

EMPATHY IN PUBLIC LIBRARIANSHIP: A SUBJECTIVE AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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[Problems and prospects of public librarianship are discussed from a personalised, human, subjective and critical point of view in this paper. It is suggested to both Librarian and public to empathise for each others benefits and get prepared to step into the year 2001. It is hypothesised that empathy in public librarianship may lead towards paving way for a fullfledged library information profession and an effective information literate society.]

Key Words :

Empathy; Public Librarianship; Librarianship; Profession

Sympathy :

Sympathy is a stable approving attitude of one person towards other people, groups or social phenomena that takes the form of affability, goodwill, and admiration and stimulates communication, reciprocal attention and mutual help. Sympathy normally arises on the basis of common views, values, interests, and moral ideals. In interpersonal relations, sympathy is a factor of human integration and maintenance of psychological comfort. Rapport is designated as close interpersonal relations based on a high degree of community of thoughts, interests and feelings.

Empathy :

The term 'empathy' was introduced by Edward Tichener, who combined in it various similar ideas about sympathy and Theodor Lipps' concept of imaginative entry into another person's feelings. The following specific forms of empathy are distinguished : common emotional experience, i.e., experiencing

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by an individual of the same emotional states as those experienced by another person by identifying oneself with him, and sympathy, i.e., emotions experienced by an individual and elicited by another person's feelings. An important characteristic of empathy which distinguishes it from other forms of comprehension (taking roles, decentration, etc.) is its weakly developed reflexive aspect, or closure within immediate emotional experience. Empathic abilities of individuals were found to grow with greater life experience. Empathy is actualised more readily when individuals' behavioural and emotional responses are similar, and also in highly anxious individuals. In a system of interpersonal relations characteristic of a developed collective, the subject of empathy develops a stand of active interference designed to eliminate frustrations in other members of the collective.

An attempt is made in this paper to apply concept of empathy in public librarianship towards reading public.

Every man is a unique being. Along with the features and characteristics shared with other people i.e., the universal ones, but only gradually, with the help of adults and through his own activity, becomes an individual through socialisation. As for the adults influence, the decisive role in this process is played by education which is purposeful, planned, professional and institutionalized. Besides the educational influences, there are also environmental agencies affecting the developing individual. These are external influences. However, the development of the individualism is also influenced by its own self inner activity, through individual characteristics and the way external influences are interpreted, which results in internal attitudes affecting the way further, and external influences are understood.

Worlds of Knowledge

Popper (1972) characterized three "worlds" of knowledge: we can call the physical world (world 1); the world of our conscious experiences (world 2) and the world of the logical contents of books, libraries, computer memories, and such like

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(world 3). It can readily be seen that Popper's world 3 is the province of the librarian; moreover, librarians act as intermediaries between the documents comprising world 3 and the information needs of their patrons, needs that Popper would characterise as belonging to world 2, or the world of thought processes. Using Popper's typology, one can say that information seeking behaviour is an attempt to incorporate world 3 objects, i. e., products of thought, into world 2 states of mind, i. e., thought processes. Furthermore, if the information seeker is a scholar, information or knowledge retrieved from world 3 documents may be used in the creation of new knowledge that when recorded, published, acquired, and stored, will in turn become part of Popper's world 3. Librarians are responsible for acquiring, guarding, grading, organising and keeping humanity's intellectual and cultural heritage for continuous usage of generations to follow.

Needs :

Taylor (1968) distinguished between four levels of needs giving rise to the inquiries put by the user :

1. *Visceral need*, which is the vague sense of a gap in knowledge and is expressed only in terms of vague dissatisfaction.
2. *Conscious need*, which is mental description of an ill-defined area of indecision.
3. *Formalized need*, where the user has a better appreciation of the ambiguities and can give a more precise and formalised statement of his question.
4. *Compromised need*, where the user reformulates his need in terms of the capabilities of the source.

Need is tricky to define. It may sometimes be expressed in demands and then in circulation statistics. But if it remains unexpressed, then the responsibility falls upon the librarian to know what is needed by public, common man. The responsibility assumed here by the librarian towards his client is tremendous,

The task of assessment of information needs of common man is a tedious job as the category is so heterogenous a group.

No agency is working towards this end. Though, Radio, Films, Audio & Video cassettes carry lot of information value, they are being used more and more for entertainment by the common man. Due to information explosion in every endeavour of human life and due to availability of alternative sources of information in different forms, it has become highly impossible for the common man to take his own decisions. Only a library, information professional can come to his rescue either by adding economic value to information or by governmental provision of information in a large scale (Devarai and Damodaram, 1993).

Australian Library Journal of September, 1964, reported the following principles as basic and distinctive of the obligations and responsibilities of a librarian within a democratic community :

1. The Librarian has a responsibility to keep open the channels of communication at his disposal so that he may discover and serve the needs and interests of his community.

2. Having regard to his resources, to the special needs of his locality and the purpose of his library the librarian should not, in the acquisition and use of library material, exercise discrimination against an author or a reader on grounds of race, sex, religion or political affiliation.

3. The function of the Librarian is to promote reading and to cater for interest in all facets of knowledge, literature and contemporary issues, including those of a controversial nature, but not to promote or suppress particular ideas and beliefs.

4. The selection of books for libraries is not a form of censorship. It presumes the right of the reader to read books widely and to form his own judgement, and it is designed to achieve this.

5. The librarian should resist attempts by individuals or organised groups within the community to determine what library materials are to be or not to be, available to the users of the library.

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6. The Librarian must obey the laws relating to books and libraries but if the laws or their administration conflict with the principles put forward in this statement he should be free to move for the amendment of these laws (statement of principles on freedom to read, 1964).

To enhance usage and readership of the library, Librarian should on a continuous basis take up the work of research into the needs and interests of his community. Need based collection becomes meaningful and hence leads to more usage and participation. Librarians should come out with objective methodologies of book selection by which they can keep themselves away from discrimination against an author or a reader on grounds of race, religion or political affiliation. As mentioned above at point 3, Librarian should not use his judgement on whether or not people should read particular titles. Let people or rather the actual readers and members of the library decide what they actually want to read in the Library.

The public library serves a geographic/political region usually quite diverse in constituency. This is the source of much difficulty in collection development. Should the community to be given exactly what it asks for? What if different segments of the same community are at odds in what they demand of the library? It may be impossible to buy everything "they" want assuming it is possible to determine what it is. Community profiling" became a popular method of determining the order to predict its needs and wants. Decisions still must be made concerning the priorities whenever there is a conflict. Will only the loudest requests be heard? What about those who are unable to attend the library or those who are unaware of all the services available to them? Reflecting the predominant community, views might have no room for the expression of minority interests. The selection of each alternate must reduce the overall depth to which the predominant view can be explored or some minority views may be edged out completely. Society will pay for what it needs and that library budgets have been restrained because

libraries have not been keeping abreast of society's needs for information. The problem is of librarian and the members (citizens) to understand each other and to assume roles in empathy. This could be one of the best theoretical models by which best results could be expected. Librarians should educate people about what they can do to help people for their welfare. He has to educate people as to how he can participate in the very process of development and struggle for existence by his tools and techniques of acquiring and organising information. The phenomenon of sociological determinism should prevail both over the librarian and the public so that they start realising their mutual dependence for survival. However, very little is known of users needs for information, of the uses of library information, of the characteristics of users.

Public Library :

Comte (1977) gives us two definitions of the public library. The institutional definition corresponds to the legal conception of the latin countries, where those institutions dependent upon administrative authorities are qualified as "public". The functional definition is linked to the Anglo-American tradition of the "Public Library" and refers to any library "whatever its origin or legal status, working towards the creation of a reading public. "Here it is no longer a question of public libraries but of libraries for the reading public where the main objective is giving immediate and direct service to all the members of a given community whatever, their educational intellectual or cultural level, and irrespective of ethnic group, religion, philosophic or political conviction (wiele, 1991).

From the fifties onwards, modern public libraries were set up almost everywhere characterised by : 1. an educational function, 2. a cultural function and 3. the information function. Libraries should strengthen the process of negating the tendencies of cultural monism by their vast store house of information and knowledge systems. Public libraries alone can reach everyone in the dissemination of information, as they are open for

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common man or for that matter any one and every one. The future status and position of Librarians and their practice depends on how keenly and sincerely they address and focus themselves on the information needs of common man (Devarai and Damodarm, 1993). The Delhi Public Library, which was opened in 1951 with the support of UNESCO and of the Indian Government, was the first modern public library in India. In the developing countries emphasis is on the spread of literacy and primary education. No public library can be considered satisfactory, unless it provides facilities for children's lending reference and local history department. These four departments involve the handling of all types of library material, and the staff are called upon to discharge some of the responsibilities for the flow of information which are associated with the general librarian, documentation officer, archivist and information officer.

Public Library Mission Statement (PLMS)

American Library association (1979) issued the public library mission statement which is an important document in redefining the library and librarian's function in the overall information process. It outlines access not just as subject access but also from myriad of directions allowing not only the facts but also the wisdom in the record to be retrieved. The agency (i. e. the library) would facilitate cross connections within the record, among many disciplines, literacy forms, and period of history. The catalogue as the mechanism of access has an even more demanding job to perform. The indexer is to indicate whatever about a book is significant representative, and relevant, shows its character, wisdom or subject usefulness. Access to information has evolved into access to wisdom. Whereas any pocket of facts and data can be considered information, it requires judgement to determine what is wisdom. This is a call for many steps beyond current professional responsibility. Librarians should build up their professional knowledge base and value system in such a way that they deal with ease the problems of clash of moralities between the right to privacy, the need to know and

the freedom of access to information explained by Chipman (1990). Yet as if in compensation for the increased load the librarian must bear the long-term goal of comprehensiveness in collection development is set to rest. The library is to house "authentic information" of sound factual authority, and to help people to separate ecological truth from the accelerating currents of propaganda and special interest. In light of the information professional's special position and abilities, his or her responsibilities are expanded officially through the mission statement to include erasure of unimportant things. What is preserved is that which is significant relevant and representative. These are intriguing words because they bank steeply against the open door: nondiscriminating trend of the library. Significant, representative and relevant all require selectivity and alter the overall balance of the collection. A minority view may be significant for example in its opposition to the main view or in being indicative of a new trend. The Librarian is mediator and populariser respectful of the total record but selecting the best on every side of an issue. Though at no time is the Librarian released from the responsibility of fair treatment to all difference in view, yet he is released from the troublesome notion that (s) he must be neutral.

The responsibility of Librarians is greater than ever before, because in order to select representative portions of the overall picture of knowledge, they must be aware of the totality of universe of knowledge.

The Public Library Mission Statement can be seen as a big step towards the resolution of value conflicts in the profession and specifically in the task of collection development. Considerably more thought must now be given to establishing a firm professional value base. This measure is not only essential to our decision making process but also provides a firm stand from which to assess equitably the fair representation of the diverse value systems lying for expression in our collections. Other value

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systems can be represented fairly if we are open in our understanding of our non professional values.

The Librarian cannot merely be an informer but naturally is an educator as well. An educator must evaluate and make decisions answayed by community interest. Contrary to the self-image as neutral transmitter' the Librarian/educator must use some independent system of value upon which to base decisions. Desire for neutrality yet necessity for evaluation causes tension between practice and policy decisions.

Case (1984) says, "The Library clinging to supposedly objective and authoritative materials is boring and has an artificially limited clientele. Libraries can be and should be controversial, inspiring, and infuriating".

The American Library Association (1985) announced goals that include "ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society. This means making decisions regarding the level of the Library's involvement in particular social causes. Intense professional debate revolves around the major themes of social responsibility. The outcome affects the bias with which Librarians decide which views are important for their Library collections. Prins (1991) reported that the general public is unaware of the social responsibilities of libraries for instance regarding the individuals rights of access to information, therefore, the status of the profession is low. Users of libraries have low expectations as to the quality of the services of Libraries resulting in a low status of the profession. There is a severe lack of professional leadership. And if there is, it is dependent on persons instead of 'Professional culture'. Wilson (1988) while examining the reasons for the low profile of libraries and low expectation of the community of its library service suggests fellow librarians to participate actively in local government programmes and in decision making.

Access to information must be unimpeded and that its flow should be assured. There can be no denial of this

individual opportunity in a truly free society, no withholding of information whether by intent or by dereliction in provision.

Censorship :

Censorship—the purposeful, systematic denial of access to certain works or ideas—is repugnant to Librarianship. To be meaningful, librarians' vigilance against censorship can embrace even discomfoting ideas.

Censorship is on the rise across the country, in the form of challenges and subsequent removal of books from Library shelves, as well as throughout the world in more explosive forms, such as the Salman Rushdie death threat. But there also are more subtle forms of censorship involving the erection of barriers to access that stem the free flow of ideas and their incorporation, for better or worse, by individuals.

The relationship of censorship and librarians probably is clearest and most immediate to those whose responsibilities lie in collection development, especially in selection of materials. Hence, the tensions inherent among conflicting professional goals and ideals that ask librarians to be simultaneously neutral and proactive, objective and subjective.

In making choices, a librarian fails to select a great many books. He is bound by budget and space restraints to do so. This is not an act of censorship in and of itself. It is censorship only when there is a deliberate attempt to suppress alternate views. Censorship can be taken to mean removal of a book from the Library's collection; locking it away in a vault for safekeeping; failure to select it for professionally unjustifiable reasons; or hiding access to it through incomplete or wrong classification or poor indexing or poor shelving.

Although the Library profession uphold strongly the principle of free expression, sometimes difficulties arise when individuals or groups of individuals within the profession do not wish to endorse the views expressed in the books they select.

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The Freedom to Read Foundation, an organization technically separate yet associated with the Intellectual Freedom Committee of the American Library Association, produced the Freedom to Read Statement (American Library Association, 1953). The most relevant of its statements are : "Publishers, Librarians, and book-sellers do not need to endorse every idea or presentation contained in the books they make available. It would conflict with the public interest for them to establish their own political, moral, or aesthetic views as the sole standard for determining what books should be published or circulated.

Access to Fiction Literature.

For some reason, Librarians who would strongly oppose, denying access to a work of literature because its content being controversial are nevertheless indifferent about having the same work made content accessible, forgetting perhaps that inadequate or incomplete indexing can be as much of a bar to access suppression. If a user who wants to find fictional depictions of insanity cannot do so due to lack of subject access, has not access been denied as effectively as if the material had been censored? Similarly, if a user knows only that he would like to read a novel "about" a given subject, how will name-and-title access help that user.

In a recent article about the bibliographic control of non-book materials, Richard Smiraglia describes Patrick Wilson's conceptual framework for bibliographic control and contends that it can be seen as the basis for a theoretical construct. Of Wilson, Smiraglia (1987) writes : He suggests the existence of two domains of bibliographic control, which he refers to as descriptive and exploitative. Descriptive control is used to organise a body of bibliographic objects. Exploitative control is the ability to make the best possible use of a body of knowledge. Wilson sees exploitative control as the superior, if unattainable, of his "two kinds of power"; descriptive control as the inferior, if more readily available.

Exploitative control is what users need. Descriptive control is what we have in our libraries to guide them. The various orderings of the objects provide pathways to understanding the relationships among the works they contain, thus offering the user some opportunities to make the best possible use of a body of knowledge.

Extending Smiraglia's thesis to fictional materials, one can argue that names, title and single generic access for multigeneric works do not constitute appropriate descriptive control for fiction. Without enhanced catalog access, what Smiraglia terms the user's "Pathway" to works of the imagination is partially obscured, with name, title and sometimes genre as the only signposts. Name and title access, though immensely valuable, especially to those already knowledgeable about literature, is simply not adequate for the non-experts needs. For example, a reader interested in fictional works "about" the British Raj might easily find works such as the 'Raj Quartet', or even 'A passage to India', whose title gives clues to their common subject, but without topical access, the same reader would probably not know that the novel 'Staying On', the Comic Sequel or ironic postscript to Scott's monumental tetralogy, also deals with the consequences of British rule in India. Finally, it does not say much for present day bibliographic control practices that public library users should have to depend on a marketing device of the publishing industry, namely a book dust jacket, to gain descriptive control of fiction, while users of academic libraries, fiction collections do not even have dust jackets to guide them.

It must be remembered, however, that in order to be retrieved from documents and used in the creation of new knowledge, information has to be found, but unless fiction is indexed according to topical content, as non-fiction is, information contained in it may remain forever undiscovered.

If enhanced catalogue access to fiction were provided, however the objectives of the subject catalogue as enumerated by Cutter, would at last be achieved. At the same time, "the

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convenience of the public", whose members often approach fiction by topic, would truly be served. Whether used for escape, entertainment, experience or enlightenment, as a source of pleasure, knowledge, information, or art, fiction merits more comprehensive access than it is presently accorded in our libraries, and more particularly in public libraries.

Document Supply :

Document supply is a basic, although comparatively small part of the freedom of access to information to which librarians and information scientists are so dedicated. The fact that a particular document is not available in a given geographical area should not prevent the person wanting it from obtaining it. This is part of the basic work of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) programme for Universal Availability of Publications (Line, 1978).

Objective Neutralism

Librarianship is a philosophically independent profession, as far as librarians disaffirm explicitly allegiance with any particular interest group, so as to serve all groups equally. Berninghausen (1979) suggested that professional statements are geared towards developing a "view of the librarian as a neutral professional functioning in a neutral institution. The Latent Social Identities* of Librarians (e.g., sex, religion and ethnic identifications etc.) hinder this process of objective neutralism. As average social beings Librarians confirm themselves to the peoples' conception (society) and rating of themselves and that they find it increasingly difficult to come out of their Looking Glass Selves** where by they are pictured in a low social profile.

* Concept discussed by Sociologist A. W. Gouldner for conveying a social identification or role held by a member of a formal organisation that is officially regarded as irrelevant to the organisation but which nevertheless influences the organisations functioning.

* * Concept developed by C. H. Cooley in his work "Human nature and the Social Order -1902".

However, Miller (1955) had expressed the hope that "objective" views of an issue should be collected: "We can and must see that the public is provided with unbiased material on the subject". The necessary alternative, however, is to prioritise between all the choices, to decide what merits a place.

Public Libraries for All :

In democratic societies governments are obliged to provide access of information to all of their citizens throughout the world through a network of libraries. The year 2001 will be characterised by :

1. demand by people for a library information centre at their clan, tribe, colony, village, street and so on;
2. demand by people for access to information from wherever it is available;
3. demand by people to get the desired information in a desired form and format instantaneously;
4. demand by people to expect librarians active involvement in the generation of diverse tailor made information products;
5. demand by people to the library information professionals to participate actively in development programmes as an active participant;
6. People expectation of librarians to assume the roles of knowledge system experts and knowledge engineers;
7. a situation of information society wherein library information professionals scale high in their social profiles;
8. a situation of helplessness and a state of chaos on the part of general and specialist people in the wake of tremendous information being generated every moment;
9. a stage of development wherein the librarian has to retain best of his conventional knowledge (Library techniques and procedures) and the best of contemporary information sciences;

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10. a stage of development wherein information is consolidated and packaged into different levels of understanding and technicality sold out for money like any other goods, in the market;
11. a stage of development wherein in the absence of relevant information living in the year 2001 i.e. in an information society becomes practically impossible;
12. a point/stage of take off for library profession by proving their social relevance, necessity and indispensibility.

Hence the year 2001 is full of hopes for the Librarians. Librarians have to shoulder the greatest of the responsibilities to enter into the 21st century. The secret of the success lies in servicing and reaching any one and every one in society. Librarians should make their presence felt in every nook and corner of the globe. The long wish of the librarians to acquire the status of a fullfledged profession remains a dream if we enter into the year 2001 (can information society) unprepared. It is a time for every Librarian to make a bit of personal sacrifice both in cash and kind. This is the only way by which Librarians can convince people and clients that the year 2001 will be an information society and that without a minimum level of information living becomes horrible. Librarians have to convince people and make them understand the vital importance of information and libraries. Librarians should take up a mass campaign for people regarding awareness about information and libraries. Librarians should pledge to educate people and make them information literate before entering into the year 2001.

Public Library movement should become a peoples movement. As long as people don't realise the importance of information and the importance of being literate to use information, public library movement would not become a people's movement. Here lies the role of the librarians to make people realise the importance of being literate and the importance of using information for culture, development and entertainment. A day should come when people realise that without information

in the form of a book, cassette or in the form of a radio or a T. V. programme, living a meaningful and purposeful life is impossible. This dream could be realised only by having a library information centre at every street, village, town and city and in every slum and colony and moholla. It is enough if Librarians convince the general public that they need information for their own development and welfare. Once they get convinced the problem is solved for ever. Public library movement becomes a peoples movement. People will come forward to pay for library services in the form of tax and they will not allow any form of diversion of funds from library head to some other heads. That day should be marked in golden letters for Library and information profession. From that day onwards there will be no necessity of looking back for library and information professionals. People themselves will come forward to recognise the services of librarians by way of according the status, salary and recognition long due to them.

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The future status and position of librarians and their practice depends on how keenly and sincerely they address and focus themselves on the information needs of common man. Professiologists are 'still not' convinced about the fullfledged status of Librarianship as a professional calling (Devarai and Damodarm, 1993). Out of the two systematic studies/research done on library profession in India, one considers library science to be a semi-profession (Jaiswal, 1990) and the other observes it to be a fast developing profession (Chopra, 1986). The reasons for the low profile libraries and librarianship are many. The future is hopeful in the wake of new support of information technologies for accelerating library services.

All these days people have suffered a lot all over the world in the absence of a well developed up-to-date library service and secondly in absence of proper support, patronage and

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recognition of public in general. Alas ! Even to this date somebody has to awaken them and make them understand that they had undergone a lot of suffering¹.

Librarians are still not clear as to why people don't accord due status and recognise their services. And people are still not clear about the potentials of information and to what the Librarian is upto and as to why he needs more and more of their attention, money, recognition and status. Answer lies not in accusing each other. Empathy is the only answer. Both Librarians and people have to empathise. The sooner they do it, the better. This can lead them towards unlimited possibilities of understanding each other, paving way for a healthier Library Information Profession and a better library-information service to public.

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