Public Libraries and Knowledge Politics

Stuart Lawson

To complement contemporary discussions on open access, this chapter considers public libraries as one element of the longer history of access to scholarly knowledge. A historical perspective reveals that access to knowledge has undergone a long, slow process of change, related to social, technical, and political developments in printing, mass literacy, universities, and libraries. Until the advent of the digital technologies which enable the open access movement, public access to the scholarly record required physical access to printed works. Public libraries helped facilitate this, fulfilling a vital role in extending access to scholarship beyond the academy. Yet the complex power dynamics at play in the dissemination of ideas are visible in the creation of public libraries, through the role of philanthropy, Enlightenment notions of self-improvement, and the class politics of the Victorian era. Examining these origins reveals that current debates around the consequences of widening public access to scholarship – and how this expansion should be paid for – are nothing new. The liberal ideals underpinning librarianship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are still present in the digital era, and exploring the biases and contradictions contained within public libraries' history may give us pause when considering the political context of scholarly publishing today.

Public libraries and expanding access

For most of their history, libraries have existed to serve specific communities, although some were also open to members of the general public. The transition from a patchwork of community and membership libraries to what would be recognised today as a modern national public library service is well illustrated by examining the origins of public libraries in the UK, the country generally recognised as the first to legislate for a nationwide library service.[i] The term 'public library' was used in Britain as early as the seventeenth century to describe libraries supported by a variety of funding models[ii]: endowed libraries (founded by philanthropists), subscription libraries,[iii] and institutional libraries. These models encompassed a diverse range of library types, from the institutional libraries of religious organisations through to co-operatively owned workers libraries. When public libraries in the modern sense – i.e. publicly-funded institutions for use by the whole community – were created, they built on this earlier legacy, in some cases very directly with the transfer of books and buildings.[iv] The idea of public libraries as a network of institutions to serve an entire nation only became possible in the UK following the 1850 Public Libraries Act which allowed town councils to establish libraries funded by raising local taxes. Over the next century the national network slowly came into being with steady growth in the number of libraries, driven by further legislation such as the 1919 Public Libraries Act that extended library provision beyond urban centres to counties as well. The amount of funding that could be raised through taxation was limited so many libraries relied on philanthropy from wealthy individuals to fund the acquisition of reading materials, with the steel magnate Andrew Carnegie taking a leading role in paying for the

buildings themselves.[v] Library provision to all finally became a statutory obligation of local authorities with the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act.

Concurrently, working-class education had expanded greatly throughout the nineteenth century, and not only through state-sponsored channels: mutual improvement societies, co-operative societies, miners' libraries and mechanics' institutes all contributed to adult education. Formal higher education also underwent big changes in the same period: despite the medieval origins, modern universities were largely a product of the nineteenth century,[vi] during which time new universities were created in Britain's civic centres.[vii] By the mid-nineteenth century education reforms meant that most adults were literate to some degree,[viii] and details of the occupations of registered library users in the 1870s show that a majority are of the working classes.[ix] The coupling of broadened access to education with public library provision resulted in a dramatic expansion of public appetite for access to scholarship. The professionalisation of science around the turn of the twentieth century[x] also contributed to greater participation in scholarship beyond the traditional 'gentleman-scholars' who had previously dominated science, although the requirement of a university education may have had a negative impact on self-trained working-class scientists.[xi] Access to reference materials through public libraries played an important supporting role in all of this – at least in the cities – particularly in expanding access to women, who had often been excluded from both universities and institutions designed for working men.[xii]

A counter reading of the history of working class education in the UK is of a gradual shift of control out of the hands of the workers themselves and towards the governing classes. It began with working class activists organising among themselves, was solidified into institutions such as mechanics' institutes which were much more heavily reliant on middle-class patronage, and finally led to state control of education. While in some ways this was a victory, resulting in universal free education for all children regardless of class, it also diminished traditions of mutual support and self-organisation in place of benevolent 'care'. This narrative is somewhat over-simplified – after all, self-educated intellectuals were always a minority within the working classes[xiii] – but raises important issues around power relations that are discussed further below. Public libraries were part of this [gentrification] process. The state-funded public library network that was becoming fairly comprehensive by the early twentieth century did offer greatly expanded opportunities for working-class people to access books, but at the cost of removing some of the agency[xiv] from the decision over what to purchase that was present in the small local libraries of a century earlier. This trade-off between access and agency has resonance with regards to current debates surrounding open access in the context of North-South relations. The 'missionary' aspect of the UK's early public library provision, whereby wealthy philanthropists bestowed gifts upon the poor, must be avoided in new open systems of knowledge dissemination by taking care to foster relationships of mutual co-operation.

Class, colonialism, and access

Libraries have often been idealised as 'neutral' and classless,[xv] which obscures their political dimension. Indeed, class relations were intrinsic to the public library movement that led to the original British legislation in 1850 – enacted after campaigns by Liberal MPs William Ewart and Joseph Brotherton – with Victorian middle class notions of social- and self-improvement a key driver in the idea of providing library facilities to all.[xvi] Public libraries were created with the aim of 'bettering' the working classes; they were designed as cultural institutions that would shape public taste and foster 'good citizenship'.[xvii] It was thought by some advocates that providing free literature to workers would dull revolutionary tendencies and interest in radical socialism.[xviii] Conversely, Rose argues against this that rather than instil bourgeois values, working-class education was a means for workers to break out of prescribed class roles.[xix] If 'economic inequality rested on inequality of education',[xx] then institutions designed to provide greater equity of access to knowledge were part of the egalitarian spirit of liberal reform. Equity of access is seen as central to the purpose of public libraries, with McMenemy arguing that they 'represent the ideal that everyone within society deserves the right to access materials for their educational, cultural and leisure benefit'.[xxi]

Such ideals are emblematic of the liberal enlightenment so it is vital to remember the destructive legacy of colonialism and empire that coexists within this same tradition. Comparing the creation of public library services in the UK with the experience of some former colonial nations shows the imprint of this imperialist legacy and the fight against it. For instance, New Zealand had an incredibly high density of libraries within a few decades of European colonisation but these were almost all subscription libraries rather than being municipally-funded,[xxii] as were the British-introduced libraries in Malaysia until American organisations introduced free libraries in the 1950s.[xxiii] The Dutch colonial administration in Indonesia created 2,500 public libraries to cement its authority through instilling its values.[xxiv] While Britain was responsible for introducing modern public libraries to some countries,[xxv] it used a similar propagandist model to the Dutch in various African and Asian colonies.[xxvi] In 1930s India, on the other hand, Ranganathan saw libraries as part of an anti-colonial political project, 'draw[ing] a link between open access to knowledge and the need for wider social transformation'.[xxvii] Although a scattering of public libraries already existed in various Indian cities[xxviii] these did not cover most of the population, and the movement to create a national network of public libraries (along with mass literacy and education) was grounded in the struggle against colonial rule.[xxix] These histories show a diverse global picture in terms of the political dynamics of introducing national public library systems, particularly in terms of their colonial origins, with lasting consequences for their future development.[xxx] Widening access to knowledge has been viewed as both emancipatory and, conversely, as a tool for indoctrination.[xxxi] If public libraries are governed solely in the interests of governing classes rather than for ordinary citizens, their potential for facilitating a more equitable distribution of knowledge is diminished.

In this light, librarians act as both facilitators of access to information but also as gatekeepers, a dual role that highlights a tension within the profession's ethics. In some ways the need to mediate

between library users and their materials has been reduced over time through both social and technological advances. For instance, the term 'open access' was originally used to refer to print materials held on open shelves rather than in closed stacks, a practice which was unknown in the early days of public libraries[xxxii] and after being introduced in the US from the 1890s[xxxiii] it only became widespread in the UK following the First World War.[xxxiv] To take a more recent example, if a library now provides an electronic version of a text then the user may be able to access it without physically going to the library. In both of these examples library workers are still facilitating access but their role is less obvious to the end user and so the necessity of librarians' labour is obscured. Unfortunately, the fact that labour is often hidden has resulted in calls from the libertarian right to end public library services due to ill-conceived notions that librarians have already been automated out.

Open access and knowledge politics

Public libraries have always had to be responsive to the political context of the time. For example, in the UK under New Labour social inclusion became an explicit part of library policy,[xxxv] whereas the later 2010-15 coalition government cut local government spending to such an extent that many councils closed libraries in response.[xxxvi] Such an engagement with the policy direction of particular governments is also very clear with regards to open access. A central rationale for open access is that not all users (or potential users) of academic research are within the academy and research could have greater impact if results are made more widely available. The composition of publics outside of the academy varies at any given time but includes teachers, further education students, retired academics, industry and entrepreneurs, refugees,[xxxvii] and 'para-academic' or contingent academic labour without a permanent faculty position. The UK government has made open access a priority in order to tap into the unlocked economic potential of these publics – especially startups and entrepreneurs. The notion that public libraries could provide scientific and technical knowledge in order to drive innovation and therefore stimulate economic growth is an old one. Although in the late nineteenth century public libraries' provision of technical literature was patchy,[xxxviii] by the First World War they were seen as supporting economic activity around scientific and technical progress, leading to the development of numerous commercial and technical libraries.[xxxix]

A similar supporting role for public libraries was envisaged by David Willetts, the former Minister for Universities and Science (2010-14), who initiated the UK's current national open access policy direction. After 150 years of expanding access to knowledge through public libraries, using them to increase access to online research can be see as a logical expansion and resulted in the UK's free access service, 'Access to Research'.[xl] The scheme provides free access to online journal articles from public library computers. This is an exception to most UK open access policy in that it focuses on end users rather than the supply side, i.e. academia. It has so far not been a runaway success – figures from the initial 19-month pilot period of the service showed a wide variance in usage between different library authorities, with some seeing no usage at all, and the national total of 89,869 searches from 34,276 user sessions during the period translates as only 1,800 users per month.[xli] Furthermore, the Access to Research scheme is taking place concurrently with an

unprecedented level of budgetary cuts to public library provision in the UK, alongside ongoing commercialisation and de-professionalisation which threaten[s] to reduce the ability of public libraries to function as a 'public sphere'. Walk-in access to research is of no value to citizens whose library has been closed.

Conclusion

From the creation of public libraries, the expansion of higher education, to the global adoption of the internet, a shifting distribution of power has put more information in the hands of more people. Open access to research in the digital era is part of this longer history of access to knowledge. But if the decisions governing open access policy are subject to whims of temporary administrations, then nothing is inevitable about the success or otherwise of open access – rights obtained after a long struggle can always be rolled back. Despite all the gains made so far,[xlii] not everyone has equal access to knowledge: money and social advantage are still barriers to access the results of scholarship, let alone participate in its creation. The extent of academic piracy highlights the uneven geographical distribution of access to research: pirate websites such as Sci-Hub and Library Genesis show great demand in majority-world nations such as Indonesia and Iran.[xliii] This indicates that there is still much work to be done. Throughout history, progress in this area has often followed on the heels of grassroots or illicit activity. For example, although nineteenth-century public libraries resulted from top-down work of social reformers rather than bottom-up demand, they entered a world already containing a rich variety of autonomous working-class libraries. And piracy is often a precursor to the implementation of legal solutions.[xliv] By paying attention to the lessons of history, particularly its social and political dimensions, those of us who see open access as a progressive catalyst for social change can work towards the *kind* of open access we want to see.

i   To qualify this statement, it should be mentioned that the UK's initial legislation only *allowed* individual local authorities to raise taxes for public libraries, rather than *require* them to do so. And legislation was also passed at a local level in the US around the same time, such as in New Hampshire in 1849 and Boston in 1852 (Shera 1949: 165–188).

ii   Kelly (1977: 3–4).

iii   Subscription libraries lasted until the mid-twentieth century when they were finally supplanted by tax-funded libraries (Black 2000: 115; Kelly 1977: 344).

iv   See Kelly (1977: 72–74).

v   Kelly (1977 115–137); McMenemy (2009: 27–30).

vi   Readings (1996: 7); Rüegg (2004: 5–6).

vii   Collini (2012: 27-28).

viii Kelly (1977: 18). In fact, there were fairly high levels of literacy much earlier than this – see Rose (2010) – but a national system of free primary education helped make this more consistent across different classes and regions.

ix   Kelly (1977: 82–83).

x   Secord (2009).

xi   Rose (2010: 70–72).

xii   Baggs (2004: 120); Rose (2010: 18–20, 76–77).

xiii Rose (2010: 236).

xiv   See Baggs (2004) for details of this process in action in the miners' libraries of south Wales.

xv   See Pateman (2000) on class and Lewis (2008) on library neutrality.

xvi   McMenemy (2009: 24–25).

xvii Black (2000: 4).

xviii Black (2000: 25–27, 145–146); Black, Pepper, & Bagshaw (2009: 42–43).

xix   Rose (2010: 23).

xx   Rose (2010: 24).

xxi   McMenemy (2009: xiii). See also the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994).

xxii Traue (2007: 153).

xxiii Yu (2008: 65–67). The US also played a similar role in Japan (ibid. pp.67–68).

xxiv Fitzpatrick (2008). See also Sulistyo-Basuki (1998) for more historical context.

xxv   For example Ethiopia (Coleman 2005), but see also Rosenberg (1993) on the British colonial authority's lack of interest in setting up a national library service in Kenya.

xxvi Fitzpatrick (2008: 283).

xxvii Roe (2010: 19).

xxviii Patel & Kumar (2001: 2–14).

xxix Roe (2010: 18–32).

xxx   Cram (1993); Ignatow (2011); Ochai (1984); Odi (1991).

xxxi See Rose (2010) on the importance of paying attention to readers' own perceptions of the effect of reading and education, rather than relying entirely on theoretical exposition.

xxxii Kelly (1977: 176–182).

xxxiii Wiegand (2015: 79–81).

xxxiv Black (2000: 52).

xxxv DCMS (1999); McMenemy (2009: 6). See also Muddiman et al. (2000) who questioned the efficacy of this policy.

xxxvi BBC (2016).

xxxvii An often overlooked point, but many refugees are university students or graduates (Magaziner 2015). With close to 1% of the global population now displaced (Jones 2016) – there are an estimated 65.3 million refugees (UNHCR 2016) out of a global population of 7.4 billion (Worldometers 2016), i.e. 0.8% of people – access to education and research for refugees has become a major global issue.

xxxviii Kelly (1977: 77–78).

xxxix Black (2000: 13–14, 28–29); Kelly (1977: 243–244).

xl   See Access to Research [n.d.]; Faulder & Cha (2014).

xli   Shared Intelligence (2015: 15–19). The Shared Intelligence report treats this as successful, but 1,800 out of a population of 65 million is extremely low.

xlii For data on the growth of open access see Archambault et al. (2014) and Ware & Mabe (2015: 88–112).

xliii See Bodó (2014; 2014a) on 'shadow libraries', the geographical distribution of their users, and the historical reasons why Russia is the centre of much academic piracy. High income nations do also have significant use of pirate websites though, as analysis of Sci-Hub usage data has made clear (Bohannon 2016; Greshake 2016).

xliv Johns (2009).

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