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Taylor L. Willingham

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Libraries as Civic Agents

Taylor L. Willingham

ABSTRACT. Libraries connect people with information, are vital to democracy and transform communities. Led and staffed by entrepreneurial thinkers, many libraries have reaffirmed their civic mission and even redefined their role in their community. They are not only relevant to their community; they are central players in engaging the public in civic discourse, weaving organizations and resources together, bridging divisions, and developing the capacity for their communities to solve problems. These libraries are places where people learn about complex public issues and practice deliberative democracy. By listening deeply to the concerns of people in their community library, staff are actively developing strategies to help the community work together. They are creating collaborative relationships between agencies and individuals, even convening stakeholders from opposite camps. They are civic agents creating civic agency.

KEYWORDS. Civic Agents, community engagement, civic entrepreneurship, change management, democracy, deliberative democracy, dialogue, deliberation

Taylor Willingham is a public engagement and change management consultant and the founder of Texas Forums, an initiative of the LBJ Library. She teaches Change Management for the Graduate Library and Information Sciences distance education program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (E-mail: taylor@austin-pacific.com).

This article is the first in a series exploring the role of libraries in communities, the innovative ways that libraries are redefining their role, and the opportunities for greater civic leadership by the library community.

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Historically, Americans have turned to their libraries for information, intellectually stimulating materials, personal enjoyment, literacy support, homework help, social interaction, and civic engagement. Today, however, people have a variety of options that satisfy these needs and interests. As a result, libraries and other public institutions are experiencing changing expectations from the public, decreasing resources at a time of increasing demand, and even questions about their relevance.

Technology, in particular, has made libraries susceptible to questions about institutional relevance. While libraries are beloved institutions and library usage is on the rise, the question, “Why visit the library when the answer is on Google?” is a pervasive and mildly irritating question librarians confront daily. The “networked” generation not only finds information online from experts, but also from strangers: Post a description of your problem, and complete strangers who have experienced and solved the problem will voluntarily respond with the solution! The advent of technology has enabled individuals with Internet access to bypass traditional library services from home, albeit without regard to the quality of the information they receive.¹

The library world has responded heroically to the burgeoning use of technology, making computers readily available to populations that would otherwise be left behind in these digital days. They offer classes on how to use the computer and are developing innovative ways to use technology for educational and entertainment purposes (e.g., gaming in the library, Info Island in Second Life, web portals, blogs, and social networking sites).

But these efforts to keep up with the technology curve, while seductive and extremely worthwhile pursuits, do not fully answer to the question, “What is or *should* be the role of the library?” and even more pointedly, “Are libraries still relevant in a networked age?”

The answers to those questions roll easily off the tongues of library lovers and professionals alike. These passionate advocates evoke images of libraries as the great equalizers—cradle-to-grave sources of learning, freely open to all, that have inspired great achievements. Libraries will remain necessary as long as there are homes without computers, people who do not read, citizens who need voting information, curious children, and people who enjoy the company of others in an intellectually stimulating setting.

These answers are inspiring and relevant, but at a time when people are turning away from the public square—the public is frustrated with politics, problems seem insurmountable, and there is little trust in many of our public institutions—libraries can also be the leaders in revitalizing our democratic practices. Libraries can become indispensable by actively seeking opportunities to use their unique positions of trust and credibility to solve community problems. Not just passive sources of information or partners on short-term projects, libraries can be the lead agency in tackling pervasive social problems.

A number of libraries are establishing their relevance and creating public value by reclaiming and expanding their civic mission: They are pursuing an active role in community building—directly engaging in partnerships with others to solve community problems. They are helping constituents learn about complex public issues and practice deliberative democracy, and are listening deeply to the concerns of members of their community and developing strategies to help them work together on divisive issues. They are civic agents creating civic agency.

Defining this expanded role of libraries as civic agents will require a new way of thinking about how libraries contribute public value, the distinct competencies they can contribute to their community, and how they may be uniquely positioned to respond to a community's social and political needs.² The new role may involve low-tech, high-touch strategies, and require libraries to reach back to their civic roots and look forward to new opportunities to serve their communities. It may also involve using high-tech innovations to help people to connect online in ongoing or ad hoc communities. It will certainly involve an examination of the fundamental role of the library, its relationship to the community, and the emerging opportunities for libraries to be civic agents.

Although the definition of civic agency is still emerging, a working definition was proposed by Harry Boyte, Senior Fellow at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and founder of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship following a meeting of leading thinkers in the civic field.

Civic Agency is the capacity of human communities to act cooperatively and collectively on common problems and

challenges. It involves questions of institutional design (that is, how to constitute groups, institutions, and societies for effective and sustainable collective action) as well as individual civic capacities and skills. Institutional design can also be understood from the vantage of a cultural lens—practices, habits, norms, symbols and ways of life that enhance or diminish civic agency.³

Libraries are ideally suited to be civic agents, but the field must first be willing to think creatively about what community needs the library can fulfill, and to ask and answer tough questions about what value they contribute to their community, such as:

- What is the role of public institutions in public life?
- How can libraries add value in a networked world where the public may have access to information, but may lack public space or the ability to connect with others to use that information meaningfully to solve public problems?
- How can libraries inspire greater civic efficacy in individuals, community-based organizations, and other public institutions?
- How do communities get and use information in order to grow, solve problems, and change?
- What roles can public institutions, particularly libraries, play in building civic capital or civic agency?
- Who is missing from the table? What voices are not being heard in our public space?
- How can libraries be the catalyst for communities to act cooperatively and collectively on common problems and challenges?⁴

BUILDING ON AN HISTORIC BASE

The idea that libraries have a role to play in democracy, community building, and civil discourse is not a new idea. Throughout the 1930s, as fascism and communism grew in strength in Europe, when book burnings became the tools for governments to control what their citizens could and could not read, Americans began to see the public library as a guardian of the people's right to know. Librarians accepted their obligation to provide balanced and

unbiased access to materials so that informed citizens could make decisions for themselves. As the United States stood on the brink of entering World War II, President Roosevelt noted that libraries were directly and immediately involved in the conflict which was dividing our world, because they are essential to the functioning of a democratic society.

The early libraries took their civic mission very seriously. Roosevelt's comments certainly cast librarians in a proactive role. Librarians saw themselves as providing an antidote to the social ills of the day. As the people's university, creating good citizens through education and literacy instruction was a core purpose of the early library.

Former Institute of Museum and Library Services Director Robert Martin has argued, however, that libraries became enthralled with the scientific/information boon of the space race and the field more narrowly defined its mission as providers of information, or storehouses of resources. In some ways, it is this narrow definition that has led to the public's misguided perception that libraries are less relevant, since a computer and an online connection are now preferred providers of information and the World Wide Web is the storehouse of information. The arguments for information literacy and information discernment, and the limitations of Google and Wikipedia are valid and library advocacy is an important strategy to garner public support.

But what if libraries were to take on a new role that would make them indispensable in their communities, as Martin suggested in his remarks to the Twenty Fifth Meeting of the Charleston Conference: "Libraries solve problems for individuals and for communities ... we need to stop being perceived as advocates for libraries, and start working to be perceived as advocates for community solutions."

This was clearly on the mind of then Urban Libraries Council Director Joey Rodger in the November 2002 issue of *American Libraries*, when she urged librarians to become players, not just advocates. Advocates go out into the community solely focused on promoting the library's agenda, always looking for what others can do for the library. Players, on the other hand, listen to the community and when they hear 'economic development, child safety, literacy, or health care' expressed as a community concern, they respond, "Here's how the library can help."

WAITING TO BE ASKED, WANTING TO ENGAGE

We need to pursue truly deep inquiries into what they [library customers] want and need to make their lives better. And then we need to fashion programs and services that meet those needs and desires. For example, it is far less important to ask users what hours they want the library to be open than it is to ask them what their goals and needs are and then think creatively about what we can do to help them achieve their goals or fulfill their needs. Ask them what are the issues in their daily lives that they care most about, and then respond appropriately.⁵

There is no shortage of evidence that the public desires the kind of leadership that will step forward and engage them in working on public problems. People are desperately seeking a sense of community, a voice in decisions that affect their lives, and solutions to our most pervasive public problems. But they have repeatedly been left out of such decisions and, as a result, may feel alienated and have retreated from the public sphere. Public leaders have failed to find meaningful ways to turn people's passion into action. People know that the stories reported in the media and the way that politicians cast issues have little bearing on their every day lives.

In 2006, the National Issues Forums (NIF) held deliberative forums addressing the theme *Democracy's Challenge: Reclaiming the Public's Role*. These forums documented a public desire for less partisanship and more opportunities for authentic public engagement. In their analysis of the NIF *Democracy's Challenge* forums held in libraries, City Halls, living rooms, places of worship, universities, prisons, and civic centers across the country, Doble Research Associates found that participants lament the decline in community engagement, but feel powerless to make changes. Those who participated expressed feeling alienated from politics and community affairs. They knew that something is off track in our democracy, but were unable to identify what steps might be taken to deal with our public problems. Too often citizens are cast as consumers or spectators rather than citizen-proprietors. Forum participants talked about a loss of public space where citizens meet informally and talk about whatever is on their mind, including community problems and political issues.⁶

This loss of public space (both literal and metaphorical) has led people to retreat from public life, a condition well documented by Richard C. Harwood in his book, *Hope Unraveled: The People's Retreat and Our Way Back*. Harwood spent twenty years crisscrossing the country and engaging people in in-depth conversations about their thoughts, aspirations, and feelings. Harwood found that: (a) Politics and public life have failed to address people's changing reality, leaving them with the feeling that they are on their own, without the confidence that their concerns will be addressed; and (b) people are unable to see themselves or their concerns truly reflected in the public square.⁷

This eroding sense of political efficacy and connection to public life can have serious consequences for our nation and our communities. As Harwood notes, it is in our public life that we shape our destiny; we identify our common concerns and wrestle with shared ideals, and forge relationships in the spirit of the public good, even while maintaining our individual identities. As Dr. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation writes in the foreword to *Hope Unraveled*, "Americans who felt pushed out of politics have become even more dispirited because of what they believe is a serious erosion of our sense of community and responsibility for one another."⁸

Participants in the *Democracy's Challenge* forums also recognized that it is important for people to engage with each other and articulated three reasons why: 1) As people get to know each other, they establish relationships that build public confidence to tackle future problems; 2) Civic work by groups like the Lions, Rotary, or religious organizations helps solve community problems; and 3) involvement teaches people how to work with others, thereby strengthening what people in Chicago called "civic muscle," which enhances a community's ability to create the political will to deal with its future problems.⁹

Perhaps the decline in civic participation is simply that people are—in the phrase used by the Public Agenda report on the relationship between the public schools and the public—"just waiting to be asked."¹⁰ In the post 9/11 forums on Terrorism, participants were willing to make sacrifices, if necessary, and were frustrated that they were never called on to do anything. In fact, the degree to which people were willing to make sacrifices was startling. The May 2003

report by Doble Research Associates on the NIF forums on Terrorism noted,

Forum participants said the American people had been ready to make sacrifices in the national interest after 9/11. Americans were, they said, more than ready to do their part but were never called on. A moderator from Austin, Texas added, "People here said we're not being asked to do anything." A moderator from Hempstead, New York, said, "In our forum, people said they had been willing to make sacrifices after September 11 but did not know what to do."¹¹

What if libraries stepped up and called upon the public to engage with each other to solve problems? What if the libraries were to fill the leadership role that so many people feel is missing in our public life. Libraries are well suited for this leadership role as one of the most trusted public institutions. At a time when people are longing for leaders that tap into their hopes and dreams, perhaps libraries can take on that role. The public is desperate for leadership that will challenge them to "put a man on the moon in the next decade." What if libraries were not just advocates or players, but leaders boldly inspiring people with the possibility that we can tackle issues of community importance? What if the library community were to issue such a bold challenge—and what would that challenge be?

COMMUNITIES OF RELATIONSHIPS

In her book, *Smart Communities: How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future*, Suzanne W. Morse notes that communities evolve around three nexuses; the community of relationships, the community of interests, and the community of place.¹² Libraries are well known as the community of place. In small towns such as my hometown, Salado, Texas, libraries are the afternoon gathering place, just as the local coffee shop is the morning place to congregate. Most libraries have community rooms available for free or a minimal cost and newly constructed libraries often have conversation pits around fireplaces or separate areas for young people to gather in their own space. In constructing the space

for its teenage library users, the Minneapolis Public Library even engaged them in the design process.¹³

Libraries are also known for their ability to build communities of interests, hosting haiku writing workshops, leading book discussions, teaching computer courses, displaying work by local artists, and other programming that serves issue-oriented groups. As the community of place and the community of interests, libraries indirectly contribute to the community of relationships, but imagine how different our communities would be if institutions like libraries became intentional about their role in creating relationships for the purpose of building civic agency.

Imagine communities of relationships between disparate groups formed for the purpose of solving community problems brought together by the library. These communities of relationship would not stifle debate and differences; rather they would be spaces where people could develop their civic efficacy and find connective threads that are the tapestry of their community. Communities of relationship help people see how they as individuals, members of a community or profession, or actors within the system, can participate in the difficult job of community problem-solving. This is a deep, abiding desire among library constituents.

The most recent presidential election in which the public was bombarded with two-colored maps deceptively used to “prove” that our nation is starkly divided, illustrates the need for public institutions and public space where communities can create their own authentic story. Based on forty-two years of traveling around America, Bill Bradley has it right when he argues in his book, *The New American Story*,

One of the biggest lies perpetrated on the public in recent decades is the red/blue division of our country—the idea that we are hopelessly split by warring ideologies, unforgiving in our criticism of each other, unwilling even to listen to the other side of the argument.”¹⁴

Harwood’s twenty years on the road and my own seventeen years of traveling around the country to help communities engage in deliberative forums confirm Bradley’s assertion, but there is even more to this story. Not only is the story of a divided nation wrong, it

fails to recognize that many of us struggle to sort out our own internal contradictions. We are repeatedly told the story that if you claim to be A, then you must believe B. We wear labels that are insufficient to tell the world who we are. Or perhaps I should say, that we *bear* these labels, that ignore how complex we are and imply ideologies that we may not espouse. We may claim affiliation with a group, but hold positions that are inconsistent with how someone else defines the ideology of our chosen label.

This certainly was the case for a recent airline seatmate of mine. He stridently claimed to be a die-hard Republican with a client list that included prominent Democrat politicians in Boston. When pressed for insight into what his political conversations with his clients sounded like, he confessed that he agreed with many of their ideas, and then proceeded to list off his various titles or labels (religion, ethnicity, occupation, etc.) followed by a personal belief or opinion completely inconsistent with the assumption one might have about those labels. After several minutes, he stopped, shook his head and said exasperatedly, "I'm just a complete mess. I don't know what I believe. I'd be useless participating in those deliberative forums you do." On the contrary! He is a perfect candidate to deliberate with others who bear the same or different labels, but are open to dialogue and willing to examine conflicting beliefs both internally and across the room for the purpose of finding common ground.

Through such a process, the authentic story emerges and new relationships form, creating the possibility that people can work together despite differences. Libraries can be the place where communities gather to find and tell their story, where people form relationships and come to care for each other. In doing so, libraries can build community by creating relationships that help people see how their interests are intertwined and why they should care about a child across town without health care or a youth at risk of dropping out, or a single mother whose food stamps do not last through the month. It also helps people stop demonizing the other, often the first step toward talking and listening and acting together. In seventeen years of hundreds of deliberative forums on dozens of issues around the country, I have yet to experience a forum where the participants were not grateful for the opportunity to engage with each other and did not walk away with a new understanding of the problem and greater appreciation for positions different from their own.

CURRENT EFFORTS IN THE FIELD

The return to the library's civic mission was invigorated when American Library Association (ALA) President Sarah Ann Long selected "Libraries Build Community" for her 1999-2000 theme. ALA President Nancy Kranich's theme (2000-2001) shone the light on libraries as cornerstones of democracy and promoters of informed, civic discourse. 2006-07 ALA President Leslie Burger expanded on the themes of her predecessors with her presidential platform, "Libraries Transform Communities."

In 2004 Nancy Kranich and this author co-founded a Membership Initiative Group (MIG), Libraries Foster Community Engagement within the American Library Association. Over one-hundred librarians at the ALA Annual Conference signed a petition supporting this MIG dedicated to exploring the role of libraries in fostering civic engagement. The purposes of the MIG are:

- To provide an ALA "organizational home" for members interested in facilitating public forums, fostering civic engagement, and framing issues for deliberation in their communities;
- To provide a mechanism for sharing experiences in convening and/or moderating forums;
- To provide a base for conference programming, formal contacts, e-lists, and the like.;
- To encourage participation in deliberative forum training efforts and local partnerships to help communities understand issues of concern and solve problems together.¹⁵

The MIG includes librarians from all types of libraries who are eager to learn about and share their experiences with facilitating deliberative public forums and fostering civic engagement in their communities. They have developed innovative civic engagement models to carry out their civic mission. In these models, libraries have formed centers for community networking; supported and led citizen research on issues like education; developed frameworks for public discourse; organized community groups to explore issues such as "how to promote youth activities"; partnered with public television stations to hold forums on Global Health, Americans' Role in the World, Security, and Economics. They are reaching deep into the community to encourage civic

participation by those often missing from public discourse, and they are increasingly using technology to bind the community together and to disseminate civic education materials.

GOING FORWARD

The MIG has provided a means for librarians engaged in innovative civic activities to join together and share knowledge. Those who thought they were lone voices in the field are finding others engaged in innovative civic activities. However, there is not yet a common language for talking about this emerging role for the library as a player in the community. For example, this article has referred to “civic agency” and to librarians as “civic agents.” Other terms that might describe these emerging roles are “social or civic entrepreneurs,” or “public innovators.” These ideas are so new in the library community that not even the most entrepreneurial and innovative librarians in the U.S. and abroad understand their civic and social work in this context.

Conduct a search of the terms “civic-“ or “social entrepreneurship” along with the term “libraries,” and you find that they are most often used as adjectives to describe a collection of materials, not as verbs to describe something that libraries do. The task ahead is to develop leaders who will be the civic entrepreneurs at the helm of these public institutions. The skills and knowledge required of such leaders are not typically part of the library school curriculum. These new institutional roles require leaders who are ambitious, resourceful, innovative, creative, relationship-oriented, results-oriented, systems thinkers who are willing to take risks.

Library and Information Science lacks the language or model of its new emerging role and in many cases, rejects proactive, community building as “out of hand” for a neutral, publicly funded institution. These were two concerns that arose when twenty five librarians met at the American Library Association’s mid-winter conference in January 2006 to discuss these and other concerns. Two questions at the heart of this struggle are: 1) Is there an operational definition of Civic Engagement? and 2) What is the library’s unique contribution?

Some librarians view an entrepreneurial role as being in conflict with the philosophy of the library as a safe, neutral space. While this is often a legitimate concern, libraries miss opportunities to make

significant contributions when it becomes the automatic response. Being a civic innovator does not mean being an advocate for a position. It *does* mean being an advocate for the community and for processes that will engage the community in effective problem-solving activities. But we have not had this conversation within the field and, as noted earlier, do not have the language to articulate what it means for a librarian to be a civic agent or entrepreneur. As one member at the January 2006 meeting noted, “The albatross we have around our neck is neutrality. We need to play with these words and confront neutrality.” Also at that meeting, participants speculated that some librarians might resist community engagement activities out of fear about what might happen.

To better understand the field of civic agency (civic innovation? civic entrepreneurship?), I have from the University of Illinois Academy for Entrepreneurial Leadership, and recently led graduate level seminar on Civic Entrepreneurship in Public Institutions for the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Sciences distance education program LEEP and students from the UIUC WISE (Web-based Information Science Education) partners. These students examined the role of libraries in building civic capital, developed case studies of libraries engaged in innovative civic activities, and identified the characteristics and skills of entrepreneurs in the public sector. They were also charged to pursue an entrepreneurial endeavor that would address a community problem in a creative way and build civic capacity, and to present their projects using two forms of media. Findings from the research conducted in preparation for and during this course as well as lessons learned from the student projects and stimulating discussions with guest speakers will be published in future installments of this publication. Readers who are interested in pursuing inquiry into this field are encouraged to contact this author.

In announcing her “Emerging Leaders” initiative, 2006-07 ALA President Leslie Burger noted, “The challenges faced in libraries today are changing at a rapid pace and require an agile workforce of problem-solvers, team players, leaders and articulate spokespeople.” Public and community-based leaders must think entrepreneurially. A growing number of librarians are responding to the civic needs in their communities and taking a leadership position. Their journey must be documented, positioned within the existing scholarship of librarianship and civic entrepreneurship and passed on to future leaders.

NOTES

1. For an amusing discussion about the limits of online searching, check out the the blog *Library Dust*, where Michael McGrorty's post Why Librarians? describes seven different answers to the simple question, "How do you pronounce Feijoa?" returned by his search engine of choice. (http://librarydust.typepad.com/library_dust/2007/10/why-librarians.html).

2. Distinctive competence is defined as the activity that is core to an organization that it does better than any other organization. For a discussion of distinctive competence, see: Moore, Mark H., *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1995.

3. Personal correspondence from Harry Boyte, October 11, 2007.

4. These are core questions being researched by the author for a fellowship on *Civic Entrepreneurship and Public Institutions* from the Academy for Entrepreneurial Leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign in preparation for a course to be offered spring 2008. For the full proposal, see: <http://www.texasforums.org/documents/AELFellowship.doc>

5. From a speech, *Beyond Advocacy: Building Community Partnerships in the New Century* given by Robert Martin during his term as Director of the Institute of Museum and Library Services to the White House Conference on Libraries and Information Services Taskforce Pre-conference in Houston, TX, April 1, 2003. Used with permission from the author.

6. Doble Research Associates. *Public Thinking About Democracy's Challenge: Reclaiming the Public's Role An Analysis of Results from the 2005-2006 National Issues Forums*. Dayton, OH: A Kettering Foundation Report, 2006.

7. Harwood, Richard C. *Hope Unraveled: The People's Retreat and Our Way Back*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2005.

8. *Ibid.*, 3.

9. Doble, 7.

10. *Public Agenda. Just Waiting to Be Asked? A Fresh Look at Attitudes on Public Engagement*. New York, NY: Public Agenda, 2000.

11. Doble Research Associates. *Terrorism: What Should We Do Now? A Report for the National Issues Forums*. Dayton, OH: A Kettering Foundation Report, 2003.

12. Morse, Suzanne. *Smart Communities*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

13. Interview and tour with Melinda Ludwiczak, September 10, 2007.

14. Bradley, Bill. *The New American Story*. New York: Random House, 2007.

15. Membership Initiative Group Petition submitted to American Library Association Governance Council, 2004.

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