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Poverty, Democracy and Public Libraries

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Poverty, Democracy and Public Libraries

A central feature of public librarianship in the United States is that librarians have worked to develop a climate of openness by defining library policies to create an institution where all are welcome. In 1990 the American Library Association adopted the policy, "Library Services for the Poor," in which it is stated, "it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies." (*ALA Handbook of Organization*, 1999-2000, policy 61). This policy was adopted because there had been a shifting level of emphasis in the interpretation of "openness" since the establishment of the public library. Open doors are very different from proactive service. In this chapter the socio-economic context of poverty is explored to gain an understanding of the role librarians can play today to provide opportunity for poor people to participate in democracy. A brief review of key writing and documents that define public library service is provided to establish the historical foundation.

The administration and policy-setting of public agencies supported by taxes are not well understood by most residents.**1** Roads, schools, sanitation, police and fire protection, social services, and libraries are used when needed and relatively few residents attempt to influence or change their performance

except at times of perceived crisis. For the most part these public services are supported by taxes, administered by local jurisdictions and overseen by elected or appointed technical experts.

Changing the mode of operation of any public service by external means generally only takes place by legislation or administrative action (desegregation rulings, welfare-to-work regulations, zoning changes), or when an influx of new monies is available (community policing, funds for new construction). Although such actions are the result of the political process, they are not often the result of action initiated at the local level. Efforts by residents to affect public services they receive locally are almost always in reaction to specific situations rather than contributory to changes of broader policy. For instance, a road through a neighborhood to add better access to a big box store might bring residents to a zoning meeting only to learn that the zoning had been authorized years before. While local boards and advisory entities provide some representation that drives the shape of public service, there is evidence that the actions and advice of these groups are no more representative of "all the people" than any other form of representative government.**2** This is not to say that there is not strong sentiment by public agencies for greater civic participation, but there is a need to foster inclusiveness with more commitment as Gates and O'Connor point out: "Working our collaborative and citizen-based efforts into the formal, local political structure will not only create policy that reflects the values of citizens but will also hasten reform of local government from that of a purely representative form to a highly participatory and dynamic decision-making structure." **3**

Agencies that operate in the public service sector must conduct self-analysis to make improvements that respond to community needs. Librarianship exemplifies a public service which carries out a sustained effort to improve services through a complex set of internal actions, association developmental activities and participation by working members. While trustees and library board members do provide resident involvement, libraries have not been able to bring to their planning and policy deliberations a truly representative community voice.

To understand how librarians have broadened and strengthened their commitment to serving all people, by working with all people—especially poor people— to enhance participation in the democratic process is very complex. A general understanding of the origins of the public library movement and the work of librarians over the last 150 years to develop mechanisms to respond to their communities is necessary.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE FRAMED AS CONTRIBUTORY TO DEMOCRACY

"The modern public library in large measure represents the need of democracy for an enlightened electorate, and its history records its adaptation to changing social requirements."

–Jesse H. Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library*, 1949. **4**

It was over a century from the beginning of the establishment of a tax-supported public library in the United States to the first major histories of public library development. In the years following World War II several major publications and actions established broad examination of the public library movement with a special focus on the democratic philosophies that framed it. Any serious considerations of democracy and libraries must be informed with knowledge of their contents.

In *Foundations of the Public Library* Jesse H. Shera provided well-documented analysis of the factors leading to the public library, as we know it today. Complex as these factors may be and somewhat open to interpretation, **5** it is Shera's identification of the democratizing function of the public library from its very founding that is important for this discussion. Shera identified four factors linking the movement for universal schooling and the movement for tax-supported public libraries:

a) A growing awareness of the ordinary man and his importance to the group,

b) The conviction that universal literacy is essential to an enlightened people,

c) A belief in the practical value of technical studies,

d) An enthusiasm for education for its own sake.**6**

Understanding these factors has remained central to the conceptualization of public library service by the profession's leaders as it has been transmitted and reconfigured for each changing era. Exploring the contributions that the U.S. public library makes to support democracy is not a new topic. The monograph, *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture* by Sidney Ditzion (1947) analyzed the public library's role in supporting democracy. Ditzion noted that in the latter decades of the nineteenth century libraries

continued "the educational process where the schools left off and by conducting a people's university, a wholesome capable citizenry would be fully schooled in the conduct of a democratic life."**7**

The histories by Shera and Ditzion coincided with initiatives of the American Library Association to identify the future of the public library in a time of great change. *The National Plan for Public Library Service* (1948) established two main objectives for public libraries: to promote enlightened citizenship and to enrich personal life.**8** *The National Plan* was the final part of the work of the American Library Association's Committee on Post-War Planning and formed part of the basis for the **Public Library Inquiry.**

In his analysis of the **Public Library Inquiry** (carried out and published between 1947-1952) Douglas Raber characterized the **Inquiry** as a professional legitimating project and noted that the discourse of the **Inquiry**, "constituted an exercise in identity creation that relied heavily on the role of the public library as a sustaining contributor to American democracy."**9** The results of the **Inquiry** yielded some recommendations, that if followed, played down the role of the public library among the general public in favor of opinion leaders in the community.**10** This point was made by Robert D. Leigh, who, as director of the **Inquiry**, wrote the general report that is the most frequently consulted overview. Leigh characterized opinion leaders as those for whom the public library was most important.**11**

These four events– the histories by Shera and Ditzion, the reports of the Committee on Post-War Planning, and the set of volumes issued by the **Public Library Inquiry 12**– provided the framework in which U.S. librarians worked at mid century. To gain an historical framework of the concepts linking democracy to libraries readers are directed to these books and primary source documents as well as the examination of the **Public Library Inquiry** by Raber, *Librarianship and Legitimacy*. Suffice it to say that in the general perception—both of the public and the profession in general, as the nation moved into the second half of the century –the identification of libraries with the support and promotion of democracy was strong.

Public librarians also worked diligently to assist immigrants and minorities as a central part of their mission and librarians have developed expertise in working with underserved groups. In 1918 the American Library Association established the Committee on Work with the Foreign Born to address the needs of immigrants for library services, but also to assist with "Americanization."

Because the U.S. southern states did not permit African-Americans to use public libraries segregated facilities were established in some cities such as Charlotte, North Carolina; Houston, Texas; and

Memphis, Tennessee. But very few libraries surveyed in 1922 employed African Americans or made special effort to serve this community . Although there were some notable exceptions such as the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library, few African-Americans had library services until the New Deal initiatives of the 1930s under President Franklin Roosevelt. By 1941 only four states had integrated library services for all. [see:Jones, P.A. Jr. *Libraries, Immigrants, and the American Experience*: Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut 1999. Josey, E.J. *The Black Librarian in America*, Scarecrow, Metuchen, NJ, 1970;; Tucker, J.M. *Untold Stories: Civil Rights, Libraries and Black Librarianship*. University of Illinois: Urbana-Champaign:, 1998; Dawson, A. "Celebrating African- American Librarians and Librarianship," *Library Trends* 49 (summer 2000), 49-87.]

DEMOCRACY FOR ALL THROUGH LIBRARIES: STANDARDS,PRINCIPLES,ROLE SETTING AND TRANSFORMATION

"Public libraries continue to be of enduring importance to the maintenance of our free democratic society. There is no comparable institution in American life." –Public Library Principles Task Force, 1982. **13**

As Leigh pointed out in *The Public Library in the United States* (1950) there was political efficacy in attending to the needs of opinion leaders, for from them would come support—especially as the nation's libraries sought broader funding through federal legislation during the '50s. In a study conducted by the System Development Corporation (SDC) for the U.S. Office of Education, *The Public Library and Federal Policy* (1974) the authors noted, "The public library community must determine whether public libraries should be principally concerned with serving the information and library needs of the sophisticated information user or whether they should try to serve the needs of all segments of the population." **14** Leigh and the SDC study bracket the third-quarter of the 20th century in terms of library direction. Between the post-World War II histories and studies and the SDC study U.S. librarians could look back to the years since World War II with recognition that the profession had endeavored to expand its service base without coming to consensus on who should receive priority for service.

The **Library Services Act** passed in 1956 aided libraries in small towns and rural areas. Its successor, the **Library Services and Construction Act** passed in 1964 provided the means for brick and mortar and well as interlibrary cooperation. Libraries also applied for and were awarded support under programs of the "**War on Poverty**". Participation in these programs was a factor that changed the way the profession looked at its articulation of service.

While some have looked back at the demonstration projects of the **War on Poverty** period and decided that librarians tried to do too much, these projects nevertheless helped to foster a grassroots movement within the American Library Association that fought to expand the meaning of outreach. In 1968 the American Library Association Council voted to establish a Coordinating Committee on Service to the Disadvantaged which became the Office for Library Service to the Disadvantaged in 1970 (and today is the Office for Literacy and Outreach Services). This is the ALA home for the Subcommittee on Library Services to Poor and Homeless People. The Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the American Library Association held its first formal meeting in 1969. Today SRRT includes a Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness and Poverty.

A number of publications during and after the **War on Poverty** shaped ideals of the library as an agent for change and contributed to the dialogue about expanded activist service during this time. These included (inter alia) the 1967 ALA survey, *Library Services to the Disadvantaged*, Margaret E. Monroe's "Readers' Services to the Disadvantaged in Inner Cities," Kathleen Weibel's *Evolution of Library Outreach 1960-1975*, Helen Lyman's *Literacy and the Nation's Libraries*, and Clara S. Jones', *Public Library and Information Referral Service*.**15** The perspective of serving poor people was passionately described and well-defined by librarians during this period.

Over this same period (1950-1975) the American Library Association issued two standards documents (1956 and 1966). **16** The 1966 Standards came out amidst the **War on Poverty** and were seen as inadequate to the times. Many librarians felt that national standards could no longer reflect local community needs. In fact, the 1966 Minimum Standards for Public Library Systems would be the last effort at national public library standards issued by the Association.**17**

The complex process of the Public Library Association moving from the 1966 standards to a planning process in the seventies is viewed by Verna L.Pungitore as a major innovation. In her study of the adoption of the public library planning process Pungitore examined how the set of techniques, developed and promoted by the Public Library Association allowed public librarians to engage in user-oriented planning, community-specific role setting, and self-evaluation.**18** This transformation of planning for public library service replaced nationally developed standards with locally derived goals. Attempts to track a particular value or focus—such as the role of democracy– are naturally more complex as the devolution of mission to the local level makes it inappropriate to identify generalizations about all public libraries. McCook, reviewing the history of the activation of the library's clientele through the filter of standards observed that the planning process is "an iconoclastic challenge to the previous statements that tried to define the role and purpose of the public library…libraries are to develop services which their community needs. There are no prescriptions offered." **19**

Once the Public Library Association developed the planning process, each public library had a methodology to use at the local level to develop its own mission, goals and objectives in collaboration with community and staff. The 1980 manual, *Planning Process for Public Libraries*, and the 1982 *Output Measures for Public Libraries* provided the tools for planning and measurement.**20** The role of the public library in serving democracy was no longer a value imbedded in a formal public library standards document, for no such document existed at the national level.

There were two documents issued by the Public Library Association during the launching of the planning process that need examination in light of this discussion: The **Public Library Mission Statement and Its Imperatives for Service**   (1979), a product of the PLA Goals, Guidelines, and Standards Committee intended as a bridge between standards and the planning process and "The Public Library: Democracy's Resource, A Statement of Purpose," **22** put together by the Public Library Principles Task Force in 1982.

The Mission Statement was not well received. In fact, as Pungitore points out, some of the members of the Committee disavowed it after it was approved.**23** However, the Statement's idealism reflected a desire by public librarians to have an over-arching mission statement while recognizing the need to establish a new methodology for local planning. This Statement is an important reflection of the profession's thoughtful reaction to the ideas of the Other America. **24** The classic thesis (old standards), antithesis (1979 Mission Statement), synthesis (1982" Statement of Principles"/ new planning process) formulation works here.

The 1982 "Statement of Principles," " The Public Library: Democracy's Resource," was issued amidst the adoption of the new Public Library Association planning process. It incorporated support for the planning model in its declaration. This one page document (issued suitable for framing) identified the public library as offering access freely to all members of the community "without regard to race, citizenship, age, education level, economic status, or any other qualification or condition."**25** It is a document of synthesis for it provides a strong sense of mission yet incorporates the new process of local role identification.

By the late eighties the publications and initiatives that comprised the public library planning process were characterized as the Public Library Development Program (PLDP). The publications issued under this designation included the **Public Library Data Service Statistical Report** and its ongoing annual successor, the **Statistical Report**, a 2nd edition of *Output Measures for Public Libraries* (1987), *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries* (1987), a manual for trainers (1988*), Output Measures for Public Library Service to Children* (1992) *and Output Measures and More: Planning and Evaluating Public Library Services for Young Adults* (1995). **26**

In 1994 the Public Library Association Committee on Planning and Evaluation commissioned a study to evaluate the effectiveness and re-define the direction of the PLDP as public libraries entered the 21st century. The study, "An Evaluation of the Public Library Development Program" completed in 1995 recommended a revised PDLP.**27** The Public Library Association then appointed a ReVision committee in 1996 to oversee the process in collaboration with consultants. In 1998 *Planning for Results: A Public Library Transformation Process* was published as the new PLA planning document moving from library roles to library responses. Among the changes was a new planning component highlighting the importance of community and visioning statements.**28** However, as pointed out in her analysis of the role of libraries in building communities, McCook identifies this point of connection as most crucial for public library inclusion in national community initiatives and not treated with sufficient attention.**29**

What can be seen by this summary of the move by public librarians from national standards to a planning and transformation process is an internal philosophical struggle to create a process that would reflect local community needs. This was carried out at the same time the nation, the states, and local jurisdictions were struggling to find ways to enable local communities to build capacity.

THE SEARCH FOR BROAD MISSION

"Since their inception, libraries have served as pivotal community institutions upholding, strengthening, and realizing some of the most fundamental democratic ideals of our society." –Nancy Kranich, "Libraries: The Cornerstone of Deomocracy."**30** –2000.

When the Public Library Association began to move to a planning process and the PLDP program in the place of national standards, the effort to establish a national mission for public libraries was no longer part of the PLA agenda although, as noted above the 1979 Mission Statement and 1982 "Democracy's Resource" statement were surely such efforts.

Ongoing debate on the mission of the public library included Hafner's 1994 reaffirmation of the library's democratic purpose and critique of the move to popularization.**31** While the PLA pulled back from broad mission definition regarding democracy for all libraries after 1982, the American Library Association and the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science continued to provide general statements of direction. This is not a place for a sidebar on the role of the American Library Association or other

entities versus ALA's type of library associations to speak for all libraries, but in the absence of a broad mission by the Public Library Association, such actions were inevitable.

In 1995 the ALA's journal, *American Libraries*, listed "12 Ways Libraries Are Good for the Country," and included in the prefatory material the statement, "Libraries safeguard our freedom and keep democracy healthy." With a photograph of the Statue of Liberty in the background the first of the "12 Ways" listed was "to inform citizens," because democracy and libraries have a symbiotic relationship.**32**

The 1999 ALA Council adopted the statement, "Libraries: An American Value," included it as an official public policy statement (Policy 53.8), and printed it on the cover of the Association's 1999-2000 *Handbook.* This statement noted, "we preserve our democratic society by making available the widest possible range of viewpoints, opinions and ideas." **33** That same year the ALA sponsored a Congress on Professional Education that resulted in an effort to develop "A Statement on Core Values,"**34** and the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science passed a resolution adopting the Principles for Public Library Service based on the UNESCO **Public Library Manifesto**. These Principles include the key mission that the public library will be a "gateway to knowledge," and that "Freedom, Prosperity and the Development of Society and of individuals are fundamental human values. They will be attained through the ability of well-informed citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to play an active role in society."**35**

This summary of the last fifty years of public libraries' efforts in the United States to establish standards and move to planning at the start of a new century is a history of a sustained and consistent commitment to the ideals of democracy. The language and location of this commitment may vary from document to document, but the idea of democracy emerges again and again. The expansion of the idea of service in support of democracy became even broader during the **War on Poverty** to delineate the heretofore left behind. This caused consternation among some that libraries were trying to do too many things. Yet others held fast to a comprehensive commitment to work with all people. This summary is only intended to provide a foundation for asserting that public librarians have remained constant in their hearts. Though much labor has gone into procedures and techniques, the essence remains a firm commitment to democratic values.

This essence is a temptation to metaphorical rhapsodizing that might seem too simple in its purity. But it can not be helped. For librarians democracy is our arsenal, our cornerstone, our beacon, our strongest value. And a commitment to democracy leads us without a doubt to be committed to serving poor people.

LOCAL COMMUNITIES INCLUDE POOR AND WORKING CLASS PEOPLE

"Although we profess that we are citizens of a democracy, and although we may vote once every four years, millions of our people feel deep down in their heart of hearts that there is no place for them— that they do not 'count.' They have no voice of their own, no organization (which is really their own instead of absentee) to represent them, no way in which they may lay their hand and their heart to the shaping of their own destinies."–Saul Alinsky "Statement of Purpose of the Industrial Areas Foundation,"**36** – 1941

"When we say 'for the poor,' we do not take sides with one social class…what we do is invite all social classes, rich and poor without distinction, saying to everyone: Let us take seriously the cause of the poor as though it were our own."– Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love*, **37**– 1979

The Public Library Association has developed powerful new tools that can assist public libraries in developing service configured to the needs of the local community. The American Library Association at its policy levels has reaffirmed democracy as a central library value. Citizen input and the librarian's connection to the community are crucial. This is where there lies a potential for misstep. The total community is not easily involved—not for community visioning, not for library visioning. Yet the ALA's policy on services to the poor, specifically objective 10, says that librarians have decided collectively that we will work to make this so. The policy states, "promoting direct representation of poor people and anti-poverty advocates through appointments to local boards…such appointments to include library-paid transportation and stipends."

The standards and planning efforts by the Public Library Association are impressive for their sustained commitment by so many which is apparent and sincere. The best legacy these documents and processes provide is great freedom to work with communities and forge a vision. But there are many levels and layers of communities within any given community. There are homeowners, business people, professionals and the working poor. The communities with which the librarians find themselves most often working or the communities that choose to work with the librarian are most likely not the communities that include poor people. This is not an act of commission, but an act of omission. It is hard to get poor people to the many meetings at which vision statements are formed—not just for the library, but also for the community as a whole. Poor people are simply working too hard to be able to exercise their chances to participate in the democratic process in a way that is sustained enough for their voices to be heard.

Poverty in the United States is defined by a changing income level calculated since 1969 that is adjusted each year for inflation using the consumer price indexes.38 In 2000 the poverty threshold was calculated at $8,350 for a single person and $17, 050 for a family of four. Yet this threshold is extremely inadequate for a modest standard of living. It is deceptive. It ignores the costs of childcare, difference in health insurance, and changes under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.**39**

In the 2000 report, Does a Rising Tide Lift all Boats? labor economist Linda Barrington has constructed a series of poverty statistics that provide four major findings:

1) Poverty has risen in both the number and share of those employed full-time and year round since 1973. Gains of the 1960s ceased in the mid-1970s.

2) Long-term economic growth has had little impact on poverty among full-time workers.

3) There are great differences in the poverty experience of full-time workers living in different regions of the country and belonging to different racial/ethnic groups.

4) Ethnic minorities working full-time move in and out of poverty more often than whites.**40**

The October, 2000 analysis of census data by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that 11.9 percent of all U.S. citizens still live in poverty and the child poverty rate is 16.9 percent. This means that 32.3 million people still live below the official poverty threshold of $17, 050 for a family of four. In fact, those who have remained poor have grown poorer. The poverty gap—the total amount by which the income of all poor households falls below the poverty line—has increased as the truly poor have experienced reductions in means-tested benefits that offset increases in earnings. The minimum wage still remains substantially below the levels of the 1970s in purchasing power.**41** Children are more likely to live in poverty than any other age group with eight percent of all American children living with incomes 50 percent below the poverty line. Additionally, it should be noted that many children (40 percent) are "near" poor and just above the poverty line.**42**

In the *State of Working America 2000-2001* it is made clear that the typical American family is working more hours, taking on high levels of household debt and that increases in income are based on more hours worked. Middle and lower income workers have increased time at work by 19 weeks since 1969. There is simply less time for middle and working class families.**43** This aspect of degraded family time is also explored by Theda Skocpol in *The Missing Middle: Working Families and the Future of American Social Policy.***44**

Without time to participate in community discussions poor and working class people seldom have their particular needs heard in community forums. Without the tools of discourse their efforts to be heard, even if they make them, are not. Librarians striving to develop comprehensive community involvement in planning must realize that to include poor and working class people there must be special effort. The involvement of the poor and working class in community development and the democratic process is critical if their needs are to be factored into decision-making. What can librarians do?

LIBRARIANS, DEMOCRACY AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE POOR PEOPLE'S POLICY

"The happiness of others is a goal worth pursuing, and the method for achieving it, democracy, is a risk worth taking."— Earl Shorris, *Riches for the Poor*, **45** – 2000

Participation in the democratic process requires a perception that one is a member of the community and that one can make an effect on the community. The May, 2000 issue of *American Libraries* focused on isolating aspects of poverty including homelessness, imprisonment, rural lack of connectivity and lack of access to the ideas of the humanities.**46** Providing a way to learn the ideas of the humanities as the way for poor people to break free of poverty has been presented by Earl Shorris in his book, *Riches for the Poor*, in which he lays out the argument that in the United States the poor have been excluded from the circle of power.**47** One way to ameliorate this is to provide an entrance to reflection and the political life through the humanities.**48** Shorris' case for the humanities as a "radical antidote to long-term poverty rests finally on the question of who is born human and to what extent a person is capable of enjoying his or her humanity."**49** Shorris makes the point, like Jonathan Kozol in his *book Ordinary Resurrections*, that poor people in our society are seen as people who work to survive but are not given the given the opportunity for reflection.**50**

What better service can librarians provide to poor people than to develop support for them at the beginning of a journey to full participation in democracy? The first step in this journey is, of course, literacy. The American Library Association has a long history of support to literacy initiatives as do state library agencies and libraries at the local level.**51** This support continues with renewed emphasis today. "Literacy in Libraries Across America" is a current three-year national initiative in partnership with the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund designed to strengthen library-based adult literacy programs. Its purpose is to support selected public libraries in their efforts to provide educational services to adult learners. Public libraries in four states are receiving a total of $2.7 million to improve the curriculum and instruction available to adult students. In addition, the libraries are expanding their use of computer technology and developing better methods to measure and document the gains made by learners. The Fund has made a related grant of $1.3 million to the ALA to coordinate technical assistance to participating libraries, organize a series conferences for participants, develop a telecommunications

network, create a World Wide Web site for library literacy and implement other strategies to strengthen the field of library-based literacy programs. **52**

Individuals make their own journey toward participation in democracy. The structure librarians can provide for adult literacy is a basic way to help poor people. Activating opportunities for new readers to have access to the ideas of the humanities is another way through support of reading and discussion programs such as National Connections or Prime Time Literacy, reading and discussion programs for new readers funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.**53**

With the integration of electronic technology in all aspects of U.S. life and work librarians have made a concerted effort to provide equitable access to digital resources. This effort has had a national focus in the successful work to move from the LSCA to the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) achieved in 1996. Administered through the Institute of Museum and Library Services the LSTA continues to make money available to local libraries through state agencies. Its priorities include electronic networking and targeting the unserved.**54** There are specific provisions for developing services to help people whose incomes are below the poverty threshold. Additional technology support for libraries serving communities with residents in poverty has come from the Gates Library Foundation which has partnered with libraries to provide access to the Internet.

Helping to create an information literate society is also a strong emphasis for librarians as exemplified by Nancy Kranich's Committee on Information Literacy Community Partnerships intended to bring together librarians and community members/organizations. Through this initiative librarians will " help the public learn how to identify and evaluate information that is essential to making decisions that affect the way they live, work, learn and govern…. These are the critical-thinking skills so essential to lifelong learning, so necessary for effective participation in our democracy." **55** One pertinent example of the kind of information literacy analysis that examines the use of technology for social activism demonstrates the need for information literacy to teach both paper-based and digital sources to support democratic citizen action.**56**

Literacy, reflection on the ideas of the humanities and the ability to find and evaluate information in an information society are among the needs of poor people. The involvement of librarians in these initiatives working with poor people has come about because librarians have a history of collective action. The fifteen policy objectives of ALA's poor people's policy, as librarians work to achieve them, may all be seen as contributing to building a greater capacity for poor people to participate in the democratic process. But we still have much work to do.

DEMOCRACY: THE ONLY WAY OUT OF POVERTY

"To be prevented from participation in the political life of the community cannot but be a major deprivation."—Amartya Sen, "Democracy: The Only Way Out of Poverty,**57** – 2000.

In his January 2000 presentation for the Wingspread Conference on "The New Information Commons," Harry C. Boyte characterized civic professionalism as public craft that does not deny the importance of scientific knowledge, disciplined effort or assiduously learned skills but integrates such things into far more contextualized and interactive practice—work "with" people rather than simply "for" them. Professions practiced as public crafts add public judgment or wisdom to knowledge. Boyte goes on to state that forms of civic work influenced many professional traditions through most of the 20th century, including librarians, who saw themselves as citizens first.**58** These ideas are explored in a forthcoming book by Ronald B. McCabe, *Civic Librarianship: Renewing the Social Mission of the Public Library* which reaffirms the traditional public library mission of providing education for a democratic society.**59**

The social mission of the public library can only be activated through librarian participation in the life of the various communities served. For this reason some librarians participated in the *Dialogue on Poverty 2000: Leading America to Community Action*, the democracy project of the national network of community action agencies to re-engage Americans, especially poor people, with each other and the process of public policy development to address the dilemma of poverty in the midst of plenty.**60** Being with the community as its residents identify the direction they choose is at the heart of working with the community to build capacity for participating in democracy and making changes for a better quality of life.**61**

And the responsibility of librarians extends beyond the local community to considerations of what can be done by librarians to ameliorate information inequity in a global context. These are the concerns of the International Federation of Library Association's Social Responsibilities Discussion Group identified in a composite paper edited by Alfred Kagan,"The Growing Gap between the Information Rich and the Information Poor Both Within and Between Countries." **62** As librarians deliberate their role in supporting democracy among all people in the United States and among all people in the world the idea of a "pragmatic solidarity," as optimistically described by Heena Patel in *Dying for Growth*.**63** can be supported by libraries. During Jubilee 2000 librarians can work with international organizations to provide information about relief for highly indebted poor countries.**64** Working with people librarians will practice their profession as a public craft recognizing with Amartya Sen, Nobel winner in economics, that democracy is the only way out of poverty.65

Notes

1 Because many poor people may be undocumented or working in the United States without legal status the term "residents" is used throughout this paper rather than "citizens" to be more inclusive except in the case of quotations.

2 Jane Robbins, *Citizen Participation and Public Library Policy* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1975). This provides a thoughtful analysis of citizen participation that makes valid points of continuing value.

3 Christopher T. Gates and Drew O'Connor, "Toward a Healthy Democracy," *National Civic Review* 89 (Summer 2000): 167.

4 Jesse H.Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England 1629-1855* (1949) reprint edition (Hamden, CT: Shoestring Press, 1974), p.vi.

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