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Information Technology and Marginalized Communities

There has been a long overdue push in recent years in areas of academia, culture, and society at large to reframe the historically white, Euro-centric narratives that have dominated discourse. To this end, libraries must adapt to meet the needs of patrons from traditionally marginalized and underrepresented communities. This includes patrons of differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds, patrons for whom English is not their primary language, patrons of the LGBTQ+ community, and patrons on the other side of the digital divide. It is important not only to consider the perspectives contained in the materials in our repositories, but also to realize that due to systemic injustices, individuals from these backgrounds are more likely to face additional hardships in other areas of life, and may seek the library as a refuge. Thus, we must also find avenues to interact with these communities and reach out in ways previously unconsidered.

I wanted to research and write about this topic because I am a proponent of equity and equality, and I wanted to better understand what issues plague communities different from my own, and how I can help mitigate them. Efforts to recognize and treat inequality should not fall solely on those from underrepresented communities themselves, who already deal with additional hardships on a daily basis. I will begin my paper by surveying the challenges different groups face, along with the ways in which libraries struggle to meet the needs of diverse communities. I will follow this with a summary of approaches that some institutions have taken to mitigate these issues, pointing out their strengths and weaknesses. Lastly, I will offer my own thoughts and conclusions that I have reached after synthesizing the research I have reviewed.

Challenges

The United States has historically fancied itself as a melting pot of different cultures and backgrounds, but to believe this is to ignore systemic exclusion. This is certainly true of those for whom English is not their primary language, even when compared to other Anglo-dominant countries, such as Canada and Australia. Canada, for instance, promotes the learning of the minority French language, and sees being bilingual as a boon for employability (Reznowski, 2005). The United States, however, rather than supporting such an immersive approach, tends towards linguistic "submersion," promoting assimilation to the level of erasure of mother tongues. As a result of this attitude of the linguistic dominance of English, "many students may experience language loss, shame, negative feelings, and beyond these, may be cheated of the opportunity to become fully bilingual and to use bilingualism to their advantage in future employment" (Reznowski, p. 156).

The LGBT+ community can face challenges in finding library resources as well. Even though the vast majority of English literature predominantly reinforces traditional views on gender and sexuality, there is still recoil, particularly from Christian and conservative organizations, toward the inclusion of queer literature in library and academic settings. Literature from this community is frequently the target of book removals and bans. Michael Willhoite's children's book *Daddy's Roommate*, for instance, with the second-most challenged book in the United States from 1990-1999, according to the American Library Association. It can be a struggle for libraries to service this community, in the face of vehement (and sometimes even litigious) pushback.

There are additional hardships in providing library and technology access when it comes to the digital divide. Real (2014) lays out the following sobering points: Rural libraries tend to

have fewer staff, fewer ALA accredited librarians, less funding, and fewer hours of availability than libraries in urban areas. They also tend to be the only providers of free Internet and computer access in rural areas. Their technology is less up-to-date than non-rural libraries. While these problems affect all users of libraries, it is easy to see how understaffing, lack of sufficient training, and lack of adequate resources compound the problems already faced by underrepresented communities.

The digital divide, however, is not limited merely to rural areas. Even urban areas like St. Louis see unequal distribution of facilities and resources as they relate to socioeconomic status (Thorne-Wallington, 2013). This is to say, libraries in St. Louis City and County tend to be located in areas that tend towards the white and affluent, and not in predominantly black- or Hispanic-identifying areas or areas with lower household income. Sneed (2014) points to a statistic that of the millions of Americans who lack access to a broadband Internet connection, "the highest numbers have incomes under $50,000, are over the age of forty-five, and are black or Hispanic" (Sneed, 2014, p. 469). These individuals, like their rural counterparts, are likely to use the library simply because they do not have free, reliable internet access at home. Thus, even in a metropolitan area like St. Louis, the digital divide hurts those from predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhoods, who do not have Internet at home, and yet are not located near libraries, which are situated in neighborhoods of a higher socioeconomic status.

Of course, there is an overarching challenge that subsumes all of the above issues. The challenge is that we, as librarians, need to know and understand our communities. McCleer, citing LaFlamme, makes the apt acknowledgement in reference to communities different from our own: "'They' almost certainly do not want just the same things that 'we' do, and libraries that miss this point are destined to be, at best, out of touch, and at worst, complicit in the

invisibility of anything or anyone outside the dominant culture" (McCleer, 2013, p. 264). We must confront our own biases and open our minds to characteristics that may affect the needs of others. This may also mean we need a better understanding of different types of resources and technologies and how to use them. Even if we know of a resource of potential import to others, but we have no working knowledge of how to use it ourselves, we are not adequately helping the patron resolve their query.

Approaches and Standards

Fortunately for librarians, attempting to mitigate these issues does not involve reinventing the wheel. The field of ethnographic research has laid an important foundation for understanding the experiences and needs of communities different from one's own. In short, ethnography involves observing and interacting with people and communities respectfully and ethically, without being intrusive or offensive, and documenting the resulting insights and discoveries. Goodman (2011), citing LeCompte and Schensul (1999), lists the following elements for consideration during research: "beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, emotions, verbal and non-verbal means of communication, social networks, behaviors of the group of individuals with friends, family, associates, fellow workers, and colleagues, use of tools, technology and manufacture of materials and artifacts, and patterned use of space and time" (Goodman, 2011, p. 1). There are even models libraries can borrow, such as the Community Analysis Research Institute (CARI) model, which presents a framework for collecting, organizing, and analyzing data about users, communities, and institutions (Greer & Hale, 1982). Ethnography can be a collaborative process, asking for input from others rather than attempting to speak for them. It can involve qualitative measurements (recording conversations, listening attentively) and quantitative measurements

(from surveys, questionnaires, etc.). Goodman cites a University of Rochester study, where the ethnographic surveying of students led to a redesign of the library's website to better meet patrons' needs. She is quick to point out however, that it is hard to translate real life experience into a scientific report. Because of this, findings from an ethnographic study (and qualitative results in particular) can be hard to translate into concrete demands and goals. Additionally, McCleer (2013) reminds us that we should not attempt to research and analyze every single characteristic of any community we study; the inclusion of a high number of variables can make a study unwieldy, and muddy the utility of the results.

To meet the information needs of those whose native tongue is something other than English, a few approaches have been taken, elaborated upon by Reznowski (2009). There exists a small but promising number of bilingual schools in the country, mostly English/Spanish, which provide instruction in both languages. However, usage in the classroom alone is not enough to elevate the status of the mother tongue. Students also need situations in which the language can be used meaningfully, and this is where libraries can play a crucial role. Outreach to families and community organizations can be of great utility, and such community involvement can be used to set up and run story time events in other languages. Libraries can also include more heritage language media, which does not have to be simply standard literature. Music, DVDs, and comic books are all popular forms of media that can engage patrons in a way that typical school material does not. To this end, librarians can also consult ALA guidelines, prepared by RUSA, for the development and promotion of multilingual collections and services, for further guidance. There are also projects like the Electronic Metastructure for Endangered Languages Data (E-MELD) and the Open Language Archives Community (OLAC) that seek to collect data and codify metadata and access procedures for materials in a vast array of languages.

Soliciting materials and building special collections can also be an important and empowering way to represent marginalized communities. UMKC is home to GLAMA, the Gay and Lesbian Archive of Mid-America. This archive-within-an-archive houses photographs, newsletters, magazines, books, ephemera, and almost any form of media imaginable to tell stories from the queer communities in the Midwest from the pre-Stonewall era to the present. GLAMA is celebrating its ten year anniversary this year, and its continued endurance and reception (an exhibit on Kansas City's role in the rise of the Gay Rights Movement, compiled using materials from the collection, toured local and state institutions in 2017-2018) highlight the utility of such collections. UMKC's special collections on prominent jazz artists highlight contributions from the area's African American community, and materials from the collection were solicited for Ken Burns' 2001 documentary, *Jazz*. Thus, curating and exhibiting special collections can elevate the status of the marginalized, and promote feelings of pride and empowerment.

When it comes to the digital divide, both rural and urban, market area assessments can provide quantitative insight into libraries and their communities, as well as find who may not be benefitting from library locations and services. Orange Boy, Inc. (2012), for example, made an assessment of population clusters in the Mid-Continent Public Library area (Clay, Platte, and Jackson counties, Missouri). They wanted to identify library behaviors of users and non-users alike. This is important, as some people from marginalized communities may not often visit libraries simply because they assume (or had a previous negative experience that showed) that libraries may not be able to fulfill their information needs. This project also had the aims of defining desired outcomes for the library; developing a way to reach these outcomes; and measuring these outcomes to evaluate progress (Orange Boy, Inc., p. 14). This quantitative

approach, while requiring a certain amount of funding and time, could at least help libraries evaluate where certain gaps are, and provide concrete data in an effort to procure funding and other resources.

One should also follow what librarians around the world are doing to reduce the digital divide in developing nations. Schweik (2018) points to the use of flash drive systems called Keepods for students in Malawi who do not have reliable Internet access on their own. They can use these USB sticks at a computer lab to access a server and save content for use on an offline device. Schweik also mentions a problem-solving workflow involving a requester, searcher, and courier, to overcome potential language barriers. For example, a requester may have an information need, but not have the search skills or resources to find it. They may then tweet their need to a courier (such as a partnered library). A searcher from the courier institution will interpret the information need, find relevant material, and report back to the courier, who will tweet a reply to the requester. This method of interpreting and relaying information could work on a local level in libraries with multilingual staff. Such a feature could easily be incorporated with the "Ask a Librarian" function found on a growing number of library websites.

In any case, however, librarians need better to familiarize themselves with a variety of resources covering a broad spectrum of needs. One can attempt to find workshops and webinars, which a number of organizations offer, and which are enumerated on any number of library mailing lists and forums. Those in rural libraries with more limited resources should attempt to reach out to similar institutions and share ideas and approaches, as well as reach out to better-funded institutions. Perhaps these institutions can be advocates for their cause, or offer some other form of guidance or assistance.

Personal Reflections

Libraries today struggle in general to keep up with changing technology and needs of patrons, particularly in an age of stagnating budgets, staffing cuts, and inflation of resource costs. Still, we must do what we can to provide fair and equitable service to our communities, and this includes those who have traditionally been marginalized and underrepresented. Unfortunately, these communities face added struggles, including: erasure of non-English language in schools; lack of relevant and interesting materials in library collections, in particular regarding different ethnicities and sexual orientations; and the digital divide, not only between rural and urban areas, but nested within urban areas as well.

Librarians can perform ethnographic research in a responsible and ethical manner, making sure to listen to and value input from those who come from different backgrounds. Institutions can perform community outreach and host story time events to engage varying groups and peoples. They can solicit and develop special collections, highlighting and elevating contributions from underrepresented communities. They can perform quantitative assessments of library districts, taking into account users and non-users, to diagnose issues and compile data that can be used as leverage for funding proposals. All of these suggestions merit additional investigation, particularly insofar as implementation is concerned. It is much easier to say that libraries should consider performing a market area assessment than it is to say precisely how that is done: What data will be collected? How will it be collected? How will the institution fund this? How does one interpret the results? These are only a handful of the near endless questions that could arise in undertaking such a task. The same practical concerns crop up when considering ethnographic research, developing and exhibiting special collections, and starting community outreach initiatives. Each individual effort merits its own extensive investigation.

Performing this research was fruitful and enlightening. While it can be obvious to realize that different communities have differing informational and institutional needs, it is not immediately clear what specific barriers and challenges exist, and how these challenges affect people (and the institutions that serve them) in various ways. And if one does not critically examine the nature and plasticity of these issues, one cannot be adequately prepared to proffer advice or recommend solutions. Of course, all of the above solutions and suggestions require valuable time and resources, which are increasingly hard to come by. Still, if we can make even the smallest steps to provide fair, equitable, and meaningful access to our materials for traditionally underrepresented, marginalized communities, we are obligated to do so. As providers of information services, we have the power at the very least to make a small, positive impact on people's lives, and we owe it to use this power to the best of our ability.

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