

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND DIVERSITY IN LIBRARIANSHIP

Lecture in Carla Stoffle's Foundations in Librarianship class
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Myths surrounding libraries

- #1: Institutions are neutral; and those within them
- must be neutral in order to be effective.
- #2: Intellectual freedom is an end in itself.
- #3: Libraries provide free access to information
- on all sides of all issues.
- #4: Libraries are not political institutions

Focus of libraries in the past has been a reflection and reinforcer of the dominant culture, socializing or educating non-traditional populations to adopt the values and beliefs of the dominant culture.

Social Responsibility in Librarianship

SRRT (Social Responsibilities Roundtable) officially began in 1969--outgrowth of activism among various social movements (Black Power, Chicano Movement, AIM, Women's Movement, Gay Liberation)

At the about the same time that SRRT was being formed, other groups within the profession began to organize and mobilize--REFORMA, Black Caucus, Gay and Lesbian Task Force, etc. Together with SRRT, these groups formed a strong presence in ALA, which eventually accepted that it needed to deal with social responsibility issues.

Social Responsibility defined by ALA:

The contribution that librarianship can make to ameliorating or even solving the critical problems of society;

support for all efforts to help inform and educate the people of the US on these problems and to encourage them to examine the many views and facts regarding each problem;

the willingness of ALA to take a position on current and critical issues with the relationship of libraries and library services clearly set forth in the position statements.

Social Responsibility is predicated upon the notion that librarians have an ethical responsibility to provide the public with information, knowledge and culture to all sectors of our society, not just the dominant culture.

Is social responsibility in opposition to intellectual freedom? NO. It helps to expand notions of intellectual freedom and expression by promoting inclusivity of heretofore excluded social groups.

Myths surrounding libraries

#1: Institutions are neutral; and those within them must be neutral in order to be effective.

We should strive for objectivity, but we are not by nature objective. (we need to understand our own cultural and psychological biases). Silence as affirmation.

#2: Intellectual freedom is an end in itself.

Too often intellectual freedom has been used as a smokescreen to perpetuate existing ideas and prevent criticism of them.

#3: Libraries provide free access to information on all sides of all issues.

The public/government fund libraries. Middle of the road approach a historical fact.

#4: Libraries are not political institutions

Libraries compete for funding and favorable legislation.

ISSUES dealt with by groups promoting social responsibility and diversity :

Collections:

Non mainstream/Alternative press materials. Left of center. Right of center. (Wilson indexes non inclusive until pushed to change).

Appropriate subject access that uses relevant language.

Bias free, relevant materials, by authors from ethnic groups that materials are about.

Services and programs:

do the programs reflect the communities served?

do people have equitable access?

fee vs. free?

do staff have the language skills needed to work with diverse populations?

Organizational issues:

diversity in orgs.

recruitment of minorities

GLISSA program, Spectrum initiative

retention: in and out before tenure achieved.

affirmative action: misunderstanding of its purpose and policy. Need to proactively recruit in appropriate forums. Need to promote women and minorities into administrative/leadership positions.

racism: difficult, subtle and hard to prove, but its there.

The Right to Know:

Schuman's presidential campaign to insist that the public has the right to know and that librarians make this right to know happen

Our profession is intrinsically bound to the ideas of democracy. Our very existence stands in defense of the first amendment and in defense of equality.

Librarianship is at risk:

illiteracy

technology

closing of library schools

privatization of information

gap between the rich and the poor

lack of funding

attempts to limit free speech

What is our role?

It isn't just to organize and keep information. It has to be more. We are disseminators of information, not merely its guardians. . We are not gatekeepers but gateways.

Librarianship is the one profession dedicated to ensuring the right to know.

Privatization of information results in less access and higher costs for the American public.

Information must be viewed as a public good to help people solve their problems.

To truly have the right to free expression, people need more than constitutional guarantees. They need societal commitments as well.

We will not live in a true information society unless and until:

- 1) We ensure that people not only have access to information but to cultural content.
- 2) People have the skills and the resources to use this content.
- 3) Public policy makers recognize that an informed citizenry is a public good that benefits us all.

We will not live in a true information society, we will not achieve equal opportunity and justice unless and until all people have the library services they need to learn, live work, participate in and enjoy our democracy.

The mission of librarians is understanding through knowledge. If we believe that knowledge is power, we must accept responsibility for the exercise of that power. We hold information in trust.

Librarians keep information affordable, accessible, and available. We deliver the materials and services that undergird the public's right to know.

The Right to Know: Political, legal, ethical aspects

In the broadest sense, the "right to know" refers to the right of individuals to obtain the information they desire or need and to receive it from various sources.

1986: Emergency Response and Community Right to Know Act: the right of people to know of harmful materials present in their communities.

1943: Martin vs. the City of Struthers: the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional an ordinance prohibiting door to door distribution of handbills noting that the 1st amendment freedom embraces the right to distribute literature and necessarily protects the right to receive it.

1965: Griswald v. Connecticut: re: contraception information. freedom of speech and press includes also the right to receive, the right to read and freedom of inquiry and freedom of thought.

The American Library Associations Library Bill of Rights affirms that library materials should be provided for all people in the community without restriction and those materials should represent all points of view.

Making information available to all sectors of the society without discrimination.

Right to privacy has been established in the courts.

Information, according to economist Lawrence White is a public good (that's why we subsidize libraries) and it's a renewable resource.

“withholding information in a democratic society is a source of illegitimate power, in direct conflict with democratic principles of decision making.

The trend has been to release less and less information by the federal government.

Federal government restricts access to classified information.

May 1991: Russ vs. Sullivan Gag Rule case the Supreme Court voted 5 to 4 to uphold federal regulations barring employees of federally funded clinics from discussing abortion with their patients.

A Circuit court back noted that access could not be restricted to the homeless because of hygiene, body odor or personal habits. The first amendment protects the right to express ideas and to receive ideas, it protects the right of the speaker and the listener, the writer and the reader.

The right to know is both an ethical and legal concept.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGY:

Librarians must be activists in the social arena.

New technological environment filled with opportunity. New technologies and telecommunications possibilities are transformative. They are changing the whole knowledge creation process and thus impacting the structure of our work. If we don't take the lead and position ourselves appropriately we will lost out and others will fill our roles as “THE” information professionals.

“The purpose of the library is to maximize the social utility of the public record.” Shera

We are about the creation, management, and transformation of information, knowledge and culture.

We need to move away from seeing ourselves as providers of traditional services and managers of facilities to seeing ourselves as educators and knowledge managers/ electronic publishers.

As knowledge managers we need to engage in creation of new knowledge packages and new access tools.

As educators, we need to create environments where learning takes place as the highest priority--self sufficiency of users.

As publishers, we must break the hold that mainstream publishers are trying to keep with restrictive copyright legislation and price gouging.

As teachers we must work with other educators to devote the precious knowledge and skill of the librarian not only to teach about information, dbut to design active student centered learning experiences for a variety of settings. We must incorporate examples from other ethnic, racial, cultural traditions outside the mainstream when we teach (literature for example).

We have to take an activist role in educating the public about information policy and new technologies.

We must engage in active outreach outside the library.

We must flatten organization to free up limited resources.

We must engage in quality improvement efforts, continuous learning, and partnerships.

Our role is to help create and transmit the knowledge that is necessary for all members of society to survive and thrive while at the same time transmitting and validating our various cultures so that we survive with soul.

DIVERSITY:

Exercise: react to the statement that “diversity is any difference that makes a difference”.

There is currently a debate about the term. Is it valuing those individuals who bring life experience outside the dominant culture to the workplace? Or is it those qualities, characteristics, that make us unique, different or special? (personality style, learning style)

Renewed efforts began in 1987, with the release of a report called “One Third of A Nation” that noted that within a couple of generations, minorities will be the majority and that if something wasn’t done to address the societal problems affecting these populations, our nation would be in big trouble. Other events, most notably a marked increase of campus racism across the country forced institutions of higher education to address diversity and to set goals for acheiving diversity in recruitment and retention of students, faculty and staffs of college campuses.

Libraries began to do this work also. ALA began to address these issues and the University of Michigan Library also took the lead by sponsoring a two day workshop on racism for the Library staff and by putting into place a diversity committee that was charged with becoming a model for working across racial, gender, ethnic lines and for addressing issues within the organization.

RACISM:

If we grew up and were exposed to the mores of this country's culture, then we are probably racist. We have been taught, since childhood stereotypes of various groups (Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Gays and Lesbians, etc). Negative images and negative portrayals of these groups have been everywhere--in the media, in our music and literature, on television.

Prejudice plus power=racism.

Institutional racism pervades organizations, especially academe. It's embedded in the structure of these institutions and perpetuated by people in power, but not blatantly. Tenure, reward and recognition, promotion systems.

New racism (aversive racism): the pervasive denial of the existence of racism and the non-acceptance of the responsibility for it.

Curry/Johnson/Cooper: survey results showed that nearly 2/3 of African American Librarians felt that they had been discriminated against in their careers.

Currey suggests that what is needed is:

need for individual recognition

need for confrontation of racism

need for sincere progressive commitment to social change which requires the construction of a truly multicultural environment in which exclusion, tokenism, and paternalism are replaced by mutual recognition, collegiality and equality.

CURRENT ISSUES:

Free speech: the internet

Copyright

National Information Infrastructure and widening of the gap between the information rich and the information poor.

Affirmative Action and diversity on the defensive.

Inflation.

Recruitment, retention, and promotion of minorities.