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## **The Ethics of Access: Towards an Equal Slice of the Pie**

### INTRODUCTION

The regard for ethics for a period of time drifted away from the lofty logic of Socrates and religious seminaries, and became a topic avoided by the political arena and forgotten by society. However, in recent times, ethics has returned to the forefront, an issue that is addressed by the media, in various publications, and at many symposiums and conferences and by politicians. In other words, it is again currently a “hot” topic. The ethical standing and responsibility of professions such as librarianship, which have an impact upon the community at large, are significant and worthy of this attention.

Ethics is a system of moral principles and of values relating to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions. When two diametrically opposed obligations conflict with one another, an ethical dilemma occurs. It is settled only by weighing and evaluating the importance of the conflicting obligations. The moral conviction of a democratic society supportive of freedom of information versus the welfare of that public might well be an example of two opposing obligations. Equal access to information by the people versus the provision of relevant and friendly information is another wordset of potentially opposing obligations. The free library for the good of the public versus quality library services is also a contender. It is not so opposing if one considers the statement of Alphonse Trezza (1986) during his tenure with the National Commission on Library and Information Services (NCLIS): “The commitment to public good requires the library to constantly improve quality of services, the effective use of technology, and the efficiency of the operation” (p. 52). Providing access and fulfilling the needs of the majority versus providing access and fulfilling the needs of the minority is yet another

opposing set. If one adds the words "equal opportunity" then the impact of this statement upon the library is significant.

As a public administrator, the author's concern is with the responsibility of the public library to provide meaningful and quality access to minorities. For the purposes of this paper, minorities are identified as the ethnic and racial minority groups. U. S. Immigration Service statistics project that minorities will comprise 33 percent of the population by the year 2000. Currently, minority groups comprise 23 percent and up to 50 percent of the population of the larger cities of the U. S. The three largest groups of this growing minority population are Hispanic, Asian, and African-American. The highest percentages are found in New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and Chicago. In the city of Chicago, projections by the Department of Planning show the Hispanic and Asian communities as the fastest-growing components of the population, rising from 14 percent of the population in 1980 to 21 percent by 2000; coincidentally or not, the poverty rate is projected to increase by 5 percent. In all age brackets, Asian and Hispanic groups will experience significant increases, up from 20 percent to 166 percent among senior citizens, while the white population will experience decreases in all but the "over 80" category.

What are some of the obligations of libraries in giving serious consideration to minority access? First, a library is obliged to determine who the groups are, their social, cultural and demographic characteristics, and their information needs. This can be part of a community survey, needs assessment, or ascertained from existing data such as census reports and local, state and federal agency documents. Second, the library is obligated to plan for the inclusion of the needs of minority groups in its overall program of service. Prioritized and measurable goals can then be identified and implemented. Third, the library should set current and projected funding priorities for specialized services to minority groups. The availability of "soft" money for such services has dwindled so that mainstreaming should be the order of the day.

Before considering funding and overcoming budgetary constraints, some of the other major considerations involved in the responsibility of libraries to provide access to minorities need to be addressed. In this era of reduced library funding, especially at the federal level, the ethics of minority access demands serious consideration.

### THE "BIG FOUR" LIBRARY OPERATIONS

Meaningful, quality-oriented access requires the inclusion of minority considerations in all aspects of library operations. Foremost among

these are the big four: Collections, Staffing, Programming, and Facilities. Experience and research have shown that there are differences between library needs of a vast portion of minority groups and the needs of the heretofore "typical" library user. Ethical considerations require that these differences, whether cultural, educational or social, be taken into account when proportioning library resources. This paper will touch upon some of the barriers or obstacles that must be overcome in providing meaningful, quality access and note some of the current initiatives underway at the Chicago Public Library (CPL).

### **Collection Access**

Libraries have recognized for some time that there are distinct barriers which impede access to use of the collection. Minority groups in particular experience to a higher degree the limitations of cultural, educational, and language barriers. The ethics of access dictate that a means be implemented which will prevent minorities from becoming victims of those barriers.

Culturally, many have not used libraries as a primary or secondary source of information. Indeed, many may not have experienced the "public library" nor developed the reading habit as part of the socialization process. These groups, once identified, will have to be introduced to libraries through public awareness and community outreach efforts. To decrease the educational and language barriers, the library may have to increase its offering of English as a Second Language (ESL) and other classes and provide basic literacy training. A collection must be developed that takes these and other significant issues into consideration when plans are being developed and dollars allocated. Formats or media types may have to be expanded, deleted, or maintained. The acquisition of foreign language materials and the turnaround time for receiving, processing, and shelving these materials are critical. The inadequacy of current cataloguing and processing procedures and devices cripples the best intentions of the selection process. Far too often, what ends up on the browsing shelves is not representative of what is in the receiving and work rooms. Access to information about and for minorities is handicapped. For the staff of CPL, knowing the community means knowing which of the collected materials, in 120 different languages, to focus upon and extensively collect. The availability from major vendors, the handling of non-roman alphabets, the integration of foreign language/multicultural materials throughout a multibranch system, or the separation or regionalizing of library materials are strategic decisions to be made.

Cooperative efforts, especially where the dollar is an issue (and

where isn't it!) seem to work well. For instance, Project ASIA was originally supported by LSCA funds and the book budget contributions of its participating libraries in California. Community outreach was conducted and the project staff selected, acquired, and catalogued books in four Asian languages for its participants.

### **Staffing**

It is important to effective service to minority groups that staff are people-oriented, possess good communication skills, and are knowledgeable about the literature, aware of trends, familiar with patron needs, quality-minded, able to manage, and so on. These characteristics should sound very familiar to all library managers. The staff should also be familiar with the institutional barriers that can impede access to information. The information needs of those in low-income areas and the non-English speaking can be a far cry from what is taught in Reference 101. Librarians have to recognize the socioeconomic and educational distinctions within a given minority group and consequently their diverse informational needs. Staff awareness and sensitivity for institutional barriers can extend from knowing when a given collection is inadequate for a patron and thereby providing the appropriate referral; or when a person is at a loss in attempting to recognize, let alone use, the catalog, follow the Library of Congress classification scheme, or simply read. The responsive library and staff will proceed to establish workable measures to reduce institutional barriers. The establishment of staff advisory committees that serve as resources for the development and administration of policies, activities, collections, and programs affecting minorities is one approach for creating and passing on the awareness alluded to previously.

In some instances, there are needs for bilingual staff. At CPL, staff working in primarily Hispanic communities are encouraged and supported in their efforts to learn Spanish. As a result of LSCA funding, there have been language classes offered for staff on library time. CPL has also initiated a joint program with Rosary College whereby staff with bachelor's degrees can work full time and complete M.L.S. degree requirements within two years. This staff development program is designed to increase the number of librarians available systemwide and therefore for the new central library—the Harold Washington Library Center (scheduled for completion in 1991)—as well as to enlarge the diminishing pool of minority librarians. In the city's personnel department, a training program is offered for all city employees on multicultural adaptation; one is targeted for managers and another for peer groups.

One of CPL's four district chief librarians provides the following



insight: Attitudes of staff in communities that are experiencing changes in makeup are often difficult to orient. In one branch, the community makeup is moving away from a white-collar, all-white neighborhood to one of blue-collar, Hispanic predominance. The unit head is expected to orientate her middle-aged white clerical staff so that they maintain the same level of quality service for the newer residents of the community as they have given in the past. This is a considerable task under some conditions, but especially so in this case when the observation is made that the branch head herself is making plans to move her personal residence out of that community.

CPL actively recruits bilingual staff, who are assigned to those areas of the library needing their skills the most. However, should the rightness and wrongness of shaping the career track of bilingual and minority staff be considered? Are there other skills, language fluency aside, that are being overlooked which would enhance the employee's value to the organization? Does the library have an obligation to assign qualified minority professional staff to communities whose makeup and patrons are not those of the librarian's ethnic or racial type? Is the library's "commitment to quality library services" kept in mind at personnel evaluation time? Are supervisors wise to the differences in work habits caused by cultural differences versus "poor" work habits?

## **Programming**

Another major area where the ethics of access comes into play is library programming. Is a proportionate share of programming planned with minorities in mind? Do the program participants, themes, and topics reflect the ethnicity of the community? Do they go beyond simply a linguistic translation of traditional programming?

In conjunction with the program design element, marketing needs must be considered. The need arises for effective communication. This may mean bilingual press releases, public service announcements, and any other means identified by community outreach that serve to inform staff of the best communication vehicles and channels for a given minority group and community. For instance, in some Arab neighborhoods, mosques and grocery stores with Arab proprietors are the current and most-used source for community information. For other groups it may be the church or the social center. The two underlying purposes of programming are to increase library use and to promote cultural awareness. For minority groups as with any other group, relevance, i.e., meaningful access, is the key.

## **Facilities**

The last of the big four of library operations is facilities. Here is where, in a number of instances, the proportionate share is not met. It is usually in minority communities that one finds a predominance of storefronts and smaller library facilities. In many instances, groups have not been empowered to demand better facilities, nor are they aware of the political process for obtaining improvements. Once the groups grow large enough and become more acquainted with the process for improvement, the demands are made. But why wait until then? If the concern for minority access and ethical considerations is incorporated in the library's capital improvement plans, then adequate facilities become a part of the library's ongoing program. CPL recently opened an 18,000 square-foot branch in the heart of a large Hispanic community. This facility is one of the many included in the library's five-year plan for branch renovation and construction within the 84-agency library. A storefront library in Chicago's Chinatown is being replaced with a new construction more suitable for the collection and community served in Chinatown.

## **FUNDING**

There is, of course, the underlying support of all the foregoing aspects of library operations: funding. Funding is where the proportionate share of the pie really begins. This involves conscientious planning after needs have been determined. Breaking away from the traditional modes and providing for the special needs of minority groups in the budget process have, in the recent past, been reactive. Libraries were compelled by the force of local demand to respond to groups such as African-Americans and Hispanics. A library should and must in its planning stages be aware of changing communities and become proactive. Is there a new group entering the scene to which the library should be responding, such as the Asian Indian population, before the group requests an audience with the board of directors or trustees?

"Towards an equal slice of the pie" means the implementation of a plan. It should contain the elements of a contingency plan as well as long-range considerations. It should include available and potentially available funding sources. When the budget is tight, the first inclination usually is to postpone doing anything. However, this is problematic. Resources must be tapped, whether public or private. Again, being in touch with the community may reveal certain power brokers previously unknown.

Another source of funds or means for adding services is the use of

creative partnerships. Other agencies or institutions may be willing to pool resources and work with the library in joint sponsorship of an effort that neither alone could provide. In addition to that noted previously, a well-known example is the joint offering of English as a Second Language classes as an effort between the public library and the local adult education providers. Museums housing and exhibiting the art or history of a given minority might also be considered. Searching for these extra public and private dollars takes some ingenuity and time. At the same time, one must be prepared; the funding of services not provided previously or the funding of program ideas that do not ring a familiar bell of "traditional" will require that administrators be equipped with a salable and workable plan. This is especially true if the plan suggests the eventuality of cutting or minimizing some existing traditional service or program.

With regard to the corporate budget, specific allocations based upon the library mission, goals, and financial plan should be made during the budget process. These may be small, for example, the hiring of a bilingual specialist, a beginning "towards an equal slice of the pie."

## CONCLUSION

The ethical issue of information service and access for minority groups is not going away. It has been and will continue to be a part of life in an ever-changing American society. In addition to the emerging and growing ethnic and racial groups are other minorities yet to be considered in a consistent and real way: the physically and mentally disabled, the institutionalized, the burgeoning senior citizen group, and the homeless, to name but a few of the statistically obvious.

It is impossible to provide a single approach to responding to the need for equal opportunity of access by minorities, and it is just as improbable that a Bandaid or other "quick fix" will address the need in a quality way.

The quality of service requested by minority groups is equivalent to that required by the majority, while the lesson of learning about and using the library is one for librarians and administrators. Are not librarians and administrators the minority when it comes to that segment of the population that can be defined as possessing skill and ease of access to library services and information? Thus, that minority is the one that must adapt. The opportunities found within a community must be identified and communicated; otherwise, the uniqueness and richness of our diversified and multicultural communities might not remain a treasure of libraries to keep.

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