

ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN PROMOTING
DEMOCRACY: ENSURING FREE ACCESS FOR
ALL

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PAPER PRESENTED AT THE JOINT GOETHE-
INSTITUT/ KNLS WORKSHOP
23RD -25TH JULY 2008 AT THE CPA CONFERENCE
CENTRE, RUARAKA; NAIROBI, KENYA.

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ABSTRACT

Libraries whose mission is not merely to provide books, honest and timely information, gather, organize and deliver information for people to make informed decision about their health, wealth and pleasure. Free and open libraries thus permit those accessing them to have a diversity of views. Libraries in all their richness are the soil on which health democracies flourish. Democracy is rule by the people. People yearning to be free, seeking to govern their own affairs; express their personal and collective responsibility, respect for human rights and intellectual freedom. Freedom to think ones thought, conceive ideas, formulate views and express them freely.

An ideal democracy thus requires an informed populace to thrive. But due to budgetary constraints in many countries and at a time when the need to encourage use of public libraries by all people of all ages is growing, proposals to charge fees for access would impact negativity to library use.

INTRODUCTION

The library is a collection of information resources and services organized for use and maintained by a public body, institution or private. (web definition). Libraries mission is not merely to provide books, honest and timely information but gather, organize and deliver information for people to make informed decisions about their health, wealth and pleasure. Democracy is rule by the people. President Lincoln described it as a government of the people by the people for the people. People yearning to be free, seeking to govern their own affairs, express their personal and collectivity responsibility, respect for human rights and intellectual freedom. Freedom to think ones thoughts, conceives ideas, formulate views and express them freely. Alex Byrne. (1999:1).

Aristotle, the great thinker once stated that democracy arose from men thinking that if they are equal they are equal absolutely.

Democracy can be corrupted. The mass media can pass half truths, or even downright lies. It can be manipulated by government and political parties through manipulation, bribery corruption and intimidation. The media can present slanted, inadequate or untrue information. Through rumors, innuendo and misrepresentation, village gossips feeds prejudice and xenophobia (as happened in South Africa).

Writing about excesses of democracy, Njau Kimemia(DN, 25.5.08:4)says that in South Africa just like in Kenya, greater democracy appears to have emboldened every other miscreant into “democratically” expressing their dissatisfaction even if such expressions invariably involves breaking the law.

IFLA / UNESCO AND PUBLIC LIBRARIES.

The 1994 IFLA/UNESCO public library manifesto proclaims UNESCO belief in the public library as a living force for education, culture, information and as an essential agent for fostering peace and spiritual welfare through the minds of men and women. UNESCO thus encourages national and local governments to support and actively engage in the development of public libraries where the services of these libraries should be provided on the basis of equality of access for all regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status.

The manifesto also proclaims that the collections and services have to include all types of appropriate media and modern technologies as well as traditional materials. Collections and materials should not be subject to any form of ideological, political or religious censorship. Services in principal should be free of charge and physically accessible to all members of the community.

Arising from this, the mission of the public library is to:-

- (i) Support and participate in literally activities and programmers for all age groups.
- (ii) Facilitate the development of information and computer literacy skills.
- (iii) Provide adequate information services to local enterprise associations and interest groups.
- (iv) Ensure access for all citizens.
- (v) Support oral traditions.
- (vi) Foster intercultural dialogue and favor cultural diversity, appreciate the arts, scientific achievements and innovations.
- (vii) Provide access to cultural expressions of all performing arts.
- (viii) Stimulate the imagination and creativity of children and young people.
- (ix) Support formal education and
- (x) Create and strengthen reading habits.

IS THERE ACCESS FOR ALL?

One of the most significant challenges facing library services in reaching the people comes from the very limited coverage of most of the library services. Kingo mchomba. (2006:8) this is due to:-

- i) Lack of government investment in setting up libraries to cover all areas of a given country. In Kenya for example most districts do not have public libraries
- ii) Most libraries are located in urban centers
- iii) The materials available are not relevant
- iv) As a result of budgetary constraints in many countries, proposals to charge fees for access to some or to all public materials would impact negatively to library use. Wisconsin library association (2006)
- v) Libraries are lauded as educational and information institutions, as centers of grassroots democracy crucial to community, social and economic wellbeing. Yet these functions have been relegated to peripheral status while recreational , reading and support of education have been seen as libraries “defector” priorities, Michael Baldwin.(2002:1)
- vi) Public libraries are poorly supported. Poor libraries provide inadequate and misleading information. These libraries are among the first public services to be reduced during any decline in local revenues. This phenomenon has been experienced in many countries and for decades. This in essence undermines democracy.
- vii) Censorship and limiting of access to information on some issues e.g. information on matters of “national security”. But this is merely used by some governments as a cover up its activities.

CAN LIBRARIES SAVE DEMOCRACY

“No nation can remain both ignorant and free” Thomas Jefferson once said. Libraries should be lauded as educational and informational institutions, as centers of grass roots democracy crucial to community, social and economic well being.

In the worlds of IFLA statement on Libraries and intellectual freedom “Libraries endeavor to make available the widest variety of materials” reflecting the plurality and diversity of society and ensuring that selection and availability of the materials and services is governed by professional considerations and not by political, moral and religious views. This is actually the heart of democracy.

Libraries contribute to the development and help to safeguard basic domestic values and universal civil rights by acquiring, organizing and disseminating information freely. In this contest the Library has the responsibility to ensure the rights of others, the right not to have our religion and our identity and our religion demeaned, not to be defamed on the basis of religion as blacks, white, Muslims and Christians and respect for others, their views and interests in paramount.

WAYS IN WHICH LIBRARIES PROMOTE DEMOCRACY

- i. Libraries inform citizens. Democracy vests supreme power on the people. Access to information by the citizens makes them make informed decisions since well informed people are important for democracy to thrive
- ii. Libraries break down boundaries. The literate and illiterate are served. The elderly, prisoners, those hospitalized the homeless, the blind and students.
- iii. Libraries level the playing field by making resources equally available to all regardless of their income.
- iv. Libraries preserve the past, the records, a nation’s culture, historical records and events.
- v. Like churches, mosques and synagogues, libraries offer sanctuary, a feeling of peace, respect and humility.
- vi. In libraries, communities are built and empowered. Socially, economically and politically obtained. Thus high dividends are obtained. People attain their goals, careers and professions.
- vii. Libraries value the individual; nourish creativity through imaginations and ideas gained.

CONCLUSION

To librarians, Librarianship is a service profession, a nurturing profession generally following the ethics of care. The world needs more care and the interests of Libraries and information centres foster concern for all people, their individually and relationships. Interests that should not be quantified or devalued Froehlich Thomas J (1997).

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