that sustains a more limited world view (coined in terms of the Echo Chamber or Filter Bubble effect). All of these scenarios hamper the pursuit of collective, consensual, solutions that improve the development of an equitable economy.

Top Actions for BC's Economic Future

[Just as the framework and guide from SFU marked the beginning of a conversation, so are these "top" actions which were part of the SFU Notetakers Form. We hope they spur more lively discussion and welcome other points of views. These are some actions that came out of the discussion.]

1. Close the "gap" in economics discussions that remove politics and political power from the

equation. Although a framework is helpful for dialogue, illustrating a variety of interpretations of BC's economy and acknowledging the politics that create it would engender a more informed discussion.

2. Empower local decision makers to investigate the more complex attitudes, conditions, and experiences of their communities by acknowledging that their communities do not have a voice that is clearly heard through conventional communications and practices because those conventions ignore the inequities of access that are the product of uneven socio-economic status.

3. Identify, from the community's perspective, what is missing from top-down institutionally driven processes, by providing more frequent and authentic discourse through online and physical public spaces. What are the questions that they want to ask and answer?

4. Ask all the communities in BC: what are the next steps they want to take to re-make their futures? This could be framed in ways that have specific relevance to individual communities. For example, when faced with profound economic decisions driving the future of a community, investigating how communities view their relationships with other communities at a grassroots level will better inform political process.

5. Encourage and support (financially) local governments to host regular and varied forms of activities that invite civic engagement that goes beyond entertainment and offers communities ways of exploring their own future from diverse perspectives.

Additional Actions to Address Social Equity

This Conversation process is very top-down. While we appreciate the efforts of SFU Public Square in initiating this discourse, The Discussion Guide doesn't necessarily reflect the nature of BC economy now and ignores the significant issue of "politics". It is an "aspirational" document but, like many documents of this nature, validates itself by defending the points of view of the institutions that traditionally dominate provincial discourse and decision-making. We have to get past this because our communities are going to move past it - with or without the mainstream institutions. In other words, there are ways of looking at the possibilities and challenges of our future that are not framed in terms of economics. While economics is an important and necessary consideration for implementing decisions, it reduces

our 'conversations' to a narrow view of how to face the future and limits innovative thinking.

Our group believes that the BC economy is still heavily dependent upon resource industries³. The services sector that features so prominently in the Guide's economic analysis, including (especially) the Finance, Insurance, and Real estate industry, figures prominently because many of its functions exist to support the resource industry. The recent BC election, especially the winning campaign, with its focus on "Jobs and Growth" and featuring key resource developments such as LNG export, echoes this predomination of resources in BC. Resource extraction is a permanent alteration to our environmental 'bank account' - a withdrawal that cannot be later returned and, for this very reason, communities need to be making very careful and informed decisions about this practice. This is hard to achieve when individual citizens feel disconnected because they are only invited into public discourse in polarized ways - proponents or critical activists. As evidenced by their continued support of public libraries, British Columbians simply want an opportunity to explore, reflect and influence decisions in ways that protect the livelihood and future of their families. But opportunities and encouragement are limited.

We believe that actions to address social equity, as well as economic improvement, must address the diversity of place in BC. Every city, town, and village must recognize themselves in those actions. They must be broad and show that they can lead to increased economic equality for anyone anywhere. So how do we get there?

Perhaps we should look to social actions in the past. For example, the roots of adult education are radical and are about communities defining their needs and empowering themselves. Here is where institutions can return the spirit of power back to communities. In this case we are thinking of libraries because we are librarians: in their current and historical roles, libraries support free unfettered expression and provide a mental space for dialogue and discourse. In reality, all provincial institutions should have a part in the solution but we are not going to solve economic problems until we understand how these institutions, even libraries, have a history of class bias and that this bias persists as a result of flawed "consultation processes" in the history of this province and the institutions within it.

So how do we do this?

We ask the community what kind of radical actions they need and want. It is a classic community development question. Institutions in BC (in which we include libraries and our own profession) often engage in the arrogant practice of "consulting" rather than fostering and aiding unfettered communication in a non-institutionally-prescribed way. For example, without soliciting opinions of BC communities, the "100 Community Conversations" asked them questions based on an economic analysis that may not include them. As a result, we have asked them to literally try to think of solutions within the "filter bubble" that is that analysis. When we do this, community members will not recognize themselves or their neighbours in the stories offered to describe those solutions and we will have alienation where we wanted participation.

In follow-up discussions among the authors (and additional librarians) throughout the fall of 2013, we identified the need to engage library practitioners and professionals individually and not just as a result of their institutional employment. Perhaps this is our radical moment in the discipline of librarianship: we want to challenge library practitioners to individually answer their own question: "What can I do for you today?" We want to look at whether librarianship adds value to communities in a future where we may not have the collections and facilities that have traditionally backed us up. For "next steps", in addition to the traditional professional events and discourse of librarianship, we want to stage participatory events and ask practitioners to propose ways that they can add value to communities based on their own professional abilities and outlook.

Notes:

1. <http://www.sfu.ca/publicsquare/community-summit/2013summit/community-conversations.html>
2. <http://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/publicsquare/summit2013/files/summit2013-discussionGuide-FIN-WEB.pdf>
3. <http://www.vancouversun.com/business/Christy+Clark+says+budget+black+resource+sector+powers+economy/9418106/story.html>

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