Risks and Benefits of Visibility: Librarians Navigating Social and Political Turbulence

Peter Johan Lor

Abstract

The deliberate burning of libraries is nothing new, but it seems surprising that such incidents have also occurred in peacetime in democracies. What does this say about community perceptions of libraries and the response of the library profession? Mostly, libraries are not very newsworthy. In some countries they are largely invisible; in others they may only attract public attention when they are threatened by cutbacks or closures or when things go badly wrong. The visibility and invisibility of libraries in the political arena confer risks, as well as benefits. As a framework for an exploration of this topic, libraries in various countries are conceptualized as being located in the political space on a continuum, from invisible to highly visible, on which the risks of visibility and invisibility can be situated. Some observations, with particular reference to library development in South Africa, follow on how librarians see themselves and their institutions in relation to the communities and societies they serve. This paper concludes that the risks of invisibility outweigh those of visibility, but that the political awareness, engagement, and commitment of the library profession are critical.

Introduction

The impetus for this paper came from vivid images of a South African public library taken after it had been burned to the ground. In March 2012 violent community protests, prompted by complaints of poor municipal services and corruption, erupted in Ratanda, a township in Gauteng province, South Africa.[1] On Monday, March 19, the local offices of the municipality were destroyed by arson. On the following day, the clinic was looted and both the center for disabled people and the library were

burned down. This was during South African Library Week, just before the country's Human Rights Day (De Wet, 2012a, 2012b). Closer scrutiny revealed that since 1994, when South Africa emerged from apartheid as a nonracial democracy, at least twenty public libraries have been destroyed by arson in violent community protests (Van Onselen, 2014). Against the background of the idealism and optimism that was so evident at the time, this comes as a shock and a great disappointment.

The burning of books and libraries is, sadly, nothing new. From the great library of Alexandria in Egypt to the Bosnian National and University Library in Sarajevo, libraries have been casualties of warfare, revolution, and social upheaval. But the burning of public libraries as part of community protests in peacetime in a democratic state should give librarians pause for thought. It may come as a surprise to learn that such incidents have also occurred in Western democracies such as France, where more than seventy libraries were burned down or damaged between 1996 and 2003. In France, the phenomenon has led to serious scholarly reflection (Merklen, 2013; Merklen & Murard, 2008, 2013; Merklen & Perrot-Dessaux, 2010). In South Africa also, questions are being been raised about what this says about how communities perceive their libraries, and how the library profession should respond (Lor, 2013).

An event like the burning down of a library is shocking, precisely because it is unusual and unexpected. For the most part, libraries are not very newsworthy. Indeed, in many countries they are largely invisible; in others, they may be valued community agencies that are taken for granted and only attract public attention when threatened by cutbacks or closures due to government austerity measures or when things go badly wrong. The visibility and invisibility of libraries in the political arena confer risks, as well as benefits. In this paper I explore some aspects and implications of the visibility and invisibility of libraries within the political space. By "political space," I mean the formal political forums at various levels of government and the various forms of media—mass, local, and social. I must emphasize that this is an exploration, not a fully developed theory.

Libraries on a Continuum: From Invisible to Highly Visible

As a framework for this discussion, I suggest that libraries can be conceptualized as being located within the political space on a continuum, from invisible to highly visible. Figure 1 suggests that libraries of different kinds, at different times and in different countries, can vary widely with regard to their visibility. In poor countries with low literacy rates and other adverse circumstances, libraries may be virtually absent, or at best few in number, unrecognized, poorly resourced, and playing a marginal role in society. In other countries, libraries are present in larger centers, if not everywhere, and they may be recognized as having value for society. Such recognition

may be largely theoretical or limited to a small proportion of the population and not accompanied by the allocation of significant resources.

A higher level of visibility is reached when a society has a well-established, widely distributed network of libraries that are used by a significant proportion of the population. Here, libraries are seen as a normal and necessary amenity of every community, and they may be taken for granted in the same way that paved roads, sanitation, schools, clinics, and other amenities are assumed to be. In a survey in the United States, where almost 9,000 libraries, with 17,000 branches and bookmobiles (American Library Association [ALA], 2014), serve a population of around 318 million, it was found that over 90 percent of respondents over age 16 said that the closing of their library would have an impact on their community, although the percentage of people actively using libraries is lower, at around 69 percent (Zickuhr, Purcell, & Rainie, 2014).

A yet higher level of visibility is found where libraries are established or renovated as prestige projects. Here, one thinks of the U.S. presidential libraries and of the building or renovation of libraries as part of urban-renewal programs, such as the Bibliothèque Publique d'Information at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. At the highest level, we find libraries that have become, or are perceived as, national, cultural, and/or political symbols: for example, the Black Diamond of the Royal Library in Copenhagen, the Très Grande Bibliothèque on the Seine that houses the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and the new quarters of the National Library of South Africa in Pretoria.

Is There a Relationship between Visibility and Risk?

Some reflection on events that bring libraries to public attention leads to a first hypothesis: there may be a direct relationship between the visibility of libraries and the risks of damage and destruction by human agency to which they are subjected. An obvious instance is the National and University Library of Bosnia, which is reported to have been destroyed because of what it was—a symbol of a state in which different ethnicities lived together in relative harmony and the bearer of their collective memory. By their very existence, this library and others in Bosnia and elsewhere stood in the way of ethnic cleansing (Civallero, 2007; Riedlmayer, 1995). However, counterexamples, such as the deliberate burning of quite small and insignificant community libraries in South Africa and public library branches in the suburbs of Paris, suggest that this relationship is not necessarily linear. In figure 2, risk is depicted as a curve; its shape is merely notional.

The curve suggests that libraries at the low visibility pole of the continuum are at relatively high risk. This is because libraries that are of marginal relevance to their communities are at risk of extinction (being unable to continue; closing down). Libraries in the middle of the continuum, where
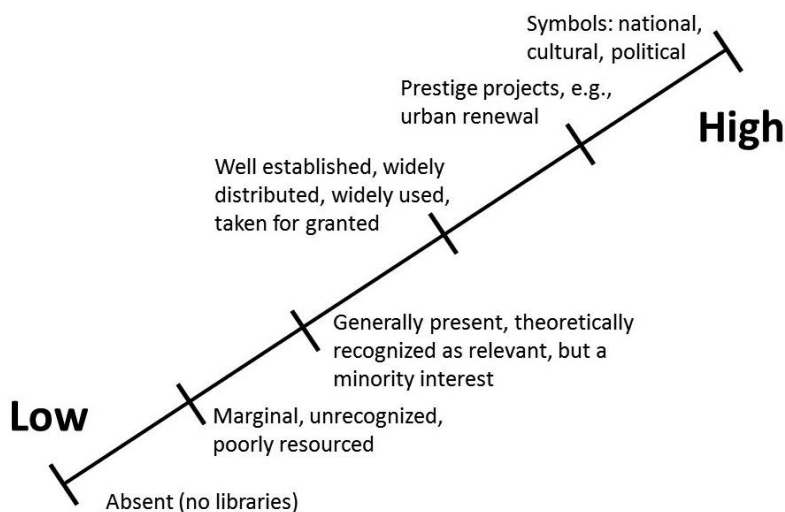
Figure 1. The visibility of libraries in society.

they are generally present though not of concern for the majority of the population, are at risk of stagnation. Those that have developed a wider support base and require substantial funding may be affected by austerity measures, such as the reduction of operating hours or closure of branches in spite of being regularly used and appreciated by their communities. In school libraries in the United States, which are very highly developed, the retrenchment of library staff members or their redeployment to teaching duties is not unusual, leading to the erosion of quality service (Schou, 2014; Strong, 2014). In societies where libraries have achieved a relatively high degree of recognition, there may be a risk of co-option whereby they are used in support of an ideology. Finally, the curve suggests that the most highly visible libraries may be at the greatest risk. In times of war or violent civil strife, if libraries are viewed as symbols of one of the parties to the conflict, they may fall victim to aggression. Fortunately, such conflict is rare. More common is that highly visible libraries may receive much negative publicity when problems of leadership and management or unpopular building-renovation plans provoke public controversy. Cases in point are the controversial buildings of the British Library[2] and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in the 1990s (Kessler, 1994), recent leadership problems at the Libraries and Archives Canada (Groover, 2012), and the planned and now abandoned remodeling of the New York Public Library's Schwartzman building ("New York Public Library Scraps Drastic Renovation Plans," 2014). Library directors will recognize that there is no foe as furious as a dissident friend.
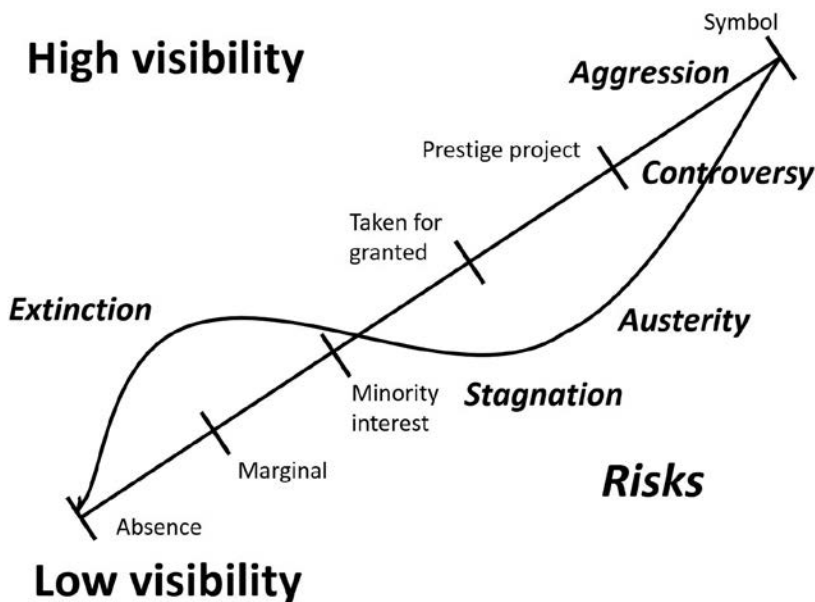
Figure 2. The relationship between visibility and risk.

This brief outline indicates that we need to look more closely at the quite diverse agents and mechanisms of risk to libraries. These can be divided into two categories: internal and external. The latter will be dealt with first.

RISKS IN THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Risks in the external environment can be seen, ironically, as arising from either too little or too much attention to libraries, from visibility that is too low or too high. The lack of visibility holds a number of risks. In South Africa, there is evidence that libraries have been set on fire not because they were libraries per se, but rather because they were located in municipal buildings that were targeted by community members protesting public corruption and mismanagement. In reports of such disturbances are suggestions that individuals leading the protests may have directed attacks on libraries because they were regarded as less important than essential services such as schools (De Wet, 2012a). In such cases the destruction of libraries may have been what the military euphemistically calls "collateral damage."

But violent actions resulting from conflict are not the only causes of damage or destruction to libraries; given enough time, simple neglect will

produce the same effect. Opinion is divided as to whether the ancient library at Alexandria was destroyed by the Romans, Christians, or Arabs (Hannam, 2012), but Newitz (2013) blames budget cuts. That may be too simplistic, but I suspect that as the city of Alexandria declined over the centuries, neglect, limited resources, and the lack of maintenance and gradual deterioration of its physical facilities all played a role as well. Empires and kingdoms rise and fall, and with them palaces, temples, theaters, aqueducts, and ramparts crumble. The invading barbarians need only provide the coup de grâce. In modern times, austerity measures and privatization can lead to the degradation of a nation's information infrastructures—the managerialist barbarians are already within the gates.

High visibility may occur when libraries are affected by severe budget cuts, leading to the curtailment of services and closures. On the positive side, the public may respond and take action to save their libraries. Major campaigns, as in the United States and United Kingdom (Voices for the Library, n.d.), may generate a great deal of public interest, even when their success is not always certain. The American Library Association (ALA) has an Office for Library Advocacy to provide support for people engaged in advocacy on behalf of libraries, and many links to the websites of such campaigns can be found on the office's website (ALA, 2016b, 2016d). During the presidency of Kay Raseroka, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, 2004) identified three "pillars" as fundamental to its strategies. The first of these, the Society Pillar, "focuses on the role and impact of libraries and information services in society and the contextual issues that condition and constrain the environment in which they operate across the world." IFLA's current program of Building Strong Library Associations recognizes the importance of library associations in enhancing the visibility and relevance of libraries in developing countries (2015).

Heightened visibility holds other risks. If libraries are obscure and unobtrusive, not much attention will be paid to their contents, but if they are visible and widely used, they are likely to come under closer scrutiny. Here, I think of censorship initiatives (by individuals, groups, and governments) that want libraries to offer only materials that reflect a limited worldview. In the United States vast amounts of professional energy and resources are devoted to challenging censorship actions that affect school and public libraries in particular. The ALA has a well-resourced Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALA, 2016c). Almost weekly the association's electronic magazine *American Libraries Direct* reports on vigorous, often combative responses to censorship attempts. These are also reported in local newspapers, radio, and television, no doubt raising the profiles of libraries in the affected communities. Occasionally the parents and residents involved are depicted as narrow-minded and their objections as mildly amusing, which I think is unfortunate because it exacerbates divisions within the com-

munity. It would be interesting to discover whether vigorous resistance to censorship that emanates from conservative community groups incurs risks to the locally based funding of public libraries.[3] The resistance to censorship experienced in the United States is not as common in countries in which libraries have a more marginalized status in society and where civil liberties are not respected to the same extent. In countries with recent, hard-won democratic freedoms, librarians may be prepared to take risks to fight for the freedom of political information, but not necessarily for sexually explicit materials or those that portray gay relationships in a favorable light. I suspect that in developing countries, equitable access to information across the digital divide and the barriers imposed by the international intellectual property regime may well be more fundamental concerns than moral censorship.

As a counterpoint to free libraries that are challenged by ideologues, there is the co-option of libraries and their absolute control by totalitarian regimes or intolerant ideological or religious movements. In both Nazi Germany and the former Soviet Union (Knutson, 2007; Neubert & Klim, 1998; Stieg, 1992), impressive networks of libraries were established, ensuring that no citizen was out of reach of one while simultaneously ensuring the dissemination of the regimes' ideologies. Here were cases of libraries' high visibility and high risk. The imposition of ideological purity is risky in the long run to the society itself, as much as to the libraries that are made the instruments of propaganda.

Most troubling, but also most newsworthy, are those situations in which libraries are deliberately targeted in civil and military conflicts. In these, the common factor is the presence of fractures within communities and societies, the lines of cleavage coinciding mostly with divisions along religious, ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic, class, gender, age, and/or ideological lines. In both India and Sri Lanka, ethnic, caste, and religious conflicts are blamed for the destruction of rare, irreplaceable library holdings—for example, those of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, India, and the Jaffna Public Library in Sri Lanka (Caswell, 2009; Knuth, 2006). In South Africa it is not clear whether public libraries have been deliberately targeted simply because they were libraries. In France, on the other hand, Merklen (2013) has asserted that suburban libraries in poor neighborhoods have been targeted as symbols of a book-based culture and education system perceived by young people of immigrant origins as excluding and marginalizing them.

While the destruction of libraries in military conflicts, as in Iraq and Bosnia, on occasion attracts considerable media attention, the burning down of libraries in South African townships rarely rates more than passing notice in the local media because of the number of protests regularly occurring. There are so many other casualties, the destruction of libraries becomes not so newsworthy. The best way to find out about ongoing "ser-

vice delivery protests"[4] appears to be to listen to daily traffic reports on the radio because they affect the flow of traffic, which is of most immediate concern. Similarly, Merklen (2013) is surprised that there has been so little media coverage of the more than seventy libraries in France subjected to stoning and arson.

Even when bad things happen to libraries, they do not feature much in the media and thus are not highly visible in the public sphere. However, occasionally things happen inside libraries themselves or librarians take actions that heighten their visibility.

RISKS IN THE INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

Occasionally, crimes are committed in libraries: confrontations, assaults, even murders, not to mention thefts of rare and valuable materials. Sometimes, and this is mildly newsworthy, there are reports concerning librarians or library employees who have stolen rare books or embezzled library funds. When library directors are caught stealing, as in the recent case of the director of the Girolamini Library in Naples (Donaldo, 2013), this provides sensational material for the media. Less worthy of notice are the cases of conflict within libraries, which occur much as they do in other kinds of organizations. There is a substantial literature, including monographs like those by Montgomery, Cook, Wagner, and Hubbard (2005) and Pantry (2007) on the causes of conflict within libraries and how they may be avoided or dealt with. Occasionally such conflicts boil over into the public sphere and are covered by the local media and reported in library periodicals. One only need Google "library director fired" to find numerous cases in which such directors lost their jobs because of personality conflicts, poor communication, inappropriate leadership styles, and other problems affecting their dealings with staff, library trustees, and/or officials of their governing authorities. A typical recent example in which a director's leadership skills were found lacking has been reported by McCord (2015). Such cases may foster much concern and some agitation in local communities and are reported by the local media. Many of these cases are ambiguous, involving both external factors, like austerity measures imposed, and internal ones, such as personality conflicts.

Of greater interest for the purposes of this paper are the cases in which library policies become the subject of public debate and contestation. There is a long history of professional and public debate on which materials should be acquired by libraries. An interesting example is the *Richtungsstreit* controversy[5] (Stieg, 1986), which arose prior to World War I between supporters of the Anglo-American public library model, who advocated for collections of wide popular appeal, and those adhering to the more elitist German concept of the role of public libraries, which emphasized the strict selection of quality materials for the "literary-aesthetic education of the people" (Chaplan, 1971, p. 44). This theme is reflected

in the English-speaking world in the ongoing high culture/low culture controversies, which pit those seeking to educate the public by encouraging the reading of high-quality literature against others who place more weight on popular demand. An interesting example is provided by the critical attitudes of librarians toward popular children's book series, such as those by Enid Blyton in England (Collins, 1993) and the Nancy Drew mysteries in the United States (Siegel, 1997). Many librarians refused to purchase these books on the grounds of their having been poorly written, with predictable plots and stereotyped characters. Librarians were concerned that children, becoming addicted to such stories, would not progress to more challenging and worthwhile reading material. From the 1930s to 1970s, library bans on these series attracted considerable professional and public attention. This same high culture/low culture duality has been manifested in a wide range of contexts: for example, in public library collection policies in small towns in the United States (Wiegand, 2011), in the collection of American folk music by the Library of Congress (Aikin, 2007), and the collection of popular materials in academic libraries (Moran, 1992/2013).

Generally, apart from when libraries are hit by manmade or natural disasters, most media attention is generated in cases in which the public is mobilized to resist managerial actions that are feared will reduce access. As mentioned above, major libraries with devoted users are at risk when changes are introduced. The decision of the British Library Board to move its reader services from the hallowed round reading room in the old British Museum building to the new library at St Pancras angered many scholars, and the resulting controversy generated considerable press coverage, as have the more recent travails of Library and Archives Canada and the New York Public Library. Library renovations and the reorganization of library collections, for example by shifting less-used material to off-site storage facilities, continue to provoke protests by professors and students, as reported inter alia by Graff (2014) and Kiley (2011). The replacement of the venerable card catalog by online catalogs incited the ire of an American writer, Nicholson Baker, who wrote a provocative article in 1994 criticizing librarians for discarding the old ones. This article elicited much debate (Cox, Greenberg, & Porter, 1998). Baker went on to expose the large-scale discarding of old, hard-to-find and valuable books from the collections of the San Francisco Public Library; the library's director, Kenneth Dowlin, was allegedly reversing an earlier policy of creating a notable research library in favor of a more conventional public library service (Baker, 1996). Baker (2000) also attacked the policy of the British Library Newspaper Library in Colindale of discarding old foreign newspapers for which microfilms were available. All of these issues emphasize the importance of good communication between librarians and users. A great deal

of criticism and anger may be provoked by management decisions that are poorly communicated to the public.

As previously mentioned, the library profession itself steps into the spotlight from time to time by taking sides on public issues that may affect services to their patrons. For example, U.S. librarians have protested against provisions in the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act, which would require them to provide the federal government with access to the borrowing records of their users (Matz, 2008). Librarians also expressed opposition to the filtering of public access to the internet in accordance with the U.S. Children's Internet Protection Act (2000) (Reitman, 2013). Through ALA, librarians in the United States have participated in advocacy for internet neutrality and various intellectual property and intellectual freedom issues (ALA, 2016a). Although activism on this scale is not a worldwide phenomenon, U.S. librarians are not alone. The journals and newsletters of library associations in many countries reflect similar concerns and advocacy issues. All these bring the profession to public attention, with attendant risks. This leads to a consideration of the responses and initiatives of librarians to enhance their visibility, and how this relates to risk.

Librarians in Relation to Their Communities: Navigating Turbulence

It is useful to return briefly to the continuum of library visibility depicted in figure 1, superimposing on it some generalized observations of how librarians view themselves and their institutions in relation to the communities and societies they serve. Figure 3 depicts these relationships and attitudes of librarians to their communities and society along the continuum of visibility developed earlier. To illustrate these relationships and attitudes, I draw on personal recollections and impressions of public library development, mainly in South Africa. Viewing the figure from bottom left to top right, the following typical situations are sketched.

After a possible initial enthusiasm has waned, the embattled librarians of small, marginalized, and barely visible libraries in some developing countries are often characterized by apathy; they may see themselves primarily as functionaries of the agencies employing them. In a more positive scenario, we regard the librarian as the devoted servant, caring primarily for a collection but also developing a loyalty to a small, élite clientele.

Next, the dedicated idealist emerges, one devoted to the use of libraries for the "upliftment" of his/her community or people. In South Africa a strong public library movement arose during the 1930s and 1940s. While one should not underestimate the important roles of a number of British librarians (Kennedy, 1970), of the Carnegie Corporation of New York (Nassimbeni, 2014), and various other players (Clark, 2004; Dick, 2007b), the public library movement arguably received considerable im-

High visibility

Activists, social justice, critical librarianship

Managerialism, efficiency, ROI

Technicism

Outreach, promotion, marketing, advocacy

Suburbanization

Dedicated idealists; emancipation, development, "upliftment"
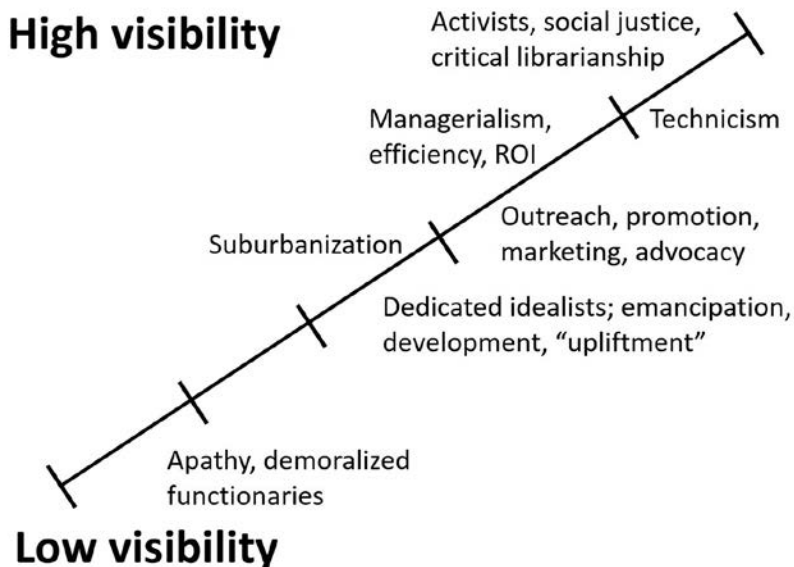
Apathy, demoralized functionaries

Low visibility

Figure 3. Librarians in relation to their communities.

petus from the cultural and political movements of the Afrikaner people, who were striving to free themselves from British imperialist domination and anglicizing pressures. During a period when language, culture, and politics were inextricably intertwined, libraries were regarded as instruments of emancipation.[6] After World War II, this movement contributed to the establishment in the provinces of free library services—initially for whites only.[7] Public library branches were established in each province and were supplied by "book trucks" from provincial headquarters. In Free State province, this service was initially headed by Samuel Henri Pellissier (1887–1978), an Afrikaner educationalist and cultural leader (Samuel Henri Pellissier, n.d.). He saw to it that the book trucks were provided with bugles, such as those used in former days by post coaches. The librarian of the book truck was expected to sound this bugle as the truck entered each village—a quite literal means of enhancing the visibility of the new public library service (M. H. C. Du Preez, personal communication, 1973).

As the community of Afrikaners became more affluent and educated through the policies of the National Party government, they moved into the suburbs, and the public libraries followed. The emphasis on upliftment diminished as libraries became suburbanized. This change was re-

flected in libraries' displays promoting books on such subjects as flower arrangements and the decorating of cakes. These were reported in local media, along with other typically middle-class pursuits like book discussions and the activities of bridge clubs and dramatic societies that met on library premises. Although there were exceptions, the impact and relevance of the suburbanized public libraries declined, along with their visibility.[8] Given how repressive the National Party regime was, libraries' low-profile avoidance of South African realities appeared a low-risk strategy. In the longer term, however, this inaction could potentially be risky: namely, the risk of these libraries' being associated with a discredited regime and consequently regarded as irrelevant, if not outright reactionary.

While the missionary spirit of the early Afrikaner library pioneers was fading away, an emancipatory movement was alive and well in the "locations" and "townships" to which South Africans of color were confined by apartheid. Dick (2007a, 2007b, 2012) has documented the use of books and libraries under apartheid. During the 1980s, soul-searching by white librarians (Zaaiman & Roux, 1989) on the role of libraries coincided with the growth of a creative and innovative community resource-center movement that emerged within the antiapartheid trade unions and community-based organizations. I shall return to them shortly, but it is not the purpose of this paper to trace the history of library development in South Africa. I must interrupt that story here to emphasize that the survival of libraries is inextricably linked to their relevance; to survive, libraries need to be relevant, and they need to be regarded as such.

The striving for relevance is at the heart of public librarianship. For communities and groups that are not served by libraries, outreach through promotional activities and marketing contributes to their visibility and acceptance, as does advocacy for the role of libraries in fostering the overall development of societies—for example, their role in reaching the UN's Millennium Development Goals—and in specific areas like information literacy. Library marketing features prominently in our professional literature, education, and conferences. However, I have a concern that the rhetoric of marketing and the glitz of promotional events may seduce our profession into complacency and cause it to lose sight of its values. Is there a problem in the relationship between a library and its community when, for example, the library is set ablaze by arsonists? After such an attack, there follows a knee-jerk reaction in our profession to increase marketing and promotion (Lor, 2013), but instead we should be seeing, listening, feeling, and thinking.

This critique is not so say that what libraries, especially public libraries, do for their communities at this level is not admirable and valuable. The work of public librarians in the United States is clearly beneficial; for example, by helping patrons put together their resumes and apply for jobs or

social benefits online using the library's available workstations, by assisting them in completing their income tax returns or applying for Obamacare, and by imparting basic information-literacy skills. This is especially true when those being helped are the poor and marginalized and thus have few opportunities because they lack a basic education. These services are, however, essentially palliative; the public libraries serve the poor and less affluent, but cannot seek to change power relationships or the gap between the wealthy (the "1 percent") and all others (the "99 percent").

Similarly, information and communication technologies (ICTs)—the internet, social media, mobile devices, and so on—have vast potential not only for increasing the visibility of libraries but also for superficiality, as the promise and challenges of adopting and keeping up with rapidly evolving technology distract from other concerns. One has only to review recent conference programs of the ALA or peruse *American Libraries Direct* to discern the amount of professional attention given to technological innovations such as e-books, makerspaces, or gamification. Too many individuals in our profession turn to ICTs for solutions before the problems have been clearly identified. In figure 3 this is referred to as "technicism." Managerialist and technicist trends become most marked in larger library systems, where overheads are high, costs are scrutinized by unsympathetic administrators, and library managers are under constant pressures to reduce costs. In an increasingly managerialist scenario, libraries are run by professional managers with nonlibrary backgrounds. They are numerate and demonstrate proficiency in calculating return on investment, and their core value is efficiency. But while they are able to contribute valuable skills, they may lack a sympathetic understanding of what a library is about. In large organizations I see a growing disconnect and clash of values between library managers on the one hand, and on the other the librarians in the trenches who are more attuned to the needs of the individuals and groups within the communities they serve. This is the origin of the discontent that erupts from time to time in high-profile libraries to the surprise of the general public, who perceive the profession of librarianship as being undemanding and pleasantly stress-free.

It is in reaction to this growing managerial mentality that, for decades, alternative groups of progressive librarians have arisen on the fringes of the profession to question the assumptions of the establishment. Proponents of "critical librarianship," armed with critical theory, deconstruct establishment librarianship and find it wanting. They deflate hallowed notions like "the myth of neutrality that divorces library and information work from participation in social struggle" (Samek, 2007, p. 10). *Library neutrality*—the idea that the library in its collections and services should be neutral and have "no religion, no politics, no morals"[9]—is regarded by progressive librarians as a cop-out, a fine principle based on an assump-

tion of level playing fields in societies where, structurally, the odds are stacked against the poor. Instead of a palliative agency, these librarians desire the library to be an agency of transformation, if not subversion, of the status quo.[10]

As we move to the upper end of the continuum depicted in figure 3, it is appropriate to return to the resource center movement in South Africa (Berghammer & Karlsson, 1988; Kaniki, 1994; Ngubeni, 2004; Stilwell, 2001). The resource centers were a living expression of alternative or critical librarianship. Rejecting the old notions of library neutrality, the activists in these grass-roots initiatives explicitly aligned themselves in the struggle against apartheid, embracing the principles of democracy, nondiscrimination, and redress of past injustices in a unitary South Africa (National Education Policy Investigation, 1992). In solidarity with the working class, these activists preferred to call themselves "library workers," which is reflected in the name of their organization, the Library and Information Workers Organization (LIWO).[11] It is important to note that, in contrast with the traditional liberal notions of public library service, which emphasize the information needs of individuals, the resource centers were engaged in a class struggle, working largely outside the ambit of formal library structures. Some operated on the fringes of legality, being subjected to raids, harassment, intimidation, and arrests by the apartheid state—unsurprisingly because, after all, they were striving for regime change. Theirs was a high-risk strategy.

The risk in alternative or critical librarianship, however, is twofold. The first, already alluded to, is suppression. Suppression can range from condescension, criticism, or negation on the part of the traditional library establishment, to heavy-handed, even murderous repression on the part of the state. The second risk is that of long-term sustainability and relevance. Progressive librarians' movements have an important contribution to make, but although they may be vocal, they are often small and ephemeral. They are also prone to using rather impenetrable theoretical jargon, which impedes communication with the mainstream profession. In South Africa another factor reduced the impact of the resource centers: namely, when apartheid ended, much of the funding upon which many of the centers had relied dried up as foreign agencies redirected their aid to the newly legitimate government (Stilwell, 2001). The activists dispersed, some into jobs in the formal library sector and library schools, others joining nongovernmental organizations or working for the new government. Ironically, several activists emigrated after the regime change. The disappearance of LIWO is to be regretted; the burning of so many public libraries under South Africa's new democratic dispensation is evidence that the country is in need of insights from activist librarians and critical librarianship.

Conclusion

This brings us back full circle to the images that prompted this paper and the question whether there are both risks and benefits to the visibility and invisibility of libraries. An academic answer would be "Yes and no—it depends"; the short answer is "Yes." Risks and benefits can be found at both ends of the continuum depicted in figure 1. These are summarized in figure 4.

To survive and contribute to society, libraries need to be visibly relevant. Clearly, being visible has significant benefits for them: a wider appreciation in their communities should, in the normal course of events, translate into the allocation of resources. If esteemed or iconic libraries are threatened or attacked, the public can be mobilized in their defense. But in attempting to achieve visibility, librarians also run some risks, such as being targeted as symbols of the enemy, being subjected to censorship or co-option by repressive regimes, or being vulnerable to austerity measures by cost-conscious managers. If libraries explicitly align themselves with the underclass or oppressed and become potential agents of transformation, they may be shut down by repressive regimes.

On the other hand, the risks incurred by a lack of visible relevance include ignorance on the part of the community and neglect. Lacking resources, these libraries risk stagnating and ultimately closing. Are there any benefits to limited visibility? This question may appear naïve or nonsensical to the adherents of library marketing and promotion; for them, "any news is good news" in that every opportunity can be seized to make the public aware of libraries. In the case of the South African example to which I referred at the beginning of this paper, the media release on the events in Ratanda, issued by the Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA), contained substantial information on South African Library Week.

The main benefits of invisibility are the avoidance of risks associated with visibility. Librarians operating "under the radar" are less likely to be subjected to censorship pressures by the "religious police" and other groups. Libraries that are not visible as national or cultural symbols are at lesser risk of being targeted by opposing forces during civil strife and wars. Being shielded from public scrutiny and political pressures may confer some freedom from state scrutiny. Moreover, libraries may, in exceptional cases, be invisible, but remain relevant. In the long term I believe that the risks of invisibility outweigh those of visibility, but this cannot be calculated according to a formula. Figure 4 suggests that there are some risks and benefits attendant upon both high and low visibility. A library will always be located in a space combining various degrees of risk and benefit. Librarians have to decide where they want their institution to be, which raises questions about how politically, socially, and culturally aware librarians are and how they understand themselves within these contexts.

Figure 4. Summary of the risks and benefits of library visibility.

Librarians should not seek to evade troubling questions by taking refuge in neutrality, technology, or managerialism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

NOTES

1. In South Africa, the term *township* refers to "a suburb or city of predominantly black occupation, formerly officially designated for black occupation by apartheid legislation" (Township, n.d.).
2. Prince Charles famously (although I think unfairly) compared the reading room of the British Library building to "an assembly hall of an academy for secret police" (Lyall, 2009, n.p.). However, the construction of the new library was also plagued by delivery problems and cost overruns (Glancey, 1994).
3. Although news reports in U.S. media indicate that censorship battles do have political repercussions at the local level—for example, in West Bend, Wisconsin—a cursory database search failed to turn up any systematic research on this topic. There is, however, a great deal of discussion on the effects of conditions attached to federal funding for libraries. The Children's Internet Protection Act, for example, requires public libraries and schools that accept federal funds to block websites that contain material considered harmful to children. See, for example, Electronic Frontier Foundation (2014).
4. These events are commonly referred to as "service delivery protests," but sociologists point out that the protests are not only about municipal service delivery (Alexander, 2010; Mottiar & Bond, 2012).
5. The *Richtungsstreit* was a fight or controversy (*Streit*) about the direction (*Richtung*) or policy to be adopted (Stieg, 1986).
6. Admittedly, this assertion, which is based on personal observation and informal interac-

tions with colleagues over the past forty-five years, needs scholarly substantiation. However, the prominent involvement of Afrikaner cultural leaders like Pellissier and membership by many prominent Afrikaner librarians during this period in the Afrikaner Broederbond (a secret society promoting the interests of white, Afrikaans-speaking South Africans) are pointers to the significance attached to libraries by the Afrikaner establishment, which governed since 1948. The subject requires additional research, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

7. To be fair, the various provincial library services later introduced services for members of other "population groups" as well, but in most cases on a much smaller scale.

8. In a moving address at the 2007 IFLA Conference, South African antiapartheid activist, writer, and former Constitutional Court judge Albie Sachs spoke of the anonymous librarian of a Cape Town suburban branch library who had provided him with books while he was in police detention (Library and Information Association of South Africa, n.d.).

9. This quotation comes from the title of a talk by D. J. Foskett in 1962, which was published as a pamphlet by the (British) Library Association. It is often quoted out of context. As Brewerton (2003, p. 48) has pointed out, Foskett's point was that the librarian should not impose his/her own political, religious, or moral outlook on library users, but not that the librarian should lack political, religious, or moral values. Indeed, the role of the librarian calls for dedication, itself a professional value.

10. The library as an agency of transformation is not the same thing as libraries transforming as they adapt to changes in their communities, desirable as that may be (Fiels, 2014).

11. LIWO members were not limited to resource center workers, but also included other progressive librarians in the "formal sector."

References

Aikin, E. J. (2001). High culture, low culture: The singular duality of the Library of Congress. *American Studies, 42*(3), 43–61.

Alexander, P. (2010). Rebellion of the poor: South Africa's service delivery protests—a preliminary analysis. *Review of African Political Economy, 37*(123), 25–40.

American Library Association (ALA). (2014). *The state of America's libraries.* Report, 2013. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/news/state-americas-libraries-report-2013

American Library Association (ALA). (2016a). Advocacy, legislation & issues. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/

American Library Association (ALA). (2016b). ALA Office for Library Advocacy (OLA)—home. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/offices/ola

American Library Association (ALA). (2016c). Office for Intellectual Freedom. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/offices/oif

American Library Association (ALA). (2016d). Save libraries in your state. Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/offices/cro/getinvolved/saveyourlibraries

Baker, N. (1994, April 4). Discards. *The New Yorker, 70*(7), 64–86.

Baker, N. (1996, October 14). Letter from San Francisco: The author vs. the library. *The New Yorker, 72*(31), 51–62.

Baker, N. (2000). *Double fold: Libraries and the assault on paper* [Review]. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/books/first/b/baker-fold.html

Berghammer, C. N., & Karlsson, J. (1988). A resource centre for a changing South Africa. *Wits Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, 5*, 8–20.

Brewerton, A. (2003). The creed of a librarian: A review article. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, 35*(1), 47–55.

Caswell, M. (2009). Irreparable damage: Violence, ownership and voice in an Indian archive. The case of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and the Sambhaji Brigade. *Libri, 59*(1), 1–13.

Chaplan, M. (1971). American ideas in German public libraries: Three periods. *Library Quarterly, 41*(4), 35–53.

Civallero, E. (2007, summer). "When memory turns into ashes" . . . Memoricide during the XX Century. *Information for Social Change, 25*, 7–22.

Clark, P. (2004). "Better Libraries for Everyone!": The development of library services in the Western Cape in the 1940s. *Innovation: Journal of Appropriate Librarianship and Information Work in Southern Africa, 28*, 22–30.

Collins, F. (1993). "The perfect ending to the perfect story": The appeal of Enid Blyton. In P. Pinsent (Ed.), *The power of the page: Children's books and their readers* (pp. 66–73). London: Routledge.

Cox, R. J., Greenberg, J., & Porter, C. (1998). Access denied: The discarding of library history. *American Libraries, 29*(4), 57–61.

De Wet, P. (2012a, March 20). Ratanda residents rekindle Heidelberg protests. *Mail & Guardian.* Retrieved from http://mg.co.za/article/2012-03-20-ratanda-residents-rekindle-hei delberg-protests

De Wet, P. (2012b, March 21). Clinic evacuated as Ratanda protests simmer. *Mail & Guardian.* Retrieved from http://mg.co.za/article/2012-03-21-clinic-evacuated-as-ratanda-protests -simmer

Dick, A. L. (2007a). "The books were just the props": Public libraries and contested space in the Cape Flats townships in the 1980s. *Library Trends, 55*(3), 698–715.

Dick, A. L. (2007b). The development of South African libraries in the 19th and 20th centuries: Cultural and political influences. In T. J. D. Bothma, P. G. Underwood, & P. Ngulube (Eds.), *Libraries for the future: Progress and development of South African libraries* (pp. 13–24). Pretoria: Library and Information Association of South Africa.

Dick, A. L. (2012). *The hidden history of South Africa's book and reading cultures.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Donaldo, R. (2013, November 29). Rare books vanish, with a librarian in the plot: Unravelling huge thefts from Girolamini Library in Naples. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/30/books/unraveling-huge-thefts-from-girolamini -library-in-naples.html?_r=0

Electronic Frontier Foundation. (2014). 404 Day: A day of action against censorship in libraries. Retrieved from https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2014/03/404-day-day-action-against -censorship-libraries-and-schools

Fiels, K. M. (2014, May 5). Libraries transforming communities: A project for ALA and all types of libraries. *American Libraries.* Retrieved from http://www.americanlibrariesmagazine .org/article/libraries-transforming-communities

Foskett, D. J. (1962). *The creed of a librarian: No politics, no religion, no morals.* London: Library Association.

Glancey, J. (1994, July 11). What took them so long?: The British Library saga has precedents. Jonathan Glancey looks at other building marathons. *Independent.* Retrieved from http:// www.independent.co.uk/voices/what-took-them-so-long-the-british-library-saga-has-prece dents-jonathan-glancey-looks-at-other-1413100.html

Graff, J. (2014, April 17). Colby College sacks the stacks. *The New Criterion.* Retrieved from http://www.newcriterion.com/posts.cfm/Colby-College-sacks-the-stacks-7434

Groover, M. (2012, June 7). The wrecking of Canada's Library and Archives. Retrieved from http://thetyee.ca/Opinion/2012/06/07/LibraryCuts/

Hannam, J. (2012). The mysterious fate of the great library of Alexandria. *Bede's Library.* Retrieved from http://bede.org.uk/library.html

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). (2004). IFLA's three pillars. Retrieved from http://www.ifla.org/three-pillars

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). (2015). Building strong library associations. Retrieved from http://www.ifla.org/bsla

Kaniki, A. M. (1994). Community resource centres and resource centre forums in the transformation and post-transformation era in South Africa. *African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science, 4*(1), 47–54.

Kennedy, R. F. (1970). Library mechanics: South Africa's first trained librarians. In J. G. Kesting, S. I. Malan, A. H. Smith, & L. E. Taylor (Eds.), *Libraries and people: Essays offered to R. F. M. Immelman* (pp. 9–19). Cape Town: Struik.

Kessler, J. (1994). The Bibliothèque Nationale de France project: Access or expediency? *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science, 26*(3), 121–133.

Kiley, K. (2011, April 27). No room for books. *Inside Higher Ed.* Retrieved from https://www .insidehighered.com/news/2011/04/27/university_of_denver_removing_most_books _from_its_library

Knuth, R. (2006). *Burning books and leveling libraries: Extremist violence and cultural destruction.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Knutson, E. (2007). New realities: Libraries in post-Soviet Russia. *Library Trends, 55*(3), 716–729.

Library and Information Association of South Africa (LIASA). (n.d.). Justice Albie Sachs Freedom Award. Retrieved from http://www.liasa-new.org.za/justice-albie-sachs-freedom-award/

Lor, P. J. (2013). Burning libraries for the people: Questions and challenges for the library profession in South Africa. *Libri, 63*(4), 359–372.

Lyall, S. (2009, June 18). In England, a royal taste that alters the landscape. *The New York Times.* Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/19/world/europe/19london.html?_r=2

Matz, C. (2008). Libraries and the USA PATRIOT Act: Values in conflict. *Journal of Library Administration, 47*(3–4), 69–87.

McCord, S. (2015, August 18). Fired Augusta library director lacked leadership skills, commissioner says. *Augusta Chronicle.* Retrieved from http://chronicle.augusta.com/news/government/2015-08-18/fired-augusta-library-director-lacked-leadership-skills-commissioner-says#

Merklen, D. (2013). *Pourquoi brûle-t-on des bibliothèques?* [Why did they burn libraries?]. Villeurbanne, France: Presses de l'ENSSIB.

Merklen, D., & Murard, N. (2008, January 7). Pourquoi brûle-t-on des bibliothèques? [Why did they burn libraries?]. *La Vie des idées.* Retrieved from http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Pourquoi-brule-t-on-des.html?lang=fr

Merklen, D., & Murard, N. (2013, November 7). "Why are people setting fire to libraries?" Social violence and written culture (K. McNaughton, Trans.). *Books & ideas.NET.* Retrieved from http://www.booksandideas.net/Why-are-people-setting-fire-to.html

Merklen, D., & Perrot-Dessaux, C. (2010). *Ce que les bibliothécaires disent de leur quartier; Le quartier des bibliothèques, les bibliothèques des quartiers* [What libraries are saying about their precinct: The libraries' precincts, the precincts' libraries]. Paris: Centre de Sociologie de Pratiques et des Représentations Politiques, Université Paris Diderot–Paris 7.

Montgomery, J. G., Cook, E. I., Wagner, P. J., & Hubbard, G. T. (2005). *Conflict management for libraries: Strategies for a positive, productive workplace.* Chicago: ALA.

Moran, B. M. (2013). Going against the grain: A rationale for the collection of popular materials in academic libraries. In A. Ellis (Ed.), *Popular culture and acquisitions* (pp. 3–12). New York: Routledge. (Original work published 1992)

Mottiar, S., & Bond, P. (2012). The politics of discontent and social protest in Durban. *Politikon: South African Journal of Political Studies, 39*(3), 309–330.

Nassimbeni, M. (2014, August). *Building resilient public libraries with Carnegie in South Africa (1927–2012): Regularities, singularities and South African exceptionalism.* Paper presented at the IFLA World Library and Information Congress, Lyon, France. Retrieved from http://library.ifla.org/916/

National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI). (1992). *Library and information services: Report of the NEPI Library and Information Services Research Group.* Cape Town: Oxford University Press and National Education Coordinating Committee.

Neubert, M., & Klim, I. L. (1998). Post-Soviet Russian librarianship in transition. In K. de la Pena McCook, B. J. Ford, & K. Lippincott (Eds.), *Libraries: global reach–local touch* (pp. 98–103). Chicago: ALA.

Newitz, A. (2013, October 8). The great library at Alexandria was destroyed by budget cuts, not fire. *io9.* Retrieved from http://io9.com/the-great-library-at-alexandria-was-destroyed-by-budget-1442659066

New York Public Library scraps drastic renovation plans: Opposition to the renovation included three lawsuits. (2014, May 9). *Building Design+Construction.* Retrieved from http://www.bdcnetwork.com/new-york-public-library-scraps-drastic-renovation-plans

Ngubeni, M. (2004). Self-reliance: Is it possible for public libraries in South Africa at present? *Innovation: Journal of Appropriate Librarianship and Information Work in Southern Africa, 29,* 45–54.

Pantry, S. (2007). *Managing stress and conflict in libraries.* London: Facet.

Reitman, R. (2013, September 4). The cost of censorship in libraries: 10 years under the Children's Internet Protection Act. Retrieved from https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2013/09/cost-censorship-libraries-10-years-under-childrens-internet-protection-act

Riedlmayer, A. (1995). Erasing the past: The destruction of libraries and archives in Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin, 29*(1), 7–11.

Samek, T. (2007). *Librarianship and human rights: A twenty-first century guide.* Oxford: Chandos.

Samuel Henri Pellissier. (n.d.). [Afrikaans] In *Wikipedia.* Retrieved from https://af.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Henri_Pellissier

Schou, S. (2014, February). How cuts and closures of elementary school libraries are hurting our kids. *TakePart*. Retrieved from http://www.takepart.com/article/2014/02/28/read -public-school-libraries-suffer-staff-cuts-and-closures

Siegel, D. L. (1997). Nancy Drew as new girl wonder: Solving it all for the 1930s. In S. A. Inness (Ed.), *Nancy Drew and company: Culture, gender, and girls' series* (pp. 159–182). Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

Stieg, M. F. (1986). The *Richtungsstreit*: The philosophy of public librarianship in Germany before 1933. *Journal of Library History, 21*(2), 261–276.

Stieg, M. F. (1992). The Second World War and the public libraries of Nazi Germany. *Journal of Contemporary History, 27*(1), 23–40.

Stilwell, C. (2001). Community resource centres: A turn of the century update. In C. Stilwell, A. Leach, & S. Burton (Eds.), *Knowledge, information and development: An African perspective* (pp. 200–214). Pietermaritzburg, South Africa: School of Human and Social Studies, University of Natal.

Strong, C. (2014). Importance of school library programs. *Educational Research Journal*. Retrieved from https://works.bepress.com/strong/1/

Township. (n.d.). In *Oxford dictionaries*. Retrieved from http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/township

Van Onselen, G. (2014, March 9). At least 20 libraries up in flames. *Sunday Times*. Retrieved from http://www.timeslive.co.za/sundaytimes/2014/03/09/at-least-20-libraries-up-in -flames

Voices for the Library. (n.d.). A place for everyone who loves libraries . . . Retrieved from http://www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/

Wiegand, W. A. (2011). *Main street public library: Community places and reading spaces in the rural heartland, 1876–1956.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

Zaaiman, R. B., & Roux, P. J. A. (1989). The use of libraries for the development of South Africa: Findings and recommendations. *South African Journal of Library and Information Science, 57*(1), 8–17.

Zickuhr, K., Purcell, K., & Rainie, L. (2014, March 13). From distant admirers to library lovers—and beyond. Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/13/library-engagement-typology/

Peter Johan Lor holds a D.Phil. degree (1991), as well as an honorary doctorate (2008), from the University of Pretoria (UP). He held positions in special and academic libraries and as a professor of library science at the University of South Africa before becoming the director of the State Library in 1992. He was South Africa's first National Librarian (2000–2003), and from 2005 to 2008 he served as secretary general of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions. From 2009 to 2011 he was a visiting professor in the School of Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, where he continues to teach an online course in international and comparative librarianship. Now an extraordinary professor in the Department of Information Science at UP, he is privileged to work online from his home in Sedgefield, on the South African Garden Route. His current research focuses on international and comparative librarianship, and on the ethical and political economic aspects of international information relations.