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Beyond Bowling Leagues: Libraries and Democracy through the Lens of Civil Society Theory

Abstract: The discussion surrounding libraries and democracy has progressively increased in sophistication. We argue, however, that this discussion must include the concept of *civil society*. Engaging with theories of the civil society provides an analytical tool to better map the relationship(s) between libraries, the polity, and democratic regimes.

Résumé : Les discussions sur le rôle des bibliothèques dans une démocratie ont progressivement atteint un certain niveau de sophistication. Notre croyons cependant que ces discussions doivent tenir compte du concept de *société civile*. Les théories de la société civile offrent un outil d'analyse qui permet une meilleure mise en relations des bibliothèques, de la politie et des régimes démocratiques.

The modern public library is frequently represented as a buttress to democratic ideals, whether through librarianship's practices or principles. The political philosophy which underpins these arguments, however, has not always been explicit. Unreflective appeals to *democracy*, *information*, *citizenship,* and *community* have led to some shallow proclamations on the role of information and libraries among the polity (Buschman, 2007). We do not reject the contention that libraries and librarians have the potential to enhance or foster democracy. Realizing that potential, though, requires constant and critical reflection concerning the particular ways in which the library, in its practices and its principles, fit into the complex arrangements of contemporary democratic regimes.

Our intention is two-fold: 1) to provide a critical analysis of the literature on libraries and democracy, and 2) to propose a new lens – from the perspective of civil society – through which we might explore this connection. In our review of the literature on libraries and democracy, we identify two distinct streams of thought. The initial stream is based on a liberal conception of democracy. As the limits of the liberal model became apparent, however, a recent strain of communitarian democratic thought has come to inform librarianship. This shift marks a recognition that the scope of a polity must go beyond the unit of the individual, instead recognizing the political significance of larger social units. Yet we must expand our scope further than communitarian thought allows. A better, more nuanced understanding of the complex workings of contemporary democratic societies requires that we look beyond individuals and communities to the totality of civil society. It is our contention that such an approach has the potential to move the discussion beyond platitudes, resist inherent problems associated with localism, reveal undemocratic forces, and provide new avenues to explore the democratic possibilities of libraries and library work.

While LIS struggles to define *information* or *democracy,* it will find *civil society* no less contentious. John Dunn observed that it "is not difficult to use the term civil society so loosely and equivocally as to carry no meaning whatsoever" (2001, 40). Typically, it is

used to refer to the space citizens occupy that is outside the state and the market. As such, it is often represented as the site of genuine popular will. In the twilight of the Eastern Bloc, for example, civil society organizations such as the Polish trade union, Solidarity, were credited with a political legitimacy that the communist state lacked. In this sense, non-governmental organizations, trusts, voluntary associations, faith-based organizations, social movements, and identity-based groups can all be considered civil society, built around common interests and collective action. These networks, regardless of how formal or informal, are under-girded by normative values that facilitate interaction and interdependence. Trust, reciprocity, tolerance and inclusivity make up the *civility* of this civil society.

This view of civil society, conceived as a well-defined and free-standing social order, would not move the discussion very far from the communiatrian vision. But inherent to the concept of civil society is something more complex; civil society is by definition a space bracketed by economic and political spheres, and there lies its analytical power. The relational aspect of civil society to the market and the state becomes the basis for examining the interpenetration of these three spheres, and how they colonize one another.

It is important to point out that civil society is not synonymous with democracy. Elements within civil society may actually impede or dismantle the democratic state (Alagappa, 2004; Edwards, 2009). John Ehrenberg writes:

> Much depends on the nature of the state and the character of the associations, groups, and movements that populate civil society. People bowled, played soccer, and sang in choral groups in Jim Crow Mississippi and in New York City, but that does not mean that their civil societies were remotely similar...The undoubted importance of voluntary activity and intermediate association cannot blind us to the overriding importance of broad and comprehensive *political* categories (1999, 239).

In the plural and diverse civil society, systematic inequalities undermine the democratic process (Post, 2006). Furthermore, within its clamour of voices (and silences), a qualitative distinction exists between those sustaining, those retarding and those ambivalent to democracy. The scope of community - however local and intimate - is not simply the site of congenial consensus, but the site of conflict and coercion that is antithetical to democratic participation (as documented in Jane Mansbridge's 1983 study of town-hall democracy).

A community-focus splinters a polity into parochial groups insufficient or inadequate to confront large-scale social issues. Civil society, however, allows us to overcome these limitations by examining the complex interactions of economic, cultural, and political forces shaping public life. In this sense, civil society "can be grasped only by looking carefully at what its constituent structures do, how they are organized, and what political and economic forces are at work—no matter how strenuously some theorists try to describe it as an autonomous sphere of democratic activity" (Ehrenberg, 1999, 235). Civil society does not stand alone; rather, it is a "heuristic device, a theoretical guide that can reveal important matters of social life" (235).

A philosophy of librarianship that assumes an intrinsic or essential connection between the library and democracy, be it liberal or communitarian, normalizes the prescriptive

nature of either model. Employing civil society as an analytical tool, however, recognizes that democracy is always an unfinished project. Information literacy, collection development, library administration, speaker series, movie showings, reading groups, job-seeking services, children activities—the myriad of ways in which a library serves its users, and just who those users are or aren't, are indicative of specific civil society formations. Grasping the particularities of these formations allows libraries to trace through their programs, services, and partnerships threats, obstacles and incursions on political participation. At the same time, the civil society perspective will afford librarians and information professionals opportunities to create principles, policies, and practices that embody the democratic values that the profession proclaims. Instead of obscuring or condoning undemocratic influences – whether instigated by citizens, business-interests, or government – librarianship practiced thusly has the potential to enhance democracy. When appealing to democratic ideals, the population the library serves (along with population it doesn't serve) cannot be understood simply at the level of individuals or communities. As quasi-state-driven, quasi-market-driven, and quasi-citizen-driven institutions, libraries are a nexus through which to evaluate the progress and impediments in the democratic project. Doing so, however, means scaling up our thinking above and beyond bowling leagues, to the level of civil society.

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