

Needs, Politics and Public Libraries: The Challenge of the 1980s

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When asked to explain what public libraries do, public librarians are often caught in a dilemma. They can elaborate a list of specific services that will cause a legislator to look at his watch. Or, they can discuss their library's mission statement. This is usually a more succinct document than the service list and less likely to threaten a legislator's time. He might listen as the librarian describes the information, education, and entertainment needs of the community. Unfortunately, he has heard it before. He probably used the same language during his last election campaign. It is a language that remains deliberately vague in order to provide a context for specific goals and objectives that are creations of both ideals and political interest.

A library community that continues to express itself in such vague terms runs a risk. This vagueness allows for complacency based on the assumption that the library is achieving its goal; consequently, a careful examination of practice is not conducted. The lack of such an examination stands in the way of revealing the actual public benefit derived from library services. The long-run implications of these factors emerge in a political atmosphere that questions the

value of publicly funded social services. These services are increasingly called upon to demonstrate their usefulness, justify their expenditures and organize their own political support. The public library community also must be able to accomplish these tasks. Among other means to that end is an examination of library practice in terms of its political implications.

In late spring of 1983 the Monroe County Public Library (MCPL) became involved in a process that led to a unique cooperative effort on the part of many social services to offer job search counseling to the underemployed and unemployed. MCPL's participation in this process reveals the way a specific objective is derived from a commitment to an idealized mission statement coupled with an appreciation of political reality.

Mission statements are vague because they must necessarily remain general. They point the way in which a given community is part of a larger culture whose day-to-day workings generate common needs and responses. For example, all public libraries will provide children's and adult services, fiction and non-fiction collections. A general mission statement should alert the librarian to special cases. How is this particular community different? What are the implications for collections and services? Also, all communities face change and new concerns. Any social service institution must be able to respond to these changes. The institution requires the flexibility to give up a program when it is no longer needed or its importance is reduced when compared to other needs and available resources.

Needs are not to be understood as abstractions, such as the public's need for information. Rather they are associated with distinct groups of people and their material social conditions. These groups are composed of individuals who are consumers and constituents of social services. Changes in a given community are the outcome of changes within and among these groups. In some cases change is slow. A group changes in composition but not character, requiring a more or less permanent library response. Children are an example of a group of this kind. Other groups are created and dissolved by short term social and economic circumstances, but this does not absolve the public library from the responsibility of service.

In the summer of 1983 unemployment reached a peak of about 10 percent. In many midwestern communities this figure was higher due to an older failing industrial base. Lack of capital and high interest rates slowed the expansion of business and social services. Many of those laid off were new to this condition. Many did not expect to return to work at old jobs. Since that time unemployment has dropped to about 7 percent, but there is no doubt that at the present time in many communities there is a special group of people requiring special services to help them cope with economic dislocation.

A public library's responsibility to act under these conditions derives from two sources: one ideal and based on traditional public library philosophy, and the other functional and based in the practical politics of library funding. Both are derived from the fact that the public library is an institution of the state. It operates on funds collected from the citizens and allocated by public authority. Its existence, therefore, is determined by its apparent historical permanence and by a demonstration of its continuing value as a service in the general interest of society.

The public library is not free, and its cost is the primary political constraint on its activity. On the other hand, its value is realized not only in the social benefit of relatively free information, education, and entertainment (it costs nothing to get in the door), but also because the public library as an organization comes to identify with its service targets, i.e., library users. Institutionally, then, it tends to act in such a way that serves the interests of these users as a more or less successful advocate for a share of public funds. Users become constituents. The point of this is to demonstrate that the public library is a political institution enmeshed in a web of constraints, demands, and social needs seeking articulation and satisfaction, all of which represent distinct and perhaps competing interests within a given community.

Traditional public library philosophy defines the library as an institution whose mission is to aid in the achievement of an ideal nonpartisan social justice. This points in a correct direction but ends as an attempt to transcend the political web by means of an abstraction that yields no clues for action. This concept of library service does not rule out the possibility of seeking new constituent groups while achieving the mission, but it does not apprehend this action as an expansion of the institution's political base. It is rather an example of the public good realized by the existence of libraries.

The current problem for the public library community is that this traditional argument is not likely to be persuasive in a political environment that includes a public authority (funding source) that is skeptical toward its role as provider of social services. Another argument is available, one based on the practical reality of political justification. In this case, legitimacy rests more on representation of particular social interests than on a contribution to a generalized public welfare.

This involves, first, the identification of constituencies or "markets" that have political impact in the larger community of interests. Examples of such constituencies include readers of fiction, youth, especially school age children, adults seeking information, film watchers, and record listeners. Adults represent themselves in the political sphere. Children are represented by their parents (witness the public support of libraries by adults who are nonusers, but nevertheless appreciate benefits enjoyed by their children). The second

aspect of the argument is a material demonstration that the claimed constituencies are in fact adequately served. This demonstration can take several forms: library use/output measures, signatures/votes for library bond petitions/issues, or supportive library boards reflecting a general community satisfaction with public library service. The public library's political position, and therefore the possibility of realizing its goals, is strengthened insofar as 1) it maintains current constituencies and yet can adapt to a changing community, 2) it can identify and generate services for new constituencies, 3) it can justify its actions to sources of public funds and authority in terms of constituencies and traditional social welfare goals, and 4) it can do all this within a budget allowed by the funding source/political environment.

The recession of 1982-83 provided an opportunity for public libraries to strengthen their position in spite of a political context dominated by government austerity. The dislocations generated at the national level of the economy had local consequences. Local government was faced with the dual problem of newly unemployed persons requiring services and poor economic conditions that restricted the funding base available to provide for these services. Local governments searched for creative and inexpensive ways of coping with the crisis. Monroe County was not alone in facing a new group of unemployed composed of persons laid off from skilled positions, unable to find jobs commensurate with their skills, and underemployed persons and spouses seeking jobs for the first time to augment family incomes. One common feature that raised difficult problems was that many of these people were unable to qualify financially for "safety net" social service programs. In some cases they were not even qualified for unemployment compensation. Many, however, were qualified for existing jobs, but they did not have the skills they needed to find and successfully apply for those jobs. They required job-search skills.

This situation created an opportunity for MCPL to enhance its legitimacy and realize its goal of community service. In the winter of 1983 MCPL explicitly identified the foregoing group as a potential constituency. We assessed our collection in terms of the need demonstrated by this group for job-search skill information and we made plans to add more material. We recognized that it was not within the competence of MCPL to actually teach job-search skills but it was within our reach to provide access to self-help. In moving to identify a new constituency MCPL also fulfilled a traditional welfare function. The means to the end, however, remained elusive. Our budget was limited and the problem of attracting the potential constituency to the library persisted. A cooperative arrangement with other social services solved this problem.

In the spring of 1983 representatives of MCPL, the City of

Bloomington Human Resources Department, Monroe County Community School Corporation, South Central Indiana Mental Health Center, the local office of the Indiana Employment Security Division, and other community organizations formed the Employment Coordinating Council (ECC). In the summer of 1983 Congress passed an emergency jobs act which made funds available at the national level to help local governments. The City of Bloomington Redevelopment Agency was the local outlet for these funds, and they solicited grant applications. A committee of the ECC prepared a proposal for a Job Hunters Service Center (JHSC) to offer job-search skill counseling and training. The ECC was awarded \$10,000 to be administered through the Monroe County Community School Corporation, and the ECC assumed the role of Board of Directors.

In addition to the service goal, the project displayed a number of political goals. It offered the opportunity to secure cooperation of social service agencies to expand the legitimacy for each agency. It offered the opportunity to satisfy the political concern that government be efficient and cost effective. It offered the opportunity to satisfy a need generated by a new constituency group. It was planned that after an initial start-up period with paid staff that a volunteer staff would continue the service. A Director was hired, Fred Niederman, who was responsible for developing and executing a five point program:

1. Workshops to teach specific job-search skills,
2. Provide individual employment counseling,
3. Assist individuals in the use of library resources,
4. Refer individuals to other employment services when appropriate, and
5. Conduct video-taped practice interview sessions in cooperation with Community Access Television Channel Three.¹

The decision to locate the JHSC in MCPL was based on a number of considerations. The library provided easy access to potential users of the service. It allowed for evening walk-in hours for those persons employed but seeking a better job. Library materials and reference assistance were immediately available even when walk-in counseling was not. Channel Three was located in MCPL, and meeting rooms for workshops and practice interviews were available. In addition, MCPL stood as a neutral site without welfare implications. The location of the JHSC in MCPL was ultimately helpful in attracting users of the service. Twenty-five percent of those who used the JHSC discovered its existence accidentally while browsing in the library.

At this time the original grant has been expended, and the JHSC is operating on a volunteer basis. Due to space limitations at MCPL, the JHSC had been moved to the Employment Security Office. Nevertheless, there are measures of success for the first ten

months of the program. Over 200 individuals had been served. The average attendance at workshops was about seven per session despite very bad weather during the winter. About 40 of those using the service acquired new jobs within the ten-month period, and the library became known as a source of job-search information beyond the limits of the JHSC target group.²

Currently the public library is facing challenges. These are manifest even within librarianship as a debate over goals with positions ranging from the provision of multiple-copy popular reading to fee-based service for special audiences. This implies no less than a re-examination of the social and historical role of the public library and a questioning of a service philosophy based on 19th century conditions and thought. Outside librarianship there have been suggestions that the public library does not satisfy certain criteria of a public good as does, for example, national defense. The implication is that library service should be "privatized," put on a for-profit basis, and that access for the poor be guaranteed by a voucher system similar to food stamps. The latter is not an answer for those individuals who, because of the collectively funded nature of the public library, have had access to and have made productive use of library services that their personal budgets, although by no means poor, would not have allowed. Nor is this an answer for the poor who would be identified in yet one more way as members of a caste of welfare receivers.

Implied in these challenges are the questions 1) what do public libraries do? 2) what are their first priorities and 3) who do they serve with what resources? These questions can be answered more clearly if it is remembered that the public library is a political institution simultaneously representing the interests of public authority and use constituencies. In the case of MCPL changes in the community resulted in the development of a new possible constituency and a chance for MCPC to strengthen its position. New services and collections were developed for the newly unemployed as a means of self-help in a structurally dislocated economy. This provides a basis for projections of what could be done if MCPL's budget were expanded. It also provides a defense for inflation adjusted maintenance of current funding levels. It also secures a new constituency, those seeking job search/change information, which can become a part of generalized political support for public libraries. The strength of a library, that is, its capability to provide the services it promises, is derived from the strength of its political support. The sources of that support, and changes within and among those sources, provides the grounds for librarians to search for concrete goals and objectives.

NOTES

1. Niederman, Fred. "Job Hunter's Service Center, Draft Report." N.p., 1984, pp. 2-3.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.