Social Capital and Public Libraries – The Need for Research

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ABSTRACT

Empirical research on public libraries and social capital has primarily been oriented towards answering how libraries contribute to social capital in local contexts, rather than contributing to solving the theoretical puzzles of the social capital literature. In spite of this, it has produced interesting findings that are in line with new developments within social capital research that emphasize the significance of institutions for generating social capital. Outlining and applying the main theoretical perspectives on the generation of social capital, this paper analyzes the findings of the literature on public libraries and social capital that deal with how social capital is created. Theoretical perspectives on social capital are undoubtedly of benefit to the study of the making of social capital in and by the library. On the other hand, the inclusion of library-specific social capital research within the wider social capital research community can benefit social capital research in general.

1. Introduction

With publication of Putnam (2000), the President of the American Library Association (ALA) found that public libraries had not been considered among the institutions creating social capital, which means "social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995, p. 67), neither historically nor in contemporary society (Kranich, 2001). This discovery has not lead to a corresponding research activity on social capital and the public library, although the research output regarding social capital has grown exponentially since the early 1990s. Before 1992, little was published and not in every year. From 1992 up to and including 2005, 1,999 documents (of which 82,6 % are articles) with "social capital" in title, keywords, or abstract fields, spanning subject areas from sociology to virology, have been registered in the *ISI Web of Science* database (accessed January 3, 2006).[1] Especially the years from 1998 (112) until 2005 (332) (latest available year) have been productive.

Search for ""social capital" AND libra*" retrieved only seven documents. The first of these articles Kranich (2001) was published in November 2001 and written by the ALA president reporting among other things on a speech by Robert Putnam to the 2001 ALA Annual Conference. Broadening the scope to the LISA database (*Library and Information Science Abstracts*) (accessed March 17, 2006) produced 11 articles in peer-reviewed journals, two of which were also in the Web of Science results. A search in

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[1]. The databases analysed have been selected presuming that they contain most of the quality peer-reviewed articles within library and information science as well as within general research on social capital. A broad

WorldCat (accessed February 20, 2006) retrieved 19 books, of which only one chapter from one book is relevant: Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen (2003).

Considering the promotion of the importance of public libraries for social capital by professional organizations, this low research output reveals an under-researched area.[2] It is also an under-researched area because not much is known about if and how libraries contribute to creating social capital. These questions are important for the work of libraries and for library research. Furthermore, studies of social capital generation in institutional settings such as the public library are vital for the progress of social capital research in general. Even though the research that is done on libraries and social capital is scarce, it provides important stepping-stones for an increased research effort. The literature is mostly without a specific theoretical focus on social capital, but the role ascribed to public libraries in relation to social capital can be discerned relatively easily from the papers. This makes it possible to categorize and analyze the literature on the library and social capital from the point of view of social capital theoretical perspectives. Different perspectives on social capital assign different roles to the public library in its creation. The present task is to find out how social capital and social capital generation has been studied in library research. Has it been studied as a question of how the public library creates social capital through enhancing participation in voluntary associations and general local community work, or has it been studied as a question of social capital generation through library activities directed at increasing library use in general; activities directed towards offering literacy, knowledge and information to the general public?

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[2] On the other hand, there are many studies of the social impact of public libraries (see, e.g., reviews in Aabø, 2005; Debono, 2002; Kerslake and Kinnel, 1997; Linley and Usherwood, 1998).

2. Social capital – two perspectives

Social capital has been credited with positive effects for democracy, economic development, government efficiency, community development, schooling, individual health and well-being, and with combating crime, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancies (Granovetter, 1985; Hutchinson and Vidal, 2004; Putnam, 1993, 2000, 2004; Wakefield and Poland, 2005). A broad consensus has developed on including attitudinal components, norms of generalized trust and reciprocity, and structural components in the form of networks into the definition of social capital (see, e.g., Putnam, 1993, and 2000, perhaps the most influential works on social capital to date).[3] Generalized trust means relations to people outside one's own group, across divisions based on class, education, and ethnicity.

One important and disputed issue in the literature on social capital is how social capital is generated. This is a crucial question for the role of public libraries as instruments in creating social capital, and accordingly a crucial question for library policy. The issue of causal mechanism is answered in two ways within the social capital literature, on the one hand from a society-centered perspective, and on the other hand from an institution-centered perspective (Hooghe and Stolle, 2003; Stolle, 2003).

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[3] For a short introduction to the development of the concept of social capital, see Goulding (2004); for the most elaborate treatment of the historiography of social capital research, see Putnam (2000).

2.1. Social capital and civil society

The societal approach to the generation of social capital focuses on social networks and forums of face-to-face interaction as the loci of social capital, primarily in the form of voluntary associations (Putnam, 1993, 2000). The causal mechanism perceived is that regular social interaction creating social trust is generated by participation in voluntary associations or other more informal settings within neighborhoods and between friends.

The proof for the effect of voluntary association membership on social capital is at best vague (Stolle and Hooghe, 2003). The effects of participation in voluntary associations largely result from self-selection. People participating in voluntary associations are the ones that are trusting in the first place. In the event of an increase in trust through participation, this is an increase in in-group social capital, in bonding social capital. There is little evidence that this translates into out-group trust, that is, generalized trust or bridging social capital. Among second generation immigrants to Denmark, Togeby (2004) finds no significant effect on social trust from organizational participation, ethnic or non-ethnic, for any of three immigrant groups. On the other hand, voluntary associations remain important vehicles for interest aggregation, for connecting citizens with government, and they do a lot of work valuable to many people in local communities.

The present status of research on voluntary organizations and social capital suggests alternative avenues for research on the generation of social capital. According to Stolle and Hooghe (2003), if social interaction matters, the most promising routes are the study of bridging (as opposed to bonding) social interactions and their potentially positive effects on social trust. The workplace, neighborhoods, communities, dinner parties, and

other informal arenas, are potential routes to civic attitudes and behaviors. Also, the role of the family in social capital formation has been left mostly unexplored (Stolle, 2003). Parents' social experiences and role as primary educators shape the social trust and civic engagement of their children, and this socialization process can be expected to vary considerably between nations, regions, and communities. In addition, the apparent inability of voluntary association related variables to explain the creation of social capital makes a search for possible institutional explanations relevant.

2.2. Social capital and government institutions

The institutional approach to the generation of social capital maintains that social capital is increased by efficient political institutions and public policies, a working democracy, political rights and civil liberties (Rothstein and Stolle, 2003a; Stolle, 2003). The importance of institutional variables for the creation of social capital is underscored.

Social capital varies greatly between countries and also between democracies. The Scandinavian countries as well as Finland and the Netherlands are consistently at the top of the league table regarding social trust in the World Values Survey (2006). On average, more than 60 percent of the population in these countries think that most people can be trusted, compared to France (21.3) and Portugal (12.3) at the other end of the Western European spectrum, while Turkey (6.8) holds the world record in low social trust. The Scandinavian countries also have the lowest economic inequalities and pursue public policies for creating equal conditions for citizens in important policy areas such as education, health care, and social security; policies applied across differences in income, race, ethnicity, and religion (Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005). In fact, research finds that

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social trust is highly correlated to equality, economic equality and "equality of opportunity" (Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005). Moreover, the direction of causality is from equality to social capital, and not the other way around. Economic equality or equality of outcome relates to how fairly economic resources are distributed. Equality of opportunity, narrowly defined, involves policies for creating equal opportunities in areas such as health care, education, and social security disregarding social class and conveys the possibility for future change in economic conditions towards greater equity.

Government policies in the form of universal social programs (e.g. in health and education) that in principle apply to the population as a whole, advance a more equal allocation of resources and opportunities (Korpi and Palme, 1998; Rothstein, 1998; Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005). This way, social solidarity is increased and generalized trust generated. Increased trust has feedback effects on policy, creating policies with universal scope leading towards equality. Universal social policies are more effective than selective policies in creating both types of equality and thereby social trust (Rothstein and Stolle, 2003b; Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005; Swank, 2002).

Several studies of social capital have underscored the special position of education in making generalized trust (e.g. Bjørnskov, 2004; Marschall and Stolle, 2004, 2005; see also Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005). The level of education has a strong effect on generalized trust. However, to increase the level of trust by raising educational level, education must be a universal service (Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005).

High levels of inequality segregate people so that the poor and the rich do not meet in non-hierarchical situations. Private schools, private health care, and security services cater only for the rich. Societies with few common societal arenas and streets crowded

with begging homeless people do not imbue shared values and social solidarity. Within group social capital is fostered at the expense of bridging social capital. On the other hand, generalized trust both reflects and reinforces concern for others, especially for the less wealthy and people who are objects of discrimination, and thus increases social integration (Uslaner, 2002).

By reducing inequality, universal welfare policies generate social trust. Universal policies that give the rich and the poor the same are more redistributive than selective policies involving means-tested social services (Korpi and Palme, 1998; Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005; Swank, 2002). While taxes are proportional or progressive, universal services are nominal, everyone gets the same. Redistribution from the rich to the poor without the universal element, which attempts to reduce poverty by selective policies (means-tested), can be theoretically appealing on the surface, but is ineffective in reducing poverty. Taxing the rich and giving to the poor alienates the middle classes from political parties promoting high taxes and selective policies because the middle classes want services in return for high taxes. Universal programs also make bureaucracies determining eligibility in selective systems unnecessary, they avoid some of the feelings of unworthiness, subsequent hostility and spirals of distrust among recipients generated in contact with street level bureaucrats, and reduce the branding of "welfare clients" and the associated stigma. In short, universal programs increase social capital by instilling a feeling of procedural justice among users of social services (Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005). Universal policies and universal social provisions do not single out the weakest as social clients and welfare recipients who benefit from economic resources collected at the expense of taxpayers. Universal welfare services are social rights, not privileges given to

the worthy poor. Universality gives social welfare a higher level of legitimacy among citizens; both the poor and the well-off benefit from universalistic social policies. Redistributive efforts through the tax system combined with selective welfare services decreases trust between classes and also trust in government, reducing the flexibility of the economy and economic growth.

Institutional variables are important for social capital creation, especially those variables relating to the universal aspect of welfare services and where citizens are in direct contact with the government apparatus, services affecting their daily lives (Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005). Policy implementation, institutional performance and quality of service in accordance with the value of universality are crucial. The implications for design of public institutions, public policies, and services are clear. To increase and not decrease the level of social capital in society, institutions, policies, and services must be considered fair by citizens, i.e. they must be universal in character and perform well. Here policy feedback processes are witnessed (Kumlin and Rothstein, 2005; Pierson, 1993, 2004, 2006). Previous institutional processes and policies shape social groups, values, and interests, that is, public policies create social trust through policy effects and procedural justice, and increased levels of trust in turn shapes the reception of new policies. High levels of trust thus give the government a leeway for policy flexibility, a greater potential for policy change and innovation. Many observers find in this flexibility one reason for the high level of economic growth and low unemployment in Scandinavia, compared to France and Germany that also have well-established welfare systems, but seem virtually unable to introduce reforms that are vital for sustaining the economic basis

of the welfare state. This inability resides partly in low social trust in the first place. The social trap of low social capital seems very difficult to escape from.

3. Perspectives on social capital generation in public libraries

When seeing social capital formation from a public library perspective, which views the library as an instrument for creating social capital, an institutional starting point is presupposed no matter whether society-centered or institution-centered strategies are considered for implementation. The library institution becomes an arena for creating social capital.

In relation to the discussion on the two perspectives on social capital, public libraries can choose three major strategies for creating social capital. Firstly, libraries can generate social capital by working with voluntary associations to find ways of enhancing participation in these organizations and thus increasing participation in local community activities. Secondly, libraries can develop their capacity as informal meeting places for people. Thirdly, libraries can create social capital in their role as providers of universal services to the public. Of these three, the second and third routes seem by far the most promising, as the creation of social capital through voluntary associations is at best doubtful. However, the public library can also contribute to the social capital forming potential of the family by directing services towards children and their families. This is already done by libraries to a great extent. Services towards children will not be discussed further at this point, as the role of the family in social capital formation is in need of more research to document its effect.

In analyzing the literature on social capital and libraries in relation to the question of social capital building, one is looking for indicators of a society-centered participation perspective, indicators of a meeting-place perspective, and of a universalistic service perspective. This will provide more knowledge on the role of the public library in creating social capital.

4. The role of the public library in the formation of social capital

The literature on public libraries and social capital is small. Of seventeen documents retrieved, only twelve actually treat the subject matter of social capital and libraries. Four of those report results from empirical research. Two of these articles focus on immigrants and social capital creation in the library. This specialized question is too big for discussion within the format of this paper and will be treated elsewhere. Of the remaining eight articles, one is a review of literature on social capital and public libraries, while seven are policy-oriented papers arguing for the importance of public libraries in the creation of social capital. Of the policy papers, only the most relevant for research are discussed in detail together with the literature review and two articles reporting empirical research. In summary, in addition to one relevant policy paper the contents of two empirical articles and one review article are analyzed.

4.1 Social capital and libraries – empirical studies

No more than two articles report empirical studies investigating the public library as a generator of social capital in general. One is Hillenbrand's study of Mount Barker

Community Library in South Australia (2005a). Library use patterns at Mount Barker are consistent with what is known elsewhere. The author distinguishes between core library usage and non-core library usage. Regarding core use, 89 percent of users borrowed documents from the collection, while 49 percent came to the library looking for information, 29 percent came to browse, 24 percent to read, 24 percent to study, and 45 percent came to use computers. Regarding non-core use, 32 percent came to the library to relax, 13 percent came because it was a place to go and 8 percent because it was considered safe. Only 19 percent did not talk to anyone during their visit. Open-ended qualitative questions in the survey conducted about benefits and importance of the library confirm the pattern of usage with the important addition that "Equity of access for all" is ranked second after traditional core functions. The author concludes that the key purpose of the public library according to its users remains distribution of documents (information), while the social aspects are important by-products.

Interestingly, Hillenbrand contrasts the opinion of users with the views of library management. Mount Barker library management for a while emphasized different priorities than those of the users. Management focus shifted from a traditional collection focus to a focus on the library as a social agency. Later this focus was reoriented towards a balance between traditional core functions and the social community function. The compromise was articulated in four strategies in the library business plan: "information literacy; social inclusion; staff development; community partnerships" (Hillenbrand, 2005a, p. 50). The strategies of social inclusion and community partnerships are both strategies aimed at combating social exclusion – to open the library to groups that seldom use the library, in particular marginalized groups as the homeless and the unemployed.

New services and partnerships with local groups and organizations are instruments for implementing strategies enhancing social capital by developing services reflecting community needs.

In Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen (2003) the public library is depicted as an active, responsive part of the local community and an agent for change. A Chicago branch library, Near North Beach Library, was built as a new library for two different local communities: one community with a majority of wealthy people and one community with a larger number of not so fortunate people. One outcome of this experiment could have been that middle-class users stopped visiting the library altogether, especially since the new library is located in the poorer neighborhood. However, plentiful economic resources and resources among library staff have made Chicago libraries attractive. The library is considered a resource, a place to meet for library and local community events, but also a place to meet informally and it is a safe place.

4.2 Social capital - literature review

In a literature review, Hillenbrand (2005b) traces the social impact of libraries and their potential for creating social capital back to the historical roots of the public library. Nevertheless, she finds that few studies focus on public libraries as institutions for the building of social capital. This is not surprising when related to the survey of the social capital literature conducted in this article. Hillenbrand cites policy oriented articles by Kranich (2001) and Preer (2001) and refers to a consensus "across all the literature that libraries already create social capital in a number of ways," and "the *primary* way libraries build social capital is by providing a shared, public space for a variety of

different groups within the community, accommodating diverse needs and enhancing social interaction and trust" (Hillenbrand, 2005b, p. 9).

What is considered by Hillenbrand to be the only empirical study of the role of the public library in creating social capital is the report "A safe place to go: libraries and social capital" (2000).[4] It is maintained that the findings of the report show that: "libraries function to enhance social interaction and trust, and that they foster equal access and a sense of equity within the community within which they are placed, which in turn contributes to social capital" (Cox et al., 2000, p. 10). This understanding of the institutional role of the public library for social capital generation is underlined when the authors stress that the existence of municipal library buildings are seen as "a public statement of governmental community commitment" (p. 4). The rest of the social capital literature reviewed by Hillenbrand is policy oriented, arguing the importance of libraries for social capital creation and the importance of marketing this point of view to the general public.

4.3 Social capital – policy papers

All the policy papers promote the public library as generating social capital, and many of them criticize Putnam for hardly mentioning the role of libraries (Boaden, 2005; Bourke, 2005; Bundy, 2005; Goulding, 2004; Kranich, 2001; Preer, 2001). In essence, they all try to connect the traditional institution of the library with the trend of the times. However, Goulding (2004) provides an interesting overview and perspective on the field. Contrary to most social capital and library policy papers, she advocates a sophisticated

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[4] Additionally, Hillenbrand's own study of Mount Barker Library (Hillenbrand, 2005a), and Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen (2003), are empirical studies found in Web of Science and WordCat. They are presented above.

position regarding the mechanism by which the public library is supposed to contribute to the creation of social capital. Goulding stresses the importance of voluntary associations in creating social capital, in accordance with the societal perspective on the generation of social capital. Yet she also underlines the importance, at least in the UK, of the government in creating policies for voluntary associations and social capital to flourish. This is done by supporting local political institutions and community institutions. In addition, it is asserted that services and places allowing people to meet on a regular but informal basis are as critical as associations. In short, the importance of public space is emphasized. Libraries are a public space "that bring together diverse populations into one community to learn, gather information and reflect" (Goulding, 2004, p. 4), and they are increasingly viewed as important in area regeneration.

5. Discussion

5.1 Social capital generation in the library

In Hillenbrand (2005a) a public library is presented that utilizes all three strategies for social capital building: activation of community groups, meeting-place strategies, and universal core services. Mount Barker library is not a public library leaving behind its core functions; this is shown by its initiatives for creating a space for young people in the library, as well as forming cyber senior computer groups enhancing information literacy. Rather, the strategy of information literacy means that library core functions are both deepened and broadened through making the library core services available to wider sections of the community. This way the universal library services are given an even

better grounding in the local community enhancing the public library's potential for building social capital. As a universal service, the library is an important factor in creating social trust. In making the universal service open to a greater plurality of groups (making universality even more universal) this trust is increased in that the library becomes an informal meeting place for more people. What probably is very important here is that the focus is not on increasing local community social capital per se by, for example, promoting voluntary association membership, but instead is on the interaction of local organizations and the public library, involving community groups in library activities and thus enhancing library use and the universality of library services – services that enjoy a high standing among the population.

The real meaning of the library as a creator of social capital is captured by Millie, a 48 –year-old African-American mother of five and a user of Near North Beach Branch Library in Chicago: "Putting this library here was more than just adding a building. It was about changing a perception. Before, I thought no one cared about people around Cabrini. And so we didn't care. Now I feel someone is watching, trying to make things better. So I am trying to better myself and my children" (Putnam, Feldstein, and Cohen, 2003, p. 37). The display of the universal values of the public library in her neighborhood reveals the potential of public institutions and policies for generating social capital. As in Mount Barker Community Library, users in the Near North Beach Branch mostly go to the library for information, but they also meet others. The library is a "third place", a place that is neither work nor home, where people can spend time like in a public bar or a cafeteria. Even if it is a place with a purpose and not purely a place for socializing like

the ideal third place, the library is unique in having free service. Users do not have to buy anything; the service is truly universal and inspiring social trust.

In her review of the libraries and social capital literature, Hillenbrand (2005b) contends that the primary way public libraries create social capital is by providing a public space, that is, a meeting-place. Although it is added that the library generates social capital in many ways, this conclusion leaves out the fact that the library is an institution with a purpose, and thus misses what people primarily come to the library for. This is all the more surprising as Hillenbrand herself in the study of Mount Barker Library found that most people came to the library for its core services. Therefore, it is likely that it is when people come to the library to find information and making use of a universal public service that social capital primarily is generated.

Existing studies confirm the importance of the library institution for the generation of social capital. This means that the universality of the service that is offered itself creates social capital. In addition, the library as an institutionalized public space for all creates social interaction and trust and a feeling of equity within the local community that in turn generates more social capital.

5.2 Towards a research agenda: public libraries and social capital

The gap between the strong call for giving libraries their "true" credit in the creation of social capital and the lack of research regarding libraries and social capital calls for an explanation in itself. Notwithstanding this, research on the topic is very much needed. However, despite the low quantity of research, it is interesting to note that the small research that has been done is of high quality. The findings and results of researchers

within the field of public libraries and social capital in some ways anticipate the theoretical advances in social capital research, focusing on the institutional origins of social capital. The reason for this is probably straightforward: when the contribution of the public library to social capital becomes the focus of research, it is difficult to avoid a discussion of institutional impacts on social capital even though this has not been part of the mainstream social capital literature until recently. Thus, studies of public libraries and social capital can give a boost not only to library research, but they can also add important contributions to research on the institutional aspects of social capital.

Until now, the institutional impact of public libraries on social capital mostly has been studied without a basis in an articulated theory on the creation of social capital. So far, considering the limited research activity, this has been a minor problem. However, in order to increase the knowledge about libraries and social capital, theoretically focused research is necessary, and this will also benefit social capital research in general. Both surveys and qualitative studies are needed to describe whether and how public library services in fact generate social capital. What services are the most promising, and which policy instruments can bring new groups to the library? Is the library generating social trust mostly as a meeting place or is it the universal services that is offered that matter - or is it both? What kinds of community-directed initiatives are relevant - initiatives linking the local groups with library services, or participating in more general social and cultural work in the community focused on voluntary associations? Building on findings in the social capital literature, it is probable that libraries working with voluntary associations to recruit new members do not increase the social capital of these association members, but in the case that these organizations in fact direct their work towards other

groups in the community and get these groups involved with the public library, this involvement might be positive. These basic questions are badly in need of answers.

6. Conclusion

The three empirical studies that exist all highlight the impact of the library institution in generating social capital. Furthermore, they support the importance of traditional library services in creating social capital. This is in line with research on social capital emphasizing the importance of institutions and universal services for social trust.

People mainly use the library for document-related activities, although many find it a place they just want to be, that is, a third place for informal low-intensive meetings (see Audunson (2005), for this concept). In addition, users prioritize the equity of access for all. Library buildings are also considered a symbol of government commitment.

From an institutional perspective on the making of social capital, the main strategy for the public library is to offer better core services and to make services more universal by attracting new groups of library users. This calls for outreach activity, but grounded in a library services perspective. A general community perspective may divert attention from the library services that form the basis for the generation of social capital by the library, and as such be counterproductive. If libraries turned into local community centers, merely functioning as hubs and recruiting areas for voluntary associations, there would be little evidence of their social capital building properties. As seen, there is scant evidence that voluntary associations create social capital, regardless of their other positive effects.

The main institutional effects of the public library in creating social capital can be expected to be at least threefold. Firstly, the library is a provider of universal services; the public library is for everybody. Universalistic public policies create social capital; this applies especially to policies regarding public services in close contact with the user. This is exactly the situation experienced in the public library. Users primarily go to the library for core services, to access documents. Furthermore, library users consider the key purpose of the library to be the distribution of documents and information. Usage patterns and user evaluations give the traditional library services a prominent role in the public library's contribution to social capital.

Secondly, the public library building is a public space. This space is defined by the institutionalized principle of equity of access for all. To access the library space, citizens do not have to become members of a voluntary organization; in the library, they can in principle meet everbody, and on an equal footing. This means it can be argued that the library also can be an important creator of social capital from below, an institution facilitating social meetings and social capital generation (Audunson, 2005). The issue of self-selection of users cannot be ignored, but the very low requirements for entering a public library may speak against this.

Thirdly, as an institution for information the library is a place for bringing people together for knowledge and reflection. Ultimately, this means that the library is not only a repository of documents and for social capital, but also a repository working for democracy in the Habermasian sense. However, libraries are already virtual places in addition to physical spaces. They will probably remain physical spaces; given that documents and information are social phenomena, people will still visit the physical

library space in future (Brown and Duguid, 2000). In all three respects, service, access, and information, equity and universality is the theme that runs through the question of the social capital forming potential of the public library. The key word is universality. From this point of view, what the library can do to become even better in creating social capital is by making its universal services of even higher quality and by increasing its appeal to user groups in the relative minority.

This far, empirical findings suggest that the universal access aspect of the public library makes it extraordinarily suited for the task of creating social capital. Not only does the library provide a universal service to all citizens without any means testing, it also provides a public space for the diversity of information and creation of meaning crucial for democracy. Being for all, the library not only enhances social capital, but also democracy. Sustaining the universal service aspect and equality of access probably are conditions for democracy in the long run, but in the short run the role of the library in maintaining the public sphere in times of threats from both commercial and political interests to the free formation of public opinion is vital. The public library thus makes a potential contribution to both the social and the political fabric of society and government.

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