

Information freedom in a Democratic Society and the role of Librarians in cyber era.

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Abstract

In this article, Democracy and the role of libraries in society, Intellectual freedom and Libraries, Democracy and the professional librarian, Information society in cyber world etc are discussed in detail. The right of access to information and ideas is vital for any society. We know, freedom, prosperity and the development of society depend on education as well as on unrestricted access to knowledge, thought culture and information. Democracy, a government of the people by the people and for the people is widely acclaimed as the most suitable model of governance in the world. According to Kofi Annan, the UN secretary General, as he stated once, "If information and knowledge are central to democracy, they are the conditions for development". At a crucial time like this, when libraries are facing decreasing resources and competition from other agencies and technologies, there is an urgent need for vocal public support for the service they provide. There is need, therefore, for an effective lobby to communicate the value of libraries and the profession to politicians, the media and others who can influence public opinion. Libraries have always been a cornerstone in building that society, which ensures those citizens, has access to information so that they can gain the knowledge to govern themselves. A commitment to intellectual freedom or right to information is a core responsibility for the library and information profession.

Introduction

The right of access to information and ideas is vital for any society. We know, freedom, prosperity and the development of society depend on education as well as on unrestricted access to knowledge, thought, culture and information. Libraries, at all levels, are instruments to assure and promote equal access to information and to disseminate knowledge. The state of intellectual freedom in libraries is considered as an indication of the progress of democracy within a nation. A commitment to intellectual freedom or right to information is a core responsibility for the library and information profession. In this age of Information Explosion, where people can access information at their fingertips with out much delay, we have to rethink our role as information professionals.

Democracy

Democracy, a government of the people by the people and for the people is widely acclaimed as the most suitable model of governance in the world. Democracies the world over

makes several assumptions about human nature. One is that people are generally capable of governing themselves in a free and fair manner. Another is that society comprises a great diversity of interests and individuals who deserve to have their views respected. In a nutshell the universal appeal of democracy is predicated on its respect for the dignity and autonomy of man. Man's desire for liberty, equality and freedom are all prescriptive imperatives of democracy. Democracy itself guarantees nothing. It offers instead the opportunity to succeed as well as the risk of failure. It is a challenge because the success of the democratic enterprise rests on the shoulders of the citizens and no one else. Precisely the pillars of democracy such as, the sovereignty of the people, government by consent, majority rule, guarantee of basic human rights, free and fair elections, equality before the law, social and political pluralism and many more, had long ago crumbled political history of the world.

Democracy and information

“If information and knowledge are central to democracy, they are the conditions for development”, Kofi Annan, the UN secretary-general stated once [3]. Modern society incessantly produces and uses information and in a democratic country information is considered as a vital resource for development. Managers, politicians, staff in the public sector, educators and many more exploit information services. Access to relevant information is the most important requirement for individuals if they are to cope with the pressures of modern society. As the world moves into the information age it is crucial that societies have a policy that guarantees access to information and knowledge for the average person. In the twenty-first century denial of access to information and knowledge constitutes disenfranchisement at the very best and tyranny at the worst. From the above it is implicit that information and ideas are basic human needs and that every citizen, no matter their race, creed or economic position, should have free access to information. It is regarded as a right. Effective access to information and ideas increases the citizen's ability to be informed on the questions of the day. It can increase their right to vote with knowledge or influence policy. As such, information is an aid to democracy. In promoting and consolidating democracy and good governance, people should be conscientious about their rights and obligations. A representative elected government and independent judiciary, and a free press, are all elements of good governance. So also is a well-informed and motivated electorate, which, through a comprehensive campaign of civic education, should be made aware of its

constitutional rights, including the right to demand accountability and transparency from those it voted into office.

Democracy and Libraries in Information Society

Libraries do not exist in a vacuum in any society; they are the storehouses of knowledge. This value is acknowledged without reservation [7]. Not only do they conserve society's culture, but as agencies of communication they also play an important role in its transmission. Libraries provide happiness, mental joy and spiritual delight. They are social institutions charged with the duty of providing perpetual self-education of individuals in the society. Libraries are powerful instruments of social and political change; they can help in the demands of democracy and the spread of literacy. In short, libraries exist for the sake of freedom and thought. Those people who trains in this art (librarians) are therefore expected to make a unique contribution by safeguarding this freedom, which is not only a vital constituent of liberty but a means of securing and preserving liberty as a whole. Providing access to the worldwide information has been the goal the modern librarianship. They can do this by their expected roles as:

- How to find information and how to use it?
- How do we evaluate the power of information in support of our organization's strategic aims?
- Effectiveness and cost-effectiveness.
- Assessing the impact of services on the end user.
- Accessing the information that is needed.
- Information transmission.

Information Society, as we call it today, is a society where information is the central factor and where primary economic and social activities are the production, storage and distribution of information.

Intellectual freedom and Libraries

Intellectual Freedom is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction [5]. The right to intellectual freedom is not just the right of free expression; it is the right of free reception also. To have real intellectual freedom, individuals must open themselves up – not only to allow other perspectives to exist, not only to allow other “truths” to be expressed, but to allow themselves to take in those ideas, soak them

up, accept or reject them, but truly “hear” them either way [4]. Librarians in particular have helped to protect this important right by ensuring that all citizens have access to whatever information they need. To exercise one’s freedom of thought in a democratic society such as India, a person needs to have the freedom to explore issues from all points of view. Libraries have always been a cornerstone in building that society, which ensures those citizens, has access to information so that they can gain the knowledge to govern themselves. The mission of librarians is to ensure access to all types of information so that every citizen can explore all types of information and viewpoints. Throughout the past years, librarians in the world have collected, organized, preserved and provided access to information for all citizens. In the future, technology can become a means to subvert censorship as well as to promote censorship.

Democracy and the professional librarian

Democracy assumes that people have access to facts and opinions from a wide range of sources. Democratic decision making, be it at local or national levels, depends on equality of access to information. Professional librarians, with their skills, can play a significant role in providing such access and thus aid the development of an informed society. Librarians can still be arsenals of a democratic culture ready to answer not only the criteria inherent in the democratic process but also responsive to varying social requirements, as democracy itself. In short, librarians are both a cause and consequence of their society. As society changes, so too must they and their institutions change. The question about their interest in political issues is pertinent because it raises issues about the kind of society want and the policies they wish to pursue so as to improve their life chances. To be precise, professional librarians have long tended to be content rather than to react to or initiate government policy. The profession has been too ready to let others set the agenda, regardless of the formation of their professional association. At a crucial time like this, when libraries are facing decreasing resources and competition from other agencies, there is an urgent need for vocal public support for the service they provide. There is need, therefore, for an effective lobby to communicate the value of libraries and the profession to politicians, the media and others who can influence public opinion. Librarians have an obligation to educate members on what their rights are in a democratic society. Librarians should develop more skills to support the constitutional right to know in their self-governing society. No longer should they distrust their ability to help users with queries about law and

government. As the awareness of citizens is vital to democracy, librarians should play a role in providing access to legal documents and proceedings. By allowing a free flow of information, citizens would be able to make reasoned judgements. Individuals need access to information about government affairs in order to maintain the privileges of democracy. Furthermore librarians are important because democracy is based on the common needs and hopes shared by people of different character and experience. Since individuals have different information needs, the ability to deal with clientele champions the right to know. Society and many at its expense educate most of the librarians. They therefore owe it to society to share their know-how in the discipline in which they have acquired expertise. The dissemination of legal information should no longer be left in the hands of law librarians. Academic and public librarians are all directly or indirectly related in the process of law making; their goal being to provide access to information about a wide range of subjects of which law is just one. It stands to reason, therefore, that those citizens who refuse to participate in the political process are irresponsible. As Plato rightly put it, the punishment which the wise suffer for refusing to take part in government is to live under the government of worse men. When more and more librarians are involved in partisan politics, and if they observe the code of ethics learned in their profession and apply the expertise they have acquired in their training and bring this to bear on political positions, it would be good for society.

Cyber effect

In this age of boundless electronic communication, boasting an abundance of information, flowing increasingly faster through satellites, cables and the Internet, freedom of expression and access to information should hardly be a problem. WWW facilitates easy interfacing of diverse information systems on Internet, which could be used as a vital tool by libraries to enhance their information services. In the present electronic environment, intellectual freedom has become an even more complex issue by allowing individuals a forum to easily state their opinions, whether truth or propaganda. The World Wide Web functions as a private, independent printing press in homes but technology provides the means to trace the home server and disable it. Technology provides the ability to hide a server but new developments provide possibilities to hide and find servers in a never-ending see-sawing race. Satellite phones and televisions allow communication without government restrictions or interference so that an open

society or organization can beam programs into countries that restrict intellectual freedom. Memory cubes carrying the equivalency of many books can be taken across borders to provide information to countries living with information restrictions and censorship. Yet these technological advances can also be used in reverse to invade people's privacy and to monitor their information habits and use.

Becoming a Cybrarian

Computerized information retrieval has brought considerable changes and yet many librarians remain untutored. Invariably then, librarians cannot respond quickly to community needs. Librarians should be desirous that their libraries should respond to the changing needs of the community and, where possible, anticipate them, Hence they are expected to draw up schemes of induction and training for their staff. There is only limited of co-operative ventures among librarians in the country. If librarians want to play a more effective role in this democracy they should start exploring ways of putting their information resources, both materials and personnel, at the service of other information and advice agencies by agreeing to keep an update of current information in documents in the country. This will provide access to their numerous users who use their services and this will indeed save time in their search for information.

Conclusion

The idea that we live in an information society is commonplace today. The information society is one in which the communication of information is one of the key activities in all developed and developing nations, and where information is a key factor in economic development. In consequence, professional librarians must be people equipped with a variety of skills to help them to perform diverse roles which effectively facilitate freedom of access to information by the literate and non-literate, so that they can acquire knowledge, develop good governance and democracy, alleviate poverty, exploit technological change and maintain social equality. In spite of the rapid growth in both the scope and diversity of information available today, the development of information services has not been the same everywhere. A large factor in development, or under-development, of information services in any given country is a function of society's perception of the importance of such services in its decision-making process.

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