

**Public libraries as impartial spaces in the 21<sup>st</sup> century:**

**Possible, plausible, desirable?**

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Libraries as Space and Place**

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## ABSTRACT

In an increasingly commercialised '24/7' information and entertainment society, are public libraries finding it progressively more difficult to provide access to trusted, impartial public spaces?

This paper focuses on public libraries in 'real world' and 'virtual' communities and addresses pertinent issues related to their place in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. The authors address whether public libraries should conform to a more commercial model in order to survive in a predominantly consumer society or retain their values and continue to provide "... alternatives and alternative spaces in a culture dominated by information capitalism and media image and spectacle" (Buschman, 2003).

## INTRODUCTION

Public libraries have played an essential role in the lives of individuals and communities for over 150 years. Since inception they have served a diverse range of users (Samuel, 1992, quoted in Usherwood 1996, p. 81) and have been expected to meet the evolving needs and expectations of wide variety of stakeholders. When public libraries were officially introduced via the *The Public Libraries Act of 1850*, one of their key priorities was to divert the working classes away from moral wrong doing such as visiting public houses and to encourage more productive leisure time activities, such as reading; thus engaging ALL citizens (regardless of social class) with the world of literature, culture and the arts (Black, 1996, pp.26,27). However, these priorities no longer need to be the main focus of public libraries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (McMenemy, 2008, p.5). Times have changed; standards of living have improved, along with education, health and leisure opportunities; and the majority of citizens now require a public library service that reflects societal shifts and technological advances (CABE, 2003, p.2). Some have suggested that many of the traditional services offered by public libraries, such as accessing information, browsing books, seeking advice and meeting friends can be fulfilled more effectively and efficiently by visiting commercial alternatives located in the high street, such as bookshops, or in the virtual world by online retailers and social networking websites (Coates, 2002; Chad and Miller, 2005, p.4). Access to the internet via PCs and mobile devices enables users to search for and retrieve just about every type of information, at any time and in any place. Unfortunately, the public library website is unlikely to be the first port of call for many internet users (Miller, 2006, p. 4). Commercial search engines such as *Google* and *Yahoo* offer a convenient alternative to the library website and building. Social networking websites such as *Facebook*, *Bebo*, *Myspace* and *Second Life* provide virtual destinations potentially challenging the library's role as a social space.

That said, public libraries still represent essential destinations; places where individuals and groups can come together to explore, learn, meet, consult and enjoy democratic access to information and resources (Bob, 1982; Sagan, 1983 quoted in Usherwood, 2007, p.84; IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, 1994; Dolan, 2007, p.7; Scroggum, 2006, p. 12; Usherwood, 2007, p.87). However, the fact is that the role of the public library as a social, educational and recreational space is becoming increasingly challenged by commercial alternatives that offer quick and efficient gratification for citizens (McArthur and Nicholson, 2005, quoted in Usherwood, 2007, p.40). For example, the internet has even been referred to as a modern day 'public sphere', much like the public library; a place where citizens can come together to challenge political views and promote democracy (Habermas, 1989; Mided, 2000). The reality is that public libraries face a great many challenges in the coming years, especially if they are expected to "compete for attention" in an increasingly 'switched on' information world (Miller, 2006, p.3; Fraser, 2006).

The aim of this paper will be to determine whether it is a realistic or a romantic notion that in a consumer society where "many can afford to walk away from public services" (Milburn, 2002), public libraries should still be expected to offer citizens access to neutral and impartial spaces. For the purposes of this paper the authors will consider the spaces that the public library occupies within the physical community and the spaces that they inhabit online. The key objectives will be to:

- Present the findings of secondary research into the public library as a public space
- Identify examples of commercial influences within public library spaces
- Produce a SWOT analysis to highlight the pros and cons of opening the public library up to commercial influence.

## THE PUBLIC LIBRARY AS A PUBLIC SPACE

Habermas defines the concept of the 'public sphere' as:

...a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens...They [citizens] then behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of the constitutional order subject to the constraints of a state bureaucracy. Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions - about matters of general interest

(Habermas, 1964, p. 49).

The public sphere is composed of public spaces that "assist in the creation of a free and democratic public life" (Carr et al, 1992, p.364). Key research in the area of library science suggests that the public library, as a public space, contributes to the public sphere (Shera, 1949; Skot-Hansen, 2002; Worpole, 2004; Buschman, 2003, p.46; Moura, 2004; Dolan, 2007, p. 7; Usherwood, 2007, p. 129). The reasons being that the public library provides:

a place of books and reading, of research, of librarians, of free thought, and of balance – balance between education and recreation, between print and electronic, between quiet and noise, and between parental concern and civil liberties...an open space where community may thrive across all socio-economic and demographic groups" (Scroggins, 2006, p.8 & p.12).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century public libraries are expected to provide citizens with access to such spaces in the real world (with branch libraries); and in the virtual world (with online libraries). However, as previously discussed, in both the real world and the virtual, public libraries face a growing number of challenges and in the sections that follow the authors will investigate how public libraries are responding to these challenges; and attempt to discuss whether these responses will have a positive or negative impact on the role of public libraries in the future.

## ADOPTING RETAIL MODELS TO TRANSFORM SPACES

Debate surrounding the proposed similarities between bookstores and libraries has been evident in the UK and USA since the mid 1990s (Coffman, 1998, p.40; Ezard, 2003; Cartwright, 2004, p.2; D'Angelo, 2006, p. 3). Towards the end of the twentieth century Coffman (1998, pp 40-46) published a controversial article which asked the library community; "What if you ran your library like a bookstore?". Coffman suggested that:

If communities choose to manage their libraries like Barnes and Noble, they could get many of the amenities people find so attractive about the new superstores – great selection, convenient hours, comfortable surroundings, and friendly staff... (Coffman, 1998, p.46)

A common perception began to emerge within the profession; that bookstores, such as *Waterstone's*, *Borders* and *Barnes & Noble*, were offering citizens access to services and resources that had typically been provided by libraries, but in a more attractive and friendly environment (Coffman, 1998, p.46; Smith, 1999, p.31). Welcoming spaces were being designed for booklovers by savvy retailers striving to create spaces that were "part bookstore, part library, part living room" (Kotler and Armstrong, 2001, p.494). It was observed that bookstores had become better at delivering the 'library experience' than

libraries themselves; and were achieving it for less money (Coffman, 1998, p.46). In addition, in the UK context, the abolition of the *Net Book Agreement* meant that books were less expensive and easier to access via bookstores, supermarkets and online retailers (Usherwood, 2007, p.42). It was suggested that this had an adverse effect on public library borrowing figures, which seemed to decline as book sales rose (DCMS, 2003, p.20; Johnston, 2004; Breslin and McMenemy, 2006, p. 415-419).

All in all, it was perceived that bookstores boasted important advantages over public libraries; 'location' and 'interiors' (Woodward, 2004, p.10); 'advertising' (Laing and Royle, 2006); 'branding' (Roberts and McIntosh, 2004); 'customer service' (Coates, 2002); and 'stock procurement' (MLA, 2006). Many within the library profession adopted an "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" mentality by actively adopting the bookstore model to transform their spaces. Such moves seemed to be supported by the UK government which encouraged libraries to look to the bookstore model for inspiration; and to emulate certain aspects of the bookstores' success (Audit Commission, 2002; DCMS, 2003). The result being that the bookshop model, consisting of effective marketing and promotional campaigns, multiple stocks of bestsellers, customer service advisors, publisher promotion tables, comfortable sofas, coffee shops and internet cafés, was implemented by several public library authorities (Buckingham and Finch, 1998, p.26; Coffman, 1998; Cartwright, 2001; Buschman, 2003, p.113). Examples include the *Idea Stores* in Tower Hamlets, London (Cunningham, 2000) and the *Library at GoMA* in Glasgow, Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2005, p. 116).

Although these new libraries attracted positive publicity some commentators spoke out against adopting the bookshop model as a technique for improving public library services. Usherwood notably called for public libraries to stop reinventing themselves as "quasi retail outlets that simply seek to maximise their popularity by responding to populist demands"(Usherwood, 2007, p.120 - 121). Others argued that attempting to emulate the retail model fails to recognise "the most important function of a public library, which is to promote and sustain the knowledge and values necessary for a democratic civilisation" (D'Angelo, 2006, p.1). After all, bookstores thrive in a private sector focussed on generating revenue, whilst libraries exist in a public sector committed to meeting needs and serving the public good (Bryson et al, 2002, p.12). Applying retail models to public services, it was argued, could jeopardise the future of the library service by blurring the distinction between *consumerism* and *citizenship*; thus giving rise to the concept of the '*Citizen-Consumer* and threatening the future of the library as a public service (Budd, 1997; Cochrane, 1998; Adcroft and Willis, 2005, p. 388; Clarke et al 2007, pp. 7, 64, 21; Usherwood, 2007, p.47;). More importantly, such actions signified "a shift towards a more marketised and privatised form of service delivery, driven by commercial rather than public service values" Clarke et al 2007. p. 9).

As bookstores exist to make profit they are more inclined to offer readers bestsellers at the expense of a diverse range of stock. Attempts to emulate this trend will have a negative effect on the quality and diversity of resources being offered to citizens in public library spaces (Norris, 1997; Taylor 2006; Usherwood, 2007, p.42). In addition, bookstores can rely on their profits to help support and develop their spaces and services. How will the public library continue to match the range of facilities and services on offer in the bookstore without the huge profits that bookstores bring in, especially in the current financial climate? So, the authors ponder the question; is this really the path that the public library service should be taking? In the short term public libraries may benefit from increased footfall, a rise in borrowing figures and increased revenue from external sources, but at what expense in the long run? As Usherwood warns, applying commercial models to public library spaces "takes away the idea of commonality. In a true public library the user is a citizen rather than

a customer. The commercial sector is not concerned with citizenship. Customers and consumers are viewed differently from citizens”(Usherwood, 2007, p.47)

## EXPLOITING REVENUE STREAMS

In today's tough economic times, public libraries face a Catch-22 situation. Although they are expected to meet the increasingly diverse needs of a wide range of stakeholders and to evolve to changes in the modern information society, it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure the necessary funding to do so. While public libraries are still heavily funded by the public purse, they exist within a world very different to the one they were born into:

People grow up today in a consumer society...[they] exercise more choices in their lives than at any point in history. Many can afford to walk away from public services which do not command their confidence (Milburn, 2002c, quoted in Clarke et al 2007, p. 34).

Along with other public services, libraries face a bleak future of budget cuts as the UK attempts to battle its way out of the worst recession for over one hundred years (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2009). Although in the past many have urged public libraries to avoid treating the public library and its users as if they were commodities (Webster, 1999, p.4; D'Angelo, 2006, p.4; Usherwood, 2007, p.9; McMenemy, 2008, p. 413), it is at times like these that alternative revenue streams appear more attractive than ever. The reason being that commercial opportunities can enable public libraries to generate revenue to supplement the funding that they will lose in the coming years (Potts and Roper, 1995, p. 13; Coffman, 2000). So, when faced with library closures does it become more acceptable for public libraries to exploit commercial revenue streams?

Commercialisation within the public library space is not an alien concept and many have opened their spaces up to commercial influence in the past with small scale revenue generation schemes such as selling bookmarks, greeting cards, USB sticks, information services to private organisations, Friends of the Library groups, etcetera. Such programmes have been relatively small scale but in recent years revenue generating initiatives have become more sophisticated, taking inspiration from the private sector to deliver sponsorship opportunities, direct marketing campaigns, contra deals, publisher promotions, book sales, and in-house coffee shops. In the sections that follow the authors will identify examples of sponsorship, direct marketing and library-bookstore agreements for further discussion.

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## SPONSORSHIP

In recent years public library book festivals have gotten bigger and better, thanks in part to funding and support from external partners which have, in many cases secured their future. Sponsorship of book festivals has been an area of considerable growth within the library sector and two high profile examples have been chosen for further discussion; *The Library of Congress National Book Festival* in Washington DC, USA and the *Aye Write Book Festival* in Glasgow, Scotland.

Although these festivals are situated on two separate continents they follow a similar model for success. Their calendars of high profile author events attract tens of thousands of visitors annually and have secured support from a variety of sources. For example *The Library of Congress Book Festival's* main sponsors include the retail giant *Target* and global communications brand *AT&T*. *Barnes & Noble* bookstore have a presence throughout the duration of the festival as the official onsite bookstore and *The Washington Post* is the official media partner (Library of Congress, 2008). On a slightly smaller scale, the *Aye Write*

*Book Festival* is sponsored by *Bank of Scotland*, a major financial institution, supported by *Waterstone's Booksellers* and media partner *The Herald* newspaper (Aye Write, 2009).

The authors have observed that private sector organisations, such as the examples provided above are keen to align themselves with the public library brand. After all, if the *Bank of Scotland* is seen sitting alongside The Mitchell Library it is anticipated that the positive associations of the public library brand in the minds of users (e.g. trust, integrity, reliability and quality) will transfer to the commercial partner's brand. Therefore, in exchange for financial support the commercial partner enjoys priceless brand attribute associations (Aaker, 1991, p.5). However, this rule works both ways and if the user experiences bad customer service or a low quality product from the commercial brand, this will reflect badly on their perceptions of the public library (Aaker and Kelly, 1990).

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## DIRECT MARKETING & AFFILIATION SCHEMES

In 2008 the *The Libraries Agency*, a marketing and communications consultancy firm focussed on "Making marketing work in libraries" joined forces with leading brand media and commercialisation specialists *BrandSpace CMS* to identify new revenue streams for libraries in the UK. It was suggested that participation in brand partnership schemes would lead to "revenue opportunities...without compromising the main purpose of the library service and its cultural and social responsibilities" (Lindley, 2008 quoted in Gazette 2008). Commercial partnership opportunities ranged from inserting leaflets into library books, selling internal and external library space for advertising campaigns; and the introduction of vending machines. Some library authorities were quick to sign up to the scheme, notably in Essex, Somerset, Leeds and Bromley where local councils seemed keen to exploit potential commercial opportunities with a number of high profile brands on *BrandSpace CMS's* portfolio, such as *BT*, *Orange* and *Britvic* (Gazette, 2008).

Representatives from *The Libraries Agency* and Heads of Services from participating councils seemed convinced that measures had been taken to ensure that the integrity of the public library would not be compromised (Lea, 2007; Gazette, 2008). However, surely this is an impossible feat, given the commercial nature of the initiatives? Regardless of the short term financial rewards (upwards of £10,000) the authors argue that the long term impact could reduce a highly valued public service to a commodity. In addition, from the moment libraries open their spaces up to commercial influence they negatively alter their valued place in society; their relationship with users; and their reputation as "civic society's unique space for free communication and critical reflection in contrast to the market's commercialisation of experiences" (Skot-Hansen, 2002). That said, in these tough economic times commercial opportunities and alternative revenue streams emerge as attractive solutions to the ongoing threat of budget cuts; offering library services much needed cash injections and prolonged financial security.

Affiliation schemes are another way in which libraries can direct users to the products and services of commercial partners, but this time via their library catalogues. In the late 1990s Coffman (1999, p.11) encouraged libraries to enter into commercial agreements with online book retailers to create links from the public library OPAC. In the UK several library authorities, including Milton Keynes in England and East Renfrewshire in Scotland encourage users to 'click through' to *Amazon* in order to buy the books they intended to borrow. In return, the library receives a percentage of any book sales resulting from that initial click. *Amazon* reciprocates by offering a link enabling customers to check if the book they are contemplating buying is available to borrow from their local library. A win-win situation for both parties? Only if the partnership does not devalue the public library brand or damage the relationship between the library and its users.

## IMPARTIALITY IN VIRTUAL SPACES

Although the majority of public libraries have managed to establish an online presence by creating official library websites, many are failing to keep up with the pace of change online. The evolution of concepts such as Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 have also added to the challenge for public libraries. The virtual world now seems awash with commercial alternatives set to challenge the libraries role as educator, information provider and recreational destination (e.g. *Google, Amazon, Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, Wikipedia, YouTube*).

Unfortunately, as commercial search engines such as *Google* and social networking spaces such as *Facebook* continue to evolve into interactive space encouraging sharing and collaboration between users, the library website has remained static; offering only a one way conversation between users and failing to create a desirable online destination for users. A problem highlighted by OCLC in 2005 which revealed that although 96% of internet users had visited a public library, only 27% (9% in the UK) reported accessing the public library's website (Miller, 2006, p. 4). Ideally, the public library website should provide a space for users to communicate, collaborate and contribute to the collective intelligence of their communities. Unfortunately, many library services have failed to develop their websites into such spaces and herein lies the problem.

Today's users now expect online public library spaces to offer more than traditional facilities, such as 'search' and 'browse' options. Virtual libraries should now boast synchronous messaging; streaming media; blogs and wikis; social network; tagging; RSS feeds; and Mashups (Maness, 2006). Opportunities exist for public libraries to integrate these services into their own website, using open source resources such as *Drupal* and *SOPAC6* to help build online communities. However, with the exception of a few high profile successes such as Darien Public Library (DPL, 2009) in Connecticut and Ann Arbor Public Library (AAPL, 2009) in Michigan, many public libraries are struggling due to a combination of dwindling budgets, time constraints and limited technical expertise (Browne and Rooney-Browne, 2008, p. 1).

A possible solution is for the public library to adopt commercial Web 2.0 services such as *Wordpress* to host blogs; *Facebook* to establish social networking communities; *Twitter* to communicate breaking news; and *Flickr* to share digital resources. These services offer a more cost effective and efficient alternative for libraries to embrace Web 2.0 at a fraction of the cost; either by paying a small admin fee or by opening themselves and their users up to third party advertising. A number of library authorities in the UK, including Edinburgh in Scotland and Manchester in England have opted for this solution. However, it presents several ethical and legal implications for the public library service involved. Social networking websites in particular expose members to targeted advertising messages from a variety of commercial partners, such as credit card companies, online retailers, cosmetic surgery agencies, diet brands and mobile communication companies. It is important to ensure that users are made aware that the public library does not endorse these advertising messages nor does it actively encourage users to buy their products. It is also imperative that users are informed that any personal details they submit to these websites will be owned, not by the public library but by the commercial organisation hosting the library's space online. By moving outwith the constraints of the official public library website to engage with users in interactive Web 2.0 communities libraries now operate in a space which no longer protects users from commercial messages.

## MAINTAINING IMPARTIALITY – ROMANCE OR REALITY?

It is clear that public libraries require huge financial support if they are to rise to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unfortunately, the UK is experiencing one of the worst recessions in its history and public libraries, like other public services, must prepare themselves for a decade of ever-increasing budget cuts, reduced opening hours, redundancies and decreased book funds (Page,2009; Bakewell, 2009). This will have an adverse affect not only on the traditional services provided by public libraries but also on the development of future services equipped to meet the expectations of a new generation of web-savvy users. Without adequate funding how will public libraries respond to misconceptions about their value; compete with commercial alternatives; meet the high expectations of users; and survive in a society dominated by “postmodern consumer capitalism” (D’Angelo, 2006, p.113)?

The answer it would seem is not quite as straightforward as the authors would have liked. Of course, in an ideal world public libraries should strive to provide spaces that are neutral, impartial, fair and equitable (Clarke and Newman, 1997, p.127). Unfortunately the worlds in which public libraries exist (both real and virtual) are far from ideal and as the authors have highlighted, commercialisation of the public library space can provide a much needed cash injection for struggling library services. In the next section the authors will produce a SWOT analysis to identify the perceived internal strength and weaknesses; and the external opportunities and threats facing public libraries when they begin to open themselves up to commercial influence.

SWOT ANALYSIS:  
OPENING THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SPACE UP TO COMMERCIAL INFLUENCE

<b>INTERNAL</b>	<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survive the recession (budget cuts, closures)</li> <li>• New revenue streams</li> <li>• Return on Investment (ROI) for parent organisation</li> <li>• Commercial partnerships with brands that 'fit' with objectives of public libraries</li> <li>• Enhance the public library experience</li> <li>• Form an alliance with competitors</li> <li>• Align with high profile marketing campaigns</li> <li>• Cost effective and efficient models of service delivery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does profit become more important than needs?</li> <li>• Selling the integrity of public libraries</li> <li>• Alters the relationship between stakeholders and libraries</li> <li>• Commodification of a public service</li> <li>• Users transformed from citizens to consumers</li> <li>• Need to apply commercial models to social institutions</li> <li>• Finding acceptable commercial partners with similar objectives, reputation and values</li> <li>• Endorsement of one brand over another</li> </ul>
<b>EXTERNAL</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased revenue</li> <li>• Challenge perceptions</li> <li>• Enter new markets</li> <li>• Compete with commercial alternatives</li> <li>• Respond to changes in user demands</li> <li>• Invest in new services and resources</li> <li>• Piggy-back high profile marketing campaigns</li> <li>• Widen appeal</li> <li>• Communicate relevance and value</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commercial partners produce low quality products and/or bad service; this will reflect badly on public library</li> <li>• Associations could damage reputation that has taken 150 years to build</li> <li>• Breakdown of trust between library and stakeholders</li> <li>• No clear distinction between bookshops/retailers and libraries</li> <li>• Governments no longer feel the need to provide funding from the public purse</li> <li>• No longer perceived as impartial spaces, free from bias</li> <li>• Long term benefits are unclear</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to take a critical look at public libraries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and their place in an increasingly commercialised 24/7 information society. The authors discussed the public library as a public space and the role that it plays within the public sphere; identified trends towards adopting retail models to help transform public library spaces into vibrant, welcoming destinations; presented examples of public libraries exploiting new revenue streams; observed public libraries attempting to establish spaces in virtual communities; and with the help of a SWOT analysis attempted to understand whether maintaining impartiality in today's consumer society is more romantic than realistic.

Certainly there are many opportunities to be gained from opening the public library space up to market influences but the threats are clear; public libraries risk losing a lot more in the long term than they hope to gain in the short term from embracing commercial opportunities. It is also worth bearing in mind that the capitalist model that libraries would be inviting into their public spaces is widely perceived to be responsible for the recent collapse of the global economy. Therefore, if we put the private sector jargon to the side for just one moment and remind ourselves that the role of the public library is to provide a space promoting community knowledge, citizenship, personal growth, democratic access to information, building trust and challenging preconceived ideas, then of course public libraries should strive to retain their impartiality (Carr et al, 1992, p. 364; Greenhalgh et al., 1995; Skot-Hansen, 2002; Buschman, 2003; Worpole, 2004; Scrogam, 2006, p.11; Usherwood, 2007, p.49)

However, as the SWOT analysis has revealed this is far from being a black and white issue. Although the authors are less keen to support the commercialisation of the physical library space it has become clear that, given the current economic climate, unless public libraries pursue alternative revenue streams it seems unlikely that they will be able to develop their spaces and services to reflect societal changes and shifts in user demands. The dilemma seems even more pressing in the virtual world where unless public libraries opt to align themselves with commercial web 2.0 services they seem unable to provide an online library space that is 'fit for purpose'.

To conclude, the authors would argue that it is one thing to suggest that public libraries can learn a great deal from the private sector in terms of efficiency, cost effectiveness, marketing etcetera, but it is quite another to endorse specific brands and push advertising messages to unsuspecting library users who expect their public library spaces to represent "...democracy, civil education and the public good" (D'Angelo, 2006, p.4). The authors recommend that public libraries must contemplate the following when considering the commercialisation of their public spaces; are we in the business of exchanging integrity, trust, and impartiality for cash?; would we not rather provide "...alternative spaces in a culture dominated by information capitalism and media image and spectacle" (Buschman, 2003, p.180); or, given the current financial climate, is it a case of do or die?

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