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Information Science Professionals as Community Action  
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Small Business Economic Development: A Case Study of  
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Bharat Mehra, Bradley Wade Bishop, Robert P. Partee II

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Bharat Mehra  
University of Tennessee  
bmehra@utk.edu

Bradley Wade Bishop  
University of Tennessee

Robert P. Partee II  
University of Tennessee

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**Abstract:** The article explores how information science professionals as community action researchers and rural public libraries can support small business economic development in Tennessee that has a traditionally debilitating history and culture. It provides insights for possibly applying similar efforts to other rural areas facing difficult socio-economic and socio-cultural circumstances.

**Keywords:** information science professionals, community action researchers, rural public libraries, small business economic development, Tennessee

**Résumé :** Cet article examine comment les professionnels des sciences de l'information en tant que chercheurs en action communautaire, ainsi que les bibliothèques publiques rurales, peuvent soutenir le développement économique des petites entreprises du Tennessee, où traditionnellement l'histoire et la culture sont négligées. L'article donne un aperçu de l'application éventuelle d'efforts similaires à d'autres zones rurales confrontées à des situations socio-économiques et socio-culturelles difficiles.

**Mots-clés :** professionnels des sciences de l'information, chercheurs en action communautaire, bibliothèques publiques rurales, développement économique des petites entreprises, Tennessee

## Introduction

In keeping with the 2016 Canadian Association for Information Science's conference theme of "Information Science in Our Communities: Reflections on Our Work and the People, Places and Institutions around Us," this article briefly discusses the involvement of information science professionals as community action researchers in a planning grant entitled *The Role of Rural Public Libraries in Small Business Economic Development in the Appalachian Region: A Case Study of Tennessee (PLSB-TN)*, which was recently awarded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services' National Leadership Grants for Libraries (Research Category) to the School of Information Sciences at the University of Tennessee (for more details about the PLSB-TN, see <http://scholar.cci.utk.edu/plsb-tn> (accessed 4 January 2017)). The PLSB-TN has involved collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback from small businesses and rural public libraries in the state to document their needs, wants, and expectations.

The US Bureau of the Census defines "rural" as areas with fewer than 2,500 people and open territory (Economic Research Service 2007). *The Encyclopedia of Rural America* defines the related concept of "non-metropolitan" counties to describe the spread of housing developments outside the boundaries of metro areas that have no cities with as many as 50,000 residents (Rathge 1997, 627), in addition to being non-urbanized (Office of Management and Budget 1998). The word "rural" in this article is used with regard to both the meanings.

So far, information science professionals have been involved in the PLSB-TN as community action researchers to organize preliminary planning activities, analyze existing needs and feasibility, solidify community partnerships, and develop initial work plans, blueprint, and a strategic action plan of a public library small business toolkit that will engage, energize, and strengthen ties between various stakeholders (Bishop, Mehra, and Partee II 2016). The PLSB-TN is serving as a pilot case experience and prototype assessment test-bed to expand strategies for the entire Appalachian region and other rural environments in the future (Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II 2016). Salient PLSB-TN aspects that are relevant to a discussion about extending the role of information science professionals as community action researchers include the following. First, involving the two stakeholder groups (*vis-a-vis*, small businesses and rural public libraries) in the grant activities is helping to develop a gap analysis and a mode of comparison of the documented perspectives between the two groups. This gives an opportunity to make connections while looking externally at the information science community (that is, engaging with the small businesses) as well as looking internally (that is, rural public libraries). Second, using mixed methods (that is, quantitative and qualitative) provides complementary data sets (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner 2007) to deepen a holistic understanding of the context from the points of view of both of the stakeholder groups. Lastly, though not least, the focus of developing a tangible deliverable (that is, a blueprint design of the public library small business toolkit) is an important product-oriented activity to potentially enhance the role of rural public libraries in small business economic development.

### **The context of need for the PLSB-TN**

As part of the mid-south buckle of the Bible Belt in the United States, Tennessee's geographic location, racialized history, and conservative politics has drawn controversial attention in recent years. Embedded in a broader stereotyping and marginalizing of the "South" (Cooper and Terrill 2009; Escott, Goldfield, McMillen, and Turner 1999), Tennessee's traditionally challenging economic, social, and cultural conditions have adversely affected the population living there (Eller 2008; Mehra 2014; Scruggs 2010). Tennessee also forms part of the southern and central Appalachian (SCA) region. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) (1974), created as a US federal-state partnership, identifies central Appalachia to include: West Virginia's nine southernmost counties, eastern Kentucky, Virginia's southwestern tip, and the northwestern portion of Tennessee's Appalachian area (Bush 2003), while southern Appalachia includes most of Appalachian Virginia and Tennessee as well as the western Carolinas and the northern parts of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. American society and the popular press have painted a parochial picture of the SCA belt and its rural library environments (Cash 1991; Cobb 2007; Wyatt-Brown 2008) with their impoverished conditions and limited availability of resources and technology applications (ARC 2010; Fritsch and Gallimore 2007; Mehra, Black, Singh, and Nolt 2011; Mehra, Black, Singh, Nolt, Cockfield-Williams, Simmons, and Renfro 2012) in a religiously and politically conservative climate with often hostile cultural conditions toward anyone who is different (Fisher and Smith 2012; Ludke and Obermiller 2012; Mehra and LaVerne 2014).

A report prepared by a research-based consortium identified collaborations between educational centres of learning (including libraries) and the workforce industry as an important potential impact variable to promote economic growth and cultural and economic development in the region's smaller communities (Economic Development Research Group 2007). At the confluence of the "South" and the Appalachian cultural and historical influences, Tennessee's rural libraries now recognize the need to extend themselves toward promoting sustainable economic viability in the region (Mehra, Black, and Lee 2010; Mehra and Singh 2015; Real, Bertot, and Jaeger 2014). There are fifty-two Appalachian counties located in Tennessee out of its ninety-five counties.<sup>1</sup> These represent 43.9 percent of the state's total population (2,785,342 living in Appalachian counties out of Tennessee's total population of 6,346,105 residents).<sup>2</sup> Sixty-six counties in Tennessee are rural with a population of fewer than 50,000 residents (National Association of Counties Rural Action Caucus 2002; US Census Bureau 2010). Information science professionals can play a significant role as educators, researchers, and practitioners to support their public libraries in rural areas to develop meaningful connections with the small business community in a redirected mission to adopt strategic directions toward community building and community development efforts in the state (Mehra, Black, Singh, Nolt, Cockfield-Williams, Simmons, and Renfro 2014; Mehra and Singh 2014).

### **Information science professionals as community action researchers**

In the twenty-first century, information science professionals and the larger academic campuses in the United States are recognizing the significance of community (or civic) engagement to redefine their traditional notions of outreach and service that were earlier applied as add-ons to their teaching, instruction, and research agendas (Harris 2008; Riddle 2003; Soska and Butterfield 2004). Describing institutional diversity in American colleges and universities, the Campus Compact (2016, para. 3), a national coalition of nearly 1,100 institutions committed to the public purposes of higher education, has adopted the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification's definition of the term as the "collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity." Community engagement in the information science professions represents a positive and progressive approach to build equitable partnerships between centres of higher learning and agencies external to the academic institutions via information-related work (Mehra and Robinson 2009).

Action research contributes to both the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework (Rapoport 1970, 499). It is a valid research method in applied fields, providing outcome-based results and suggesting direction for progressive change (Kemmis and McTaggart 1998; Stringer 1999). Essential action research characteristics include decentralization, deregulation, and cooperativeness in execution to make possible transformations in social practice and changes in the social institutions where they take place while redefining relationships that support it (Mehra 2006).

There is a natural (though not fully operationalized) intersection between the role of information science professionals and community action researchers owing to common service-based ethics, a focus on needs of local communities, and attention to rigour and details in praxis (Maack 1997; Mehra and Braquet 2007; Mehra and Sandusky 2009). However, historically binding expectations and internally and externally imposed perceptions (Mehra, Rioux, and Albright 2009) as mere storehouses of world knowledge and information providers (McCook and Jones 2002) have limited the discipline from playing a more proactive role in shaping progressive social changes at the local, regional, and national levels (Harris 1973; Muddiman 2000).

### **PLSB-TN plan**

The goal of the PLSB-TN is to research the role rural public libraries play in economic development and economic growth based on the needs, expectations, and experiences of small businesses and rural public libraries with a focus on Tennessee as a pilot case study. The project objectives to achieve this goal include the following.

Objective 1: Based on the perspectives of Tennessee's small businesses, what are their information needs, expectations, and experiences and what past

and current role have rural public libraries played in assisting these agencies toward economic development and economic growth?

Objective 2: Collect feedback from Tennessee's rural public libraries regarding existing services and programs they provide to small businesses.

Objective 3: Based on the data collected from the research (as above) a blueprint toward informing the design and development of a public library small business toolkit is proposed.

The intended project audience is small businesses, rural library staff and managers/directors, LIS educators and students, rural economic council and chambers of commerce members, and small business entrepreneurs (Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II 2016). The PLSB-TN stakeholders and potential benefits include the following.

1. Rural small business community: quantitative and qualitative data collected from small businesses about their experiences during economic crises and their involvement in the PLSB-TN process is providing holistic understanding of the issues to develop strategic partnerships with rural libraries.
2. Rural libraries: developing a blueprint of the public library small business toolkit and a preliminary strategic plan for its operationalization and implementation will help Appalachian rural libraries and others facing similar challenges extend their role to provide meaningful and valuable services to the small business community.
3. LIS educational programs: by integrating action research experiences in the PLSB-TN into the LIS classroom/curriculum and shared at local, regional, and national levels will help train future professionals to provide better services in these areas.
4. National impact: the researchers are sharing the experiences during this research planning grant activities in conferences and meetings of professional associations and publishing the work in professional peer-reviewed journals and monographs to inform and shape current practice of strategies, programs, and services that strengthen ties between public libraries and small businesses. The blueprint of the public library small business toolkit and preliminary strategic action plan is providing initial versions of a product to be developed further to include appropriate resources and best practices. The PLSB-TN will have an impact at the regional and national levels serving as a pilot experience to expand using similar strategies for the entire Appalachian region and other rural settings based on availability of additional funding in the future.

### **Community action researchers in the PLSB-TN**

The following salient aspects of the authors' involvement as community action researchers in the PLSB-TN are significant toward energizing and enabling rural public libraries in Tennessee to support small businesses in the state:

**Practical Concern:** in response to the slow economic development in the state, the PLSB-TN is developing a practical solution to address the problematic situation that has traditionally kept the state behind in terms of economic growth and economic revitalization.

**Tangible Product:** gap analysis of the feedback provided by the two stakeholder communities is ongoing and is providing a blueprint for the design of a public library small business toolkit for feedback from key partners in the region to develop a strategic action plan for its operationalization and implementation. It gives a ground-zero perspective of translating research into action that benefits local, regional, and national communities experiencing economic crises and facing challenges toward economic recovery.

**Local Partnerships and Collaborations:** by building initial stages of a public library small business toolkit with best practices and resources to facilitate economic recovery, economic development, and economic growth, the PLSB-TN helps strengthen ties between small business agencies and rural libraries. Based on data collected during the research the blueprint and preliminary strategic action plan gets tested and operationalized in the rural state and the Appalachian region.

### **Conclusion**

As a next step, information science professionals in the PLSB-TN have received a 2016–17 Community Engagement Incentive Grant from the Office of Community Engagement and Outreach at the University of Tennessee to support a small business community information exchange at the Blount County Public Library in East Tennessee.<sup>3</sup> As an interactive community forum proposed during fall 2016 with at least thirty small business and public library participants, the event provided an opportunity to engage small businesses and public libraries in the region to finalize the blueprint design of the public library small business toolkit, an ideal resource that Tennessee's rural public libraries can develop for small businesses in the future.

To meet the challenges in the twenty-first century, public libraries are getting out of their comfort zones and into their local and regional communities to engage with various stakeholders (for example, Kindergarten to Grade 12 schools, colleges, universities, non-profit agencies, government organizations, and others) (Mehra and Davis 2015; Mehra and Hernandez 2016). This article proposes information science professionals and rural public libraries work together to support small business economic development in Tennessee that has been challenged, traditionally and chronically, by its history and culture. The case study offers possibilities for extending key lessons to other similar socio-economic areas beyond Tennessee.

As community action researchers in the PLSB-TN, the authors are applying their skills as information science professionals in information organization-retrieval-management-dissemination processes to develop potentially viable solutions to the challenges being experienced across the state (Mehra, Bishop, and Partee II 2017; Mehra and Braquet 2014). These solutions are getting explored at various scales of inter-related application that include: (1) the development of a user/use-based model to represent the information context of small businesses; (2) gap analysis of needs and expectations of multiple stakeholder groups; (3) collaborative action research strategies between small businesses and rural public

libraries toward economic development; and (4) the process and development of a blueprint design of the public library small business toolkit. The experience is focused on information science professionals extending their roles as community action researchers to support rural public libraries in small business economic development.

Though we will present research findings regarding the toolkit blueprint in future publications, preliminary analysis is identifying information categories, query types, and particular information resources for rural public libraries to provide small businesses in the state. This is important in part because answers to seemingly simple small business-related questions are often difficult for users to find online. Public libraries take tremendous pride as community referral agents (Black and Muddiman 2005). Hence, rural public libraries can take several steps to improve the dissemination of locally relevant and regionally appropriate information on their websites. The public library should serve as a virtual storehouse and reservoir to local small business information, and its website needs to provide local content to make answering location-based questions easy for both users and non-local librarians. Tennessee's rural public libraries should also begin to collect local information related to small businesses to answer different types of questions in a knowledge base/service that may be of use to other library systems as well (Bishop, Sachs-Silveira, and Avet 2011). The findings from this research will be integrated in classroom and advising discussions, particularly for rural students enrolled in public library courses. The integration of the PLSB-TN research experience in the critical and emerging area of small business service planning and practical librarianship in the LIS and business curriculum is also important. It will allow many future students to benefit from the learning of skills that help them play a more meaningful role during harsh economic times toward economic development and economic growth in marginalized areas such as rural environments.

## Notes

- 1 See <http://www.arc.gov/counties> (accessed 8 November 2016).
- 2 See <https://www.arc.gov/data> (accessed 8 November 2016).
- 3 See <http://engagement.utk.edu/blog/2016/2016-17-community-engagement-incentive-grant-winners/> (accessed 16 November 2016).

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