Topic chosen: Joseph Donohue has called community information "Information needed to cope with crisis in the lives of individuals and communities." Discuss and assess the roles of the public library and voluntary sector agencies in the provision of such information.

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Introduction

The topic chosen is the one of Joseph Donohue whose quote is included in the book by Allan Bunch, *Community information services: their origin, scope and development*:

"In this respect there is a remarkable degree of consensus, centering around the idea of information needed to cope with what Joseph Donohue terms 'crisis in the lives of individuals and communities.' The same writer expands on this definition by identifying two types of information provided by a community information service:
1 survival information such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunity, political rights, etc;
2 citizen action information, needed for effective participation as individual or as member of a group in the social, political, legal, economic process." (Bunch, A., 1982: 2).

After having read Bunch's book and Usherwood's chapter "Community information" in a book edited by Margarett Kinnell (Usherwood, 1992: 17-40), this essay might seem like the comment the US librarian Jesse Shera made on Alfred North Whitehead. Witehead, said Shera, mentioned that the whole western philosophy is a footnote beside the philosophy of Plato (Shera, 1990: 511). Thus, this essay might be as well a footnote beside Bunch's book or Usherwood's chapter, nevertheless, it is hoped to bring all the past and present synthesized in a harmonic holistic approach, following this sound scholar tradition underpinning this essay.

Thus, the working definition of this essay is the one by Donohue as enhanced by Bunch above. This paper is rather laconic in its form, but at the same time analytical and critical in its content.

As for the roles public libraries and voluntary sector agencies in the provision of such services, these are centered on these general axes:

1 roles with social responsibility, and social change
2 roles to seek and foster the welfare of the working classes, the disadvantaged, the poor, the needed and the social excluded
3 roles to alleviate and ameliorate all kinds of inequalities in the society
4. roles with a political and social commitment to foster the values of democracy and respect for human rights such the right to know, the right to be informed, the right to information access and so on; a committment towards the liberation of information;
5 roles to seek for the free of charge production, organization, and dissemination of the information
6 roles to promote community based research, like using the community profiling methodologies to gather accurate data and updating, and monitoring the users needs in their real environment.

Discussion and assessment of the roles librarians and information workers should play

1. **Roles with social responsibility, and commitment for social change**

Being mentioned that Bunch is the classic work underpinning this footnote about community information, he explains what it means to have a social responsibility and be committed for social change through the servicing people with information and help to cope with daily lives crisis:

"since the sixties, a growing number of librarians who have recognized the need for the library to forge new links with the community and to redefine its purpose as an agent for social change. They have seen the library

1 as accepting 'responsibility for the informational life-support needs of all people in a complex multicultural society'
2 alerting the community to needs for which either resources have not been mobilized though they exist in the community, or where there is an absence of resources
3 playing an acting role in community development or even fostering a community spirit." (Bunch, A. 1982: 12).

2. **Roles to seek and foster the welfare of the working classes, the disadvantaged, the poor, the needed and the social excluded.**

Some librarians or information workers might feel uneasy with trying to play these roles in their working milieus. But many commentators have criticized that even nowadays libraries and voluntary sector agencies play a very downsizing, discriminatory and socially excluding roles (Black, A. and Muddiman, D., 1997; Schiller, H.I., 1996; Bunch, A., 1982; Martin, B., 1998; Amoros i Fontanals, J. et. al., 2000; Lozano, R., 2004; Omella i Claporols, E., 2003; Suaiden, E.J. , 2003; Muddiman, D., 2000; Webster, F., 2002; Muela Meza, Z.M., 2004 and some others).

Therefore, the librarians and information workers should play a proactive, effective and efficient role when servicing information and help seekers with a commitment or sympathy in providing welfare and true, honest, felt, sensitive help, advice, and information, nearly more friendship and understanding and support than the information or the help per se to the information and help seekers, but having solidarity with bad luck or fate of the working classes, the needed, the disadvantaged and the socially excluded and divided from society.

Another group of society deeply marginalized from the mainstream of social services are the handicapped individuals. For everyone, but specially for them, having a handicap, for these individuals their sole existence is a daily martyrdom, not only a crisis, an eternal crisis they have to live with it for the rest of their days. Are the librarians and information workers from public libraries and voluntary sector agencies aware of these people? Are they prepared well enough to serve them well? Are they sensitive enough to serve them with a human touch?

For a US librarian, Ruth A. Velleman, in 1979, access to these marginalized groups is more than access to information or help to cope with this or that eventual crisis:

"Access has become the word that characterizes this phenomenon—access to education, employment, housing, and recreation, access to the right to live with dignity with some measure of independence, whether or not employment is feasible. For all people the quality of life is more important goal, not its length or its economic productivity." (Velleman, R.A., 1979: 53).

Quite some years have passed since then, but Velleman was right about remarking the quality of life. Kieth C. Wright, another US librarian, from the same year argued this:

"Given the maze of information sources, publications, research studies, local ordinances, federal regulations, and public laws, libraries have the responsibility to provide guides through this information maze. Becoming knowledgeable about other community service and information functions and providing coordination or information referral services will certainly change the role of the librarian. There is obvious need for cooperation with a wide variety of the community and government agencies as well with professional groups." (Wright, K.C., 1979: 130).

As for servicing the ethnic minorities, The Commission for Racial Equality from the UK since the 1970s has issued policies to ensure asylum seekers and foreign minorities just arrived to the UK be served well (Commission for Racial Equality, 1977). The most comprehensive work reviewed in the literature dealing with all kinds of excluded people in society is the work by Muddiman. (Muddiman, D. et. al., 2000).

Thus, some might disagree to try to adapt a point of view of the people being served, specially this point of view, that is "to put oneself in the shows of the user" and try to interiorize his or her despair into oneself, and try for one moment to feel how is like to be homeless, unemployed, handicapped, asylum seeker just arrived to a new country, poor, alienated, etc. Those are the roles challenging librarians and information workers to take in order to serve people in a better fashion.

And still, there is still more to do. The people who supposedly are more information literate, middle upper class, even they also need the kind and warm service. There is a very sad tragedy that illustrate well this. In Sheffield, UK, the past 28 July 2003 a man committed suicide because he had 19 credit cards, some of them with the same bank, he earned only £22,000.00 a month and he owed a debt of £70, 000.00 to the banks. The banks hounded him to pay the cards, by letter, by telephone, by visits, etc. He spent more than he could pay and he even withdrew money from some of the cards to make even the minimum month payments. He could not stand the pressure and hung himself. (Arnold, A., 2004; The Star Sheffield City Final, 2004). So, what is the lesson this tragedy shows to librarians and information workers? Would the community information services have saved his life if they were more proactive in providing financial information as to cope with credit debt crisis?

This is a social problem and has many aristae, and it is open to many different interpretations. It shows, on one hand, that the banking system in the capitalism is simply moved by a greedy thirst to obtain the most of profits from the people and that surely does not care at all for their welfare. The banks lent this poor victim without any control or regulation that much amount of credit he would never mortgage, pay, even if he worked 24 hours for 100 years or more. On the other hand, it shows too, not quite differently from the critiques from 1979, that librarians and information workers might still be playing a deeply reactive role to learn about their communities as to serve them pertinently, effectively and efficiently. Certainly, as explained in other section, this is not an isolated problem. If libraries and voluntary organizations do not have funding, then is a government's problem which does not care enough for the welfare of the individuals of society, and that is a major problem. Still, librarians and information workers must be committed to play a leading and proactive role and get the solutions for the people before the problems appear.

3. **Roles to alleviate and ameliorate all kinds of inequalities in the society**

Social inequalities in general are caused because of the way is organized, where the social wealth and good is not equally distributed and enjoyed by all members of society. Therefore, it exists many inequalities of many different kinds. As for information, there is information inequalities.

To this matter a U.S. sociologist and critic from the school of Critical Theory, Herbert Shiller, stated in his book *Information inequality: the deepening of the social crisis in America:*

> "In truth, public services, by definition, mean everyone in the society benefits from their provision, often in indirect ways, totally outside the reach of calculation. Similarly, everyone suffers if these services are either limited to certain groups or denied altogether. When these services are stripped of their social character, privatized, and put on an individual ability-to-pay basis, the common good is grievously wounded. Along with the inevitable inequity that accompanies ability-to-pay standards comes a further weakening of the social organism. The more contractual arrangements enfold the lives of people, the less cohesiveness there is in the community." (Schiller, H.I., 1996: xv).

Another commentator strongly argued that library and information workers in general do not tend to be theory driven, but that they instead are more practical or pragmatic (Muela Meza, Z.M., 2004). And if they in general are not very fond to theories, and are rather fond to practical matters, and if in the way the approach those matters have a hollow or empty commitment towards playing a leading role as to try as much as they can to alleviate social inequalities, then the services rendered in libraries and voluntary agencies would definitively be severely influenced by this lack of social commitment.

4. **Roles with a political and social commitment to foster the values of democracy and respect for human rights such the right to know, the right to**

be informed, the right to information access and so on; a commitment towards the *liberation of information*.

The world at large as for the provision of information services for the people who need it to improve their lives or cope their daily living problems has historically been driven by two antagonistic forces: those towards a full, open, accountable and transparent society as far as in information goes, and the others towards secret, corruption and hindering society. So far society has reached 7, 000 years of informational recorded history whichever the encryption material those records are engraved or printed. But the history of society as for its openness or closeness, definitively is the history of the last one. The informational closeness of society is a very old dinosaur, a taxidermist informational cadaver it has lasted for about 1690 years. The informational openness of society it is on big strokes an infant taking its first steps in life; it has about 10 years or 20 or so.

Librarians and information workers cannot take a proactive, effective and efficient roles with a political and social commitment if they do not take into consideration this historical issue. There was a research regarding intellectual freedom and legislation of information access to public and government records and documents (FOIA) and from the most industrialized countries these were the years they issued a FOIA: USA in 1966, France in 1978, Canada in 1983, Germany between 1998 and 1999, Japan in 1999, UK in 2000. (Muela Meza, Z.M., 2001). That is, even the self called exemplary countries, pattern and role model for the world's development, their governments entered to the spiral of the informational openness, accountability, and transparency in average in 1988. From the non highly developed countries Muela Meza found Sweden with a FOIA since 1766, but that was the only isolated country and fact which does not count much against this 1988 average year; infancy of the road of society towards the full informational openness, accountability and transparency of all of its members, specially from most corruptible as the governments.

Carl Sagan, US biologist, astronomer and critic, criticized that closeness and secrecy of society from all ages in his book *The Haunted-Demon World: Science as Candle in the Darkness:*

> "Secret with very few exceptions, it is profoundly incompatible with democracy and science. [...] Tyrans and autocrats have always understood that literacy, knowledge, books and newspapers are a latent danger. They could promote ideas of independence, even of rebellion in the heads of their governed ones. (Sagan, C., 1997: 109, 390).

Accordingly with Sagan as for the secret informational still dominant society, a mathematician and social scientist from Australia, Brian Martin in his ad hoc book *Information liberation: Challenging the corruptions of information power,* went even long way beyond Sagan and he even argued that FOI is a limited concept or inadequate for our current period of history and proposed the concept of *information liberation* instead of freedom of information; he criticized:

> "In order to bring about a more just and equal society, struggles need to be waged over information. It would be nice to call the goal "freedom of information." Unfortunately, that phrase is already taken over by legislation that is supposed to allow citizens access to government documents. FOI legislation has not been very successful in opening up government to public scrutiny. Politicians and government bureaucrats have restricted access in various ways, including charging fees that make a mockery of the name "freedom of information." Even if FOI worked perfectly, it is a very limited freedom, since it does nothing about corporate secrecy, defamation law, surveillance and ownership of information." (Martin, B. 1998: 172).

For the US reality Schiller argued in the same way as Martin but 2 years before:

> "The capability of Americans to begin to undertake the far-reaching transformational tasks that are literally imperative to national sustainability depends to a very large extent on the adequacy and openness of the informational system." (Schiller, H.I., 1996: xvi).

Thus, both Schiller and Martin challenge the informational system as a whole. Then the roles for the librarians and information workers are to acknowledge these historical and political issues, and to take a strong and firm position to challenge the information power. Muela Meza (2004) also promotes to take a political position when making an analysis of the political challenges of the so called information society.

Muela Meza (2001) argued that having the right to information in the FOIAs does not mean that people have the right to access actually the information, because it might be legislated so well, but if the

informational system is not backed with professional and trained staff, then accessed would be denied or hampered somehow. Usherwood went even further promoting librarians and information workers to take political action in benefit of the information seekers:

> "For those in need, access to information by itself is often not enough to solve a person's problems. Very often the information has to be linked to action and this require the involvement of a variety of community groups, self help organizations and the like." (Usherwood: 1992: 30-31)

5. Roles to seek for the free of charge production, organization, and dissemination of the information.

Librarians and information workers, as any other professionals, have always to struggle to get funding to serve their users with community and local information. Some critics explain that with the advent of the mass media termed "information society" rather than a real societal change, more and more the organization of society is changing towards an informational society; to an informational society driven by the commoditization of information. One of the strongest critiques comes from Schiller:

> "The spectacularly improved means of producing, organizing, and disseminating information has transformed industrial, political, and cultural practices and processes. Manufacturing, elections, and creative efforts are increasingly dependent on informational inputs. This has conferred great value on some categories of information. The production and sale of information have become major sites of profit making. What had been in large measure a social good has been transformed into a commodity for sale." (Shiller, H.I., 1996: 46).

In a capitalist society where the production and exchange of commodities is the skeleton of its organization, the charged or free of charge issue in the provision of social services as the ones for the community, will always be on discussion. One thing is true for this analysis, the more the market forces commoditize the informational production, organization and use in libraries or voluntary sector agency, the more that will affect the common good. But as just mentioned, this issue has many aristae.

But he also states:

> "Many librarians resist this direction and work valiantly, sometimes successfully, in the democratic tradition, defending the general social good." (Schiller, 1996: 37).

6. Roles to promote community based research, like using the community profiling methodologies to gather accurate data and updating, and monitoring the users needs in their real environment.

Part of the main issues intending to expand the work of the remarkable predecessors on this subject, has to do with the methodological issues.

This essay promotes those methodologies which lead the librarians and information workers both in the public libraries or voluntary agencies or from elsewhere, to use methodologies rooted in the community to bring about information based on the real community.

For example, as to assess how important is the solid marriage or aggressive divorce of librarians and information workers with their users within their communities; the closer or the more distant service providers and service seekers are from one another, it is an issue of giant importance. In one study carried on in London, Ontario, Canada, to assess how women abused by their husbands or couples searched for help and information, there was found that from 105 women participating in the study, just one sole woman went to the library to find help or information to cope with her severe crisis. (Harris, R. et. al. 2001: 135). In the same study it was also found several factors that discourage abused women for a successful help and information seeking:

- "help and information seekers cannot find the service they need because it does not exist where they live;
- help and information seekers do not know which agency to contact;
- help and information seekers who succeeded in reaching appropriate service agencies encounter obstacles that are deliberately or inadvertently constructed by the agencies;
- help seekers fail to receive assistance because the services they contact are not adequately funded or staffed." (Harris, R. et. al., 2001: 127).

Then there it comes evidently obvious from this study that the service providers are not adapted –in this context-- to meet a vast and ever crescendo myriad of services to satisfy every need of users. Unlike regular or normal library services as defined in the introduction by Donohue, the success of the community services can only be measured against the actual happily successful and complete satisfaction of the users. If this complete satisfaction cannot be such, then something is wrong with the service.

In general most of the commentators from the literature review argue about the evaluation of service provision focusing more on the service providers or the service seeking, but they miss to add the social and political issues behind the institutions providing those services. It can be fairly easy to assess that the service seeker may succeed or fail to get the right service, in the right time, at the right service provider, as it can be assessed otherwise. The same can be said about the service providers. In this case, the successful or unfruitful provision of service has strongly to do with the reactive or proactive position the providers take. If it is only reactive, then it can be surely be inferred that the quality of the service provision will be bad. But in order to be proactive they need to assess the community needs and serve them accordingly. But as for the social and political issues behind those service providers institutions, things are more complicated and cannot easily be assessed. This is so, because this has to do with broader issues like the political system of a nation, or a region or a locality, or the economic production mode i.e. like capitalism itself. And these are beyond the scope of this essay, nevertheless they are strong barriers as explained by Harris. Muddiman criticizes this issue in this way:

> "What this suggest, of course, is that the library service as currently configured comprises a service model that effectively shuns perhaps a majority of working class and other disadvantaged people." (Muddiman, D., 2000: 183).

As for the methodologies proposed in this essay.

To assess thoroughly the environment of the community as to be able to collect, and organize the heartbeat or pulse of the community at its very core of its community, and to facilitate service providers give a proactive, effective and efficient service to users, several community research methodologies are necessary.

Usherwood, in the British reality, combined the use of the methodology profiling as to survey, profile and analysis the conditions of the community and adapt community information services to their profile. (Usherwood, B., 1992: 34). Who have developed this methodology per se in a deepest fashion is Beal, there in Britain too. (Beal, C. 1976; 1985). Others who have used this methodology in the British reality are: Backhouse, R. (1986); Manzi, S. (1993). In the US Sarling, J. H. & Van Tassel, D.S. (1999) have a sound study on community profiling where they call it there community analysis. In Spain Amorós i Fontanals, J., Ontalba y Ruipérez, J.A. and Pérez i Salmerón, G.P. (2000), Omella i Claparols, E. (2003), Rodríguez Parada, C. (2002) and Lozano, R. (2004) have made deep studies assessing the community information services as well as the local information as they also typify this service as to be bounded to municipal or local authorities strategic plans, strongly supported by community profiling. The same has done as well Suaiden, E.J. (2003) in Brazil.

On the other hand, librarians and information workers should pay close attention to the theories and methodologies focusing on the research, evaluation and assessment of social needs. For this purpose, the works by Ann Glampson, Tony Scott and David N. Thomas in their study *A guide to the assessment of community needs and resources (1975)* and by Jim Macbeth and Dave Hitchens, *A Report on community information needs (1977)* are two hallmark works to understand the sociological background and LIS applied on the understanding social needs.

Thus, combining the methodologies of community profiling and assessment of the social needs or the needs of the community, one obtain a thorough understanding of the heartbeat and pulse of the community. Nonetheless, the researchers must be critical enough to challenge the government and ask for the government to provide community, what the community needs, not what the government says is available to them, no matter if reactively or proactively, but the needs must be assessed and met before hand or when the requests, and problems arrive. Muddiman is very critical on this issue on developing a very critical assessment of community and individuals' needs (Muddiman, D., 2000: 185).

Conclusion

In general words, in order to provide services to information and help seekers from the community, for them to cope with their daily, or minute to minute, crisis and despairs and hopelessness of this challenging world, librarians and information workers must take leading roles, be proactive, socially and politically involved in the flesh and blood of the people who are meant to serve, not just the elitist ones who may be information savvy, but all those immense majorities who might never ever approach a library or advice centre and not even closer.

Muddiman (2000: 186) suggests some other methodologies to assess better and in a cross related fashion. He suggests the "needs auditing" or "community auditing" with these elements:

- conventional market research where users are seen as consumers of public services –a caveat word is that in this essay is proposed a free of charge services at all times;
- more interactive consultation processes such as focus groups and consultative panels, which involve users, non users and service staff;
- both individual and community profiling and needs assessment –already assesed;
- measurement and evaluation of effectiveness of services;
- input from politicians and other community representatives.

Finally. There is a saying somewhere that says: "if Mahoma does not come to the mountain, the Mountain must approach to Mahoma." Librarians and information workers, in order to serve well, pertinently, effectively and efficiently must include in their job descriptions the flagship duties of going out to the streets, to walk and stroll around the community veins and arteries and be a nicely welcome guest carrying their hemoglobin and oxygen they need to cope with their daily and second to second life crisis in order to help them always reach their best quality of life and never be left out by them as that gentleman who took his life away for not being information, and financial literate. Suaiden (2003: 381) shows also a story of social sadness and pain where Silvana, a prostitute who died at the age of 17 in Brasil of AIDS, because she severely criticized before her death that she blamed the government and the public library where she got customers around, because no body told her what a condom was for and that librarians and most other people looked at her over the shoulders and downsizing her, rather then helping her with all the crisis that led her to prostitution after being abandoned at the age of 5 before a cathedral frontispiece.

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