

COMMUNITY LIBRARIES: A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN SOUTH AFRICA?

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The criticism levelled by the late Mary Lee Bundy (one-time professor at the University of Maryland) at the American public library for treating equally a request for a book on flower arranging and the plight of a hungry child¹ encapsulates the challenge facing South African public librarians. The poverty figure for South Africa is 44.5% of the population.² Black people living in shacks and other temporary shelter outnumber the *total* number of whites in the country.³ The current rate of illiteracy is in excess of 60% of the population; 63% of last year's matric students failed. In Alexandra (a Black township near Johannesburg) the percentage reached 80%.⁴ Further, many people between the ages of 18 and 25 have been excluded from the formal schooling program and will need to be drawn into meaningful employment if South Africa is to move towards stability.

This paper argues that community librarianship provides an appropriate vehicle for social concern and is eminently suited to serving South Africa emerging from apartheid. The terms, however, need definition. "Community" can be best understood as an image of coherence, a cultural notion which people use to give reality and form to their social actions and thoughts. The sociological existence of communities is founded on social interactions among members, which inevitably produces social boundaries which define them and give them identity. The boundaries of communities are symbolic and exist by virtue of people's belief in their existence. Communities are made, engaged and believed in. Appeals are made to them which depend on the belief of most people that communities ought to exist, that they are the legitimate goal of all political action. However, while the goal might be the achievement of community, the painful truth is that communities are the result of complex political processes and exist in history, not above it.⁵ This recognition indicates important limitations on the kind of community librarianship possible in South Africa at the present time. The racially-determined identities of the geographic entities that make up communities will limit neighborhood-based libraries to serving a particular racial grouping. On June 5, 1991 the Group Areas Act was abolished.

Neighbourhoods and schools should integrate more rapidly but integrated housing will come more slowly because a vast number of poorer people will not be able to purchase houses, either in the townships or the formerly white areas.

Thomas Childers, a pioneer of community information provision in the United States, has used the term "information poverty" to describe the lack of basic survival information experienced by large numbers of people.⁶ Ward of the British National Consumer Council points out that a lack of information on how to obtain basic services is tantamount to lacking the services themselves.⁷ W.H. Martin, who has described the benchmark Highfield community library in Belfast⁸ (a war-torn area like South Africa) states:

I have no doubt as to the validity of that essential connection between community information and disadvantage. Indeed, a lack of information or access to it is frequently found within a cumulative syndrome of disadvantage which includes poverty, unemployment, poor housing, limited access to social services and the social pressures of living in districts where the incidence of crime, disease and misery is well above average for society.⁹

There is also the frightening possibility that those who already command better than average sources of information and are able to use these productively for the benefit of only a small minority of the population will be able to increase the range of information to which they have access and to apply this knowledge to the advantage of a few; those who are already disadvantaged by not commanding good information sources will become increasingly disadvantaged. In other words, the information rich will become richer and the information poor will become poorer.¹⁰ Add to this the growing practice of paying for the use of a library and the problem is exacerbated. Information deprivation can be accelerated by the introduction of sophisticated computerized information systems that place information at a further remove from all but the initiated. To a large extent we are all looking for simple tracks in an information forest growing more and more dense and strange.¹¹

"Information" too requires definition. Reid distinguishes in an important way between information and data. Data only becomes information by the act of imparting it and receiving it:

Thus if we wish to provide information services we have to understand first of all that while the collection and ordering of data—at which librarians are adept—is a prime requisite, it does not in itself provide information, information is primarily a process, a process which goes on in many different ways.¹²

There are needs for information which may be unexpressed and inarticulate, and questions for which no printed or organized answers exist.¹³

Community information can be defined as information that is in essence survival information, needed for participation as a full and equal member of society. Community Information Service, drawing on the British Library Association definition, is different from reference and local materials provided by public libraries. Community information assists individuals and groups with daily problem solving and with participation in the democratic process. It entails a positive decision to concentrate on empowering people and requires several things—a radical re-definition of the library's purpose first of all. Reid states: "I see the modern public library as a vital element for social change. The library has always had this role—its just that the light has grown dim."¹⁴

In speaking about Australia (but it applies perhaps with even greater clarity in South Africa), he states: "I want to sound a warning, that unalloyed and narrow professionalism could be a major barrier to the future vitality and relevance of the public library."¹⁵

The rationale for community libraries, whether as part of the public library, as a separate entity or as part of a local or international network, lies in their essentially different sense of social purpose. They differ from traditional libraries in that they are pro-active about their sense of social purpose. These centers reject the idea of neutrality as being neither desirable nor possible and further acknowledge a political connotation to the use of information. This could be described as political in the ideological sense.¹⁶ The primary stimulus is humanitarian and it is social intervention in support of a positive prejudice. According to Barugh it is positive discrimination based on an approach to information provision which addresses the real problems of people in need rather than a supplier-oriented approach.¹⁷

These services show a radical difference in their approach to defining community needs. Traditional libraries intentionally or by omission essentially protect the *status quo* and by default link themselves with the interests perpetuating social inequality and injustice.¹⁸ Community information services gather, organize and seek people (therefore not only published materials) as sources of information, and repackage with the aim of changing social conditions. Community information necessitates a radical re-definition of the purposes and function of the public library. What is called for is essentially a system-wide approach rather than a piecemeal tinkering with existing services.¹⁹

Community information services involve changing public expectations of the library, not only by increasing the range of formats of the available information, but by significantly altering the way in which librarians present themselves to the public with regard to the handling of inquiries. There must be a positive identification of specific needs within a community and the provision of materials to assist individuals and groups to meet these needs in a form and language that is useful to them. Its success depends on the active promotion of the information available and requires follow-up action of various sorts. Close personal contact between the librarian and the groups served is essential. Ideally the librarian/worker should be one of the community. Community librarianship aims at information provision in the crucial areas of people's lives and at those who have limited access to other sources of help.²⁰

Community information can be provided from within a library or from a separate center. There are various opinions about which is better, but what comes across is that librarians are skilled in the type of information storage and retrieval work required. Librarians need to reaffirm this sense of what they are good at. They may, however, depending on their outlook, need to go through an adjustment process. A major part of the problem is to free one's mind of the old compartmentalised way of thinking.

All libraries can give some information in the course of their ordinary work that would be of the sort provided by a community information service, but it is the re-orientation and preparedness to do the follow-up, in the form of referral, escort or advocacy that make the real difference. Community information services differ as to which of these functions they provide and there is a great range

depending also on the type of community served. It is hence not really possible to generalize a type. Pat Coleman usefully sees community librarianship as having 4 distinguishing characteristics—offering different materials to those usually provided by a public library, having a different relationship between librarian and user, relying on close links with other agencies (not those that caused the user's problem in the first place) and having an overtly political nature.²¹ Aitchinson reviewed the incidence of community information services in South African libraries up to mid-1989. She argued that, laudable as these services are, they are not community information services in the sense of Childers or Bundy or Martin. They do not show the radical re-definition of purpose and neither do they perform the follow-up actions, such as escorting a client or even arguing their case in an interview.²² A possible exception is Miriam Khunou's library at Vosloorus in the Transvaal.²³ Apart from the lack of community information service, access for black people to some public libraries has to be fought for bitterly. At Vryheid in Northern Natal, two Black residents threatened Supreme Court action unless their application for membership was accepted.²⁴ In July 1990, at Ashton, in the Cape, violent confrontations between Black residents and the police resulted in July 1990 from the formers' attempts to put the Freedom Charter into effect and open the library's "doors of learning."²⁵

Elsewhere in Africa, particularly in Tanzania and Nigeria, a strong case is being made for community librarianship as a form of public library service. Anxiety about the vast percentage of the population not served is a reason. A Nigerian pilot project has shown that these methods can serve the illiterate and literate alike.²⁶ Over the last 30 years countries with such diverse systems as Algeria, Brazil, China, Cuba, India, Iran Jamaica, Mali, Somalia and Tanzania have launched successful literacy campaigns on a national scale. Such countries are now concerned with the most effective way to provide continuing education for new literates. In Tanzania, where adult literacy was raised from roughly 25% in 1971 to about 60% in 1976, the follow-up program included setting up simple village libraries to provide reading material to adults who have attained literacy, a radio program to encourage the development of the reading habit and a writers' workshop to encourage the development of suitable reading materials and rural newspapers.²⁷

All these activities put the public library within every person's grasp. Martin has asked: Who is to serve the public if not the public library? He states with reference to the British:

I believe in public libraries and in their mission as a reforming and interventionist agency. My benchmark is the poverty and deprivation that continues in our society today and the apparent lack of concern about this fact in library circles.²⁸

"Carnegie libraries" epitomize for the United States, Britain and South Africa a library model that is not suited to either the developed or developing countries.²⁹ For one thing (and vitally important) this model has lost its education function. In Africa this imported library model, a public library norm, is a relic of colonial times when the concerns of local people were not uppermost in the colonisers' minds. The role of the library as coloniser has been documented.³⁰

A crucial area for exploration is what people want of libraries. Firstly the community/communities must be consulted through their accepted leaders. Librarians have many skills to help in this task such as participative research (and participative management) techniques. Libraries need to be established where people of all classes can use them. The pattern of building Carnegie-type mausolea should not be repeated. Kingo Mchombu states, with relation to Tanzania, that one should not try to construct buildings modeled on those of the United States and Britain. If resources are severely limited it means that only one or two of these imposing structures can be erected in a decade.³¹ If cost effective methods (such as those explored by the local Department of Architecture at the University of Natal) are used, it may lead to the discovery that the cheap, small and well-maintained buildings made of inexpensive materials are the key to the growth of information services (or perhaps the community could provide a building as happened in Highfield, Belfast).

The pattern of library services needs to be approached from the bottom upwards rather than from the top downwards. Small, cheap, attractive units close to where people actually live must come before large sophisticated libraries. Community libraries of this sort would be suited to all communities and should not be reserved for some rather than others. Failure in community librarianship can be traced to failure to consult the community properly. Highfield, for example, has an impressive record of serving groups traditionally recognised

as non-users. Libraries that are organically linked to their own communities and their vital structures need to be set up, although examples from other countries may be helpful. A priority will be overcoming the municipal and other boundaries that cordon off South African cities and rural areas into a patchwork of divided responsibilities and consequently of neglect. The neglected area is always regarded as the responsibility of another authority. The formal and informal settlements of South African cities should be targeted for service, and not just the magic circle within the mainly White borough or municipality.

If the communications system is to be successful the existing communications network in the community must be taken into account. The potential of the tape cassette has been recognised widely. Drawing on the experience of Kenya, Durrani sees tape cassette recordings as important in expressing the grassroots culture of the people and so getting a two-way communication going—in other words the process is not top down.³² Martin points out the part played by the humble tape-cassette in the Iranian revolution when all the might of the Shah's military and political machine proved useless against the words of an 80 year old man purveyed in oral form.³³

Gassol de Horowitz suggests that what is called for is a new type of librarian and for a bold, non-traditional library service that cuts across the compartmentalization imposed by tradition to meet the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves.³⁴ What could be more challenging or exciting? The new orientations suggest that the role of librarianship may lie in conscientizing the individual in the sense of Freire. Enabling people to "read the world"—to recognize their plight and consciously act upon it. Participation in the social and political processes means being able to decode the social realities codified by others as well as being able to encode and structure for transmission the realities personally experienced. Why do South African public libraries not reflect the growing sense of a people's culture, for example? Plays such as those of the South African Workers' Co-operative drama group have been seen by more people than any others in South Africa. Thousands of people see them at sports stadia but public libraries tend to ignore them.³⁵

Today's public library should be inextricably bound up in the daily life of the community. The library must become an arena, not

only for local cultural expression but for the equalizing and democratizing function. Local librarians must become highly visible in their communities as participatory rather than mandatory providers. For many this will be a difficult change. South Africans, generally, are unused to democracy and its processes in spite of the prevailing sentimentality about the Western way of life.

Research done by Nyongwana in Lamondville,³⁶ by Mini in various parts of Edendale³⁷ and by Lategan in Tembisa³⁸ suggest that there is an urgent need for community information services to provide survival information. In the Northern countries the information needs of disadvantaged groups have been identified as including general health, nutrition, family planning, abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, drug abuse, alcoholism, mental health, home and family, consumer matters, housing, employment, welfare benefits, the law, the political process, transport, education and recreation. The everyday information needs of the average citizen are very similar. It can be said that the disadvantaged and the average citizens in developed countries share much the same problems. In many respects the information needs of those in developed countries and in developing countries are also similar. The main difference lies in their differences of priorities and emphases, since the disadvantaged in developing countries are most concerned with the basic needs of food, shelter, jobs and health. There are also differences of scale since in the developing countries the disadvantaged would represent the majority of the population.³⁹

In the survey of Tembisa respondents saw a great need for adult education, literacy training and vocational training. Lategan perceives these as generally improving employment prospects and giving a better quality of life. An article in the *Weekly Mail Review of Books*⁴⁰ quotes the public library motto, "Curl up in bed with a book," only to point out its inappropriateness to our society. So many people do not have homes, never mind beds and at least half of the population cannot read.

Soweto has 5 libraries (excluding those of Dobsonville and Diepmeadow which are administered by their own city councils) with a total stock of 34,500 books for a population estimated at close to 3 million. It is not as if the other media, besides radio, are in plentiful supply. Patience Maisela, head librarian of Diepkloof Library (under Diepmeadow council) has 10,000 books for a population of 325,000 people. The library is well used by adults and

children. To meet the critical shortage of library facilities a group of librarians and academics have set up a Workers' Library in the central business district of Johannesburg after the example of the 19th century British Workers' Libraries. The Congress of South African Writers has taken to operating with suitcases full of books in Kroonstad, Harrismith and Welkom in an effort to promote reading and writing.

The greatness and the urgency of the need to address South African library and information services and to make them effective, democratic and able to support development that is worthy of people makes librarians fearful of this task. The knowledge and the resources to embark on it are to hand. This is a real opportunity to provide, within the public library structures, a new beginning. Much of the work has been done with great dedication and for very little reward, by the progressive resource centers. There is a considerable network of these in the country, all with a keen sense of the potential of information work. Perhaps this is one of the most obvious differences between public librarians and resource center workers at present—many public librarians seem to have lost their way.

In all developing countries the literacy rate is lower for women than for men. Women in our society bear the double disadvantage of their position in an unequal and a male-dominated society. In East Java it was found that wherever village women's clubs grew in strength, villages came to life. Infant mortality rates fell, there was micro-economic development around the village homes—better fish ponds, better fruit trees, better gardens, more poultry, more handicrafts such as weaving and making pots.⁴¹ These pursuits may seem very hearth-oriented but this example raises the key role of women in moving out of a situation of disadvantage. It is also related to the crucial environmental issues of our time and to the pressing need for us to teach each other "to live lightly on the earth." Community libraries could play a large role in bringing about and supporting such initiatives.

To some extent it is up to librarians whether there will come a time when South African society will be regarded as normal; when the children who would have been the street children of the present time have had the opportunity of sitting, as children should have, on a beloved person's lap, listening and talking and being read and listened to. Then public librarians can afford to be generous about a request for a book on flower-arranging.

Notes

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