

Library needs to 'rethink' mission, says cardholder

(Re: Ontario Public Library Week 2016 and the APL)

As Ontario Public Library Week comes to a close, the role that libraries play in a 21st century society comes to the foreground. Libraries are lauded for their reputation as gathering centres and research hubs, offering safe spaces for innovative thinking and a free-flow of ideas. In an increasingly digital world, libraries are dually pivotal in moulding and influencing the needs of its town's residents.

At the Aurora Public Library, Aurorans are fortunate to have access to first-rate services such as free Internet, downloadable digital multimedia, and for a fee, use of the 3-D printer. Sounds pretty fantastic, right? But what's missing?

Books. And therein lies part of the APL's problem.

Contrary to popular belief, books are not dead. In fact, according to BookNet Canada's SalesData, the unit sales of print books in the Canadian trade market saw a 1 per cent increase last year over those figures in 2014. If book-buying is on the rise, this should bode well for print circulation in public libraries.

This snub is apparent at the APL: the word 'books' doesn't appear anywhere on its header and homepage. Though 'One Book; One Aurora' is based upon this year's pick (Kim Echlin's excellent *Under the Visible Life*), this event series felt forced, frenzied and leaves much to be desired.

I'm a proud card-holder at the Aurora Public library for over twenty-five years, but in the past few years, I've increasingly noticed a dramatic change in the library's *raison d'être*, the greatest of which is underscored by the 'living room' space. I cannot count the number of conversations with fellow patrons bemoaning noise levels in the library, further shocked to hear that it's the library management who approved these events. Thankfully, the APL now runs a 'noise alert' banner on its website, but it's hardly a consolation prize.

What do we say to students who seek out the library for its calming atmosphere, only to be greeted by unnecessarily loud concerts and disruptive events? There's a time and a place for jazz concerts, holiday music, and MC'ed events, but that place isn't in the lobby of an open-concept library.

Although the study rooms are a great resource, they are usually all booked up, and not in fact sound-proof. There's a time and a place for community events in a library space, but the APL all too often misses the mark. That being said, the well-attended documentary film festivals, popular book clubs, and tax clinics are just some of the exemplary events put on by the library.

There's a deep disconnect between the APL's 'modernization' of the library, and its community outreach strategies. If the library wants to reach out to Aurorans, it must make good use of its social media channels. As it stands now, the APL's Twitter and Facebook accounts boast little more than re-purposing links posted by other outlets, rendering their feeds stagnant. A successful social media presence creates content exclusively for its online platform to generate public interest in using the library's services. Despite this, some lights still shine brightly at the APL: the children's department offers a strong array of programming for children of all ages, much like those that children of yesteryear (present company included) enjoyed at the old location on Victoria Street. Staff members from the information and circulation departments should be applauded for their knowledgeable skill-sets and friendly dispositions.

Without taking a good hard look at redefining its mission statement, the APL risks becoming an obsolete institution. The library's management, along with the Town of Aurora, must have a thoughtful consultation with patrons about their library's future; to cater to their needs and wants something that's long overdue. If they don't, the APL will soon find their patrons checking out.

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