

Community-Building vs. Customer-Driven Librarianship

Countering Neoliberal Ideology in Public Libraries

by Mark Hudson

I want to start by mentioning the early work of the critical education theorist Henry Giroux. I think one of Giroux's most important insights from his early work in the 1980s — he was writing about schools but the insight applies equally well to libraries — is that mainstream educational institutions do not merely reproduce existing social inequalities of class, race and gender. They are also places where this reproduction is contested and resisted by the people who work in them and the people who use them. In Giroux's reading, ideological and cultural hegemony as Gramsci understood it is not something that is simply imposed upon subordinate social groups; it is essentially a pedagogical relationship, a mode of control that the dominant class is constantly struggling to maintain. The first task of radical educators is to acquire a critical understanding of the cultures, experiences and historic struggles of the oppressed and socially marginalized people in our communities, so that we can begin to understand how the institutions we work in might be transformed to meet their need for knowledge and resources that facilitate self-emancipation instead of reinforcing passivity and powerlessness.

A related insight from Giroux's early work, based on his reading of the Frankfurt School theorists, is the way in which a pervasive "technocratic rationality" impedes the development of the critical consciousness needed to transform educational institutions into vehicles of emancipation. The logic of technocratic rationality reduces educational practice to a form of social engineering, based on empirical data and disassociated from concerns about ethical purposes and questions about class, culture, power and knowledge. In public libraries we see this logic in the increasingly exclusive emphasis on circulation statistics in collection development, in the rise of the "business model" of library administration, and in the gradual

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redefinition of librarians as technicians, as mere managers of information technologies, away from our historic identities as educators and cultural workers. Giroux's work provides us with some of the intellectual tools we need to resist these trends and to develop an understanding of our true social responsibilities and purpose.

The work of Kathleen de la Peña McCook provides a concrete model of activist librarianship for librarians committed to the goal of grassroots community building. In her 2000 book *A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building*, McCook challenges librarians to get involved in community-building efforts that recognize cultural diversity, economic inequalities and the urgent need for social solidarity. She emphasizes the importance of understanding the community's culture, demographics, social and political structures, and major issues of concern, and she advocates new models of library work that will allow librarians the time and resources they need to fully participate in community events, meetings and organizations. Librarians can contribute to ongoing community-building initiatives by providing resources, programs and services that support community organizations and meet the needs of all the different groups that make up the community — not just the affluent middle class but also the immigrants, people of color and working-class people whose needs are so often ignored by librarians and who therefore understandably perceive us as irrelevant to their lives.

Another model is the community-led or needs-based libraries approach developed in Canada by the Working Together Project and in the UK by John Pateman and others associated with the Open to All? study, which was an effort to understand how public libraries might more effectively address the problem of social exclusion and contribute to the development of a more inclusive society. Pateman and Ken Williment's book *Developing Community-Led Public Libraries: Evidence from the UK and Canada* provides a comprehensive theoretical and practical overview of the community-led model of library service. Social exclusion affects groups of people who are poor, unemployed or underemployed, racial, ethnic and cultural minorities, and those who are marginalized because of gender, sexual orientation, age or disability. Pateman and Williment advocate prioritizing the needs of these groups by actively engaging them in library planning. This means going beyond the traditional outreach approach, which takes already-designed services into the community, and instead embracing a community development approach in which librarians build meaningful long-term relationships with socially excluded groups and work with them as equal partners to plan and produce services. The community-led model doesn't require us to abandon our current users, but it does mean giving at least the same priority to the needs of socially excluded groups that we've traditionally given to the needs of affluent middle-class people in the communities we serve.

Of course, the management philosophies and practices of most libraries make implementing these community-building models on more than

a limited scale very difficult. Public library boards tend to represent the most affluent and privileged sectors of their communities, so instead of community-building librarianship, we get customer-driven librarianship and the “business model.”

As my fellow panelist John Buschman argues in his 2003 book *Dismantling the Public Sphere*, customer-driven librarianship is undermining the public sphere role of libraries as institutions that organize and circulate intellectually diverse discourses, that provide resources for rational argumentation and truth verification, and that create spaces for alternative views of the world and society. The customer-driven model manifests itself in the demand for “accountability” and “quality measurement” to justify funding, which assumes that the social value of a library service is measurable and quantifiable (i.e., a commodity with an exchange value), and in the growing emphasis on marketing, public relations and “brand identity,” which assumes that emulating the ethos and practices of private enterprise is the best way to improve the library’s financial position (the reality being that libraries are struggling financially more than ever despite their efforts to imitate the private sector). It also appears in the “give ‘em what they want” philosophy of collection development, which abandons any notion of intrinsic merit and the library’s responsibility to provide the widest possible diversity of viewpoints and forms of expression, in favor of collecting and retaining only what is currently most “popular,” as defined by circulation statistics. This philosophy assimilates the library into a corporate-controlled media system that marginalizes unorthodox and oppositional viewpoints and non-commodified forms of knowledge and cultural expression, with the result that increasingly only the most profitable products of the biggest corporate media conglomerates are represented in library collections.

Customer-driven, “business model” librarianship reproduces existing social inequalities because it reduces library services and collections — public resources that belong to the entire community — to the status of commodities while suppressing questions about class, culture, power, knowledge and social responsibilities. The advocates of the customer-driven model call this “neutrality,” because they subscribe to an ideology that sees the market as an impartial arbiter of the public good. In fact, they’re partisans of the status quo, because they’re ignoring the needs of socially excluded people and impeding the development of the community-building librarianship needed to transform libraries into vehicles of social emancipation and the renewal of democratic culture.

Public libraries today are contested ideological terrain where frontline librarians struggle to implement community-building strategies in a professional environment increasingly permeated by the ideology of customer-driven “business model” librarianship. The customer-driven model treats library resources and services as products to be “marketed” and assimilates the library into a corporate-controlled media system that marginalizes unorthodox and oppositional viewpoints and non-

commodified forms of knowledge and cultural expression. It reduces the purpose of library programming to mere “infotainment” and “boosting the gate count,” instead of developing substantive educational and cultural content aimed at improving public participation, increasing understanding of critical issues we face as a society, and facilitating the self-emancipation of the oppressed and socially marginalized people in our communities.

Thus the customer-driven model deprofessionalizes librarians by rendering their professional knowledge, subject knowledge and critical understanding of their social responsibilities and purpose irrelevant. After all, it doesn't require an MLIS-degreed librarian to provide tech support to computer users, plan entertaining programs devoid of substantive educational and cultural content, and manage collections based solely on circulation statistics.

Another name for the ideology of customer-driven librarianship is “neoliberalism.” Neoliberal doctrine maintains that market forces are the ultimate arbiter of the public good and that public sector institutions such as libraries need to justify their existence in purely economic terms. But the value of library resources and services is social, not economic. In the long run I believe that community building, not emulating the ethos and practices of the private sector, is the best way to guarantee the survival of the library as a public institution.