

LIBRARIANS AS AGENTS OF DEMOCRACY

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1. INTRODUCTION

The transition and transformation of South Africa from apartheid to democracy has been hailed by the world as a miracle. Since the 27th April 2004 South Africa has been celebrating a decade of freedom through various events and activities. The celebrations are aimed at uniting the country in marking the achievements of South Africa and the consolidation of our democracy since 1994. The celebrations are also meant to provide an opportunity to consolidate the emergence of our national identity as well as for the international positioning of the country. It is an opportunity to review our progress in this young democracy and to assess the challenges ahead.

This conference is also a celebration of libraries in a decade of democracy. It is an opportunity to review our progress in the democratization of library and information services in the country and to examine the challenges ahead. It is also a celebration of the transformation of libraries from restricted access by race to open access for all, from isolation to becoming a global player in world library and information services. It is also a celebration of unity within the profession which was divided along racial lines and now thrives under one umbrella body, LIASA.

Now, more than ever, librarians are expected to serve and promote democracy in their countries. Libraries and librarians in South Africa have a crucial role to play in reorganizing, realigning and reshaping libraries to preserve and deepen our democracy. As agents of democracy, librarians have to assist in creating an informed nation as well as to increase an awareness and use of libraries as community centers which will assist the nation with the democratic way of life.

2. PAPER

This brings me to the title of my paper, namely, librarians as change agents. The aim of the paper is to challenge librarians in democratic countries to function as agents of democracy with special reference to South Africa. I will first start by giving a brief background about our libraries in South Africa pre-1994 in order to illustrate where we come from, the transformation which has occurred and the vital link between libraries

and democracy. Consideration will also be given to librarians as agents of democracy, and their role in promoting democracy. Finally, I will examine the challenges they face in their attempt to serve the diverse needs of the rainbow nation.

3. BRIEF BACKGROUND

3.1 Lest we Forget ...

South African libraries come from a painful journey of restricted access, censorship and suppression of ideas or opinions. The role our libraries were compelled to play then was not honourable, especially in relation to freedom of access to information for all. The collections were constantly censored. Free flow of information was restricted. The majority of the population were denied access to libraries. Librarians in this era were forced to act negatively against freedom of expression and access to information. The majority of the nation remained ignorant or ill-informed. Librarians had to serve the prevailing order. They had to function as the prolonged arm of the law by denying blacks entry to libraries and by withdrawing censored material from their collections.

The library services to black communities in urban and rural areas were non-existent. The collections of the few libraries which existed in townships left much to be desired. The libraries failed to meet the information needs of that era. The communities, especially the militant youth of that era, needed information on freedom, democracy and other ideologies. Such information could not be found in our libraries. The libraries were labelled apartheid structures. Hence most of them were targeted, burned and destroyed during the struggle for democracy. It was not easy to be a librarian then.....

The transition to democracy actually saved libraries and made it possible for them to be regarded as vehicles for empowerment and change. Today the image and role of libraries is where they were supposed to be... right at the heart of democracy, helping to build an informed nation.

In his address to the nation, on the occasion of the celebrations of a decade of freedom, our former President, Nelson Mandela, also referred to as the father of South African democracy, said "... as we celebrate this decade of freedom, we should keep our terrible past in mind, but refrain from using the memory to keep us shackled or chained to the past in a negative way. The memory should be as a joyous reminder of how far we have come and how much we have achieved. The memory should inspire us to say "never again" shall we, as a nation, allow such injustices to prevail... .."

3.2 Transformation

In the spirit of our new democracy, transformation is taking place in our libraries. Since democracy is a process and not an event, the changes are unfolding at a very slow pace. The restructuring and merging of libraries throughout the country indicate the commitment of our government to dismantling the apartheid legacy. Although progress towards providing each community with a library is slow due to funds being earmarked for basic problems like water, housing, poverty, unemployment, education and HIV/AIDS, people can access any public library for information. This is understandable since democracy has to improve the quality of life of all citizens. Libraries are now open and accessible to all. They will assist in unleashing the potential of individuals since they are often referred to as people's universities.

The librarians themselves had to change their mindset about their associations which were divided along racial lines. They are now united under one non-racial library association. LIASA is only seven years old but has made great strides in uniting the profession and moving us from isolation to a global partner through IFLA. We are benefiting much from international networking with other colleagues and other national associations. The establishment of NACLIS in South Africa is a major achievement, a beacon of hope for librarians and libraries. Through NACLIS we hope to lobby the government to regard and fund libraries as a vital link to democracy and a vehicle for development.

In their new role as promoters of democracy, librarians are upholding the country's constitution which laid the foundation for a democratic and open society. They are also upholding the Bill of Rights which states that "...Everyone has a right to freedom of expression... Every one has a right of access to information held by the state or another person...." Libraries have opened their doors to all citizens. But the rainbow nation has diverse information needs, eleven official languages and attaches great significance to the freedom and rights of individuals. Meeting all those needs and empowering the majority of the nation, who were never exposed to libraries, to become informed citizens, is a tall order for librarians. But it must be done in order to enable them to participate meaningfully in the democratic process.

Democracy in South Africa will become a hollow process if its citizens are not informed. There is a need for the development of public and school libraries. Librarians should speak in one voice when it comes to the rights of the democratic. Indeed if everyone has

a right of access to information, then they have a right to libraries which provide that information. As librarians we should educate the nation about democracy. Since democracy is a government based on the will of the people, then the people should speak about the importance of libraries so that the government delivers.

Library facilities in urban and rural communities are not enough to cater for everyone. Unfortunately inadequate funding for our libraries is a major challenge and will remain so for years to come until our democracy has borne fruit and eradicated basic problems such as poverty, housing, education, unemployment etc. We should however remember that these problems accumulated over many years of apartheid and cannot be solved within a decade of democracy.

3.3 WHAT IS DEMOCRACY?

No political concept is more used and misused than democracy. It is often interpreted to by individuals and governments to suit their ends. But the term democracy is derived from the Greek words demos (the people) and kratos (power). Literally, democracy means power of the people. It is a form of government of the people, by the people, for the people. Democracy features a constitutional government where the majority rules, a belief in individual freedom, equal rights for all, freedom of expression, freedom of choice and political freedom.

4. THE VITAL LINK: LIBRARIES AND DEMOCRACY

According to Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights:

“Everyone has a right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

The Bill of Rights in South Africa embraces this declaration It states that: “ Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes freedom of the press and other media; freedom to receive and impart ideas; freedom for artistic creativity and academic freedom and freedom of scientific research”. It continues to state that, “Every one has a right of access to any information held by the state and any information held by another person and is required for the exercise or protection of any rights.

Our Bill of Rights and the United Nations declaration confirms that....” freedom to hold and impart opinions” constitutes the one side of freedom of expression while the other

side consists of freedom and access to information. These two fundamental principles are the pillars of democracy. In a democratic society people are empowered, through information, to exercise their rights and duties as citizens. Libraries as social institutions are in a position to provide such civic information and assist in enabling the citizens to enjoy their democracy.

An informed nation is vital to democracy. People cannot vote intelligently if they do not understand both sides of issues. Libraries empower people by contributing to an informed and educated electorate who will be able to participate fully in the democratic processes. They build communities, nourish creativity, preserve culture, provide access to information and safeguard our intellectual freedom, thus keeping our democracy healthy. Democracy requires a free flow of information. Libraries are there to provide the information needed. The number of libraries in a country usually reflects the extent to which the government values knowledge, truth, justice, books and culture. The link between libraries and democracy is evident. Librarians are therefore agents of democracy, their work promotes and strengthens democracy.

5. LIBRARIANS AS AGENTS OF DEMOCRACY

5.1 WHO ARE AGENTS OF DEMOCRACY?

Agents of democracy are people who promote the values of democracy, namely freedom, respect for human dignity and human rights, equality, freedom of expression, intellectual freedom, and freedom of access to information. Since the success of democracy depends on an educated, informed nation, librarians assist in creating such a nation. They open their libraries to everyone to facilitate public dialogue, freedom to read and freedom to view. Free unlimited access to knowledge, thought, culture and information are cornerstones of democracy. As agents of democracy, librarians promote, preserve, support and serve democracy. South Africa needs committed, visionary and vigilant librarians like you, to function as agents of democracy.

5.2 ROLE OF LIBRARIANS AS AGENTS OF DEMOCRACY

5.2.1 ASSIST IN CREATING AN INFORMED NATION

Librarians who are agents of democracy prepare citizens for a lifetime of political participation. They are flexible and provide information and opportunities for dialogue, making the library accessible for civic meetings where citizens can share similar interests and concerns.

5.2.2 OFFER TRAINING

Apart from providing access to information, the agents of democracy offer information literacy training, assisting citizens to identify and evaluate information essential to making decisions that affect the way they live, work and govern themselves.

5.2.3 BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Librarians in a democratic country should strive to bridge the gap between the information rich and the information poor. Information equity should become their priority. They have to lobby the government to ensure that all schools and community libraries have electronic access to information.

5.2.4 MANAGING CHANGE

In order to promote democracy, librarians need to embrace change and use it as an opportunity for growth and development. They have to work hand in hand with LIASA and the government to start initiatives like the national virtual library and multipurpose community centres and information services.

5.2.5 PROMOTION OF INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM

As agents of democracy, librarians are uniquely qualified to promote intellectual freedom and fight censorship. They speak up against censorship whenever it occurs and refuse to remove material from their libraries on grounds of political or religious views.

5.2.6 ADVOCACY

Librarians have to go an extra mile to lobby the government through their library associations and NACLIS to ensure that every community and school has access to a library or information resource centre. Libraries are also agents of democracy and should be treated by the government as partners.

5.2.7 OPEN ACCESS TO LIBRARIES

As agents of democracy, they open their libraries to everyone irrespective of race, age, sex, religion or political views. They tend to assume professional neutrality and do not let their personal beliefs or opinions interfere with their services.

5.2.8 PROMOTE CULTURE OF READING

The culture of reading among blacks in South Africa has been compromised through lack of exposure to libraries. As agents of democracy, they should be innovative and build a culture

of a reading nation. " Born to read" initiatives should be extended to rural areas as well. Libraries should become "places of healing" and their collections inspire hope for the future.

5.2.9 BUILD BALANCED COLLECTIONS

Librarians support democracy by building balanced library collections with diverse subject matter to meet diverse needs. Librarians foster and encourage open discussion and unrestricted debate. As agents of democracy, librarians preserve the cultural heritage of the democratic countries they serve, so that the coming generations can profit from past experiences.

5.2.10 SUPPORT RESEARCH

Academic and special librarians have a special role to play in a democratic country. As agents of democracy they support research by facilitating retrieval and use. Research is also vital to democracy.

As agents of democracy, librarians uphold, strengthen and promote the democratic ideals of our society. This is possible because libraries are the only institutions that make knowledge, ideas and information freely available to citizens.

6. CHALLENGES FACING LIBRARIANS AS AGENTS OF DEMOCRACY

6.1 INADEQUATE FUNDING

Libraries in South Africa are faced with the challenge of acquiring the adequate funding needed to level the playing fields. Funds are also not enough to purchase adequate materials needed to meet the diverse needs of the nation.

6.2 INADEQUATE LIBRARY FACILITIES

Up to now, most communities and schools do not have libraries. The situation in rural areas is worse. Librarians are unable to meet the aspirations and expectations of citizens.

6.3 INADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE

The reality of the digital divide is a challenge facing libraries in South Africa. The gap between the information rich and the information poor is widening as technology advances. Most libraries lack the infrastructure to provide internet access.

6.4 LIBRARIES NOT A PRIORITY

Libraries are not a priority on the national agenda since the country is still faced with eradicating pressing issues like poverty, unemployment, HIV/AIDS etc. Libraries are still regarded as soft targets for budget cuts.

6.5 LACK OF TRAINING IN DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

Librarians still struggle with their new role as agents for democracy. Most of us have not been exposed to supporting the needs of a democratic society through libraries. Fortunately we can learn from colleagues abroad who are making headlines in fighting censorship.

6.6 DIVERSE NEEDS

Because of the inequalities of the past, information needs are diverse and librarians may find it difficult to meet all of them adequately. The eleven official languages also means all languages should be catered for in all libraries. Inadequate funding may make this impossible. But the greatest challenge is for libraries to adapt to the different needs of communities in rural and urban areas.

6.7 LACK OF NATIONAL LIBRARY COORDINATION AND COOPERATION

Libraries in South Africa function separately according to different types. Lack of a national library network based on agreed standards of service is a challenge. It could facilitate access to information for all.

6.8 CENSORSHIP

Fighting censorship to promote freedom of expression is our role. We have to take the courage to speak up in defence of intellectual freedom.

6.9 LIBRARY ADVOCACY

We still have a lot to learn about library advocacy. Through LIASA and NACLIS we can lobby the government to regard us as partners in the promotion of democracy and fund us as such.

Despite the above challenges, librarians will continue to play a critical role in building an informed nation needed to contribute meaningfully to the democratic processes. These challenges should energize us to work hard towards the development of libraries for all

communities and schools because libraries will safeguard our freedom and keep our democracy healthy

CONCLUSION:

Our special role as agents of democracy touches on the core of librarianship. We are uniquely qualified and placed to promote intellectual freedom and fight censorship. It takes noble, courageous, committed librarians like you to function as agents of democracy. It involves standing up and campaigning for the right to read, hear and view. It will sometimes mean challenging the government to protect the principles of democracy namely, " ...the right to freedom of expression...freedom to hold opinions without interference.... And freedom to seek, receive and impart ideas through any media regardless of frontiers..." This is the ideal librarians should stand for. An ideal we should never compromise. Let us rise to the challenges of our democracy.

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