

OUTSOURCING THE PUBLIC LIBRARY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

While the majority of public libraries operate under a traditional model – they are publicly funded entities, locally controlled, and managed and employed by public employees, some municipalities have taken a different approach where public library service is contracted out to a private company. Part of the discourse informing this phenomenon is located within the contracting documents which form a chain of ideas from RFP to proposal to contract. While the RFPs, proposals, and contracts represent the largest part of the data, additional information was pulled from letters to the editor of local newspapers and notes from city council meetings.

There are three main players in the contracting process, the local government, the contractor, and the community. This study explores the documents of the contracting process using Norman Fairclough's (1993) critical discourse analysis in order to understand what voices are privileged in the discourse surrounding the outsourcing of public library management and what definitions of the library exist within this phenomenon.

The findings indicate that (1) the contractor has an enormous amount of power in defining the library for a particular community; (2) the RFPs are normative; (3) much of the contract management criteria are decided by the contractor after the contract is already in place.