

The Role of Public Libraries in Society:

A Case Study from a Poor Suburb of
Windhoek, Namibia.

By Sarah M. Webb, Syracuse University

ABSTRACT

Introduction:

This research focused on empirical evidence to clarify the role of the public library in society. Public libraries are a particular type of information provision, where information is thought of as a public good. Ideas of information as a public good lead to discussions of the role of information and information provision in democratic societies. The researcher believes that the more we know about the roles of various information providers in society, the better we will be able to make policy for the provision of information, whether it is through market forces or through government sponsored provision.

Background:

The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto [1] defines the public library as an organization, which helps create a democratic, equal and peaceful society. This definition helps to justify the creation and cost of public libraries for societies around the world. Buschman (2007)[2] and Kabamba (2008)[3] both open the question of whether the libraries actually live up to the promises of the Manifesto. Buschman notes that there is little empirical evidence to support the link between public libraries and democracy. Indeed, many non-democratic countries (e.g. the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany) had excellent public library systems.

Kabamba (2008) notes that the particular services offered by many public libraries in African countries limit the ability of the library to realize the promises of the Manifesto. He states that the libraries focus on providing a place for children to learn and grow, and do not provide enough services for adults.

A case study was carried out in a suburb of Windhoek, Namibia – Katutura. This site was chosen because Namibia is a newly independent nation, which has made public libraries available to all citizens within the last 25 years. This means that the role of the library is being constructed within society. As well, Katutura was the former black township of Windhoek and is still a poor neighborhood. Most libraries in Africa are urban, often situated in areas, which are difficult for the poor to use. By situating the study in a lower class neighborhood, it was possible to see if the library could help equalize society.

Research Questions:

Many librarians, including the researcher, believe in the promise of public libraries to create peaceful, democratic and equal societies. Empirical evidence is needed, however, to determine if they do. As Buschman points out, determining how libraries help

with the creation and continuation of democratic societies is not easy. Thus, this research sought data that might elucidate the role of the public library in society.

This research question is not easy to answer on its own, so two sub-questions help clarify the role of the library in society. As Wiegand and Bertot (2003)[4] noted much has been written on the user in the life of information systems and libraries, but little has been written on the role of the library or information system in the life of the user. The first sub-question, therefore, is “*What is the role of the library in the lives of a person?*”

Many researchers have noted (e.g. Mchombu, 1982)[5] that public libraries in Africa are often built to serve the educated elite. For that reason, uncovering who uses the library and gaining an understanding of the identity issues surrounding library use also seemed important. This led to the second sub-question, “*Who uses the library?*”

Methods:

The case study was carried out following Burawoy’s Extended Case Method[6]. Most of the data was collected through participant observation, with interviews and document analysis for triangulation.

Results:

Who uses the library?

Interviews with people in the library and people in the neighborhood around the library revealed that the library was for students and learners. This emphasis on education and library use as a key to life success was clear. People using the library were assumed to want or to have success in school.

Individual Role:

The identity issues around use of the library reflect the role of the library for individuals, which is mostly one of education support. Students and learners, people in university programs and secondary schools, need a place to study, resources to aid their study, and the motivation that comes from seeing other people working hard. Younger learners often use the library as a space to do homework and to learn informally.

For the younger generation, the library is seen as a key element of their educational success and their educational success is seen as a key element to their potential life success. The secondary school students and university students in the library, in general, are hard working and optimistic about their country and their life-goals.

Adults using the library are either using it to help them find a job or using it to read the newspaper. For the most part, men read the newspaper in the library, and seemed to have the leisure time to spend hours in the library reading the newspaper or magazines or books. Older women were not seen doing these things, although some young women would.

The libraries partly played a role in people's lives as a source of information, but their more important role seemed to be as a place for knowledge creation. People studied to create knowledge about their school subjects, and people created information documents to help them find employment. The library provided a quiet space to think and the tools, photocopier and computer, to make employment documents.

Societal Role:

One way to ascertain the societal role of the library would be to project the micro-role of the library to the macro-level. The library is helping students and learners attain success at school. Therefore, the role of the library in society is to help with formal education. One could also say it plays a role in making newspapers available, and the provision of newspapers and a free press can be tied to the building of a democratic society. The role is also to provide people with the space and tools to create knowledge and improve their life chances.

The role of the library in society is hampered, however, by the fact that the libraries are few in number and small. Thus, defining the role by those who use the library, ignores the fact that most people do not live close enough to a library to be able to make use of what it may offer. Since Namibia became an independent nation, the number of public libraries has increased from 23 to over 60.

The government of Namibia has a strong stated desire for a knowledge society and an economy based on knowledge work. Statements in the Namibia Vision 2030 for the society and in various development plans all speak to this desire. This desire is reflected in the notion that learning and school success will help with life-success. The notion that each individual's success at school will make for a more successful and developed nation is an ideal heard repeatedly in interviews, conversations and government speeches.

The library administration tries to make the case that libraries are a key part of this strategy - in order to create a knowledge society, people will need access to information. Although the belief that education is a key to individual and national success, this has not

always translated into more library programming, although it may be part of the reason that more libraries exist today. As in other countries, however, advocating for libraries and ensuring good budgets for libraries is a difficult job.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, my findings indicate that for libraries to have an impact on society, everyone needs to have access to them. Even though Namibia has tripled the number of public libraries, they still have so few that most people in the country do not have access to public libraries. The desire for a knowledge economy is strong, however, and libraries could be part of the achievement of this goal. Many documents attempt to position the libraries to do this, but limited budgets have kept libraries from realizing their potential.

At the same time, when libraries are available they play a substantial role in the lives of the people who use them. Many people use the library every day or multiple times in the week. These people primarily use the library to support their formal education. A small but persistent number of young adults also use the library to read the newspaper and help with job searching. In this way the libraries are living up to some of the promises of the Manifesto.

1. REFERENCES

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