Public Libraries in the UK – History and Values

Public library interior, Woking.
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1. Historical development of public libraries, and library "faith"

Introduction

Public libraries have existed for a comparatively short space of time in terms of human history. In the twenty-first century it is difficult to conceive of any large community in the developed world that does not have at least one public library; yet this was the case for the majority of the citizens of Victorian Britain. The network that currently exists in the UK owes its existence to a number of individuals who either led the way by altruistic provision of a library for their local community, or through their campaigning for a national network through parliament. As Black suggests, "Proposals for a truly free library service did not appear overnight: they emerged on the back of a healthy tradition of independent library provision made by a diverse range of social, political and educational institutions" (Black, 1996: p.26).

The early antecedents

The origin of public libraries, as in libraries freely open to members of the public to consult the materials within, can be traced back long before the 1850 Act of Parliament that established the principle in law in England. The publishing revolution brought about by Johannes Gutenberg and his development of movable type took the production of books into a new era. While still relatively expensive items well into the nineteenth century, the ability to mass produce texts meant that they were more readily available for purchase by benefactors or groups who wished to create libraries for their local communities. As Kelly has discussed, the term public library had been used widely from the seventeenth century to refer to libraries open to the public that had been endowed by such benefactors (Kelly, 1977: 4).

The first public library, as in a library freely accessible to the general public without restrictions, is commonly attributed to the library set up in the Free Grammar School in Coventry in 1601, which existed until 1913/14 (Minto, 1932: 22). Subsequent libraries were created in Norwich (1608), Bristol (1615), Leicester (1632) and the famous Chetham Library in Manchester in 1653 (Murison, 1971: 19). No one model accounts for all of these early libraries, as they were a mixture of endowed, subscription, and parochial libraries. While the discussion below will focus on each type in its own right, it must be noted that some of the antecedents were actually a combination of library types. For instance, it was not uncommon for an endowed library to also be a parochial library due to the materials purchased for it or bequeathed to it by the benefactor. Kelly summarises this potential confusion well:

> We thus have three main types of non-publicly maintained libraries: institutional libraries, endowed libraries, and subscription libraries. These three methods may be combined in various ways, e.g. a library may be created by endowment and maintained by subscription, or created by an institution and maintained by endowment, and so forth, but these three main principles are worth keeping in mind (Kelly, 1966: 7)

ENDOWED LIBRARIES

An endowed library was a library that existed due to the generosity of an individual or individuals. This often occurred as a bequest on the death of the sponsor; however, it could also be an endowment in their lifetime.

The previously mentioned Chetham Library in Manchester is perhaps one of the most well know examples of an endowed library. Humphrey Chetham, the benefactor, was a Lancashire wool-factor and money-lender who bequeathed a sum of £1000 pounds to set up a library in his

name for the use of the local community. By 1826 the library had in excess of 14,000 volumes available for consultation.

Another example is that of Stirling's Library in Glasgow, formed in 1791 from a bequest by Walter Stirling, a city merchant. This library existed in various locations near its original site until 2002 when it moved into the basement of the Gallery of Modern Art and formed the basis of the library there. An additional later illustration from Glasgow is that of the Mitchell Library, created at the bequest of Stephen Mitchell, a local tobacco baron. He left the sum of £70,000 to build and stock a library for the people of Glasgow.

PARISH AND OTHER ECCLESIASTICAL LIBRARIES

Access to written knowledge in the middle ages and beyond was problematic for most citizens. The only realistic model for access was among the various institutions of the church, and as Kelly states almost every conceivable kind of ecclesiastical community had a collection of books for its clergy and other learned community members to consult (Kelly, 1966: 9). These early libraries, housed in monasteries, churches, and universities, were immensely protective of the valuable materials within, and this was not merely in terms of cultural value. Books before the invention of the printing press were extraordinarily valuable commodities as production by hand was a task that was extremely time consuming. The old image of libraries with books chained to large lecterns is a negative but accurate one, and many books were kept under strict lock and key by institutions desperate to ensure they would not lose their precious collections. Such libraries were, however, hugely influential in the intellectual development of Europe, and also the development of cataloguing standards.

Parish libraries were a natural smaller extension of the ecclesiastical libraries that had been built up over the middle ages. Created primarily for ecclesiastical purposes by local clergymen or benefactors, their primary purpose in most cases was for the continuing education of the clergy. This was an essential component of the clergyman's role in his community, the ability to dispense knowledge and wisdom. However, to say there was one model for parochial libraries would be incorrect. While many purely contained religious texts, others contained works on other topics such as history. That said, the growth in literacy meant that even libraries that were predominantly based around theological collections still offered readers the chance to build on their literacy skills and spread a reading culture within communities: "Though the books in such libraries seem to us dauntingly theological, it would be wrong to assume that they were never read" (Kelly, 1966: 18).

SUBSCRIPTION LIBRARIES

Subscription libraries were libraries that offered access to members for a fee, normally an annual payment. Kelly offers three models of subscription libraries that were popular:

- Private subscription libraries
- Book clubs
- Circulating libraries (Kelly, 1966: 26)

Britain's industrial growth also led to a desire for knowledge among those classes who were prospering from the industrial revolution and the wealth it was creating. The industrial centres especially saw a rise in the number of groups that were formed around intellectual discourse, evidenced by the formation of groups like the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society in

1781 (Kelly and Kelly, 1977: 47). Such groups offered the opportunity to pool resources and create a collection of materials for members to borrow.

The earliest examples of what were dubbed *Gentlemen's subscription libraries* were found in Scotland in the mid 18th century, with libraries at Dumfries, Kelso and Ayr of prominence (Kelly and Kelly, 1977: 50). The London Library remains one of the finest examples of a working subscription library. Formed in 1841, it numbered some of the greatest literary figures of the Victorian era as members; Thomas Carlyle, William Thackeray, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens all being members in the early days of the library. To this day luminaries from all aspects of the literary world count themselves as members.

MECHANICS INSTITUTES

Another important development in shaping the notion of public libraries was the spread of Mechanics' Institute libraries. These were institutions formed in local communities for mechanics, engineers and other working people to offer a means of sharing texts on professional subjects, as well as offering lectures and courses on matters of interest. The roots of the movement can be traced back to the work of Professor George Birkbeck of the Andersonian Institute (now the University of Strathclyde) who began in 1800 to provide lectures on the 'mechanical arts' for the local mechanics in Glasgow, which inevitably led to a library being formed to support the subjects under study. These lectures subsequently led to the formation of the first Mechanics' Institute in 1821 in Glasgow and the movement spread nationwide, with 400 such bodies in the UK by 1849 and over 700 by 1863 (McColvin, 1956: 22).

An account of the services on offer in the Glasgow Mechanics' Institute is given by Hendry where he tells us that the "institution was founded by the mechanics of Glasgow, for obtaining instruction in the useful branches of knowledge, especially those connected with the arts, and was opened to all classes of the community" (Hendry, 1974: 21). Membership of the Institute was available for a fee of 4 shillings which allowed attendance at lectures and courses in topics such as chemistry and mechanics. Membership also allowed borrowing rights to a collection of over 6700 volumes (Hendry, 1974: 21).

As well as forming the basis for many of the public libraries formed in the late Victorian era some modern universities in the UK were also influenced by mechanics' institutes including Heriot-Watt University, University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST), the University of Strathclyde, and Birkbeck College, now part of the University of London and named in honour of George Birkbeck who continued his adult education work after moving to London. Their emphasis on access to books for their members was a crucial part in the raising of the educational attainment of the working classes, and led inevitably to the demand from some quarters for a more robust system of rate supported libraries for local communities. The role of mechanics' institutes in creating a culture of learning among many in the working classes was a major catalyst in the development of publicly supported libraries in the UK.

OTHER ANTECEDENTS

In the early part of the 19th century an ambitious plan was formulated by the Reverend Samuel Brown, a Minister in the Scottish county of East Lothian. His plan was to formulate a series of "itinerating libraries" whereby 50 books would be placed in each village of a county, and after a period of 2 years this stock would be circulated to other villages, and would continue to move

round on a 2-year basis to be replaced by a collection from another village. He began his plan in 1817, and by 1835 there were over 2000 volumes circulating around 47 libraries (Allen et al, 1978: 269). While the purposes behind such a project was to provide appropriate textbooks on religious subjects, the libraries also contained material of a "plain and popular nature" on topics as diverse as the arts and sciences (Allen et al, 1978: 269).

The Public Library movement

Public libraries can still to this day be seen as social education vehicles for their communities; while they were not designed to offer formal education akin to schools or colleges, they have always formed a self-improvement function for many of their users, and as such can be seen in light of the great social improvement movement that was a popular cause of the Victorian middle classes.

The desire to create a more formal system of public libraries was driven by several factors, ranging from social to economic. The Industrial Revolution had transformed British society from a largely agrarian one, to one based around vast urban centres, where working class communities sprung up to support the major evolving industries, such as mining and cotton spinning. This necessary evil for economic development brought with it large numbers of people with little to do outside of their working hours, and concern grew within the middle classes that the lifestyles chosen by many of the working classes were utilizing their leisure time in ways that were not conducive to their own wellbeing or that of society.

There was also great concern in the middle of the eighteenth century that Britain was falling behind Europe in terms of its provision of libraries freely accessible for the general public. The notion of large cities providing an accessible collection of books for the general public was common in Europe, with Italy, France and Germany all leading the way in provision (Minto, 1932: 80). As will be seen below these points were made prominently in the evidence gathered by the Select Committee examining the need for an Act of Parliament related to public libraries.

A precursor to the 1850 Act was the 1835 attempt by John Silk Buckingham to present a Public Institutions Bill, aimed at allowing local boroughs to levy a tax to create museums and libraries; however, this failed to make it to the statute books. Buckingham was an advocate of temperance, and wished to create spaces other than public houses for workers to frequent in their leisure time, thus his ideas incorporated not only the creation of libraries, but also other public spaces supported by the local community.

Buckingham's efforts, however, influenced two of the leading figures in the path towards the 1850 Act, the Members of Parliament, William Ewart and Joseph Brotherton.   The initial success of the pair came with the passing of the 1845 Museums Act which "empowered boroughs with a population of 10,000 or more to raise a ½ d rate for the establishment of museums" (Kelly and Kelly, 1977: 77).   This Act can be seen as a major influence in the road to a Public Libraries Act. The pair later joined forces with an assistant at the then British Museum Library, Edward Edwards, who had previously published pamphlets on the potential of public libraries to enhance communities. Edwards was "a self-taught former bricklayer...passionately convinced of the value and significance of libraries" (Sturges, 1996: 30).

Their efforts in advocacy paid off in 1849 with the formation of a Select Committee charged with investigating the state of free public library provision. Ewart and Brotherton both became members of the Select Committee, and Edward Edwards was a key witness before it, "and, very naturally, his message was that public libraries were conducive to the development of a better educated and better informed populace" (Sturges, 1996: 30).

MOVING TO THE ACT

The Select Committee of Parliament charged with gathering evidence for evaluating the, "best Means of Extending the establishment of LIBRARIES freely open to the Public, especially in large towns, in Great Britain and Ireland" began its deliberations in March 1849.

The opening paragraphs of the Select Committee Report lament the fact that the great scholars of the time who hailed from Britain were very often challenged in their work by limited access to scholarly works. While bemoaning the fact the historians such as Gibbons, Roscoe and Graham were unable to satisfy their research needs in British libraries, it suggested that their foreign counterparts were not so disadvantaged:

> While we learn that, more than half a century ago, the first step taken by a foreign writer was to consult a Public Library on the subject of his studies or composition; we find that no such auxiliary was at the service of the British intellect (House of Commons, 1849: iii.)

The Committee's final report ran to 450 pages of passionate evidence extolling the virtues of public libraries in large towns and cities, and constantly reinforcing the benefits continental Europeans enjoyed that their British counterparts did not. Statistics were presented showing that the major cities of Britain's European rivals contained several publicly accessible libraries, with 7 in Paris, 4 in Dresden, 2 in Berlin, 3 in Vienna and 6 in Florence (House of Commons, 1849: iv). The statistics for the countries as a whole were even starker, with France attributed with 107 libraries, Prussia 44, Austria 48, and Bavaria 17.

The Report was also at pains to suggest the social transformation that could occur with the provision of a library service. Citing the example of Peebles Library in Scotland it suggested that the library had "promoted literary taste and temperate and moral habits among the inhabitants" (House of Commons, 1849: vii). Another benefit that would be accrued from the formation of public libraries, it was argued, would revolve around steering the public away from frivolous or immoral works of literature: "It is also truly observed that the establishment of such depositories of standard literature would lessen, or perhaps entirely destroy, the influence of frivolous, unsound or dangerous works (House of Commons, 1849: viii).   In closing this argument, the question is asked:

> "Shall we therefore abandon the people to the influence of a low, enfeebling, and often pestilential literature, instead of enabling them to breathe a more, elevated, and more congenial atmosphere?"(House of Commons, 1849: vii)

Even with the 450-page Report produced by the Select Committee, the Bill did not receive an easy ride through Parliament. Objections were in several areas. Firstly, there were those MPs who objected to the tax-based element of the proposals, but others objected to the potential for lecture rooms in the libraries to lead to increased social agitation if they were used for political purposes (Kelly and Kelly, 1977: 80).

The Public Libraries Bill was presented to Parliament in February 1850, and became law with the granting of Royal Assent in August of the same year. The provisions of the Act were that town councils administering over a population of more than 10,000 people were now able to levy a ½ penny rate to provide the accommodation for and maintenance of a library and/or museum (Kelly, 1977: 15). Crucially, however, the tax could only be levied for the provision of the library building, its upkeep, and to hire staff. It could not be used to buy library materials such as the books necessary to lend to the public, for which the library would have to rely on the philanthropy of the local community. For a town to adopt the Act, the question of whether to support a public library had to be put to a vote of the people and a two thirds majority received in favour of the motion. The 1850 Act applied only to towns in England and Wales, and thus in the summer of 1853 an Act was passed that extended the provisions of the 1850 Act to Scotland and Ireland.

Early public library development

The same arguments against the merits of the Act were utilised by objectors within the local communities themselves when charged with voting for the creation of a library. In Scotland, notably Edinburgh and Glasgow resisted early adoption of public libraries, and in England the proposal was rejected on more than one occasion by several boroughs, including Islington, Bath and Hull (Kelly and Kelly, 1977: 81).

Norwich, continuing its leadership in such things from the 17th century, was the first local council to adopt the Act with a vote of 150 for the motion, and only 7 against, although due to the ambition of the project they instigated the service did not open until 1857 (Minto, 1932: 96). The first public library to open under the auspices of the Act was in Winchester, which adopted and opened the service in 1851 (Kelly and Kelly, 1977: 88). Edward Edwards returned to prominence in 1852 as the librarian of the first large municipal library adopted under the Act, in Manchester. The opening of the library was a stellar affair, with orators present including Dickens and Thackeray (Kelly and Kelly, 1977: 89).

It is fair to say however that early take up of the Act was generally poor, especially in London, which was ironically one of the main urban targets of the legislation in the first place. Even over 30 years after the first Public Libraries Act, there was no real national network to speak of. A Parliamentary return in 1885 indicated that only 23% of the British population were served by a public library, 23% in England 15% in Wales, and only 8% in Scotland (Kelly, 1977: 122). Many arguments have been posited as to why this was the case, and Sykes suggests that the very notion of the free library rather than being a selling point was actually a negative in the minds of many potential users. He argues that, "In appearance, location and smell many were associated with that very condition so abhorred by the bulk of the working class – charity" (Sykes, 1979: 19). Sykes goes on to suggest that the 1850 Act was actually too early in terms of its introduction and that a more successful outcome would have occurred had it been introduced 20 years later (p.19).

Yet despite this, by the end of the First World War, the numbers had risen significantly to 602, from a number totalling 125 in 1886 (Kelly, 1977: 122).   The 1850 Act was amended several times over the succeeding decades, most notably to incorporate changes to the population levels where they could be created (reduced to 5,000 in 1855 and removed entirely in 1866) and to raise the levy to one penny. This legislation, while on paper enhancing the number of

towns and villages able to adopt a public library, also led to many communities creating them that simply did not have the population to sustain them in a fit state.

The penny rate which has been argued, "did more to retard the progress of public libraries than anything else," (Minto, 1932: 125) was finally abolished with the passing of the 1919 Public Libraries Act.   This Act was a significant influence on the network of public libraries, for other reasons:

- It allowed County Councils to establish library services across their entire geographic domain
- It permitted existing town libraries to hand over their administration to the local authority

As a result, many small libraries that had existed solely under the funding of their local community, and in isolation, became part of a local network of libraries. Thus the 1919 Act was a first step towards a professionally managed national network.   However, it was not the panacea for the problems of variance in service provision across the country, and it would take until the McColvin Report (discussed below) for the inadequacies to be widely debated.

PHILANTHROPY AND GROWTH

As significant a figure as anyone in terms of the development of public libraries was the industrialist Andrew Carnegie. A Scottish born émigré who made his wealth in the steel industry in Philadelphia, he spent a large portion of his fortune in philanthropic works, and his investment in public libraries in North America, Britain, Australia and New Zealand transformed the lives of many communities through his Carnegie Trust. He explained in his own inimitable style why he chose to spend his fortune in this way: "No millionaire will go wrong in his search for one of the best forms for the use of his surplus who chooses to establish a free library in any community that is willing to maintain and develop it" (Carnegie quoted in Aitken, 1971: 76).

Some of the sums allocated to communities to build libraries were significant, even by standards of today. The exercise began in Carnegie's hometown of Dunfermline, Fife where an £8,000 grant was provided to create a free library, which opened in 1883. In total, throughout the world, Carnegie's generosity funded the development of some 3,000 libraries, an incredible gift to humanity. As well as this influence, the Carnegie Trust also funded research into library use with its 1915 study into the position of public libraries in England and Wales. The Trust was also a major catalyst in promoting inter-library cooperation and lending through the funding of regional catalogue development.   Other philanthropists were significant contributors to the advancement of public libraries in Britain. John Passmore Edwards was central to the development of libraries in both London and Cornwall, and in Glasgow, as previously discussed, a notable contribution was made by tobacco baron Stephen Mitchell who bequeathed a gift to the city that resulted in the development of the Mitchell Library.   To this day many of the finest and oldest public library buildings in the UK owe their existence to the philanthropic gestures of others. The investment in public library buildings in the late Victorian and early Edwardian period went a long way to installing the infrastructure we now take for granted.

THE MCCOLVIN REPORT AND POST-WAR DEVELOPMENTS

The publication of *The Public Library System of Great Britain*, or the McColvin Report, as it came to be known, set the case for a realignment of public library services. The report was

published in 1942 and attacked the variance in quality of library services across the country, with particular emphasis on rural libraries. McColvin was highly critical of what he saw as a fragmented structure, and he advocated larger administrative units being constructed to look after multiple libraries; a reduction from 604 library authorities UK wide, to just 93 (McColvin, 1942, p.149-157). This was a crucial point, as the variances in quality and service were inevitable with the huge differences in populations served by libraries; while some served populations in the thousands, others like metropolitan services had to cater for numbers in excess of a million. McColvin's belief was that only large structures could deliver the range of services modern libraries required to provide for their users, such as children's services, and efficient and effective reference services. Indeed, in terms of reference services it became clear that the large city authorities began to develop some outstanding provision in this area due to their size and organisation, with several including Manchester, Glasgow and Liverpool developing superb collections of journals and reference materials that smaller authorities could not replicate. This led to many of the major city reference libraries serving not only as reference hubs for their own community, but also being called upon by smaller authorities to answer questions when their own resources could not meet the needs of users.

McColvin's goal, however, was not a navel-gazing lament for the current inadequacies, but a focus on what the future could be for the public library service, and a call for central government to play their part in the funding of libraries by the provision of grants. He was a believer in the potential of the public library service to transform communities if properly delivered and managed, and this passion was evident in his report as he considered what he believed to be unacceptable variances in quality throughout the UK.

The report was not only an overview of the current state of play in libraries, but it was also a motivating tool for a generation of librarians. As Black has suggested this idealistic report, "resurrected the burning faith in the importance of self-realisation through the public library which had marked the discourses of the service's Victorian pioneers" (Black, 2000: 97). Published as it was during the Second World War the report hit a note within a society ready for radical change post-war, the kind of radical change that brought about a transformation to a Labour government, and the development of a National Health Service. As such public libraries became, if not a major strand of the emerging welfare state, a large-scale example of the principles of welfarism (Black, 2001: 111).

In his exhaustive consideration of the impact of the report Whiteman summarises that its central message, "remains of long-term significance" (1986: 181). For him the key legacies of the report are its focus on the transformational qualities of the public library for its citizens, and its notion that only large well organized authorities can deliver the range of services necessary.

McColvin also discussed the nature of the workforce of the public library, advocating a more formal approach to the training and qualifications of librarians serving in the public sector. The qualifications for librarians were administered by the Library Association, formed in 1877. Perhaps the most pivotal moment in its early history however was the receipt it's Royal Charter in 1898 which gave it the status as the "supreme arbiter of all matters concerned with professional library practice" but also crucially gave the association sole responsibility:

- To promote whatever tends to the improvement of the position and qualifications for librarians

- To hold examinations in librarianship and to issue certificates of efficiency (Bramley, 1981: 29).

McColvin proposed a two tier category for library staff, namely professional and non-professional. Professional staff would preferably be university graduates, but would at least bear the Higher School Certificate. Progression to professional librarian status would be related to them successfully undertaking a two-year full-time course at an authorised library school (Whiteman, 1986: 97). On consideration of the recommendations the Library Association (LA) proposed a set of criteria that largely mirrored those set out by McColvin, although graduate entry was played done somewhat more than in the original report. A key strategy of both McColvin's and the LA's approaches was the establishment of a network if library schools covering the country, and this was perhaps the most crucial catalyst in moving the profession to a graduate profession, with the explosion in numbers in the late 1960s onwards and the recognition by the late 1970s that the majority of new entrants to the library profession were now coming via the graduate route, leading to a re-evaluation of the LA's qualifications system to assert that minimum requirement for entry to the professional register was a degree or equivalent .

The modern statutory context

The most significant development in the later part of the 20th century was the adoption of a new Act of Parliament for libraries, the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act, which came into force in April 1965. The most important component of this Act was that it made it a statutory obligation for a local authority to provide a "comprehensive and efficient" public library service for its community. With this came the power of the Secretary of State to oversee that the library services, and "superintend" their operations. A dramatic aspect of the Act was in the aforementioned powers it conferred on the Secretary of State to remove the right to be a library authority from any service deemed to be unacceptable in its performance. The Act made clear, however, that this was a scenario that should only take place in the most extreme circumstances.

This 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act remains the legislation for the delivery of public library services in England & Wales. In Scotland the legislation making public libraries a statutory service is the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 and strategic direction is provided by the Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC).

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

Local government reorganisation in the early 1970s and mid 1990s has also seen a significant impact on the way public library services have been delivered. The key issues to bear in mind relate to the impacts any iteration of local authority reorganisation have on the structure of the library service, namely:

Change in the geographic region the library authority serves: this often means that after reorganisation, specific libraries find themselves part of a new geographic grouping. For instance, in the 1996 reorganisation in Scotland, Glasgow City Council had its geographic boundaries redrawn, and several libraries were transferred to the new South Lanarkshire Council.

Change in the departmental structure of the local authorities: in recent reorganisations, departments have been merged together for multiple services. Therefore, it is now uncommon to find a department solely responsible for libraries, they would now often find themselves part of a larger department with overall responsibility for services as diverse as theatres, museums, libraries, education, or community services.

The implications of these changes are discussed more fully in Chapter nine of McMenemy (2008) *The Public Library*. London: Facet Publishing.

Conclusion

We can see, then, that the development of public libraries in the UK has been a case of historical trial and error, founded on the goodwill and commitment of many individuals and communities to arrive at a national model for delivery, and an expectation of service quality that is broadly universal. Essentially the 1850 Act rather than create a brand new network from scratch actually led to the formalisation of a pre-existing network of ad hoc libraries which were added to as the public library concept gained ground.

The public library network that now remains in the UK continues to be strong in numbers, with over 4,500 in existence when last counted (CILIP, 2007). This remains a significant investment in society from the public purse. Despite the controversies and challenges faced by the institutions, we can look back at the work of reformers such as Ewart, Brotherton and Edwards and acknowledge that their vision that started small has become a project of immense national pride. The modern nationally accountable professionally run network of public libraries would have been far beyond the visions of the early campaigners. McColvin has suggested that the most important aspect of the work of the reformers was that they inspired five key principles on which our modern understanding of public libraries is now enshrined:

1. That public libraries should be publicly funded
2. That they should be administered by public bodies and not private organisations or individuals
3. That they should be freely available to all members of the community
4. That they should embrace the needs and interest of all members of the community
5. That they should be free both financially and intellectually, and provide access to materials without bias or interference (McColvin, 1956: 24)

These principles underlie the basis of the modern public library service; however, in an age of austerity and a shrinking of the public sector they are increasingly coming come under challenge.

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Public library exterior, Manchester Central Library.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Manchester_Central_Library.jpg

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2. Public libraries – service for all?

Introduction

Public libraries are statutorily charged with providing their service to the entire community, essentially providing equity of access to their resources for all. Equity of access is about all members of a community having the right to use the information and books that they need regardless of their ability to afford them or without undue influence or prejudice from others who may wish them not to have access.

The right for anyone of any race, creed, or colour to access the collected knowledge of humankind is something that it is easy to take for granted, but ultimately that is the key role of the public library for its community. This is a key strand of the joint *IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto* which states that, "services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status (IFLA, 2004).

This piece will focus on:

- The broad notion of equity and freedom of access as a core mission of public libraries
- The professional challenges faced by the librarian in providing equity of access
- Services aimed at specific user communities to facilitate equity of access

Core values

Librarians pride themselves on being a profession that is happy to serve all library patrons, and defend their right to access materials. This is something that is enshrined in the professional codes of many of the associations that represent librarians across the world (ALA, 1995; ALIA, 2005; CILIP, 2005).

WRITINGS ON LIBRARY VALUES

Over the years attempts have been made to provide a core set of values for the profession of librarianship, and equity of access as a concept features prominently. The first major set of values set out were the *Five Laws of Library Science* espoused in 1931 by S.R. Ranganathan:

1. Books are for use.
2. For every reader, his or her book.
3. For every book, its reader.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. A library is a growing organism (Ranganathan, 1931)

While the terminology could be seen as historically grounded the principles provided are as relevant today as they were in 1931. Ranganathan has been interpreted exhaustively over the years since his five laws were first published, but a simple translation of them for the modern era might be:

1. we must encourage all potential users to access information;
2. regardless of creed or colour there is something a library has that will be of value to a user;
3. we must ensure that the way we organise and store the material is for the benefit of the user and not our own;
4. that we should continuously to add to the collections we make available to people and manage this accordingly.

At the heart of Ranganathan's laws are the universal notions of equity of access to, and availability of, information for all.

In recent years Michael Gorman has made an attempt to revisit the guiding principles and values of librarianship: he has identified 8 themes that he calls the enduring values, namely:

1. Stewardship
2. Service
3. Intellectual Freedom
4. Equity of Access
5. Privacy
6. Literacy and Learning
7. Rationalism
8. Democracy (Gorman, 2000)

Gorman's ethos mirrors that of Ranganathan, yet he articulates a fuller set of principles for the modern era. The themes of intellectual freedom and rationalism play to a world where both are continuously under threat.   Gorman's values are interesting because they combine a twin track of service delivery and professional influence; not merely the act of issuing a book or a piece of information, but knowing that, by doing so, you are contributing to a larger goal, be it the literacy of the individual, the intellectual freedom of the author, or the rationalism of society fighting against censorship.

The values and principles espoused by both Gorman and Ranganathan can be seen as central to the public library mission. In the specific context of public libraries, Usherwood has recently revisited the issue of equity from the point of view of his belief that services should be focusing on a breadth of material, to include both popular and high quality literature, in order to achieve equity of access (Usherwood, 2007).

Public library as social equaliser

In terms of equity the first thing the public library does is act as a social equaliser for access to books and information. Again it is easy to take for granted, but public libraries provide access to materials that many people cannot afford to buy themselves. For the voracious reader who borrows several titles per week, if they chose to purchase these it would be an expensive habit. Yet with the public library on their doorstep they can borrow titles without worrying about the expense.

Crucially this also relates to access to expensive items of information, such as encyclopaedias and other reference materials. Many of the best and most respected reference sources are truly only within the buying power of large institutions like libraries, and without them purchasing such materials for users it would be difficult for someone who could not afford the expense to be able to access these works.

PREJUDICE FREE

The selection of materials for users must be free from any bias or prejudice on the part of the librarian or others, if they are undertaking selection on the librarian's behalf. This is all the more vital when dealing with viewpoints from communities that may differ, since often religious and ethnic tension can lead to controversy in terms of specific texts or themes present in texts. The public library must offer a balanced collection that takes into account all viewpoints, even those that may be controversial or challenge orthodoxy. To not do so limits the potential reach of the library, but perhaps more importantly the ability of the users to broaden their horizons.

INDEPENDENCE OF SELECTION

This brings us to the issue of independence of selection.   A fundamental role of the librarian is to ensure that selection of materials is undertaken with the wider interests and needs of the community they serve in mind.

Clearly it is a positive policy to allow library users to request material to be purchased, and this is a common feature of all libraries, however the purchasing decision should be made independently by the librarian. This is for two main reasons:

- Value for money
- To ensure the purchase is appropriate

Titles requested may be overly expensive or may not meet the needs of the community in other ways, and the librarian is charged with making this decision in the best interests of the community.

PUBLIC LIBRARY AS HISTORICAL ARCHIVE

While it is not the statutory obligation of the public library to operate in the same capacity as a national library and gather the totality of experience and printed works produced in a specific country, it remains a truism that for many large library authorities that the central reference library operates as a de facto regional library, collecting important materials and building special collections of crucial local and regional importance. In addition, local branch libraries may well hold in their own local history collections material of a rare if not commercially valuable nature. It is important that this type of material is preserved for future generations, and thus public libraries must maintain a store where older material can be housed safely.

BREADTH OF CHOICE

An ongoing concern for librarians should be the goal of ensuring that users have access to as broad a range of material as is practicable. This is not always straightforward however. For instance, a limited budget can provide challenges for librarians who have the twin pressures of purchasing enough in demand material to satisfy user requests while also ensuring a collection that is representative of the cultural, educational and leisure needs of the community. This tension increases more in an environment where performance of the library is measured in terms of the number of book issues it can deliver. The temptation may be to buy material that is popular to ensure usage figures are robust.

Censorship

Censorship is an affront to a democratic nation and something that library associations across the world attempt to combat through their ethical policies, adhered to by members.   It can take several forms, from subtle pressure not to purchase material on a certain topic or by certain authors, or more overt campaigns by special interest groups or individuals within a community who wish their own moral viewpoint to be at the fore.

Censorship can also involve self-censorship, where a librarian errs on the side of caution so as not to offend or potentially make available material that may be illegal. Such an occurrence is not alien to the UK, as for 15 years between 1988 and 2003 (2000 in Scotland) it was illegal for a local authority to promote homosexuality. The specific law, Section 28 of the *Local Government Act 1988*, stated that a local authority, "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" which led to confusion amongst librarians as to what could be purchased and to subsequent problems in collection development for materials of interest to the gay and lesbian community. Clearly while the librarian risked breaking the law by purchasing some material that dealt with gay and

lesbian issues as a result of such a draconian piece of legislation, fear of doing so led to some self-censorship and erring on the side of caution, to the detriment of collection building and equal service to a large number of users.

Self-censorship can also occur for political reasons. In 1986 a bitter industrial dispute occurred between News International and the print trade unions, and as a result between 20 and 30 public library authorities, including major cities such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Sheffield refused to display copies of any newspapers published by News International (Ezard, 1986). Such a stance, while politically expedient for the political party in control of the public library service, is an affront to the notion of equity of access. It was also later deemed illegal in court in 1987 when in the case *R v London Borough of Ealing and others ex parte Times Newspapers* it was deemed to be an unlawful abuse of the 1964 *Public Libraries Act* because the decision was made purely on politics.

In the USA the American Library Association (ALA) has operated an annual Banned Books week since 1982 to draw attention to censorship across the country in libraries of all kinds (www.ala.org/bbooks/). As part of the campaign they issue a list of the most challenged books in the preceding year

Despite the UK and USA being two of the foremost liberal democracies in the world cries to restrict access to or ban altogether material deemed objectionable can and do occur.   It is therefore important that both as individual authorities and as a wider profession that public librarians are aware of such calls and able to address them proactively. As the ALA has reported, the majority of challenges to material go unreported, and as a result the decision on whether to restrict or ban also go unreported. Since the UK has no equivalent of Banned Books week it is difficult to estimate how large a problem this is, however the rise in influence and the resultant lobbying of religious and other special interest groups raises the potential for material to be challenged. IFLA's Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) have a website offering advice and resources on intellectual freedom including policy documents (http://www.ifla.org/faife/) that may be useful in such cases.

Social Inclusion

Perhaps the term that most librarians in the modern era would equate with equity of access is the phrase social inclusion. This is a term that has gained prominence in the UK since the election of the New Labour government in 1997. Early in its tenure it set up a Social Exclusion Unit which in 2006 became the Social Exclusion Task Force based in the Cabinet Office. The

remit of the Task Force is to focus on the most excluded people in society and ensure different government departments and other agencies work together to facilitate inclusion.   The Social Exclusion Task Force defines social exclusion as:

> a short–hand term for what can happen when people or areas have a combination of linked problems, such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime and family breakdown. These problems are linked and mutually reinforcing. Social exclusion is an extreme consequence of what happens when people don't get a fair deal throughout their lives, often because of disadvantage they face at birth, and this disadvantage can be transmitted from one generation to the next (Cabinet Office, 2008).

However social exclusion is about more than income, crime or education levels, it also relates to other barriers to accessing public services, such as geographical or physical barriers.   For instance, the challenges of delivering services to people in rural communities is an ongoing one, as in some cases local authorities cover geographic areas that span huge distances. To physically get the services to the people in these communities is a major challenge, and this is also the case for users with disabilities.

OPEN FOR ALL?

For an 18 month period between October 1998 and April 2000, a major research project was undertaken into how public libraries were contributing towards social inclusion. The findings of the report suggested that in a bid to be equitable, and having a "take it or leave it" approach to service provision where excluded people were give only the same consideration as all other users, that libraries were failing to achieve social inclusion (Muddiman et al, 2000).

The authors proposed that all levels of stakeholders needed to be more proactive in their approach to addressing exclusion, with specific programmes aimed at excluded communities. The public library would need to become "a far more proactive and interventionist institution" that it had been to achieve this (Muddiman et al, 2000: 59).

PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND EMPATHY

A recent major study funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and undertaken by a team at the Centre for the Public Library and Information in Society at the University of Sheffield investigated public library staff attitudes in England towards social inclusion policies and towards disadvantaged communities (Wilson and Birdi, 2008). The findings, "revealed a lack of clarity and understanding within public library services of what social exclusion means and its relationship with other social policy objectives, particularly within the access and equality agendas" (Wilson and Train, 2008: 105). In addition while 50% of respondents to a survey

indicated that they were familiar with national social inclusion policy, the qualitative data gathered by the researchers suggested that the real figure was much lower.

The research also revealed tensions within the public library system towards social inclusion policies, with a culture evident of a quick-fix approach to achieving targets in the area (Wilson and Train, 2008: 105). The researchers suggested major improvements in recruitment, training, and partnership working with appropriate stakeholders where necessary to plug the gaps that existed. Crucially they reiterated the point that a one-size fits all approach does not aid inclusion, just as Muddiman et al reported in 2000.

It would seem then that while public libraries have a clear identification with a mission towards social inclusion, research indicates that much work remains to be done to ensure this is the case.

Public library users

As discussed, public libraries are charged with serving every member of the community. This is a challenging goal for any service, public or private as to meet the needs of an entire community means being able to satisfy a myriad of diverse user needs and demands.

Let us consider in more detail the broad categories of users a public library strives to serve, and some service scenarios that may be appropriate for that user type:

- *Children and Young People*: services aimed at children and young people are some of the most vital provided by public library services across the world. The emphasis is on encouraging a reading habit within children from an extremely young age, and to develop their reading as they grow up.
- *Students*: while students are normally well served by the library of the institution they study in, public libraries are expected to provide services for any potential user who lives, works or studies in the area. This means that they must be responsive to the needs of the student population as much as is practicable. In a university town or city served by a public library this could mean a considerable user population whose needs must be understood and met where possible.
- *Unemployed adults*: the range of services that an unemployed adult may wish to access in their library is wide. As well as the traditional services on offer, such users may find access to the newspapers for job advertisements, any training or classes on offer within

the library premises, and any outreach programmes from other bodies looking to link the unemployed with external opportunities.

- *Working adults*: it could be said that reaching working adults is one of the most challenging aspects of public librarianship. Many adults who work simply cannot fit their life around the opening hours of their local public library. This raises issues for libraries who see a potentially large swathe of the population that they find difficulty in reaching.

- *Adults with disabilities*: the key considerations in providing services to people with disabilities are related to access to both the library building and the materials within.

- *Senior citizens*: arguably one of the easiest user groups to market to given the high proportion of senior citizens who frequent libraries, yet there is little specific focus on senior citizens as a group with their own special needs. The public library offers enormous potential for senior citizens to engage with the local community through reading groups and other organised events.

- *Community groups*: organisations within the community have a great deal to gain from the public library, and also a great deal to offer in terms of potential partnerships. Community groups can range from senior citizens or youth clubs, through to voluntary sector organisations, and each will have specific needs.

- *Businesses*: public libraries can offer direct access to information that local businesses may find useful for their operations, everything from access to newspapers, information on potential clients, through to market reports.

- *Schools*: the needs of schools differ from the needs of children as individual library users. While schools may well organise class visits to the library to engage with help for homework and the like it is important that public libraries also treat the child as an individual user and also seek to meet their needs outwith those that are educational.

- *Nurseries*: nursery groups are an excellent way of encouraging younger children to read and enjoy the library as a location. Public libraries can offer local nurseries and playgroups a venue for activities for children that can alleviate the pressures they may have on their facilities.

REACHING EXCLUDED USERS
Targeting services towards specific user demographics poses challenges for library services.
As Muddiman et al state:

The particular needs of specific excluded social groups and communities are different. It is not possible, in the end, to reduce them and try to find one universal solution for all excluded communities (Muddiman et al, 2000: 66).

As discussed above, exclusion can encompass physical, social, and geographical barriers against access, and some of the specific initiatives employed by public libraries to combat such barriers are discussed below.

Services to ethnic minorities

Public libraries have offered pathways into the social life and culture of Britain for minority communities and immigrants since their inception. Equally public libraries offer the ideal venue for members of ethnic minorities to know that society values their culture through access to works in their mother tongue, or related to their religion or culture.

The role of a librarian supporting ethnic minorities is a challenging one, since depending on the community there may be numerous languages and cultures. In addition, immigration is a fluid process, and with the opening up of European borders to the east immigrants from the former Soviet republics have moved to the UK in large numbers to find work. As people who live in the community and pay taxes they have a legal and moral right to expect library services be provided for them.

Librarians supporting ethnic minority communities need to build partnerships with community groups and other specialist organisations to ensure they can build collections that represent the cultures of the communities served by the library. They will also be concerned to ensure that as much documentation as practicable is translated for users who do not speak English as a first language.

ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES

The *Welcome to your Library* project was an initiative that ran from 2003 to 2007 and aimed to connect public library services with immigrant and refugee communities. It was funded through the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and co-ordinated through London Libraries Development Agency.

As part of its remit it developed a good practice guide aimed at informing public library staff about the issues inherent in dealing with refugee and asylum seeker communities, and the policies they needed to be aware of in providing services. It also offered advice and contact information for further information on service development for this community (Vincent, 2007).

SERVICES TO USERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

It is now a legal requirement for public services in the UK to ensure where reasonable that they provide access to services to people with disabilities. This can be easier said than done in some libraries housed within old buildings that are difficult to make accessible. Physical infrastructure improvements are the most visible way of ensuring disabled users can gain access, including ramps for wheelchairs, and perhaps elevators for libraries that have multiple floors.

ICTs bring other challenges and assistive technologies offer the opportunity to make previously inaccessible services ICT-based accessible to disabled users. There are numerous types of assistive technologies related to several ICT uses which are discussed below:

- *Pointing Devices*: Many disabled users have problems navigating a desktop using a traditional mouse.   The most common solution to this problem is a tracker ball, which is a large ball housed in a mechanism that allows the full hand to navigate the cursor on screen.   This also means that users who may have arthritis can also use this instead of a mouse to operate the desktop of the computer.

- *Alternative keyboards*: Similarly, to the mouse, many disabled users find real difficulty in using a traditional keyboard. Alternatives exist that provide a real solution to this problem. The key element in most alternative keyboards are larger keys, but some use coloured keys as well as using an alternative to the QWERTY key set up. This is normally achieved by simply putting the keys in standard alphabetical order, making the keys easier to find for someone not familiar with QWERTY.

- *Software Solutions*: For visually-impaired users the problem is reading what is on the screen and also typing text on to the screen. Solutions exist for this, the most famous for screen reading software being JAWS. JAWS narrates the contents of the screen to the user, even highlighting where an image appears and where a hyperlink appears on a page.   The use of such software makes good web page design all the more vital, as sloppily captioned links or images will mean the software does not recognise the image or link for what it is.   Speech recognition software can be used to allow the user to dictate to the computer and allow the dictation to be translated into text on the computer screen.

The challenge in the uptake of assistive technologies is in terms of the costs of the solutions.   It is common to find only a handful of machines in a library equipped with the technologies necessary, both software and hardware driven. How provision of such technologies is

accomplished is obviously a decision for local authorities to consider themselves, but at the least it seems sensible that at least one tracking ball and large keyboard should be available in every public library in the UK.

HOUSEBOUND SERVICES

Housebound services are a crucial tool in facilitating social inclusion of library services. For many citizens who are unable to physically visit the library such services offer an important outlet for them to access reading materials.

The common model is for users to register with the library service and to receive a regular (normally monthly) visit from a volunteer or library staff member who will bring books. The selection of titles occurs via the user completing a questionnaire based on their tastes and library staff putting together a range of titles for them based on their stated preferences.

Conclusions

It is essential for the modern public library service to be as inclusive as possible. The concerns raised by the Muddiman et al study force the profession to examine how accurate beliefs in the fundamental inclusiveness of libraries have been. As Train et al have suggested:

> The librarian should… reach out to the local communities, forging links and developing sustainable partnerships. In promoting a culture of inclusion, and at the same time celebrating the individuality of the library user, the librarian will maximise opportunities for all people. All library staff must be proud of the contribution they make to the inclusive society, and should learn to articulate this contribution to all (Train et al. 2000).

The nature of true equity of access necessitates the public librarian having a thorough understanding of the needs of the community they serve, and ensuring through partnerships and networks that they are utilising all available options to enhance and deliver those services.

The ethical dimensions to equity should be the driver for all public librarians, as inherent in the codes of Ranganathan and Gorman is the belief that all human beings have a right to access the knowledge of their peers. Public libraries offer the best possible opportunity to achieve this through their services.

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