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The Role and Priorities of Service of the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec Regarding the Public Libraries of Québec

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From their very beginning in ancient times, to those in our modern world, libraries have been an integral component of the community. For some, they have been places of learning, for others, places of adventure, and for a few, places of respite. Today, libraries are one of our greatest democratic institutions, providing free access to all sectors of the community. Their presence in the community fosters a sense of solidarity and security as they strive to provide knowledge, promote literacy, and preserve our cultural heritage without bias or prejudice. National and public libraries are the great civic institutions that promote these initiatives. These organizations are separate entities, with distinct mandates and services. National libraries have as their responsibility the collection, cataloguing, and preservation of materials representing national cultural heritage, the acquisition of foreign materials, the provision of centralized service to the public, and to other libraries, and the development and implementation of national literacy programs. National libraries are also concerned with the development of working relationships with community organizations, in particular, public libraries (Chevallier, 2001). Public libraries seek to provide their patrons with services to facilitate and promote lifelong learning and personal development. These services may be of various forms, such as entertainment, literacy, distance education, teaching and instruction, and community advocacy (Pungitore, 1989). Though they are separate entities, national and public libraries have a common mission, the betterment of the communities that they serve. In this respect, national and public libraries work together in a coordinated effort to realize this goal.

It is within this context that the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will find its role and priorities of service regarding the public libraries of Québec. The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec is forward thinking and innovative in recognizing the role of the national library in the community, and stands at the threshold of a new era in library service. By taking an active role in community affairs, and by partnering with the public libraries to share resources and to support public library initiatives, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will assist the public libraries in developing a strong mandate for community service. Its affiliation with the public libraries of Québec will essentially be one of fostering partnerships and support systems, working together to strengthen library policy, focus energies on service provision, and raising the profile of the library as a valued institution, within the community.
The public libraries of Québec are vibrant community organizations that serve a large and
diverse multicultural population. For some individuals, their public library has been a major
stability factor in their lives, providing a place of warmth, friendship, and caring; a place as
familiar perhaps as ... a good book. In some cases, the relationship between library and user has
evolved into a family affair, with the public libraries serving successive generations of family
members. In this respect, public libraries have come to know, intimately, the unique needs of the
communities that they serve, and are therefore able to provide very specialized and personal
service. To maintain this level of service, public libraries require a supportive yet autonomous
environment in which they are able to determine the policies and procedures that will allow them
to best serve the needs of their community. The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec can foster
this autonomy and quality of service by serving as a partner and a guide, sharing its knowledge,
expertise, and resources in the realization of the common goal of all libraries – community
assistance. The goal of the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec then, is to provide the public
libraries with sufficient resources so that they may become the best that they can possibly be.

Service provision
Because of its unique mandate, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec is interested in the
development of standards and codes of practice that will be beneficial to librarianship in general.
From this perspective, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will be able to provide support and
guidance for the public libraries, and to foster a spirit of goodwill and diplomacy. Within this
context, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will be in a position to offer specific services to
the public libraries in program development, research into user needs, community analysis, and
collection development. The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will also be able to provide
centralized services in the areas of cataloguing, bibliographic control, subject analysis,
abstracting and indexing, and interlibrary loan services. Coordination of these services will
provide for standardization in these areas, as well as decreasing redundancy and duplication of
service, and will facilitate the public libraries’ ability to offer value added service to its patrons.
In the area of collection development, we can assume that the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec
will house a large and diverse collection of materials. This resource will complement that of the
public libraries, ensuring that library patrons have access to a comprehensive and diverse
selection of books, magazines, and audio/visual material. This will guarantee that all citizens
have access to information, and will greatly enhance literacy and the acquisition of knowledge within the community. Additionally, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will be able to offer appraisal services to the public libraries, to assist them in determining the strengths and weaknesses of their collections, and their appropriateness to their user group. By acting as a clearing house for information, resources, and interlibrary loans, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will ensure that materials are made available to all public libraries in a spirit of equality and sharing, and that valuable resources are put to their most beneficial use. By coordinating and sharing their resources, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec and the public libraries of Québec will be able to undertake major projects that might not be possible for individual libraries, for example, in the areas of children’s services, literacy and cultural awareness, and to make acquisitions of materials and equipment such as educational and cultural materials, and computer hardware and software. By integrating their resources, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec and the public libraries will be in a powerful position from which to offer specific, goal-oriented services to the community.

Because of its centralized location and facilities, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will provide an excellent resource in which to hold cultural activities, children’s programs, concerts, and lectures. In cooperation with the public libraries, these activities can be jointly sponsored events, and would provide an opportunity for communities to come together, to share library activities, and to be exposed to the larger library experience. In sponsoring such events, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec and the public libraries will fulfil their mandate to offer multidimensional services to the community in areas that will affect positive community growth.

The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will also be a valuable resource for the Boards of Directors of the public libraries. By providing consultant services, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will assist the public library boards with the recruitment and training of board members, and will provide direction in areas such as financial and strategic planning, resource allocation, fundraising, and evaluation of library services. The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will also be in a position to provide support in staff training for public libraries. In utilizing the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec for this purpose, staff of the public libraries will be exposed to the large, provincial scope of librarianship. This will help to develop a sense of community
between the staff of the public libraries and the national library, and to reinforce professional standards of librarianship.

A priority of the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will be to create a network of public libraries dedicated to providing quality service and to enriching the lives of the individuals in the community. To this end, developing and maintaining an open communication forum between the public libraries will be paramount. By keeping the public libraries in contact with each other, and by providing expertise and knowledge, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will ensure that the best possible library service is made available to all communities within the province of Québec. To ensure the success of this ideal, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will be required to be a role model for the public libraries, and to assume a leadership role within the library community. Through resource and information sharing, the public libraries throughout the province of Québec will be able to develop supportive links with its provincial counterpart; this will be a valuable resource for decreasing feelings of isolation and solitariness that can often accompany small libraries. As the public libraries are spread over a large and diverse area, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will function as their central coordinating body, providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and the sharing of resources and information between libraries. As it strives to develop and maintain supportive community relationships, so too will the public libraries. Through its example, the public libraries have the potential to build upon their existing resources, and to evolve into essential community organizations.

Because of its status as a national library, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will be required to cultivate and maintain close relationships with national and international organizations and committees, such as UNESCO, the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and the International Standards Organization (ISO), and with other national libraries, in particular, the National Library of Canada, and the national libraries of other French speaking countries such as France, Switzerland, Belgium, and Morocco. This network of organizations is dedicated to creating a strong voice for libraries, and is a vehicle through which libraries can discuss local and global issues affecting the provision of library service, and through which librarians can obtain professional support. Through its membership, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will
represent the public libraries of Québec, and will be in a position to bring their concerns to the international table. By means of this representation, the public libraries of Québec will become active members of the international library community. This involvement will add a dimension of universality to the vision of the public libraries, as they are exposed to the international perspective of librarianship, which they will be able to utilize in their own evolution and growth. The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will also maintain relations with the media, and will act as a spokesperson for the library community on issues of library concern.

**Literacy**

In most communities, literacy is a problem that is addressed by the public library. In Québec, this problem can be even more exacerbated by the multicultural nature of its population. As a national library, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will have under its jurisdiction the development and administration of literacy programs that are run by the library system. To develop literacy programs, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will be required to work closely with the public libraries to determine the demographics of their user group, and the specific literacy needs of the communities that they represent. As a result of this consultancy process, and in conjunction with provincial education institutes and government departments, literacy programs can be designed exclusively for individual communities, but which also deliver a required standard of education. Whether in the form of formal literacy programs, or through the provision of literacy materials in their collections, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec and the public libraries will be required to address this issue, as literacy is a topic of growing concern throughout the world, and one which is finding its way into our libraries, as individuals and community groups look to libraries for assistance. For Québec, the issue of language is of increasing concern as newcomers to the province, whose first language is not French, seek to find French language training in order to become active and productive members of the community. Many look to the public libraries to obtain resources, or to find information and referral services to structured training programs.

**Advocacy**

All libraries, national and public, have as one of their fundamental guidelines the mandate to protect the intellectual freedom of their patrons, and to provide access to information for all
members of the community. Nowhere is this more critical than within the national library system, as this institution represents the fundamental right of each individual in the community, regardless of culture, religion, age, or sexual orientation, to access information. By being an advocate for the rights and freedoms of the community, working with governments to develop legislation concerning issues of censorship, and actively contesting acts that are contrary to its access policies, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will provide the public libraries with a foundation for the provision of services that support their mandate of service for all. In a censorship challenge, it is most often the public library that comes under attack from individuals or community groups that object to material that it has chosen to add to its collection. A censorship challenge can be a destructive force, and has the potential to destroy relationships between the library and the community that both have worked long to build. In situations where public libraries are faced with issues of censorship, the support and direction of the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will provide a necessary and crucial resource for the public libraries, and for public library staff who may come under personal attack. Additionally, and equally as important, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec can also offer direction in addressing the philosophical questions concerning censorship, such as the libraries’ right to withhold material that could be potentially harmful to the community, the use of filtering software to prevent children from accessing questionable materials via the Internet, and the extent to which the community is able to control the type of material that libraries should and should not have in their collections.

The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will also be of invaluable assistance to the public libraries by providing advocacy services for specific target groups within the community, such as the blind, and the hearing impaired. By speaking for community groups that are disenfranchised in some way, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will ensure that library services are available and accessible to all individuals within the community.

National depository
The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec has as one of its directives the collection and preservation of items relating to Québec history and cultural heritage. Within its archives, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will house papers and artifacts from both the public institutions of the
province, and from private individuals who have been especially noteworthy in Québec history. The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will also be the legal depository for the collection and preservation of the public records of the province of Québec. The availability of this information will help to foster national unity and a sense of cultural pride within the province, in both long-term residents and people who are newly arrived in Québec. For newcomers to the province, this information will assist them in their integration into Québec society, and will help to promote the French language in Canada. The public libraries will be able to use these resources to create special projects designed to promote the history and cultural diversity of the province.

As the national documentation centre for Québec, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will also be responsible for the acquisition of national and international information resources that it deems to be of value to its collection. Potentially then, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec could become the collection agency for a large and valuable collection of historical, cultural, political, social, and economic literature from all over the world. By making this information available to the public libraries on a consultant basis, library patrons in all communities in the province will have access to a rich and unique selection of information. This material will be especially useful for students and scholars with particular research interests that cannot be filled at the public library. The public libraries will, however, be intimately knowledgeable of the specifics of this collection, and will be able to refer interested parties to the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec.

Additionally, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will most probably be the first resource for individuals and organizations from other Canadian provinces, and from foreign countries doing research. In this respect, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec must be familiar with the resources of the public libraries so as to locate the requested information, or to make appropriate referral.

To ensure that the unique collections housed at the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec are available to the public libraries, and to all library patrons, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec must keep the public libraries informed of additions to and deletions from its collection, and of any changes related to access policy or library procedure. To guarantee maximum availability
and accessibility, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will be responsible for the publication of bibliographies, catalogues, and reviews of its collection, and to ensure that all pertinent material is distributed in a timely fashion to the public libraries.

Research and development
The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will maintain an extensive reference collection ranging from general dictionaries and handbooks, to scholarly works on French language and culture, to political treatises, archival material, rare books, maps and prints. These research materials will be available to all individuals, whether academic scholar or interested citizen. The public librarian will be able to direct patrons with specific research interests to the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec, where they can use its facilities, and seek assistance from its knowledgeable staff.

The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will also be involved in conducting research into specific areas of library concern. These areas may include such issues as strategic planning, advocacy, copyright, censorship, resource allocation, the social responsibility of libraries, and the changing needs of the library profession. It will also be concerned with developing standards of service for libraries, and with developing legislation on matters pertaining to librarianship in Québec. In conducting this research, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec must request the cooperation and input of the public libraries, as they represent the front line of library service to the community, and will be in a position of awareness of the issues and concerns affecting library service. The results of this research will be shared with the public libraries, and will serve to improve library services within the province, raise the standard of professional librarianship, and enhance the public image of the library within the community.

Information technology
Public libraries today often find themselves caught between traditional library roles and responsibilities, and those of 21st century information management. Smaller public libraries in particular may find it difficult to fulfil the latter role, because of demands on time, staffing, and financial resources. It is, however, crucial that they do so, in order to meet the information requirements of today’s library user. In this respect, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will
be able to assist the public libraries by investigating new areas of information technology as it applies to libraries, and then to make recommendations to the public libraries. To make the transition to new information technologies as straightforward and effortless as possible, the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will assist the public libraries with the implementation of new technologies, with the provision of training for library staff, and with the development of training programs for library patrons; the goal being to reduce the level of stress that often accompanies change for the public library boards of directors, the library staff, and the library patrons.

Change management
Over the past few years, the public library system has been faced with many changes that have challenged the traditional library mandate. Public libraries are in a state of transition, with budget cuts, increased demand for user services, a changing user profile, system automation, and a transition from the traditional type of librarianship to one that is focused on information technology. For many public libraries, coping with and responding to these changes has been difficult, as they struggle to redefine their role within the community. The role of the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec will be to assist the public libraries in responding to their changing environment, and in adapting to its demands. Within a proper infrastructure, the public libraries will be able to identify the areas of change that must be addressed, develop strategies for change, and initiate the proper procedures to bring about change. In this way, the public libraries will create for themselves a long-term vision of the future. This is extremely important today, because there is concern in some sectors of society that the day of the public library is over, to be replaced by the computer and the virtual library.

Conclusion
The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec and the public libraries of Québec are distinct library entities, with diverse roles and responsibilities for the provision of library service. Their commonality, however, lies in their vision of the library as a fundamental community resource. Together, they are in a position to provide accessible, high quality library service to all citizens of Québec. This is no small undertaking, and requires from each, a dedication to literacy, and a devotion to the ideals of librarianship in their purest form – to provide library service that is free, voluntary, and available to all. The physical presence of the Bibliothèque nationale du Québec,
being a highly visible landmark within the community, with its very building suggesting a place of knowledge, learning, and community spirit, will foster a new awareness of the library as a community resource, and through it, the public libraries will acquire increased visibility as citizens are reminded of their public library’s resources.

It can be said that the library is a reflection of the society of which it is a part. The Bibliothèque nationale du Québec and the public libraries will create together a society that is literate, open, and community oriented – a credit to the province of Québec, and to the vision of the library as a unique, valuable, and essential community service.

Aucune bibliothèque isolée ne peut répondre adéquatement aux besoins des usagers et c’est en s’engageant sur cette voie de la coopération et de la mise en réseau que les bibliothèques publiques maximiseront leur participation à la démocratisation de l’accès à l’information, assurant à tous les citoyens le même accès aux collections disponibles sur l’ensemble du territoire et même à l’extérieur (Gouvernement du Québec, Ministère de la Culture et des Communications, 1998).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


