Working Paper 2

Public Libraries and Social Exclusion: the Historical Legacy

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Abstract

This paper reviews the history of attempts made by public libraries to develop services for the "disadvantaged" and socially excluded. It analyses in particular three models: the Victorian "working class" public library; the "welfare state" public library of the mid twentieth century and the "community" librarianship of the 1970s and 80s. Overall, it argues that the focus of public libraries on social inequality and division has been patchy and ambivalent and that action in this field has been hampered by a legacy of universal but passive service provision which has favoured the middle class. It concludes by noting, however, that the current context of rapid technological and cultural change provides an opportunity to reconfigure the service, and it urges that libraries prioritise the creation of a socially inclusive "information" society. (April 1999)

Introduction

This paper aims to analyse, from a historical standpoint, the attempts made by UK public libraries to support the interests of excluded and disadvantaged social groups. It seeks to trace how public library policy towards social exclusion has developed over time, focusing in particular on three historical periods:

   * Victorian libraries, 1850-1914

   * the "welfare state" public library, 1927-70

   * "community" librarianship, 1975 - 85

Throughout, it draws on the distinction between (i) *universal* approaches to the problem of social exclusion (like, for example universal healthcare or child benefit); (ii) *selective* approaches (i.e. those aimed at particular groups or classes); and (iii) *particular* (or user and community based) approaches (Thompson and Hoggett, 1996). Overall, I shall argue that in its first 100 years the public library developed what it claimed as a universalist approach to service provision and that this still dominates much professional and managerial thinking. The approach has a number of strengths, but the dominance of the universal, it will be claimed, has limited the development of policies resulting in targeted and community or user oriented service models. This has impaired the public library's capacity to engage with both social difference and social exclusion, and, as I argue at the end of the paper, suggests that a more balanced policy framework will be needed if

libraries are to have a significant impact on poor and excluded communities, social groups and individuals.

The Victorian "working class" public library?

However, I want to begin with the Victorians, and in particular the contention that the Victorian public library was essentially a selectivist "working class" institution. This is part of the mythology of the public library movement, undoubtedly because many public libraries can trace their origins to Mechanics Institutes and other independent working class libraries. Moreover, advocates of the 1850 Public Libraries Act like William Ewart argued specifically that libraries would improve the "cultivation of the minds" of the labouring classes . More generously, Dickens, at the opening of Manchester public library in 1852, emphasised the rights of those excluded from Victorian prosperity, conceptualising the public library as a "source of pleasure and improvement in the cottages, the garrets and the ghettos of the poorest of our people" (Kelly and Kelly, pp.79-80).

Many Victorian libraries undoubtedly did seriously engage with the previously excluded labouring classes. Large urban centres like Manchester and Leeds established "branch" libraries in what we would now call inner city neighbourhoods where the overwhelming majority of residents were poor. One such branch was Ancoats in Manchester where user statistics for 1858 were recorded by Edward Edwards, the city librarian. Such figures show that the great majority of library users came from skilled working class backgrounds, even though Edwards argued to his library committee that they represented "all classes of the community". As we shall see, such figures were not totally typical of all Victorian libraries, but they do indicate a significant impact on some elements of the working class (Edwards, 1869, pp.89-91).

Reading rooms, including special rooms set aside for youths and women, were also set up in Manchester and elsewhere and appear to have been very popular with working class users because of their open access and their provision of popular and topical magazines and newspapers. In 1895, W.R. Credland, the Manchester city librarian, reported that such rooms were

> "crowded with lads busily engaged in assimilating the literature provided for them............the boys themselves are of that age and class which it is most desirable to influence for good. They are for the most part the children of parents whose poverty draws them perilously near the borderland of crime, but are still too young to have crossed it themselves. It is just such lads as these whom it is essential to detach from vicious companions and surround with every possible influence that can tend to social or moral improvement, if they are to be made into useful men and good citizens and rescued from absorption into the pauper or criminal classes" [1].

Credland's comments are, of course, double edged. For although they testify to the popularity of the reading room, they suggest also that the inclusiveness of the Victorian public library had its limits. Paupers and criminals certainly seemed to be outside the ambit of the Victorian library: Dickens apart, the rhetoric of the public library reformers focused upon the "deserving" poor and usually categorised as unreachable the dangerous underclass of criminals, vagrants and those condemned to the poorhouse. As Alistair Black (1996, p.190) reports Victorian librarians, were

plagued with instances of noisy and disorderly conduct and adopted arguably exclusionary practices as a result. Exhortations to silence and complex, police like closed access and issue systems were often the norm and these were often guaranteed to exclude the marginal, semi literate or poor. Thomas Greenwood, in his *Free Public Libraries* (1886) reports that "on the doors and walls of some of the libraries in the manufacturing districts a notice enforcing 'clean hands and faces' is conspicuous and rigidly enforced by careful librarians". It is perhaps no accident that the resulting problems of social control seem to have quite quickly become centred around the popular reading rooms. Thomas Kelly notes that a number of librarians were beginning to complain about these by the end of the century and one, James Duff Brown, successfully persuading his committee in Islington to close one down because it had become the haunt of drunks, vagrants and other undesirables (Kelly and Kelly, 1977, p.112).

As this suggests, inclusion in the Victorian public library was thus to be largely on the terms of the includers. As Greenwood's famous cartoon [2] indicates, the spirit of philanthropy motivated many library supporters very deeply: the local grandees of library committees were often keen to improve both the morals and economic utility of their workers, and to a limited extent their capacity for self help and social mobility. The inscription over the entrance of Norwich public library that "work is no punishment, it is a blessing" was perhaps one of the more blatant pieces of capitalist propaganda on show in a public library but it nevertheless unmasked the moral economy of the movement (Black, 1977, p.237). More subtle, perhaps, were the attempts made by library committees to influence working class reading in the direction of morally wholesome material, such as the ban on popular fiction in 1901 in Darwen, Lancashire (Snape, 1996, p.78-9).

In the end, of course, such bans were ineffective in the face of (significantly) opposition from all classes, and the same can be said for any (covert or overt) project of social control. One effect of this seems to have been that many Victorian public librarians appear to have lost interest in the "undeserving" working classes quite quickly and engaged in a search for alternative readers. In general this involved the more comfortable (and politically expedient) tactic of an appeal to a broad coalition of skilled, literate artisans, liberal professionals and lower middle classes in trades and commerce [3]. As Sturges (1996) observes, such an appeal was based upon the development of new kinds of services such as local history collections; reference and information services; children's services and above all, fiction. Despised by many librarians as the "fiction nuisance", popular fiction nevertheless gradually gained in pre-eminence in public library provision, supported and often selected by library committees sensitive to the popular whim of ratepayer voters. The demand for popular fiction was undoubtedly enormous: Robert Snape estimates that Liverpool public library issued 200,000 romances and novels as early as 1868 and that fiction usually constituted between 65% and 75% of the issue figures of the Victorian public library (Snape, 1996, p.70). These figures are supported by the issue statistics of Bolton lending library in 1868 which show that in 1858 out of a total issue of 49,830, 29,604 were novels and romances alone [4].

As these service developments progressed Victorian librarians found it expedient to develop a new service rationale acceptable to its emerging coalition of users and supporters. As early as 1858 Edward Edwards was to claim, not entirely justifiably in the face of his statistics, that Manchester Libraries were used by "every grade of society in Manchester" and that the principle of free use by "ALL CLASSES OF THE COMMUNITY" (Edwards' capitals) should thus

underpin service development (Edwards, 1869, p.163). This universalist ideology quickly became the norm. By 1864, Ewart also was writing that "so far as my intentions went, free libraries were meant for all classes.............I always thought one of the good results of such institutions would be the bringing of all classes together, and uniting them by the common bond of literary pursuits" [5]. By 1879, as Alistair Black reports, campaigners for the adoption of libraries had picked up this message. In Darlington it was claimed that "free libraries form a standing protest against the system of caste, and supply some help towards bridging the gulf between classes" [6]. The idea of the library as an inclusive institution, playing its part in the construction of an organic, harmonious community through the creation of a common culture had thus appeared well before the end of the Victorian period. In common with other public institutions libraries were beginning to rely on a universalist rather than a sectional approach to the problems of excluded groups and communities, although in practice libraries were already privileging the tastes of a powerful constituency of skilled working class and middle class readers, upon whom survival and expansion would depend.

The "welfare state" public library

These ideas, I now want to suggest, were now to form the core of public library policy and strategy over the first half of the twentieth century. The public library system developed, in tandem with organisations such as the BBC and the NHS, on the basis of universal provision for all and it involved, by and large, making an increasingly standardised set of services available to as wide a range of the population as possible. It was, according to information sociologist Frank Webster (1994, p.111) "arguably the nearest thing we have in Britain to an achieved public sphere". In library terms, the elements of this approach were spelled out in 1937 by Lionel McColvin, City Librarian of Westminster and author of the key post war report entitled *The Public Library System of Great Britain.* McColvin claimed that a "library provided by all must be for all" and that the "things in which we deal - facts and ideas - are of significance to all". "What is good for one man, one class, one age can", he claimed, "with necessary modifications be good for another" (McColvin, 1937, p.4).

The institutional strategy associated with these ideas was spelled out by a contemporary of McColvin's, L. Stanley Jast, in 1939, in a book entitled *The Library and the Community.* Jast modeled this strategy in a diagram he called the "Library Grid" (Jast, 1939, p.161). This envisages the National Central Library (the then equivalent of the BL lending division) at the hub of a vast wheel with regional subsidiaries, branch libraries and mobiles at the outer rim. It is an excellent metaphor of an institutional approach to social inclusion. Over the next twenty years or so attempts were made to extend the reach of the library grid to institutions as various as prisons, hospitals, lighthouses and the homes of the sick and the "handicapped". The idea of "outreach" was thus born as the logical extension of the institutional strategy of inclusion: the attempt was made to offer as much of the standard service as feasible to those excluded by mobility, impairment or geography. The aim was to create an institution that would not only serve all, but which would cement all classes of society within a common institutional frame.

The purposes behind these efforts were not entirely neutral or impartial, as many commonly have supposed. Quite explicitly, the mid century public library pursued a cultural project which the

Kenyon report of 1927 expressed as "the training of the good citizen" [7]. For some mid century librarians, libraries thus came to mean much more than the passive provision of collections of material - they were about, essentially, the cultural construction of the ideal British citizen. For, Edward Sydney, Borough Librarian of Leyton between 1934-50, "the public library was one of the major fundamental instruments in the continuous education and development of the adult citizen". In the 1930s and 1940s, in his largely working class London Borough, Sydney organised a huge range of cultural activities designed to foster an intellectually active and culturally enlightened local community. The attendance figures for these events are impressive by today's standards. The content of Sydney's programme is too detailed to analyse here, but overall it amounted to a mix of liberal adult education, cultural enlightenment and political education in the principles of social democracy (Sydney, 1950, p.21-53). It was replicated and developed in some other library authorities, notably in Swindon by Harold Jolliffe and in metropolitan services like Manchester and Sheffield, and offered in diluted form in many locations nation wide.

The welfare state public library thus attempted what might in retrospect be seen as a strategy of inclusion through cultural education and assimilation. For librarians like Sydney and Jolliffe, there was little sense in which the library might need to adapt its services to the needs of a diverse range of social groups. Indeed, their vision of society and the "community" was a totally different "organic" one. For Jolliffe, library services and activities were to be directed, democratically, at the "whole public" rather than at various forms of "limited clientele". The purpose of extension activities was to foster inclusion in the world of the library: "to inform those who do not use the library service of it, and to attract them as quickly as possible to it" The public library was thus a kind of metaphor for an inclusive social order. This did not mean, however, a surrender to populism. Indeed Jolliffe seems to have shared the cultural pessimism of contemporary writers like Richard Hoggart about TV and other mass media. He claimed that "activities such as lectures, discussion groups, story hours etc. distract people............from other mass media and are fulfilling a distinct and valuable social purpose", presumably initiating them into the enlightened world of literature and the book (Joliffe, 1962, p.23-5).

Ultimately, however, such a programme of cultural inclusion was doomed to fail. Although, as Hoggart himself has insisted (Hoggart, 1995), the library provided an avenue of social mobility for some of its working class patrons, in the 1960s and 70s broader evidence began to suggest that the poor and disadvantaged heavily under-utilised this "universal" service. Surveys such as those in the late 1960s by sociologist Bryan Luckham found alarmingly low levels of membership in some libraries among unskilled workers and their families, and Luckham argued as a consequence that the "openness and non-exclusivity of the public library inevitably favoured middle class users" (Luckham, 1971, p.126). Another study in the London Borough of Hillingdon heavily criticised the inflexibility of public library services, arguing that "overwhelmingly, all public libraries were seen as essentially similar" and that they were "supplier effective, user ineffective" (Totterdell and Bird, 1976, p.130). The seminal Corbett Report, *The Libraries' Choice,* the last major official investigation into the public library and social disadvantage concluded in 1978 that "only a minority of public library services are actively fighting disadvantage" and that, in those that were, such efforts were "generally seen as a worthy extra to the normal service to be financed only when funds were available". "At no time

in public library history, it concluded, has it been more essential to reassess its aims and practices" (Department of Education and Science, 1978, p.44).

Community librarianship and social exclusion

For public library reformers the solution, as is well known, was to advocate a more flexible and diversified form of public library provision which would enable resources to be targeted at the disadvantaged. As a philosophy of service, it became known as Community Librarianship (CL) and is well documented in contemporary and more recent publications [8]. Most readers will be familiar with its main elements and there is not the space to describe in detail the practices of CL here. However, I want to make a number of general observations about CL in its historical context because it seems to me, at the very least, to have marked a significant (if ultimately unsuccessful) attempt, by some public library authorities at least, to address disadvantage and social exclusion in library terms.

First, CL did seem to mark a major policy reversal for the public library. Because it stressed that public libraries should *respond to,* rather than determine, the needs of diverse client groups and communities it signified an acceptance by the public library profession that society might be pluralistic and diverse rather than homogeneous. Protagonists of CL recognised that, as a consequence of this, the public library itself needed to become a looser and more decentralised institution catering for the *particular* needs of social groupings and local communities. They advocated ways of working, such as outreach; inter-agency partnerships and targeted services that attempted to diversify the institutional and cultural uniformity of the public library. Moreover, it was argued by some, perhaps for the first time since the Victorian period, that public library policy should be to *target* disadvantaged and excluded client groups and communities (Coleman, 1981). These included groups "excluded" from libraries, in the terminology of the *Libraries' Choice*, not only by physical but by "psychological" factors. Thus specific services targeted at disadvantaged (in library terms) user groups such as black and ethnic minority communities; the elderly; teenagers; people with a wide range of disabilities and so on all emerged in the late 1970s. Many of these services and initiatives have continued to this day, although recent evidence suggests that they continue to struggle to achieve mainstream service status (Mattarasso, 1997)

Important as these developments were, they nevertheless never really amounted to the wholesale "deinstitutionalisation" of the public library service envisaged by Bill Martin on his book on community librarianship. CL was, above all, an uneven and limited phenomenon. The response of public librarians to the unemployment of the early 1980s gives some idea of these limitations. Many local authorities did develop an enhanced range of services for unemployed people such as business start up and community information packs; job boards; links with advice and unemployed workers centres; enhanced leisure services and discounts for AV loans. In a few instances like Clwyd and Renfrew, major service initiatives were undertaken, such as the opening of integrated neighbourhood centres or the expansion of advice services under the library umbrella. However, as John Barugh and Roger Woodhouse (1987) remind us in their study of such initiatives in the North East, many new projects were supported only by Urban Aid or other temporary funding, and they were poorly evaluated and discontinued after an initial

term. Moreover, extensive activity running throughout the whole library service was exceptional, and usually amounted to the compilation of little used leaflet packs. In the main, library staff had "little substantial communication" with organisations working with the unemployed and they had not explored the development of informational support services for these organisations. According to Barugh and Woodhouse, the main reason for this failure was the institutional conservatism of library managers and staff, many of whom were tardy or unwilling to work with other agencies and most of whom struggled to redefine the universalist perception of the "basic" book borrowing service.

CL was thus an inconclusive and incomplete revolution. Not only in the field of services to the unemployed, but in a whole host of other areas, (services to black and ethnic minority communities; services to disabled users) public library professional practice was very slow to move away from the mid-century universal model. Moreover, by the late 80s and early 90s, although community initiatives continued, the key policy concerns of the public library were no longer in the field of social exclusion. Policy makers and managers were more concerned with defending the "core" (universal) library service and demonstrating that it provided value for money, consumer choice and access for all. In mounting this defence, successfully as it turned out, defenders of the public library tended to revert to the arguments of Lionel McColvin about access and libraries for all, whilst managers concentrated on improving services for existing users through initiatives like TQM and customer care.

As a result, even though community initiatives continued, by the early 1990s CL as a total philosophy of public librarianship was certainly diluted and marginalised, and a concern for those excluded from the institutional pattern of public library services was expressed only by a minority. The recent research by Comedia: "*Beyond Book Issues",* for example, confirmed that public library community initiatives were perhaps the most effective way of working with "excluded" communities and groups, but that they continued to be bedeviled by their shoestring funding, marginal status and lack of permanence (Mattarasso, 1997). Roach and Morrison in *The Public Library, Ethnic Diversity and Citizenship* (1997) confirmed also that the public library continues to fail to engage with the cultures of many black and ethnic minority British citizens. In our own research in the mid-nineties Alistair Black and I found that the label "community librarianship" itself was increasingly being utilised by librarians as a description for any and every form of community contact (including, very often, marketing or "customer care"), rather than as a description of service innovations directed at the disadvantaged or excluded (Black and Muddiman, 1997, Ch.7).

Conclusion

Where then, now, is public library policy towards socially excluded groups and communities? It is arguable in some respects that things have moved on very little since the Corbett Report of 1978 and that a fundamental reassessment of policy is still needed. History demonstrates that there are some real problems about providing targeted and focused services and resources for the excluded within an institution which continues to cherish universal principles of access and predominantly passive modes of service. It is a problem which has never really been resolved and as a result the reservoir of concern within the public library community about poverty, disadvantage, and social exclusion has not always been translated into effective organisational

policy and practice. The balance between universalism, selectivism and particularism is thus a key problem which must be addressed in any developing policy framework.

In other respects, however there are historical discontinuities which provide some new opportunities for innovation and action:

* We have a central government that seems to be serious about tackling poverty and disadvantage and, one might hope, about rebuilding and reinventing the public library service.

* The technological environment of the public library has changed dramatically since 1978. Some argue that this new technology provides opportunities to develop a "socially inclusive" information society in which public libraries can play a key part (Library and Information Commission, 1997)

* The current local government environment is perhaps more responsive than ever before to policies which focus on the development of flexible and responsive public services which work in partnership with communities and local people. The time has thus perhaps arrived for a change in the institutional culture of the public library which might benefit those excluded from its reach.

These matters will be developed specifically in some of the other working papers. From history, the challenge is now to build on the radical tradition that began with the Victorian reformers, ran through to the welfare state utopians and materialised most recently in the community librarianship of the 1970s and 80s. The challenge is develop new models of public library service for the 21st century which are pluralistic, in that they relate to the diverse needs of a multifaceted, multicultural society, but which are also inclusive, in that they reach out to the disadvantaged, excluded and dispossessed.

Notes

1. Cited in Kelly and Kelly (1977), p.113-114.

2.. The cartoon is printed in the frontispiece to Greenwood (1886). It shows, under the heading "The Rivals", potential readers presented with the alternatives of "The Red Lion" and "Free Library".

3. That this appeal was at least partially successful is born out by for example, an analysis of the membership breakdown of Leyton public library in 1902. This is accessibly reproduced in Black (1996), p. 270 along with various other useful tables relating to readers' occupations.

4. The figures are reproduced in Edwards (1869), p. 163.

5.. Cited in Munford (1951), p.63.

6.. Cited in Black (1996), p.189

7. *Report on Public Libraries in England and Wales* (Cmd.2868), 1927. Cited in Kelly and Kelly, (1977) p.168.

8. See, for example Vincent (1986), Martin (1989), Black and Muddiman (1997).

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