

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND A DECADE OF DEMOCRACY: REBIRTH OR RETHINK?

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Abstract

The paper examines the state of public libraries in South Africa since the country became a democracy in 1994. There seems to be a worrisome aspect that the place of public libraries within local and provincial governments is in a state of uncertainty. The paper argues for a rethink of the role of public libraries and librarians within local government. The author warns against a blind acceptance of the now somewhat Utopian African Renaissance, but pleads for a rethink of the place of public libraries within a socio-economic context. It is the author's contention that the services of a public library should contribute towards the quality of life, that is, the library should play a role in **education**, the **promotion of moral values**, the **eradication of illiteracy**, the **alleviation of poverty** and **assisting** in the quest for **knowledge** and the **promotion of democracy in society**. The promotion of the concept of democracy in society should be one of the key aims of the public library. However, the whole notion of democracy needs to be deconstructed. Certain objectives need to be set in order to attain this aim of the public library, namely, the library should foster and provide certain facilities for the development of individuals and groups at all levels of education, for example, a study area and an activity room or auditorium; the library should be accessible to the user to fulfil his/her information needs, in the quickest possible time; the library should be a main centre for the promotion and appreciation of all arts so that cultural life can be enriched; the library should play a positive part in the encouragement of active usage of leisure and recreation time. Books and associated material should be made freely available to all members of the community. Not only active members of the library should have access to these materials but also potential library users. In addition to these, the informal self-education of citizens should be promoted and encouraged, for example, library instruction programs could be introduced inclusive of information literacy instruction; books and other library materials should be conserved for future generations, especially local history collections; indigenous knowledge should be preserved. This calls for a well – informed and empowered library professional.

Introduction

Clem Sunter in his 1992 work, **The new century: quest for the high road** poses two scenarios:

- The High road of closing the gap between South Africa's rich and poor and
- The Low road allowing the gap to increase (Sunter 1992: 12)

In a sense my paper dwells on a similar scenario question with regards to public libraries, now a decade after the country's first democratic elections. The paper tackles the

important question: Do we need a rebirth for public libraries or a rethink of their role for a true democratic order? Simpler stated, should public libraries be replaced or become refocused?

Transition invariably requires a need to refocus on political and economic structures. These have an impact on the well being of society. The democratic process, for instance requires:

- Free movement of information flow;
- Quick and easy access to information and
- Wide use of updated information for the needs of education, science, culture and economics.

To achieve the ultimate objective of development in a community, libraries have to be included, precisely because of their connection between people and information. As Kantumoya (1992), quoted by Uhegbu (2001: 242), has argued:

People will not be able to get their due as citizens of the present day society unless they have a continuous access to information which will guide them through and where necessary the advice to help them translate that information into action.

Historically, public libraries have come into being with very noble roles. Laura Pinhey (2003) states that in the United States of America (USA), for example, they were established to safeguard democracy. In many other countries they are a symbol of important social changes. In some regions, the public library, like the church and the school, is part of the local landscape. There are many examples of public libraries becoming a natural medium of social inclusion (Suaiden 2003: 382). This author further points out that when a library opened its doors to the public, it became a focal point, a reference point, for the community in which it was situated, thereby facilitating the introduction of books and reading into people's daily lives (Suaiden 2003: 379). This was a fundamental function of the public library. One may perhaps argue that the primary purpose of a public library is to provide resources and services in a variety of media to meet the needs of individuals and groups for education, information and personal development including recreation and leisure. The public library therefore has an important role to play in the development and maintenance of a democratic society by giving the individual access to a wide and varied range of knowledge, ideas and opinions (Gill *et al.* 2001: 2). However, has the public library achieved this role?

Public libraries: Elitist establishments or people-centred?

A chronology of viewpoints regarding the public library since the 1980s follows. Bekker & Lategan (1988) argued that public libraries are not used by black people as an information source, but are only used as study centres by students and pupils. Another view holds that public libraries are institutions that came into being as a result of the industrial revolution (Murison 1988: 15). There was also the perception that public libraries are places “where school children go to read books away from home” (Banach 1988: 10). This model was imposed, not negotiated with local communities.

Public libraries pay too little attention to different target groups in their market apart from reference and children's services (Stilwell 1991: 6).

Totemeyer (1994) suggests that the traditional public library in Africa has failed to make any substantial impact because the idea to create libraries in Africa was external and emerged from a different context and for a different reason. Some observers also questioned the relevance of the so-called Western model. Aina (1994) for instance points out that what is disheartening is the training of the information worker, which is still aimed at providing traditional library services imported wholesale from the industrialized countries. Alemna (1995) again observes that the library service left behind by the colonisers, while useful to an educated elite is of much less utility to the mass of the people. He suggests that most people choose to solve their problems through oral means.

According to Mostert & Vermeulen (1998) African communities initially embraced the Western model of the public library, expecting it to support the educational and informational needs of the people, and to assist in the process of general upliftment and development of the disadvantaged. This Western model of public library services has been described as the home reading of books borrowed by a predominantly middle-class educated public (Mostert & Vermeulen 1998: 10).

The traditional public library in Africa has failed to make any substantial impact. From the currently available literature it is clear that the model of public library service imported from the West hardly took into consideration local needs and the socio-political situation of African peoples (Issak 2002: 330). It seems therefore that the traditional public library model was inadequate as regards meeting the information needs of African peoples.

However, another view holds that public libraries provide access to knowledge, information and works of imagination through a range of resources and services. The public library is equally available to all members of the community regardless of race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic and employment status and educational attainment (Gill *et al* 2001: 1). Although people of all classes have access to public libraries in all communities, there is unfortunately still an unequal distribution of resources. It is also argued that public libraries are generally stocked with literature that is usually foreign, outdated and irrelevant to the information needs and interests of the people expected to use them (Okuy 2003: 127).

Public libraries are often perceived as elitist institutions serving only the most educated living in cities and ignoring the rural people. Suaiden (2003: 1) for instance posits that public libraries became viewed from a social perspective as elitist places, book depositories, or somewhere to do schoolwork. Those problems prompted the emergence of a conflict of views between the information professional and the wider community. Okuy (2003) posits that the public library should discard its traditional docile role as repository of knowledge and ideas and rise to the challenge that any rapid modernisation process entails. From these views it seems public library services in Africa have for a

long time operated without fully taking into consideration the needs of the people they are meant to serve.

It was considered for a long time that the main purpose of a library was to preserve its collection, and that made the circulation and dissemination of books difficult. This notion promoted the creation of "useless" [public] libraries (Suaiden 2003:379). However, with the emergence of a new society, the so-called information society, the preservation paradigm seemed to dissipate. This new society essentially demonstrates that information generates power, especially when it is disseminated in a short space of time or in real time (Suaiden 2003:379). With the emergence of the information society, it became more important for public libraries to play a vital role in enabling people to use Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). However, a discussion of ICTs is beyond the scope of this paper.

Redistribution of resources

The African National Congress (ANC), argued for a single centralized council that will "redistribute resources from rich and mainly white suburbs to poor black townships" (Cavanagh 1998:3). This argument is based on the perception that the previous Metropolitan Councils (MCs) and their substructures with their various chief executive officers (CEOs), including the chief executive officer of the Metropolitan Council, executive directors and a host of departmental heads, have created major administrative problems with high running costs. It was therefore the African National Congress' (ANC's) contention that one centralized structure with one chief executive officer would reduce running costs as well as address service delivery problems. For this argument to really hold water, in terms of libraries, the ANC's model can only be conducive to growth if a rethink on the distribution of library resources takes place. If not, only libraries in the more affluent areas will have the infrastructure to render library services conducive to progress, while the poorer areas will continue to suffer.

Libraries situated in wealthy municipal areas may very well provide services conducive to the progress of society, but those in marginalised areas will continue to lack the necessary resources. Although certain functions of the CMC in terms of the public library should be centralized, there should be areas where decentralization is in place, especially in terms of decision-making. For decision-making to be decentralized, however, an organizational structure for libraries, conducive to growth, should be put in place.

Policy formulation and implementation

According to the National Educational Policy Investigation (NEPI) report, human resources development that reflects the demographic realities of South Africa in terms of occupations and student enrolments was one of the goals of future policy formulation (Library and Information Services 1992:203). Within the framework of this future policy formulation, library staff needs to become pro-active in terms of their roles in social, political and economic issues. At the same time they need to become well informed. A possible way to achieve this is to improve academic qualifications. Service rendering

should be done with the aim to enrich communities culturally, spiritually and intellectually. However librarians also need to know and understand policy documents and be aware of current and relevant legislation. Here one can think of South Africa's Constitution, the Promotion of Access to Information Act and others. In terms of strategic planning documents there are the Integrated Development Plans on local level. Examples include the Western Cape's 2004 – 2007 strategic framework for development, **Ikapa elihlumayo** or **Growing Cape**.

Institutionalization versus deinstitutionalization

In most countries public libraries are managed as a subset of government departments. It is often argued how formal structures, organization and rules of Government departments create barriers. To this end Chijioke (1989) observes that the vision of library planners in an African context was limited to the institutional pattern with which they (planners) were familiar.

It is also argued that the present system of building huge, monumental public libraries based on Anglo-American architectural designs is not only expensive, but also unsuitable for the tropical conditions of Africa. I may also add rather impractical at times. According to Alemna (1995) what is expected is a simple, inexpensive plan of well-ventilated reading rooms. Such buildings are not only cheaper to construct, but also inexpensive to maintain. A generalization of climatic conditions does not serve here as not all areas in Africa have tropical conditions. However, Chijioke (1989) also fears that to the public, anything different from the European model would be inferior and they might not use the facilities.

From public library to community library?

Stilwell (1991) sees the community library as an appropriate vehicle for the equitable spread of resources in the educational restructuring, which has taken place e.g. curriculum 2005. The return to basics in library and information services provision in the 1970s and 1980s led to the development of community librarianship, which promised a rejuvenated egalitarian and a more relevant public library. However, Bell (2002) argues that public libraries have failed to address community information needs. Factors, which have contributed to this failure, include elitism, too much reliance on the Western model, irrelevance in terms of Africa, geographical distribution, lack of adequate training and institutionalization. Issak (2002) is of the same opinion when claiming that public libraries have "failed to fulfil their role in society." This has brought about severe deterioration "because of factors such as the economic crisis, the lack of definition of the role of libraries, an excess of centralization in the management of libraries, and a lack of human resources to run the libraries professionally" Issak (2002:330). Since public libraries did not perform as expected, community librarianship was born.

Mostert & Vermeulen (1998) argue that the term **community library** could mean different things to different people and its services will differ according to the needs of specific communities. Mokgaboki (2002: 78) defined community libraries as information centres whose purpose is to provide the entire community with timely educational, informational, recreational and cultural information, documents or resources, in general or to specific users. These community libraries must provide cutting edge information, which must enable the community to participate meaningfully in their socio-economic development in a bid to provide a better life for all.

On the other hand Lategan (1995) as referred to by Kalley (2000) sees the community library as a library controlled, owned and sustained by the residents to motivate, empower and enable the local people to participate in projects aimed at meeting their needs and to develop networks. Mayer (2000) states that the community library is rapidly becoming the Centre where the uninformed as well as the informed can gather in their quest for self-improvement and information.

However, some commentators believe that a change of name will not solve the problem. If public library services are rooted in the communities they serve and if they operate through mechanisms, which the citizens of those communities find comfortable, then the public library would be doing what community libraries are expected to do. For example, Kalley (1995) mentions that the Vosloorus Library is engaged in formal and non-formal education projects. A significant area in education is lifelong learning. However, whether community libraries can play a significant role to sustain lifelong learning is questionable. Public libraries, which are mostly dependent on the Government for sustainability, are currently struggling. Unless the community librarian can lobby for funding, the task of sustainability may be a daunting one. Perhaps a closer look at the concept of community is necessary.

Community defined

Uhegbu (2001) quoting Anyanwu (1992) outlines six basic characteristics with which a community can be identified:

- Shared territory within which the members live and develop the ways of life that give the community an identity;
- Shared beliefs, which are nurtured and cherished by the people in the development of their common ideals, objectives, attitudes and values;
- Shared bonds of fellowship, which demands obligations from the citizens, and the conferment of benefits to them;
- Set standards and patterns of behaviour which bring every citizen to conform to norms and values; it also helps to develop intimacy of relationships and bond of love and association;
- A common culture which is the aggregate of the social, ethical, intellectual, artistic governmental and industrial attainments of a community; it includes the ideas, traditions, customs, usages, institutions, associations and material objective characteristics of such a community and

- Common administration where there is a common plan, a process involving accountability and responsibility for the good governance of such a community.

These characteristics involve needs, which also may be common. Some of these needs may also reflect common library needs. There is a tendency in the post apartheid South Africa to express these library needs as:

- Provision of study facilities as the majority of the users does not have study facilities inclusive of electricity or privacy at home;
- Provision of Information Technology e.g. Internet, Word Processing facilities;
- Provision of Computer and Information literacy skills;
- Provision of Adult Basic Education and Literacy programmes;
- Provision of community based activities, focusing on educational support and arts & cultural development

These library needs call for a different or revised model of library services to the different communities.

Atuti (2001) posits that the aims of a community library should be:

- To encourage the community to identify its information needs and to involve its participation in the establishment of such new sources of information for their use and mutual benefit;
- To be an advocate for society's appreciation of the role and importance of library and information services in modern socio-economic, cultural and political life;
- To develop partnerships and strengthen co-operation with the community, and to utilise available community resources (funds, buildings) through mobilization and
- To supplement government efforts in providing library and information services in rural areas.

Community information

Bunch (1993) differentiates between two types of community information:

- Survival information such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunity, political rights, etc;
- Citizen action information that is needed for effective participation as individuals or as members of a group in the social, political, legal, economic process.

The purpose of community information is to empower people to take control of their livelihoods in order to interpret information correctly. People should also be able to use the information to take action for solving their problems. This information should put them in a position to develop their creativity for their own personal satisfaction and enjoyment and for that of their community. In a sense a quest for undertaking a more broadly based community development role is important.

Rethinking the role of librarians

Librarians and libraries build community, although this is not recognized in the broad literature of community building. Libraries are seldom included in the national dialogue on the broad concept of community building. This calls for a rethink on the library practitioner's role within the community and society.

One of the public librarian's key roles is to provide information and referral community services to patrons. This information is found not only through manual and online services, but to be accurate and effective must be supplemented with personal knowledge of existing community resources (Feinberg & Feldman 1996:13).

Library personnel need to act as agents for grooming and nurturing African communities towards their renaissance (Banach 1988:10). However, more than a decade later all communities need to cultivate this habit. Librarians need to become more imaginative and willing to break new ground. The professional skills and attitudes required of librarians also need to change if services are to be in line with change. The librarian/worker needs to be involved with, and be a part of, the community if he/she is to be accepted by the community.

According to Banach (1988) the "barefoot librarian is seen as an alternative to the professionally qualified with appropriate skills in teaching, literacy, design and production of audio-visual instruction, with a training in oral literature, and techniques of acquiring and processing eyewitness information and applying new information to the development and improvement of life appropriate to a particular community." Will the "barefoot librarian" be appropriate to all communities given the diversity and ever changing needs?

South Africa has diverse communities with different cultures. Affirmative action, alleviation of poverty, eradication of homelessness, unemployment and dealing more effectively with HIV/AIDS are some of the main concerns of the South African government. These concerns are changing the landscape of community building. The librarian's role is to be aware of happenings in the community and if needs be attend community meetings, listen and participate in offering some solutions.

Information professionals are all aware that, in order to serve the needs of their users, readers and customers, it is essential to work with others.

Pilling and Kenna in (**Cooperation in action...2002**) remind us in the introduction to this work that no library is an island, nor ever has been, and it is no longer realistic, cost-effective or indeed logical for any major library or information provider to work alone. It is the library's role to support lifelong learning and underpinning the move towards increased social inclusion and economic regeneration.

Characteristics of community building

There are a number of characteristics that should be present in the process of community building:

- Widespread participation. Participants should represent all or most segments of the community and must be recruited continuously;
- There should be a good system of communication;
- Communication ensures that all residents of a community remain aware and motivated, serving to maintain widespread participation;
- Successful community building focuses on tasks but also pays attention to organizing and bringing new residents into the process;
- Linkages to organizations outside the community. Ties to organizations outside the community can help in identifying financial support, political support, and sources of knowledge and technical support. The librarian can seek information that helps reduce community isolation and provides it for community meetings.

The modern librarian needs to help create community identity, community dialogue and community collaboration. Librarians indeed need to be recognized as proactive agents or interfaces for the cultural, educational and economic life of society. Written policy statements are important so that future generations can benefit from an understanding of library objectives indicative of user needs.

The place of the public library within the local government is facing uncertainties. Librarians have to act upon these uncertainties in promoting libraries to their communities in practical ways. While always an important part of family and community life, today's libraries have an even greater potential to play a significant role in responding to and meeting the broader needs of children, youth and families in communities.

A rethink on socio-economic issues

If especially black South Africans were more than overjoyed with the ANC victory in the April 1994 national and subsequent regional and local elections and perhaps naively thought that this would signal the end of hardships and poverty, it did not take long for disillusionment to surface. As Moller (1997), puts it "... post election happiness showed that the political aspirations of the formerly disenfranchised had been fulfilled, [however] the subsequent drop in happiness and satisfaction eighteen months later, indicated that the material aspirations fuelled by the election promises of 'a better life for all' had still to be met." This is despite the ANC's promise to "... reduce and eliminate the massive inequalities established by apartheid by making resources available for the advancement of those oppressed and kept back in the past by racial discrimination and gender oppression." (African National Congress 1994:3). Not too long ago, Ebrahim Rasool, the then Minister of Finance and Economic Development and now Premier of the Western Cape Province, made a similar remark, when he stated that the government is committed to a "...society where women are treated equally, where children are protected, where our

youth are nurtured, where the aged are cared for, where the disabled are valued...and all race groups can declare that indeed [the Western Cape] Province is home for all” (Western Cape Provincial Government 2004: 3). Hopefully, a valuable resource such as the public library can be part of this commitment.

The future: some considerations

Libraries can help to bring about change by the provision of imaginative and socially responsive programmes that seek to increase the range of individual opportunities as well as enhancing the social infrastructure.

Democratisation of the state and society can only succeed if communities are empowered by effective distribution and use of information. Therefore libraries should extend library services to all. In particular, emphasis should be on services to previously marginalised communities, especially in rural areas, townships and informal settlements. Libraries should strive to become learning centres for life long learning and development. Guidance is the essence of service rendering and service orientation.

Technological changes and the fact that South Africa is becoming an Information society, make it imperative that library staff be given opportunity to attend continuing education programmes. The library as centre for the generation of recorded knowledge can only provide services conducive to growth if the staff is well informed of global information issues. Continuing education programmes can range from basic computer literacy skills to human resource management skills. It must be borne in mind that librarians as well as library assistants need to be updated on a regular basis of issues, which affect their work.

Provincial or local government should have the responsibility of establishing a system whereby staff is allowed to attend continuing education programmes, without disrupting the day-to-day functions at their libraries. This calls for adequate staffing at these libraries. The divide between theory and practice should be narrowed, so that graduates should not find a hostile environment, given their theoretical backgrounds. Practical fieldwork by students should be a compulsory aspect entrenched in the curricula of Library and Information Science departments/schools, so that practising librarians could evaluate the performances of students, in conjunction with lecturers. On the other hand, practising library workers could attend summer or winter schools at tertiary institutions. These could be in the form of information literacy skills, Internet searches and other skills for capacity building.

Library material selection policies should be reviewed on a regular basis. Community needs are to be taken into account and determined by scientific investigation, by recognised methodologies. Library authorities should liaise with academic institutions in this regard. Du Preez, Director of Cultural and Environmental Affairs: Western Cape (1998), aptly states that “...the process of the selection of library materials for public libraries will have to be refined and focussed more sharply on the user level.”

Library services should be more directly relevant to the needs and interests of the masses. This argument is further supported by Feinberg & Feldman (1996) that libraries are essential partners in interagency collaborations that affect policies and services for families within communities. Increasing emphasis should be placed on advocacy, community action and community education. Individuals and groups can therefore be assisted with daily problem solving and with participation in the democratic process. Volunteers can provide services that concentrate on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance and on the most important problems that people have to face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs and their rights.

Communication between library staff and the families in the community is particularly important. Librarians should consider forming partnerships with parents, early care and education providers, and other community-based agencies. The coordination and coalition between libraries, families, community agencies and other information organizations would end passivity and neutrality of libraries and committed participation in the real world outside libraries. Barefoot librarians can provide for their communities in a significant way, with the help of agencies and educational organizations. Through the development of coalitions and networks, librarians can expand their horizons, become informed professionals, and be alerted to trends in youth services, and early childhood and parent education. Feinberg & Feldman (1996) give the following reasons why the integration of library services with the community and other agencies will increase the library's gain. Parents and professionals will learn:

- To recognise the library's ability to organise and disseminate information to its community;
- To understand the role of the library in providing free access to information;
- To look towards the library a primary community center for serving families and young children;
- To place the library and the children's librarian in a leadership role in advocating for youth and family services;
- To appreciate the library's role in sharing community resources, building a democratic nation, and beginning the lifelong learning process.

Some programmes for cooperation

- Child care and Day care facilities;
- Youth Clubs;
- Public health programmes;
- Job creation programmes;
- Local agencies involved in victims of abuse;
- Parent educator's network or parent resource centre;
- Church and hospital information services;
- Organization serving teen mothers;
- University development programmes;
- Library services to house-bound patients;
- Library services on farms and rural areas;

- Local history collections;
- Community information and referral databases;
- Literacy classes;
- Volunteer programmes for library support;
- Local business and entrepreneurial Forums;
- Small business Corners;
- Revisit of Vegetable garden initiatives;
- Book talk groups for moms and toddlers;
- Book circles;
- Cultural clubs;
- Cooperation with school libraries cooperation;
- Shared collection development with other library and information services.

Conclusion

If one takes into account the discrepancies of the past, where public libraries reserved for whites had more library resources than those allocated for blacks, it is clear that circulation statistics cannot be used as the only criterion, if at all, for determining information and reading needs. Library managers will have to address illiteracy issues and lobby for the establishment of infrastructures for the promotion of literacy. Library facilities like auditoriums can be made available for training trainers of basic adult education. The library can in this sense become a centre where people can empower themselves. Especially the unemployed can make use of the library's materials for information geared towards self-reliance.

Public librarians should therefore strive to change the image of public libraries as "storehouses of information" to a deinstitutionalized agency that involves families, the community and other role players. Perhaps we can then meet the high road.

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