

# THE PROFESSIONAL IS POLITICAL: Redefining the Social Role of Public Libraries

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## *Part 1: Librarians and their Societies*

The first question to consider is “what are libraries and information all about?” Let us take an experience from Kenya to answer this question. A library attendant lived in an area that produces coffee. When he went home for holidays one year, he was asked by a number of peasants a simple question: “You work in a university library; you have information from the whole world around you. We want you to answer a simple question for us: we work from dawn to dusk growing coffee, right from tending little shoots, to weeding, to harvesting, to drying coffee beans, day after day, month after month, year after year. We hear that our coffee sells for thousands of pounds in London, yet we do not earn enough from our labour to buy our own coffee in local shops let alone feed and clothe our families. You tell us why not, you who have all the information at your finger tips, you tell us – what happens to our coffee money?”

It was not as if the university library did not have information about coffee. It had one of the best agricultural libraries in Eastern Africa. The library’s collection on coffee and other cash crops was rated world class. Yet the library was not equipped to answer these simple economic-political questions from local peasants.

Now the questions asked by the peasants are fundamental to the work of librarians. The local library did have adequate resources to meet the needs of its users. It is just that its services were not aimed at peasants and workers. More important, the information that was available was depoliticised. It took the agricultural world around it as a reality that could not be challenged. It failed to see the difference between the natural world in which the coffee was grown and the social world, which had created social relations, and which decided on who owned the land, how labour was remunerated and where the profits went. Nor was it considered

necessary to understand and explain that reality, to examine its history and, perhaps to see the need to change that reality – as the Kenyan peasants were demanding.

### *Globalisation and Effects on Libraries*

The key issue then is to decide what the social role of librarians is. Should they take the social, economic and political situation they find themselves in as “given” without understanding why and how we arrived at this situation? Is it their role to dig deeper into “facts” that are given to them by their social environment? Is it appropriate to see the role of librarians in the same light in which Marx saw the role of philosophers: “The philosophers have interpreted the world in many ways. What matters is changing it.”<sup>1</sup>

But before we consider the question of librarians trying to change the world, we need to question whether they even interpret their worlds. A large number of professional libraries remain unconnected to the social and political reality around them. Their model of a “global library” is much like McDonald restaurant outlets which serve the same product in every part of the world. While this approach may be a useful one in ensuring a standard level of service, and a useful model for maximising profits for the McDonald chain, it is disastrous for libraries if they want to root themselves in their local communities.

Librarians trained to run such global libraries take professional pride in being “neutral” in the social divide all around them. They thus become increasingly isolated from the majority of people in their local communities. Forces of corporate globalisation then push them even further from their communities by offering to save staff time and mental effort by supplying pre-packaged “bestsellers,” guaranteed to meet the wants of 30%<sup>2</sup> of the population – and to boost the profit margins of transnational publishers and booksellers. The success of their libraries is then judged by the number of such bestsellers they manage to loan out. No critical questions are asked or answered here: What is a library all about? What is its social role? Who has the power to make key decisions, and on whose behalf are decisions made?

The “global library,” then, is a standard library service that can be located in any geographical, social or political situation, in any historical period, and still be expected to function normally as a “library.” The global librarians who run these global libraries take pride in their non-political stand, in their “neutrality” in the social struggles going on all around them. They claim to

be outside social struggles taking place in their societies, somehow uplifted to a loftier position by their “professional” training. Their class position in their societies isolates them from the struggles of working people whose basic need for information is ignored by their libraries.

Corporate globalisation can be described as the “process enabling financial and investment markets to operate internationally, largely as a result of deregulation and improved communications” (Collins). We do not intend here to go into details of what globalisation is and how it affects libraries, as this has been dealt with adequately in a number of sources.<sup>3</sup> However, a key point that needs to be made is that not only are new technologies making it possible to rationalise tasks and work practices, but it makes it necessary to change at a faster rate as technological progress is changing the world around them. At the same time, many traditional library tasks are increasingly being handed over to private companies, rather than being done in-house. As the whole local authority sector is redefined to become facilitators of service rather than direct providers, significant changes are on the way. Other areas of local authority work are also changing. For example, household waste collection is no longer done by local staff; schools and education are being removed from local authority control. It is inconceivable that libraries will continue existing as they now are for very long.

We are not arguing that all changes associated with globalisation are necessarily bad. But we would like to see more librarians in Britain adopting the 10-point plan, proposed by Mark Rosenzweig, supporting “democratic globalism” as opposed to corporate globalisation:

We shall oppose corporate globalization which, despite its claims, reinforces existing social, economic, cultural inequalities, and insist on a democratic globalism...which acknowledges the obligations of society to the individual and communities, and which prioritizes human values and needs over profits.<sup>4</sup>

Iverson explains how the politics of globalisation affects libraries and their local communities. The inherently political role of librarians is clear:

As our global society becomes increasingly based on the commodity of information, power becomes increasingly focused and managed by those with access to information. Those without such access remain marginalized.<sup>5</sup>

However, Iverson notes, librarians often reject any stated political stance, seeing themselves as “neutral service providers” a position encouraged by their training:

While librarians are trained to maintain an objective or neutral stance they are also expected to make decisions regarding “good” and “bad” materials. Unfortunately, they do not often recognize the inherent bias at work in making these decisions...and generally regard the selection of materials as apolitical.<sup>6</sup>

Few librarians have taken Muddiman’s warning seriously:

Exclusion thus challenges public agencies like the library service to produce policy and practice which will challenge social division and create a harmonious, diverse and more equal civil society where access to knowledge is a fundamental right of social citizenship. If the public library can rise to this challenge it might begin to successfully reinvigorate and reinvent itself. If it fails, then the public library too, like the poor and excluded communities it exists to serve, might find itself consigned to the margins of the “information” society in the twenty first century.<sup>7</sup>

Faced with a situation where libraries are blindly walking into extinction, it is important that those with conviction and commitment stand up for a new role of libraries in society – and actively practice this new role. In the world ruled by corporate globalisation, it is too easy to drift along with the tide of “neutral” librarianship and do nothing to make libraries play a central role in liberating people, their cultures, and their economies from the privatised future that globalisation has planned for them. This is not merely something that might happen in the future. It is already happening, as Rosenzweig points out:

Trade ministers and negotiators alike are under increasing pressure to expose more services, like education, healthcare, culture...to the market powers of transnational corporations.<sup>8</sup>

A new approach, in which real democracy, equality and transparency flourish, is essential.

#### *The Myth of Neutrality*

Thus the myth of the “neutral” librarian needs to be exploded. There is no way that librarians are or can be neutral in the social struggles of their societies. Every decision they make – how much to spend on books, which books to buy, what staff to appoint, how to manage the service – is a reflection of their class position and their world outlook.

What librarians do – and don't do – is not merely an academic question. It affects our understanding of our natural and social environment, which, taken in its totality, affects our world outlook, affects what we think and what we do. It influences the minds of the young generation and becomes the prevailing outlook of the adult world of tomorrow.

Manipulation of information, whether conscious or unconscious, is an important matter, not only in local life, but in international relations as well. Recent events have shown how misinformation can be used to generate popular support for wars of somewhat questionable legality, for example when the USA and Britain invaded Iraq, killing thousands of people in the quest for non-existent “weapons of mass destruction”.

If librarians are involved in the world of information, then surely they have social responsibility to ensure that people get correct information. It is a matter of ethics that they challenge misinformation, particularly when this is used by a small, powerful clique to wage wars and kill people on false pretexts. But our average “professional” librarians are too “neutral” – or too scared - to challenge the hand that feeds them. At the very least, they need to make alternate views and opinions as freely available as they do the views of the ruling classes. But this is not what the “globalised librarian” is trained to do. However, many progressive librarians in USA are taking a stand for their and communities' information rights against the USAPATRIOT Act which seeks to take these rights away from people. Their example needs to be followed globally.

Two aspects of the job of a librarian can be seen to be to collect and then to disseminate information, in a relevant form and language, to all those who need the information. This gives librarians tremendous power as it is they who decide what material to acquire and how and when to disseminate it. However, the easy availability of information on the internet is fast changing their monopolistic role as it democratises the flow of information.

#### *Libraries and Society in Britain*

There is often a time gap between the emergence of a new social reality and that reality being accepted in people's consciousness. Jacques refers to the gap between the perception and the reality:

we still like to consider ourselves a global player, but in reality we are not: our pretensions are now more like pastiche, substance has been replaced by vacuity... Post-imperial Britain has become deeply parochial – yet we remain almost utterly oblivious of the fact (the liberal elite included).<sup>9</sup>

Thus, lessons and reality of history are shut out from social consciousness by denying the reality of a new world where Britain is no longer the superpower ruling the world, where China is flexing its muscles to become the most powerful nation in the world. Yet most public libraries have very little relevant material in English from or about China – a fact reflected in the lack of awareness among people as a whole about that part of the world.

In a society that has sought to shut out the reality of a new globalised world, it is not surprising that its libraries have shut themselves in a dream world of presumed superiority and “professional” might. The fact that the library world has not come to grips with changes in British society is a reflection of British society as a whole not coming to grips this new reality.

#### *Creating a People-orientated Library Service*

There is an urgent need to develop a library service that helps to create a new consciousness among people about their society and also about the position of their country in the context of the wider world. Only on such wider awareness can a people-orientated library service be built. Libraries cannot tell people what their “real role” is. They can only provide information to help people decide for themselves.

If there is going to be a true people-orientated library service, it is necessary that there is a clear understanding of social forces within which a particular library service operates. Librarians face a number of challenges today. Let us look at some of them.

The first need is for all librarians to investigate our society and our communities. Mao’s recommendation, at a political level, is equally valid in the information field: “no investigation, no right to speak.” It is important to understand working people’s lives and struggles, be one of them, and then seek ways of creating a relevant library service.

In all societies with class divisions and class struggles, library services tend to be a service for elite by elite, providing a service to the dominating classes and their allies only. In situations like these, the process of liberating the library service for those previously excluded is the key role of library workers and professionals. The challenge is to develop a service that is open to all irrespective of class, race, gender, ability, age, sexual orientation, political beliefs, etc. The service needs to be an inclusive one which reaches out to all who are currently excluded. Yet this task is not easy. The very language of this struggle has been removed from

the “mainstream” by government action. Thus class differences are not mentioned in government reports and policies; racism is hidden under the bland term “social exclusion” thereby not only removing the reality of racism from public mention, but resistance to it is also disguised as criminal acts or as “terrorism.” No society can be serious about addressing social oppression and economic exploitation when it chooses not to admit the very existence of such.

If librarians are to build truly people-orientated libraries, they will need to stop operating in isolation from the progressive forces that are already struggling for liberation. It is thus important that we develop creative partnerships with progressive forces, such as trade unions, workers’ and peasants’ social, economic and political organisations, youth groups etc. Alliances also need to be made with all those struggling against all forms of social oppression.

But before librarians reach that stage, they need to liberate their minds from the norms of a class-divided society, its social, cultural and political norms. Its information systems and education provides us with a one-sided view of life. We will need to see the whole picture and not just the aspects we are shown. In the library context, we will need to free ourselves from the commandments taught at traditional library schools. We will need to learn not to be “neutral” but, instead, take sides on behalf of those previously excluded in everything we do in order to build an “equal” library service.

As is the case in all social revolutions, there are no specific guide books on how to create a liberated, “open” library service. It is only the actual practice of learning from people that will provide a solution that is relevant to our particular social situation and will help us build libraries without walls.

But just learning from people is not enough. The next, and perhaps the most difficult, step is to turn our ideas into action. This is best done by empowering the excluded so that it is they who decide how our resources are to be used and how our energies are spent. People themselves will then be the best judges of our success or failure. It is in putting these ideas into practice that a people-oriented, “open to all” service can be built.

#### *PART 2: Public Libraries in England*

Speaking to the Society of Chief Librarians in June 2004, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Tessa Jowell, posed a number of challenges to the profession:

This is a critical time for the future of public library services. Although for over 150 years, libraries have given pleasure and provided opportunities to learn, it is now time to ensure that libraries are relevant and inviting to future generations...the challenge is to generate new users...it is important to learn lessons about why people do not use libraries – only one third do, so how do libraries attract the other two thirds? <sup>10</sup>

The Secretary of State made it clear that she wants change in public libraries. She explained what needs to happen so that libraries “become, once again, central points in local communities”:

But they can only take back this role if they consult local people, and put them in the driving seat. Not just once, but as a continuous dialogue. <sup>11</sup>

This challenge, however, is not reflected in the initiatives that the Department of Media, Culture and Sport has taken, primarily through the *The Framework for Future*, (F4F) programme.<sup>12</sup> The key development since the publication of F4F has been a programme to put the key points of the Framework into practice, led by the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). MLA explains what the *Framework* is all about:

*Framework for the Future*, published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in February 2003, is the government’s ten-year vision for public libraries – how libraries can best serve their communities in the 21st century. It aims to promote public libraries, give them improved visibility, and to set out why libraries matter.

The *Framework* aims to do this by focusing on three key areas for libraries to develop: books, reading and learning; digital citizenship; community and civic values.

Recent developments led by Museum, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA)<sup>13</sup> are positive moves in the right direction and go some way to make up for what some feel to be immense failures of the *Framework*.<sup>14</sup> This includes the “Fulfilling their potential” (2004) programme which provides useful guides to developing services for young people. Other developments include the redrafting of the Public Library Standards, focus on “impact measurement.” It remains to be seen how far, taken as a whole, they will challenge and change the foundations of the public library structure in Britain to ensure they meet the needs of all current and potential users of library service.

At the same time, unless issues mentioned in Part 1 around commodification and globalisation of information, “neutrality” and politics of information services are addressed on a national level, any changes that come about are likely to be partial and not able to address real problems.

Iverson, commenting on the important role that libraries have to play, raises concerns about their role:

I would argue that their role should not be to act in “collusion with the forces which perpetuate disadvantage” but to redefine their role to assist in the establishment of a truly equitable society.<sup>15</sup>

British librarians have generally ignored the fundamental issues about the role of public libraries that Iverson raises. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport, through its enthusiastic endorsement of what is perceived by some to be the vision-less F4F, has failed to give leadership to a field desperate for change.

### *PART 3: The Merton Library Approach*

It is in the context of the Secretary of State’s challenge that developments in Merton Library & Heritage Service (MLHS) between 2000 and 2004 need to be seen. Change and development for a relevant service can only be made if a foundation for change has been created.

The following section considers how a changed environment made it possible for a project involving young people to become self-sustaining and, in so doing, create a new model of public library service that sought to place the needs of a particular community at its heart.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Creating Conditions for Change – Staffing Structure & Equalities*

MLHS’s staffing structure,<sup>17</sup> introduced in 2003, aimed to address some weaknesses identified in the 2000 structure within an overall perspective of developing a relevant, needs-based service. It was partially driven by the need to make savings in the service in keeping with savings being made in the Council as a whole. The structure was split into two distinct “wings”: Operations and Performance Management (O&PM) and Innovations and Development (I&D) in such a way that an equal approach could be mainstreamed. This approach allowed the targeting of services to key sections of communities whose needs have not been fully met. The two-wings approach was expected to ensure that innovative services were

initiated and developed in the I&D wing. The O&PM wing was expected to ensure that the day-to-day existing work of libraries was carried on within a strong performance management culture, guided by policies developed in the I&D wing. Its role was also to ensure that new projects developed in the I&D wing would be nurtured and embedded as part of a mainstreamed service. The majority of the staff and resources were in the O&PM wing.

This approach was meant to resolve some of the contradictions identified in the service during the service review beginning in 1998. These included the contradictions between the needs of current users and potential users; between developing new services and maintaining current ones; between resource allocation for new services and allocations to established services. Implicit in these contradictions were the key contradictions between new ideas and “traditional” ones; between staff and managers who support the “traditional” mode of service and those keen to develop a new model of service to meet new and unmet needs of current and potential users.

Two key requirements were considered essential for the success of the new approach. The first was the support and commitment from senior management in the library service, within the Department, the authority as a whole, and crucially, from Members.

The second requirement was the need to address, in a clear and appropriate manner, clear resistance to change from some senior and middle managers who did not support the change programme and were unhappy about meeting the targets set out in the new programme. Addressing such resistance is considered a key factor in ensuring that planned change takes place.

The existence of this resistance was identified as a key risk factor by the team from the Management Research Centre of the London Metropolitan University which had guided the service through the early period of change as part of an ESF-funded change management and management development programme.

Another area where the Service placed a great deal of emphasis was the need to have a policy approach in all its work. MLHS had a deficit of written policies, resulting in uneven practices between library sites. The aim of the policy approach was to address this deficit through the provision of policies that would, through effective performance management, ensure that there was uniformity in service delivery and resource use. At the same time the mainstreaming of equalities, with responsibility for equalities being transferred from the Equal Access Services cost centre to

individual libraries was also to be governed by the policy and performance management approach, with the overall strategy being decided by the Libraries Senior Management Team.

The staffing structure recognised the fact that public libraries are at a crossroads. The Audit Commission report, “Building Better Library Services” (2002) notes that while libraries have a place in people’s hearts, they “are losing their place in people’s lives.” Libraries thus need to change if they are to be relevant to the communities they serve. MLHS believed that, for public libraries to be relevant, they needed to respond to needs within local communities and that they needed to be well placed to respond quickly to changing needs. This, it was realised, would necessarily involve moving away from the traditional “books based” approach to embrace a closer focus on informal learning through a wide variety of activities, providing information through a variety of means that would help people in many different aspects of their lives. Additionally, it would mean the recruitment of people with the types of skills not traditionally found in libraries e.g. skills in working with youth.

#### *Innovations Project Approach*

In order to develop the needs-based approach, MLHS developed a number of strategic partnerships, enabling it to acquire new skills and enabling it to focus on what were key needs in Merton. The development of an innovations projects approach was thus a response to the need for change on several levels. It was recognised that the new staffing structure had to do the following:

- Respond to community needs
- Mainstream equalities
- Develop new skills within the Service

The aim of the innovations projects approach, therefore, was to take a targeted approach to outreach, develop library services based on need, which could then be embedded into mainstream service delivery. Such an approach was a key part of the new staffing structure, which had policy and performance management very much at its core.

The Innovations and Development wing was thus set up with key aims in mind:

- To mainstream equalities through a policy approach (the implementation of which would be performance managed by

- the Operations and Performance Management wing)
- To develop new services and reach out to marginalised groups of people via a programme of “innovations projects” targeted at specific groups
  - To develop policies to support the mainstreaming of new services
  - To ensure that managers and staff at all levels and sites take ownership and responsibility for services to all groups and communities in the catchment area of their site.

It was recognised that library services needed to develop and reach out to a wide range of people. At the same time, budget restrictions did not allow the service to increase the staffing establishment. MLHS’s response was to develop a number of partnerships both within, and without, the Council, allowing it to target key groups of people, using dedicated staff, in developing new services to these groups. Staff were either wholly or partly paid for by the partners.

There was a shift in the service focus as part of the new staffing structure. The previous approach was to devote staff and resources towards Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities. However, this did not allow MLHS to develop services where the needs were greatest, and targeting services to BME communities, irrespective of needs, began to create unnecessary tensions among staff and communities.

The new focus was on age, as age was seen as the one equality issue that cuts across all groups. With a mainstreaming equalities approach the aim was to ensure that, within each age group, all equality aspects are addressed e.g. race, disability, gender etc. By adopting this approach, the Service contributed to community cohesion and reduced the tensions that could exist when one community feels that resources are being directed away from its services to services for other communities in a narrow area. MLHS was therefore taking a needs-based approach to ensure that the limited resources were targeted to meet the needs of current and potential users.

#### *Why the Innovations Projects Approach?*

It was decided to use a project approach to bring about change and development in the service. This approach has a number of positive aspects, for example:

- Allowed risk taking
- Could be stopped if they did not meet requirements

- Could be operationalised if successful, thus becoming part of the “mainstream”
- Could develop new partnerships
- Could generate new resources
- Could help connect libraries to sections of the community not using the service before
- Could develop new skills in staff

Space does not permit consideration of all Innovation Projects, so there follows a focus on one project only, Merton Sense, and an examination of its development.

#### *Merton Sense Innovations Project*

This section focuses on one of the Innovations Projects, *Merton Sense*, as an example of how libraries can be community, rather than management, driven resulting in relevant, sustainable services responsive to community needs, as dictated by the community itself.

Recent reports on public libraries reveal declining usage of libraries by young people. New and creative ways of reaching them need to be found to attract them to use the service. Discussion with Merton’s Youth Service revealed that young people in a less advantaged part of the borough were interested in exploring creative avenues not available in the local area. MLHS consulted with a group of young people, which revealed that they were interested in setting up and running their own project – a magazine by and for young people. MLHS, seeing this as an opportunity to connect with young people, worked with Merton Youth Service to provide the space, ICT facilities and staff support needed to bring the magazine into being.

#### *Merton Sense Leads the Way*

The magazine was called *Merton Sense*, a title chosen by the young people themselves. Its aim was to connect young people, many of whom were from socially excluded groups, with their library service by actively engaging young people in designing the new service. The magazine was then produced by them with financial and management support from the library service.

The first need was to find a home for the magazine. Thus was created the “Youth Space” in the newly established Innovations Unit based at Mitcham Library. The Youth Service provided computers which set the

group going. The young people themselves decided how they wanted the space decorated and what furniture they wanted.

The youth group consisted initially of about 12 young people, and grew to over 45 within the first year. This number has now grown to over 50 young people aged between 14 and 24 years old. The staff time that went into the support of young people producing the magazine was very important to the project. Often, library staff spent additional time in the week working with group members on article writing and graphic design to make their pieces presentable for the magazine. *Merton Sense* works with some writers for whom English is a second language and believes that all young people have something to add, irrespective of their varying abilities. However, such young people benefited enormously from the input of staff who were able to advise them on writing in English. The qualitative nature of staff input enabled young people eventually to write without any assistance and, as such, was highly empowering. The success of *Merton Sense* would thus not have been possible without the commitment and input of MLHS staff.

The group produced the first issue of the quarterly *Merton Sense* in June 2003 with a print run of 1000 copies. A network of writers has been set up with different young people from around the world. Writers from Australia, Spain and the USA have already printed articles and plans are in place to encourage writers from Kenya, Pakistan and Brazil to contribute articles. *Merton Sense* has empowered the young people of Merton to take action and put their views and ideas into a creative and enjoyable experience. The group has learned about writing styles, how to compile a magazine, cohesive teamwork and working to reach deadlines.

Many of the young people involved with *Merton Sense* had never used the library service; some had never even been inside a library! As a result of MLHS initiating this project and introducing young, hitherto, non-users, to the libraries they are all now members of the library service and much more aware of the diverse resources available to them. Libraries have also been an invaluable resource for the group in terms of background information for writing and composing articles electronically and in book form.

A retired journalist who had worked for the BBC was a volunteer through the Lending Time Project. He offered support and advice for a while, from a professional perspective, on how to compile a magazine, and provided invaluable experience on writing styles and skills and on how to compose articles. His involvement was one example of how MLHS encouraged inter-generational work. The magazine has developed in many areas the skills of the young people involved. These include ICT, writing styles and desktop publishing, thus improving their employability and further education

options. The Welcome to Your Library Project, through its connections with Asylum Welcome, provided the group with young people who were new to the country and were from an asylum seeker or refugee background. The magazine gave them the opportunity to interact with other young people who might, or might not have been from a similar background. For those not from a similar background, this experience helped to gain a greater understanding of refugee and asylum seeker issues.

### *Some Outcomes*

The magazine connected many young people, some of whom had never used the library service before, to the libraries, but perhaps *Merton Sense*'s greatest achievement is that it has empowered the local young community and brought a tremendous sense of community amongst the team and its readers.

Among achievements of the magazine, the following can be listed:

- Involves communities: Wide range of youth from different groups are able to speak not only to youth but to the wider community of Merton through the pages of *Merton Sense*. The young people are now openly tackling, maturely, difficult subjects that are of interest to a wide group of people.
- Encourages reading: The use of the internet and library resources to research articles is now commonplace among the young people involved in the Project. *Merton Sense* itself is a literary product.
- Encourages learning: Participants have developed a wide range of new skills in a friendly, informal manner – these had not been provided by the formal educational sector. Besides the “job specific” learning of publishing skills such as ICT, layout, design, desktop publishing, writing styles, artwork, editorial work, etc, the young people have also developed a wide range of social and leaderships skills, such as team working, people skills, dealing with difficult issues in a mature manner,
- Shares information: *Merton Sense* speaks not only to young people, but to the whole community and keeps all informed of a wide range of issues from a youth perspective.
- Has the potential to be developed and adapted elsewhere: The model developed in Merton can work anywhere, with appropriate management support, resources and quality staff input and a trust in young people. In fact, the approach can also be adapted for other projects.

One of the key achievements for all team members, however, is the engagement in a learning process entirely driven by individual wishes to develop in particular areas. Examples include creative writing; journalism; language and communication skills; marketing and fundraising skills. Although informal learning is a key aspect of public libraries, without such a project it would have been extremely difficult for MLHS to offer such a range of relevant, community-driven learning opportunities. The opportunities afforded by this project have led to a number of achievements including:

- Two of *Merton Sense's* writers were picked up by national magazines to write articles in a freelance capacity.
- Three of the young people involved are now studying towards a career in the media, with *Merton Sense* forming an important part of their portfolios and increasing their employability options.
- *Merton Sense's* resident poet, Amie Russell, won a local poetry competition in which this project encouraged her to participate and her work will now be published by Xpress in a new poetry anthology book.
- A number of young people have been awarded the Millennium Volunteer Award.

The editor of *Merton Sense*, Duane Melius, recalls what working on the magazine has meant for him:

For the first time since I left school there was a valuable opportunity for me... From here *Merton Sense* began. It has been a joy to watch the birth of an idea and witness its refinement. Being part of *Merton Sense* gives me a sense of identity. It is heartening to realise there are agents in the community willing to give people like me a chance.<sup>18</sup>

The magazine has gone from strength to strength and the initial print run has grown from 1000 to 15,000. A *Sense* website has now been developed.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Merton Sense – Strategic Issues and Lessons*

There is no doubt that *Merton Sense* has played a key role in reconnecting the library service to a large number of young people in Merton. These include not only the ones directly involved in all aspect of producing and writing the magazine, but also hundreds on the mailing list or who get

copies through libraries, youth clubs, schools and in other ways. In the process, the library service was learning a new way of connecting with its potential users. The success of the project was recognised by the Youth Ofsted inspection in 2004:

At the *Merton Sense* magazine group, young people took responsibility for project development, set challenging targets, evaluated their own progress and gained formal accreditation.

One of the areas recognised as requiring attention in local and public service is the need for innovation. The *Merton Sense* project can be seen as an example of an innovative service development, which at the same time helped to develop new skills in managers and staff.

Another issue that should be understood in the context of making organisational change is the need for effective leadership with a clear vision, commitment and a strategy for ensuring success. In the case of Merton, this was certainly available during the period under review. *Merton Sense* also provides a very clear example of how service users can take total ownership of a new service if they are able to influence the direction of the service and are allowed to have control over it. The key point is that an idea and a service should grip their imagination. The young people at *Merton Sense* are keen to keep the magazine going and are developing financial and political skills to meet the needs of this complex project. There are enough lessons here for local government managers to digest.

#### *Conclusion*

As societies develop, as new technologies create even more possibilities for growth, the communications and information sectors needs constantly to develop in keeping with major changes in society. There is thus huge potential for developing services that meet the new needs of all people and it is quite possible for libraries to be at the centre of this vastly changing world. Engaging with the traditional library commodity of information in a “non-traditional” way that responds to local contexts, via the involvement of local people in service design and development, will enable libraries to help bridge the gap between the information rich and the information poor. Libraries can thus play a part in better-enabling local people to take informed decisions.

However, realising this potential requires creativity, innovation, commitment and vision on the part of service leaders. Effective leadership in the information field, therefore, is the key to making libraries places where

different social, political and economic forces in conflict can deposit their various views, experiences, knowledge and world outlooks. By ensuring that this contradictory information and knowledge has an equal chance to be acquired, stored, heard and understood, librarians and libraries can, perhaps, find a new social role for themselves. They will then have played a meaningful social role in creating more just and “equal” societies.

As custodians of information, librarians everywhere have a role to play in eliminating the root causes of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and inequality. It is no longer acceptable for libraries and librarians to refuse to acknowledge this social responsibility. The choice is simple: if the information profession does not acknowledge its social responsibility and act upon it, it will no longer have a social role. People will then develop alternative models of information and knowledge communication, which do meet their needs. There will then be no libraries as we know them today. The choice is ours to make – today.

#### NOTES

1. Karl Marx in his Theses on Feuerbach.
2. “Almost 30 per cent of the population use libraries for borrowing books or other items”. Audit Commission (2002).
3. The politics of globalisation is covered admirably by A. Sivanandan in his article “Globalism’s imperial war” (12 March 2003), available from <<http://www.irr.org.uk/2003/march/ak000008.html>>. The library aspects are covered by IFLA at: <<http://www.ifla.org/III/clm/p1/wto-ifla.htm#3>>; see also Durrani (2000), especially pp.89-94.
4. Ten point programme presented to the groups which met at the Vienna Conference of progressive librarians sponsored by KRIBIBIE (2000) Available from <<http://www.libr.org/PLG/docs.html>>.
5. Iverson (1998/99).
6. Ibid.
7. Muddiman (2000).
8. Rosenzweig, Mark (2005).
9. Jacques, Martin (2004).
10. Jowell (2004).
11. Lend it like Peckham! (2004).
12. DCMS, 2003.
13. See MLA website for further details: <<http://www.mla.gov.uk/index.asp>>.
14. See for example: Durrani, S. (2003) Review of the Framework of the Future. Library and Information Update. March 2003.
15. Iverson (1998/99).
16. This was covered in Library & Information Update 2(8) August 2003, p. 17.
17. This was a British Home Office and Department of Culture, Media and Sport-funded project whereby library services worked with Community Service Volunteers to encourage local people to volunteer their services to local libraries in the aim of service development.
18. Melius, Duane (2003).
19. See: <<http://www.sense.ik.com/>>. The magazine has now been renamed *Sense*.

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