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‘When I’m 64’: the public library after the retirement of the baby boomers

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Abstract

Across the world, governments are aware that the retirement of the baby boomers will have a big impact on developed societies. This large group of the population is better educated, more technologically literate and generally wealthier than any previous generation. They are also renowned for their voracious consumption of information in all media.

The pilot project reported in this paper has investigated the likely impact of the retirement of the baby boomers on the public library. The study was exploratory, in interpretivist mode, with the emphasis being placed on questions to encourage participants to think creatively about the library of the future, unfettered by present realities or even possibilities. The study focus was the generation of ideas and, therefore, begins with two visions of the future library that might serve baby boomers. The sample included 16 baby boomers representing mainly leading edge boomers (born between 1946 and 1955) but also trailing edge boomers (born between 1956 and 1965), who were interviewed in two focus groups – one in Newcastle, NSW and one in Melbourne. We also interviewed four gatekeepers, defined as visionary leaders in the baby boomers age range, who have a broad knowledge of the needs of their communities.

There is a rich array of findings, a selection of which will be discussed. A key finding was that there were some differences in the perspectives of those who believed that they would be financially comfortable in the future and those who thought they would have minimal resources. Major issues include: the particular characteristics of the baby boomer cohort, e.g. the perception of them as a demanding generation who will want to travel when still active, who will have a range of interests and will require services that are flexible and of high quality; needs in the transition period (when some of the baby boomers will be only semi-retired); the role of the library in relation to technology; and the popularity of the notion of the public library as a social/cultural hub and a key networking and linking organisation. The needs of the baby boomers when they are ‘frail aged’ were included in the project, but will be the subject of another paper. The conclusion will discuss the visions, in relation to the project findings, and the need for further research.

¹ Ms Lynne Makin (CEO & Manager, Upper Murray Regional Library and Executive Director, Public Libraries Australia Ltd) initiated this project and will be the Partner Investigator representing two of the collaborating organisations in an ARC Linkage application on the topic later in 2005. The authors would like to acknowledge: Professor Ross Harvey, School of Information Studies, Charles Sturt University, who assisted us when we piloted our interview schedules; the two public libraries that assisted in finding participants and in hosting the focus groups – Port Phillip Library Service and Newcastle Regional Library; the focus group and gatekeeper interviewees who generously gave us their time and their views; Ms Maureen Lockyer-Benzie (formerly Maureen Kahlert) who very generously assisted us with information and advice, based on her pioneering research in the area, and who acted as a ‘critical friend’ by giving us feedback on this paper.

Introduction

For some time now, the Australian government has given increasing attention to the consequences and the cost impacts of the retirement of baby boomers on community infrastructure and service provision. This cohort numbers about 5.4 million (Overington 2005) – more than one-quarter of the Australian population. Throughout their lifetime, baby boomers have had a major impact on Australian society. They are now likely to revolutionise the meaning of ageing and retirement, just as they have led other social revolutions in earlier times, e.g. the gender and sexual revolutions. McKay (1997) has pointed out that ‘boomers have grown up with strong egalitarian viewpoints’ (p. 64). This is the generation that led the Vietnam moratorium in Australia and the civil rights movements in the US – and who can ever forget ‘flower power’? Libraries have good reason to be involved in planning and policy development if their services are to be relevant and timely to baby boomers.

Older baby boomers have already started to move out of the full-time workforce into retirement, and this will accelerate from the next five years onwards, i.e. between 2011 and 2031. It is anticipated that they and other boomers are likely to consider flexible working options post-retirement and/or to consider pursuing areas of interest that they have not had the leisure time pre-retirement to follow, e.g. travel, hobbies (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999, p. 7).² These are issues this paper considers. The paper reports a pilot study that focussed on the role that the public library can play for baby boomers after they retire. The themes from the study which are addressed in this paper are:

- characteristics of baby boomers (life experiences, life-styles, information and recreational preferences, and financial issues), together with needs for post-retirement work, for maintaining technological access and for sustaining social and cultural activities; and
- the responses that the public library might make to these characteristics, preferences and needs.

Data on the needs of the baby boomers when they are ‘frail aged’ were also collected, but need a separate paper to do them justice. Likewise, data on the contribution that the baby boomers might make to the public library were collected but will be reported elsewhere. Since the purpose of this paper is to generate ideas about the future public library, we begin with two visions of the future public library suited to baby boomers.

Two visions for the future

The visions, outlined below, were written without knowledge of the findings of the pilot study. The aim is to stimulate the imagination and then, later, to compare these visions with those of participants in the research. The literature review, the project’s research design and method, the findings and conclusion will follow.

Vision one

It is 2013, and Dr Smith is due to retire from an academic career in a great Australian university at age 65. Dr Smith has clawed her way up the educational ladder, has married and

² *Australian Social Trends* 1999 is the key Australian Bureau of Statistics resource that covers the implications of an ageing population, with particular reference to baby boomers. There are also State-based Australian Bureau of Statistics reports on baby boomers – for Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia – which are less relevant to this paper.

raised a family. She now finds that her children and their spouses need her help because, despite advances in equal opportunity and childcare, they battle to sustain family life and careers while meeting the demands of parenting. Because of broken periods of service in the earlier years of her career, her superannuation history is chequered. On retirement day she plunges to about 40% of her former income. She is aware that life-expectancy for her age group has been constantly increasing, and she knows that she and her husband will need to stretch their assets perhaps over more than two decades, years in which declining health is likely to bring increased expense.

Dr Smith is used to the outstanding resources and service of her university library. Since the advent of personal computers and broadband networking she has received a richer library service than ever before from the university library because of the rapid build-up of full-text electronic resources. On the day after retirement her access to the outstanding resources of the university and its library will be gone. Thus, from being a marginally necessary amenity during her working life, the public library will become one of the key pillars of her lifestyle strategy. Most important of all it must supply her with information – good information and lots of it – to maintain her sense of personal empowerment. The Web, outstanding as it is, is not enough. She wants to feel that she can find and engage new challenges within and beyond the family sphere and keep up her own sense of intellectual growth. This may involve part-time work to supplement her income or voluntary activity.

There should be state-of-the art computer access in her future public library and plenty of it, especially because, as the years pass after Dr Smith's retirement, her home equipment will become obsolescent. Economy rather than speed and capacity will become the basis for choosing her home Internet service provider. Beyond computer access, the library should provide training and support to computer users, whether at the library or at home.

Most important of all, both the fiction and non-fiction resources of the library should be excellent. User needs studies of public libraries have time and again identified book stock as the highest priority. A major additional tranche of funding will be needed – to license excellent networked access to digital resources for recreation and personal development. Journals like *Science* need to be online for full text access from public libraries, as they are in universities.

For older people, fee-for-service in the library context – or even modest co-payments – is even less appropriate than for the population as a whole. The problem is that to provide high-end services to the baby boomer cohort a tenfold increase in library funding would probably be required. At this point we are squarely in the territory of what Hardin (Davis, 2003) called 'the tragedy of the commons', where the availability of shared resources can lead to such heavy use that the sustainability of those resources becomes impossible.

Vision two

In twenty years time, Australian baby boomers, who already enjoy unprecedented levels of affluence, education, health and social and physical mobility, will benefit from widespread use of one Australia-wide networked public library, called POLKA (Public Online Leisure and Knowledge Australia). By 2030 all existing 1,700 libraries around the country will be fully networked to each other, alongside state and national libraries. POLKA will permit customers to have reciprocal access to local services, allow them to borrow physical items from each other by online request, will provide access to personal synchronous online advice about all sorts of useful knowledge, and will allow individual nodes in the network to share the purchase of costly single publications or databases for mutual exploitation.

The emphasis will be on access, not collections. Baby boomers will access the national public library network, via portals on the Internet (or its successor) and by personal mobile digital devices, facilitated by ubiquitous wireless connections. They will alert their middle-aged children by e-mail to digitised do-it-yourself multimedia guides for renovating their homes, which they have located on the POLKA. They will exchange reminiscences (online back-fence gossip) with lifelong friends about long-past local events and relationships. There will be heavy reliance on e-formats of all sorts – for fiction, travel guides, films, documentaries, multimedia, music, magazines, online newspapers, directories, financial management, and geographical positioning systems. The dominant motivations for using POLKA will be communication, escapism, general knowledge, hobbies, personal investments and active and passive recreation.

The means for funding the POLKA dream are difficult to predict. Not only are there massive costs involved in establishing comprehensive, efficient networks, but their full maintenance and ongoing staffing are also costly. Baby boomers who are IT-savvy will be demanding knowledge consumers. If current government policies continue to prevail, a level of privatisation must be anticipated. POLKA will very likely rely on sponsorship by corporations, such as a telco, large media company or information technology business. It is probable that baby boomers will be quite willing to pay fees for some services (e.g. downloading, copying, video-conferencing).

How close do these two visions come, firstly, to what the literature says and, secondly, to what the project participants saw as their needs and the public library of the future? This question will be discussed later in the paper.

Literature review

Here we discuss literature that appears to throw light on the future public library needs of the baby boomers. We begin with the characteristics of the cohort. Apart from the work of Lockyer-Benzie (Kahlert 2000a, 2000b; Lockyer-Benzie 2002), there is a paucity of Australian research on the likely impact of the retirement of the baby boomers on the public library. The only pertinent international research discovered was in the UK where a minor dissertation (Dobson 2004) investigated public library provision for baby boomers, concluding that there was need for further research. No US research was discovered, although there have been calls for library planning to meet needs of baby boomers (e.g. Kleinman 1995; Long 1995; Turoch 2005). Kahlert /Lockyer-Benzie's Australian work indicates that, as a vital community resource for information, education and leisure, public libraries will be an important facility for baby boomers, providing a range of resources to support each part of the next stages of their lives as they age – through the transition from full-time work to more flexible work arrangements, and as they have increased leisure time.

Characteristics of baby boomers

The key researcher focussing on baby boomers in Australia, Hugh McKay, described this cohort as voracious users of information (1997, p. 118). This, coupled with the fact that they are the most highly educated generation of any previous one (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999) gives rise to the need to investigate the impact of the retirement of baby boomers on public libraries (Kahlert 2000a, 2000b; Lockyer-Benzie 2002). Once they retire, baby boomers will become suddenly time rich enough to explore those areas of interest (e.g. hobbies or travel) hitherto not possible, to pursue those dreams that have been shelved in the past, or to explore new realms of opportunity. At the same time, the information resources of the workplace will be removed. Public libraries are therefore very likely to be a key information and recreational resource for this group.

This was a key finding of Kahlert (2000a, 2000b) in the report of her survey of public library users in the Shire of Swan, Western Australia, where 31% of those surveyed were found to be baby boomers. As indicated above, Kahlert's research appears to be the only Australian study of the future library needs of baby boomers. She found that baby boomers have high expectations of life in general. They are keenly interested in education, leading to the suggestion that lifelong learning will be of interest to them when they retire (Kahlert 2000a, p. 8).

Baby boomers are, generally speaking, more affluent than previous generations, often living in two-income households and having accumulated assets more successfully than previous generations. They are an influential market sector as a result (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999), enjoy quality products, convenience, and demand value for money (Kahlert 2000a, p. 4). Health and lifestyle are important to them (Kahlert 2000a, p. 4; Healy 2004) and they are likely to live longer and remain healthier longer than previous generations (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999; Healy 2004). They strive to remain youthful and mentally young and they view retirement as an active period of their life (Kahlert 2000a, p. 4; Harkin & Huber 2004). They are also more likely to remain in their own homes, living relatively independently compared with previous generations (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999).

Leading edge and trailing edge boomers

Two major groups of boomers, labelled 'leading edge' and 'trailing edge', are apparent within the baby boomer cohort. Kahlert (2000a) cited Davis (1995) and McKay (1997) as using these two major groupings in their studies of baby boomers. The 'leading edge' boomers, born 1946-1955, are in stronger financial positions than 'trailing edge' boomers, which Kahlert defined as born 1956-1961. The former had wide choices in the job market, own their own homes, have few debts and now mostly empty nests, whereas the latter did not have the same opportunities earlier in their working lives and particularly suffered from the depressed economy after the 1987 stock market crash. They do not own their own home outright and are still educating their children. These two groups have two very different economic profiles as the definitions above imply. The financial situations for the 'trailing edge' boomers, coupled with the highest divorce rates for any generation (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999), will exacerbate any financial burden for this group. There are implications for public libraries for these two financial scenarios.

Future needs of baby boomers

The literature provides background for two particular needs – post-retirement work and technology. In relation to post-retirement work, it is likely that, once baby boomers retire from full-time work, many will enter into more flexible working arrangements, including self-employment, part-time or casual work. Early retirement trends indicate that some baby boomers will continue extending their working lives, given that there are increased life expectancy and projected worker shortages (Collins 2003, p. 145), as well as no compulsory retirement age in either NSW or Victoria (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999). Federal government policy is attempting to reverse early retirement trends, encourage older people to remain in the workforce and introduce more flexible working conditions (Australian Treasury, Social Policy Division 2004). One imperative to remain in the workforce for boomers will be the need to fund several decades of a comfortable lifestyle. An increased need for information to assist boomers to set up self-employment opportunities and small businesses is highly likely to have implications for public libraries.

In relation to technology, baby boomers have taken this up with enthusiasm. Workplace experiences and an intense interest in technology have fuelled their competency and interest. In the late 1990s boomers, at 25% of users, were the second highest group of users of the Net

from home (Davidson 1997), behind the five to seventeen year olds (41%). Lockyer-Benzie (Kahlert 2000a, 2000b; Lockyer-Benzie 2002) saw remote access to public libraries via technology as a high priority issue for baby boomers. A proportion will also expect public libraries to offer 'the latest and the best' in terms of technology in the library itself (Kahlert 2000a, p.8).

Research design, method and techniques

The research design is underpinned by interpretivist/constructivist research philosophy. The constructivist paradigm is particularly well suited to stimulating creativity and generating ideas, and therefore well suited to this pilot project. We wanted to understand how the various participants in a particular age cohort construct their world (Glesne & Peshkin 1992, p. 6), in this case in relation to public library needs in their future retirement. We were interested in exploring their 'multiple realities' which Guba & Lincoln (1981) once graphically compared to the layers of an onion: 'Each layer provides a different perspective of reality, and none can be considered more 'true' than any other' (p. 57).

Data collection

In keeping with this philosophical approach, we designed the study in a way that would allow opportunities to explore participants' views in depth. We chose an ethnographic technique, the interview, for the data collection and decided to use it in two different ways: in focus groups where we could take advantage of interaction amongst participants, which can be powerful in stimulating ideas and fruitful discussion; and through individual interviews with well-informed interviewees (whom we called gatekeepers) where they had full rein to air their views, unaffected by the need to take the views of others into account. In the case of both types of interviews, we used open questions (e.g. about the role that the public library might play in the future) through which we attempted to stimulate participants to think creatively and in ways we might not have thought about ourselves. We particularly emphasised this with the gatekeeper interviewees, asking them near the beginning to try to think creatively about meeting the needs of the baby boomers, unconstrained by what is available or possible now. It is important to note this emphasis on new ideas, the focus of this pilot study. It was not our purpose to evaluate the performance of libraries or librarians.

Since this was a pilot study, we needed to limit the data collection and therefore decided to use two locations only: the New South Wales regional city of Newcastle, where one of the researchers lives, and an area of Melbourne, the home of another researcher. In each location, we conducted one focus group of library users: in the Newcastle Public Library and then the St Kilda Headquarters of the Port Phillip Library Service. The data collection took place between March and May 2005. The focus groups ran for about 1.5 hours each and the individual interviews for about 1 hour. Data collection took place with the approval of, and in compliance with the procedures deemed appropriate by, the Charles Sturt University's Ethics in Human Research Committee.

The sample

This consisted of two parts, the first being the two focus groups consisting of eight baby boomers each, 16 all told, born between 1946 and 1965. They were recruited for us through each of the library services involved. We decided that for this pilot research it was not necessary to have balanced numbers of 'leading edge' and 'trailing edge' boomers, resulting in the chance outcome that the former predominated. One group had high educational and job status and was homogeneous, as advocated by many focus group experts (e.g. Krueger 1994; Morgan 1988). The other group, although having less homogeneous education and job status,

included people whose backgrounds were not sufficiently diverse to result in refusal to share opinions or uncontrolled conflict (Morgan 1988, p. 10). The achievement of a 'permissive, non-threatening environment' (Krueger 1994, p. 6) is the goal of homogeneous focus groups and this appeared to have been achieved with the focus groups in the study. The lesser qualifications and job status of the second group was reflected in the fact that there was much more concern in the latter group about how they would cope financially after retirement. Overall, there were four librarians in the focus groups, and these participants brought particular library experiences and professional viewpoints and provided insights beyond those that resulted from just being baby boomers. It was a deliberate ploy to include some librarians in the focus groups as we believed that the interaction of the professionals and clients would result in a richer generation of ideas – the purpose of the pilot study.

The second component consisted of 'gatekeepers', defined as visionary leaders in the baby boomers age range, with a broad knowledge of the needs of their communities. These four interviewees were encouraged to think creatively about the future public library, drawing on their particular work and life experiences. Two were senior librarians, the third an academic and sociologist, and the fourth the director of community, business and government developments in a regional city.

Data analysis

As stated above, this was a study specifically about the generation of ideas. The aim of the analysis was therefore to extract the ideas that appear to the researchers to be useful to public library policy makers, as well as portray the overall tenor of participants' views as faithfully as possible. While we did not undertake a constructivist grounded theory per se, the words of the initiator of that approach, Charmaz (2003), are highly relevant: constructivist grounded theory 'recognises that the viewer creates the data and ensuing analysis through interaction with the viewed' and, therefore, the data do not provide a window on an objective reality (p. 273). This indicates an acceptance that researchers' backgrounds will influence their interpretations of the data. In our case, our findings are the results of the interaction of the ideas of our participants and our own, as indicated through our selection and discussion of the data available to us.

The interviews were audio-taped with the permission of the participants and then transcribed by an experienced transcription typist. In terms of the process, three of the researchers read the transcripts and developed the major themes as they saw them. They began with detailed margin notes, or codes, on the left-hand side of each transcript page and then, later, allocated a major theme to each code in the right-hand margins. Comparisons showed a high level of agreement amongst the three researchers. Each of the major themes was then allocated to one of the three researchers. As they wrote up their sections, the others provided critical feedback with regard to the goal of a fair and balanced portrayal of participants' views. The themes we chose are those outlined above, at the end of the introduction, and in the findings which follow. The latter are divided into two parts, with the first section discussing the key characteristics, preferences and future needs of baby boomers and the second section discussing suggestions for possible library responses.

Findings

1. Characteristics, preferences and future needs of baby boomers

We begin with characteristics of baby boomers (life experiences, life-styles, information and recreational preferences and financial issues), along with needs for post-retirement work, for maintaining technological access, and for sustaining social and cultural activities.

Characteristics, life experiences, and lifestyles

The individual nature of the baby boomer cohort emerged strongly. As one gatekeeper said: 'I think this generation is very different to the one that is out there now.' Although baby boomers have enjoyed economic, educational and technological advantages, many women, as well as men, have worked full-time and therefore have been time poor. Kahlert (2000a) noted that this situation will change when the baby boomers retire. With this our interviewees concurred talking of hobbies and interests they would pursue when they had time. As our sociologist gatekeeper, who had undertaken research about baby boomer women and their retirement intentions, said: 'With baby boomer mature age women, a whole new world [will be] opening up to them to do things that they might have wanted to do but never had the chance.'

There was also a strong interest in continuing education, stemming from the high education levels achieved by baby boomers, as noted by Lockyer-Benzie (Kahlert 2000a, 2000b; Lockyer-Benzie 2002). This was mentioned frequently by participants, for example: 'Retirement should be a great time to learn things just for the pure pleasure of learning' (FG).³ They have indeed been voracious users of information, as McKay (1997) stated, but they have also been questioning and critical in their approach to information, as one of the gatekeepers pointed out.

As Kahlert (2000a, p.4) noted, baby boomers enjoy quality products and convenience and require value for money. They are renowned for their high expectations of life and for being the 'demanding generation'. They also want prompt and efficient service needed to support their busy lifestyles where time is of the essence: 'Baby boomers get into the latest thing ... you want something and you want it now' (GK). These characteristics emerged time and again in the interview data. A much repeated phrase – with variations – was: 'wanting it now'.

Information and recreational preferences

While many baby boomers have perforce absorbed technology-led changes through their workplaces or educational experiences, many of our participants expressed a preference for the traditional book for information and recreational material. One participant expressed the view that: '[What] you find on the Net is pretty bland kind of stuff whereas the books I accessed were written with passion' (FG). As represented by one focus group member who said 'I like to read paper things', people who were competent in the online world still might prefer to read physical books. One of the key findings of the pilot study is the devotion of many baby boomers to the book, together with a revulsion against the notion of the electronic book on the part of some: 'I definitely prefer the hard copy rather than reading electronically. That is one of my worries' (FG). Nevertheless, many baby boomers are also very good information seekers, are accustomed to finding information easily using all available resources, and appreciate the access to information now available through the Internet.

Financial issues

While we did not set out to compare leading edge and trailing edge boomers, we did perceive some stark contrasts in participants' views about their financial circumstances after retirement. The disparity between baby boomers who will have the means to get what they want immediately, and baby boomers who will retire to a less affluent lifestyle was referred to

³ If not otherwise mentioned in the text, each quote is ascribed to either a focus group (FG) or gatekeeper (GK).

by a gatekeeper who is aware of the needs of female baby boomers, many of whom will be single and possibly not well provided with superannuation funds. She suggested that the more prosperous library users will have access to resources and the means to get what they want without delay. Those less well off will have to wait their turn for access to sought-after resources through their free public library service. Indeed service equity was important to all our participants, regardless of their particular financial situation: they were concerned that less well off retirees should not experience lack of access to library resources. As a focus group participant said: 'I think we need libraries for their affordability too because not all baby boomers are going to retire on superannuation.'

Post-retirement work, or the transition period

The gatekeeper sociologist in the study identified that baby boomers will spearhead a changing trend in retirement patterns. The reasons are that many will want to keep on working, as long as it is on their terms and they are not in the situation 'where their time is controlled by someone else', as the gatekeeper said. Moreover many of them will need to work for financial reasons: 'because also don't forget their expectations are higher. They like to go out to dinner every now and then and have a bottle of wine, keep a car, help their children out.' The gatekeeper referred to this period when the baby boomers will be semi-retired as a 'transition stage', one that extends from full-time work to full-time retirement and which will involve a range of flexible working options often in new 'career' areas, though using the skills and experience already gained through many decades of full-time work.

Technological needs

The role of technology in baby boomers' lives has been extensive and challenging. They are IT savvy, in general, with younger boomers particularly having acquired new technical skills via further education and the demands of the workplace. Many boomers will retire from a connected workplace and may face home access without the IT support they took for granted at work. How they would maintain their places in the wired world loomed as a major issue for participants: 'when I'm not working I'm terrified I'm going to lose my ability to keep up to date with the current technology' (FG). First, there were hardware and software updates to contend with, with one participant saying that, on retirement, 'I'm not going to be able to do all the upgrades when needed' (FG). Then there were the questions about who would troubleshoot their technical problems, how would they learn new software, and so on.

Social and cultural needs

In all interviews the popularity of the idea of library as a social hub emerged, as was also noted in Lockyer-Benzie's research (2002, p. 6) and Jones (2004). There were several comments about the possible loneliness which baby boomers who had worked all their adult lives might face: 'people might become lonely after having worked their whole life. They mightn't be married and have kids and all of a sudden they're sitting on their own' (FG). Another focus group participant looked forward to 'keep[ing] in contact with young people ... because with libraries you get a real social mix.'

For a range of reasons the concept emerged of the library as a neutral place that is open and inviting to a cross-section of the community – a non-commercial social hub with a strong community focus to facilitate people's social interactions and self education. Indeed, participants perceived a strong role for public libraries in developing 'social capital for the community' as one focus group member put it. Another comment was: 'There are very few places where you can actually sit and spend any time without forking out fairly large amounts

of money' (FG). It was hoped it would be 'a welcoming place, and a social place' by one of the gatekeepers.

Books and coffee

'I see as one of the pleasures of life, coffee and the library together' (FG).

Participants were very much taken with the idea of a coffee shop, not just a café bar but good coffee with great ambience, something that extends the lifestyle that baby boomers now enjoy. Indeed, comments about coffee in relation to the library were ubiquitous throughout the data. The coffee shop might be either within the library or just next door – a place where people using the library as a social hub in the community can establish friendships or read recently borrowed books in comfort with a cup of coffee. The coffee shop concept was seen as an extension of the library or part of the library precinct, where people could meet, individually or as groups, and be able to talk and not feel the pressure to be as quiet as in the study areas of the library.

Clubs and organised events

Linked to the notion of the library as a social hub, a strong theme emerged around book clubs, travel, news clubs and discussion groups. There was a strong sense of the desirability of the library having a role in organising and hosting such groups. Envisaged as loose and flexibly designed, they might enhance self-directed learning and provide leisure time activities. As a gatekeeper put it: 'While they might not be as interested in formal learning processes, I think they're going to be really interested in informal things and wanting to come along to more writers' talks, and having an opportunity to talk about what they're reading and so on.'

2. Suggestions for library responses

In this section we present, succinctly, possible responses that public libraries might make to the characteristics, preferences and needs, outlined above. Drawing on the interview data, it is suggested that public librarians could:

1. Consider the types of interests and hobbies baby boomers are likely to want to pursue in their retirement: '... all kinds of issues. Travel, gardening, reading, fitness, beauty' (GK). One of the librarian gatekeepers emphasised a range of impacts that the baby boomers' predilection for travel will or should have. As she pointed out: 'if they're going to be up and travelling ... and be away for three months of the year travelling around Australia, then how on earth can they get a book back within a month?'
2. Begin planning for continuing education needs for retired baby boomers. As one focus group participant said: 'Libraries could be a fantastic place where people who are interested in studying something, not to pass it but because they wanted to learn.' It might be in partnership with other organisations such as TAFE colleges, 'where the library might facilitate the activity without necessarily providing it' (GK). The topics mentioned as likely to be popular relate to baby boomer interests, e.g., current affairs, languages and other background learning for actual or armchair travel, investments, literature, art and other cultural pursuits.
3. Take into account the information focus and preferences of baby boomers. As well as technological access (discussed in point 7), there is likely to be a continuing love of the book. Two responses suggested by focus group members were: [what] 'baby boomers would like to see is better collections and more responsive collections.' and 'public libraries [need] to find some way that they can get the best sellers on the shelves almost as soon as they're in the bookshops and in sufficient quantities.'

4. Be aware of the 'wanting it now' attitude of baby boomers who are going to want fast and efficient service: 'So if you could tap into that 'now' thing that would be really good' (GK).
5. Take into account equity issues in relation to the fact that some baby boomers will struggle financially. Moreover, the concept of libraries charging for some services was not popular with any of the interviewees in the focus groups who felt that the introduction of value-adding would be the thin edge of the wedge: 'I don't think we should go down that path because you only have to look at history that once you start going down that path you just keep going down it' (FG).
6. Consider the role that public libraries can play in the transitional phase when some baby boomers will be looking at ways to continue earning an income. The sociologist gatekeeper thought that: 'maybe public libraries could really have an important role to play in that transitional phase' when baby boomers will need, or want, to learn new skills for their money-making ventures. She thought that their penchant for self-help should be taken into account: 'Topic areas? We have business, minimum stuff on how to get businesses going and how to manage them.' Since baby boomers are starting to move out of the full-time workforce (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999, p. 7), it is important for libraries to start considering this transitional stage.
7. Address issues relating to technology, taking into account that baby boomers will need a range of support for remote access as well as in-house state-of-the-art hardware and software. One of the librarian gatekeepers felt strongly about the role of the library in relation to technology, believing that the library needs to showcase 'technology in a safe environment, where the sellers are there.' This is so that people [are] 'able to assess what is the most affordable and what is going to provide them with the information services that they require.' Innovative approaches to partnerships between libraries and hardware providers and software companies could well be at least part of the answer. Another major consideration is the need to assist baby boomers to keep their IT skills up-to-date: 'That to me is a role that libraries could play... a training role. I'll want to use all this technology but how am I going to learn how to use it?' (FG). Focus group participants, however, made it quite clear that they were not keen to enrol in courses characterised as 'Internet for Oldies'.
8. Begin planning to provide the vibrant social and cultural hub about which participants felt so passionately. In discussing 'critical issues in public library planning', Jones (2004, p. 376) also acknowledges 'a general recognition of libraries as hubs of their communities.' The provision of good coffee either by the library, or nearby, was the most strongly supported of all suggestions made during the interviews. Participants made comparisons with contemporary bookshops with their coffee shops, and suggested that libraries would benefit from including this concept in their building design. In terms of provision of cultural activities, for which there was strong support, the notion of some of the activities being provided through partnership with other organisations came through strongly: 'I see heaps of collaboration through writers' groups, arts, performing arts groups, visual arts groups with the library. Because people come to the library it's a really good spin off for other places to hang off their programs' (GK).

Conclusion

The first vision, outlined earlier in this paper, resonated with many of the participants' views, e.g. regarding fears of reduced income, loss of access to information resources previously available through the workplace, the need for assistance in keeping abreast of technology, and the need for public libraries to supply excellent book collections. In contrast, the second vision tried to describe the public library network as a whole across the country, including

rural areas, providing an innovative perspective in this regard. This concept of the broad scope of knowledge resources, proffered by a national network, does not appear in any form in the findings of the project, nor does any consideration of the need for wide-scale reciprocity of use of resources in order to benefit individual service points. The project data relate only to perceptions, although legitimate, of individual urban library services. The predicted extensive use of all forms of e-resources, in Vision two, seems not to match participants' views. Perhaps the concept of a virtual interactive commons seems cold and impersonal when compared with the companionship and comfort offered by an ideal of a coffee-with-book in an armchair in the library building itself? Nevertheless, the second vision seeks to address some strategic policy issues that should be included in further research. Unresolved in both visions are issues of whether the future will be affordable, and who will pay, and once again, these issues deserve to be explored.

Building on the localised work of Kahlert/Lockyer-Benzie, the pilot research discussed in this paper is ground-breaking in that it opens up, on a national scale, the issues for public libraries of the retirement of the baby boomers. Nevertheless, there is a need for further research based on a larger and more geographically dispersed sample. As mentioned by one of the gatekeeper library managers, such research focussing on the needs of the baby boomer cohort will act as a driver to assist in the wider refocussing of public library services for other cohorts in the library's community. Further research should:

1. confirm and/or expand the findings outlined here (as well as those about the frail aged and issues of volunteering for which data were collected but not, at this stage, documented);
2. include library non-users as well as library users in the sample;
3. include baby boomers and public libraries in rural and remote communities as participants;
4. investigate issues raised by Vision two (discussed above);
5. examine the, as yet, unexplored differences between the 'leading edge' and 'trailing edge' boomers, together with the challenge for public libraries in dealing with those differences;
6. re-formulate the value proposition for public library services in the light of the evidence collected, relating this to current government economic policy at national, state and local levels.

This further research is urgent, given that the baby boomers are already beginning to retire and libraries need to respond in terms of resources, appropriate information service provision, planning of library buildings, technology provision and online service delivery. The recently formed Public Libraries Australia Ltd has the potential to aggregate the services of the 1,700 public library outlets across Australia, to maximize service delivery for the whole community. Nevertheless, to achieve this potential, Federal Government support is essential. Baby boomers, with their past record of achieving change in society, may well be the cohort to help make this happen.

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