

Public libraries as platforms for civic engagement

May 2018

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ABSTRACT

What role should the world's public libraries have in civic engagement? In recent years, traditional media have weakened, the civic space has become increasingly divisive, and society has become ever more divided socially, economically and politically, yet public libraries have stood strong. They have long fulfilled a vital need for communal spaces where people can engage and exchange ideas and served as a "civic commons" where people can work together toward what they perceive as the public good. With democracy in crisis in many parts of the world, public libraries and librarians are asking how they can re-envision and nourish the role of libraries in promoting civic engagement. To this end, the University of Washington Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) and the University of Southern California's Annenberg Innovation Lab invited a select group of thought leaders for a conversation aimed at sparking new ideas and solutions for global action. This gathering brought together a cross-section of leading thinkers from public libraries, civic media, collective action, peace building, the arts, media and data literacies, civic technology, gaming, and other fields, to explore ideas and practices to advance civic engagement. This report documents the discussions of this event.

140-CHARACTER SUMMARY

With democracy in crisis in many parts of the world, what role should the world's public libraries have in civic engagement?

KEYWORDS

civic engagement, public libraries, civic media, civic commons

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1 Introduction

What role should the world's public libraries have in civic engagement? In recent years, traditional media have weakened, the civic space has become increasingly divisive, and society has become ever more divided socially, economically and politically, yet public libraries have stood strong. They have long fulfilled a vital need for communal spaces where people can engage and exchange ideas, and served as a "civic commons" where people can work together toward what they perceive as the public good. (Kranich, 2012, 94). With democracy in crisis in many parts of the world, public libraries and librarians are asking how they can re-envision and nourish the role of libraries in promoting civic engagement – and whether they should provide not only space and encouragement, but instruction and advocacy.

Broadening the scope of public libraries' civic engagement raises a host of issues and questions. Among them: In which aspects of civic engagement can libraries play a positive role? How does increased civic engagement change the public's perception of libraries? What level of advocacy can – and should – libraries and librarians have? And how do public libraries tailor their civic engagement efforts to ensure they are meeting the needs of their communities?

Amid heightened urgency worldwide to build and strengthen platforms for civic engagement, the University of Washington Technology & Social Change Group (TASCHA) and the University of Southern California's Annenberg Innovation Lab invited a select group of thought leaders for a conversation aimed at sparking new ideas and solutions for global action. Held May 9-11, 2017, at the University of Washington in Seattle, this gathering brought together a cross-section of leading thinkers from public libraries, civic media, collective action, peace building, the arts, media and data literacies, civic technology, gaming, and other fields. This opportunity was made possible by a grant to TASCHA from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, aimed at strengthening the global library field.

The gathering began with an exploration of ideas and practices to advance civic engagement. The discussions that followed focused broadly on two areas: 1) the **civic infrastructure** of public libraries – the conditions that exist that encourage or discourage public libraries regarding their role in civic engagement; and 2) **civic practices** – the actions public libraries can take to promote civic engagement, and the consequences those actions might have for libraries, librarians and librarianship education.

This report aims to document the tone of these discussions. For the most part, it reflects the general consensus of the group as reflected in notes from roundtable discussions and breakout sessions. Where noted, it reflects additional research or the thoughts of an individual participant, expressed either during the event or in a written "thought piece" he or she provided in advance.

1.1 Why civic engagement?

While there are many definitions of civic engagement, for the purposes of this report, "civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of

life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.” (Ehrlich, 2000). An engaged and informed citizenry is central to a healthy democracy, in which civic engagement makes people feel welcome and involved. People take part in civic engagement when they vote, attend community meetings, call their local and national representatives, sign petitions, volunteer in schools, clean their neighborhood parks, or take any number of actions that address a larger public concern.

However, in the United States and in other democracies around the world, civic engagement is in crisis. Nancy Kranich, a former American Library Association president and a leading voice on the topic of civic engagement, wrote, “Americans are more disconnected from each other and from the institutions of civic life than ever before.” (Kranich, 2012, 75). Many observers argue that the advent of the internet and social media has made people more insular, more likely to act as bystanders in the democratic process than as participants, and less likely to interact with people whose views don’t comport with their own. As the rise of authoritarianism around the world illustrates, a disengaged and alienated citizenry poses a danger to democracy itself, creating conditions that call for intervention by our civic institutions.

1.2 Why libraries?

Among the world’s 360,000 public libraries (Library Map of the World, IFLA, 2018), many are well-positioned to play a more active role in civic engagement, owing to their role as trusted civic institutions. As Kranich wrote:

“Libraries have long recognized their role in promoting access to a diversity of ideas, serving as depositories for government, community, and other useful information. But many are also expanding that civic role by facilitating the exchange and sharing of those ideas. Why? Because libraries uphold and strengthen some of the most fundamental democratic ideals of our society; they not only make information freely available to all, but also foster the development of a civil society. They also provide comfortable, inviting, neutral, safe civic spaces conducive to democratic discourse – spaces where citizens can work together to solve public problems.” (Kranich, 2012, 75).

In many ways, libraries serve as a modern-day “town square” – in some communities, offering the only freely accessible public space for community events. Their role in civic engagement can manifest itself in many ways, as passive as simply providing space, and as active as outwardly seeking participation among members of their communities. Many libraries have already taken an active role in the civic arena, such as programs that tackle challenging social issues or encourage youths to get involved in their communities. When they don’t take on a leading role themselves, public libraries can be willing partners in efforts to improve the quality of life in their communities.

1.3 Why this event?

TASCHA, along with International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and the United States Public Library Association (PLA), has received major, long-term support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to accelerate the transformation of public libraries as critical centers of

learning, creativity, and community development. TASCHA's role is to drive research and innovation, engaging thought leaders from within and outside the library sector to incubate new ideas and solutions in partnership with other researchers and organizations at the forefront of fostering societal change.

The gathering brought together leading thinkers from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences with civic engagement. Participants had the opportunity to learn from people outside their normal sphere and consider how their ideas and practices might be activated in the public library sector. As one would expect, the discussions were wide-ranging. The concept of increased civic engagement raises a bevy of issues, including the professional demands on librarians, the value of neutrality vs. activism, and whether a more active form of civic engagement falls within libraries' mission at all. For public libraries that seek to increase their efforts around civic engagement, the discussions pointed to several courses of action that could support such efforts.

2 Civic infrastructure: the civic engagement ecosystem of libraries

2.1 Libraries' role in their communities

It's important to note the distinction between community engagement and civic engagement, as we've defined it. Community engagement is broader and includes any outreach activity that involves the public, whereas civic engagement is a subset of community engagement that involves efforts to improve the quality of life. While community engagement may come naturally to librarians, some types of civic engagement may not.

In recent years, libraries have moved from an internal focus (i.e., "We know what we do best and we provide it") to a focus on community engagement, where librarians leave the building and conduct outreach (i.e., "What does the community care about and how can we give it to them?"). By going into the community, librarians see what needs there are and become more responsive to the people they serve.

Thus, when we look beyond their traditional roles, libraries' functions vary greatly from community to community, culture to culture. In Chicago, IL, USA they are a key hub for "On the Table," an annual event at which people gather in their neighborhoods to share their challenges and ideas for solutions. In Colombia, mobile libraries have conducted outreach in areas where former combatants settled after a long civil war, an attempt to help reintegrate the past combatants into society with what often represents their first interaction with government services. In Seattle, the city library conducted programs for marginalized immigrant and undocumented populations. Online, the Internet Archive works with fact-checkers to verify statements from public officials.

In Multnomah County, Oregon, a community-wide reading program in 2017 focused on issues around eviction, homelessness and affordable housing. Library Director Vailey Oehlke wrote that it included "a set of compelling discussions, poverty simulations, an author lecture and other explorations of the issues with high school classes and community members." That same year, the library partnered with the Muslim Educational Trust and Portland State University's Middle East Studies Center for community discussions on the Muslim experience in Multnomah County, part of an annual series of programs and booklists on different cultural perspectives that began in 2013.

In Barcelona, a university library defines itself as a space for technology innovation and citizen participation. Gabriel Rissola, a senior scientist with the European Commission Joint Research Center, wrote that the UAB Library Living Lab is located in Volpelleres, a new neighborhood in the Barcelona metropolitan area that suffers from a lack of public services as a consequence of the economic crisis. Rissola wrote, "This joint initiative of the neighbor's association, the local municipality (Sant Cugat) and the Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona has revitalized the life of the neighborhood, getting a strong commitment of neighbors as co-creators and facilitators."

2.2 Social, structural, and human capital

Libraries have several built-in assets for civic engagement. They are well-known and well-liked community institutions, with space they can make available and librarians trained to help people become better-informed. Civic action can be as simple as providing a public space where people can gather to discuss issues. The conversations can be woven into a civic fabric that already exists, and the public library is a natural extension of this.

Brian Bannon, Chicago Public Library commissioner, illustrated this in his discussion of *On the Table*, a project that aims to spark a broader dialogue by bringing people together for a single night in small groups across Chicago. For the past three years, 80 libraries – along with hundreds of workplaces, restaurants, homes and other locations – have hosted these annual events at which people share a meal and talk about the challenges and opportunities in their neighborhoods. While the *On the Table* events take place in many public places, the library may be the only suitable place in some neighborhoods. The events attracted an estimated 11,500 people in 2014, 25,000 in 2015, and 55,000 in 2016. (*On the Table Report*, 2017). The 2017 event was centered around the theme of race and equity.

The Chicago Community Trust partnered with the University of Illinois at Chicago's Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement (IPCE) to assess the impact of *On the Table*. The IPCE gathered data based on surveys of the participants and published their findings, which included demographic data on participants, some of the most common themes they discussed, and how many people made new connections or planned to take action based on their conversations. Open questions include how to better target social justice issues, and whether public libraries should reach out directly to invite people to participate.

Another example of the importance of a library's physical presence comes from Colombia. Diego Merizalde, program coordinator at Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia, shared how public libraries provide a space for people to share cultural values, which is key in a nation that has suffered through 50 years of internal conflict. Merizalde said a physical space for interaction is important to promote participation. He noted that we can't share from our hearts in a tweet as well as we can in person.

Colombia developed a nationwide strategy to strengthen library services that invite people to work collectively and connect with each other. Through a joint project with Libraries Without Borders, Mobile Public Libraries were sent to 20 jurisdictions where there were large numbers of former FARC guerrillas. This, Merizalde said, "has been the first intervention the Colombian government deployed in these zones and has made a very strong case for the relevance of culture and public libraries in the peace building process." For many of former combatants, their first interaction with the government was a positive one with the library.

Similar to their physical counterparts, digital libraries provide infrastructure to support civic engagement. Wendy Hanamura, director of partnerships at the Internet Archive, discussed how her organization collects information and tries to provide context for people in support of its mission of providing universal access to knowledge. Internet Archive collects television (series / programs / episodes) and makes it searchable and quotable; works with fact-checkers such as Politifact and Factcheck.org to verify public statements of US politicians; and crawls and stores US government data.

Hanamura said the Internet Archive wants to work with librarians as curators because its information is not useful without guides to help people discover it. The Internet Archive has servers and technical infrastructure, but not space. That makes public libraries potential partners and collaborators for civic engagement.

The American Library Association has also taken steps in the digital space to broaden the role of libraries in civic life through a partnership with the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation. Mary Davis Fournier, director of ALA's Public Programs Office, discussed the "Libraries Transforming Communities" initiative, which seeks to introduce libraries to various dialogue and deliberation approaches, enabling libraries to foster conversation and lead change in their communities. ("Libraries Transforming Communities," 2017). The ALA Center for Civic Life offered a series of webinars in 2017 to instruct library professionals on how to convene and lead public forums on issues that are important to their communities. Recordings of the webinars are available at www.programminglibrarian.org.

2.3 Community agency

Before embarking on civic engagement efforts, it's important to gauge the appetite for them. Academics, library administrators, or library staff might see an urgent need for civic engagement, but to be effective, such engagement must originate at the ground level. We must ask ourselves, why are we trying to reach out and promote civic engagement in communities? What outcomes and impacts do our communities want to see? We take for granted that civic engagement and civic skills are what many communities need, but we need to ensure community agency remains at the heart of decisions moving forward.

Understanding the cultural realities of a community – its social, racial, economic, political, and ethnic makeup, among other aspects – is critical for developing and implementing civic engagement programs and practices in libraries. Civic engagement manifests itself differently depending on the local social dynamics, and the intersectionality of power can have an outsized influence on how libraries engage with their community's members. Understanding these dynamics is a key ingredient for promoting effective role of libraries in advancing civic skills. We have to understand the ecosystem to know how to reach people.

In Seattle, a majority white city with a substantial immigrant population, rising anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment prompted the city's libraries to look for ways to not only help immigrants and undocumented people, but to engage the general public in conversations on race and social justice. The Seattle Public Library established a Race and Social Justice Change Team in 2016 with the goal of transforming the ways in which structural and institutional racism are addressed in the library. It conducted programs such as "American Visionaries," which featured a slate of immigrants giving personal talks celebrating the contributions of their communities, and "Interrupting Whiteness," an evening of discussions about how white people can support racial justice.

C. Davida Ingram, public engagement programs manager, wrote that the success of such programs relied in having a diverse set of voices: "I have found that using formats like Pecha Kucha (rapid-fire slide shows) and intergenerational programming that intentionally gets youth, families, elders and single adults in the same room is important."

2.4 Challenges to civic infrastructure

If public libraries become more actively involved in civic engagement, it creates a number of strains on the existing civic infrastructure. Among those identified at the workshop:

- **Lack of training for librarians:** Civic engagement typically is not a part of library and information science curriculum, and most working librarians are unlikely to have had classes. Librarians who are thrown into civic engagement efforts might find that they are “flying blind.”
- **Lack of civic skills among patrons:** Many of those whom librarians would try to reach through civic engagement activities are currently disengaged from the concept of participation. Librarians would have to act not only as facilitators, but as motivators and educators. In the United States, those in the librarianship profession are overwhelmingly white, while the populations they serve are more diverse, creating an additional challenge in that they might often lack the cultural competencies to create effective and impactful civic engagement programs.
- **Competing priorities:** The scope of public libraries is so large it can become overwhelming for librarians to quickly switch focus to different projects and messages. For example, the Seattle Public Library has prioritized helping combat homelessness and hunger, and felt overwhelmed by the actively educated population’s demands after the 2016 election. Public libraries in many countries (including the U.S.) already deal with unfunded mandates to shelter and serve homeless people and provide them with access to information. Especially in poorer areas, resources are already stretched thin, while demands are already heavy.
- **Demands on librarians and library staff:** Even if they have the skills, librarians cannot expect a surge in funding for their civic engagement activities. They would still need to balance that work with the other demands on their time.
- **Global differences:** Luis Santana, an assistant professor at Universidad Adolfo Ibañez in Chile, noted that the perception of libraries as safe spaces is not the same everywhere. In some countries, a library is considered a community center, but not in others.

2.5 Civic infrastructure: key takeaways

Libraries have evolved in recent years from an internal focus -- providing what they have to the community – to an external focus, listening to community needs and addressing those together. Design processes and methodologies are being used to create programs *with* their communities to cultivate a sense of community agency and ownership.

As prominent, ubiquitous civic institutions, libraries are a natural place to turn for help in addressing the crisis of civic disengagement and the threat it poses to democracies. Libraries have social capital, financial capital, and human capital, and they provide the physical and digital spaces that are essential for civic engagement.

However, the existence of the public library ecosystem and its civic infrastructure doesn't necessarily mean that libraries are the best channels, conduits, or social spaces to promote civic skills in all contexts. Librarians may not have the skills to conduct civic engagement; the scope of public libraries is already so large, it can become overwhelming for librarians to quickly switch their focus to different projects and messages; and some communities may not welcome the idea of public libraries taking on a different role.

Community agency is of paramount importance. For any library's civic engagement initiative to succeed, it needs to embrace the needs and desires of its community.

3 Civic practices: libraries in action

3.1 Open leadership

During the opening discussions, Brian Bannon of the Chicago Public Library discussed open leadership and how it applies in the context of libraries. Through transparency and engagement of the broader community, open leadership is a way to harness the power of a diverse group of volunteers to accomplish things a leader can't do alone. This approach to leadership promotes trust and community agency, and helps foster effective partnerships. Bannon noted that Wikipedia is a prime example of an enormous accomplishment made possible by open leadership. Only through the work of countless volunteers can a project of that magnitude be successful.

The same emphasis on openness and transparency is crucial to community agency, and has major implications for how libraries work. For their civic engagement efforts to be successful, library leadership must understand the social dynamics of the environment in which they operate and act as true partners with members of the community. Leaders have to balance the tension between central decision-making and local, community needs-based decision-making. They have to account for the additional training library staff will need to support them in community-centered design thinking. And they have to consider what broader community engagement would mean for library programming.

3.2 Strategic programming

Libraries around the world have been experimenting with programs intended to encourage civic participation. An example comes from Marnie Webb, CEO of Caravan Studios at TechSoup. Webb discussed Caravan's work with communities in Brazil to build technology for the public good. *Feito Na Biblioteca* ("Made at the Library") is a project in which Caravan works to connect public library users to open government data to improve everyday life in two Brazilian cities ("What Do You Do at the Library?" 2017). Its participatory methodology, based on design thinking, seeks to include the participation of community members, including programmers, designers, NGO and local government staff, librarians and library staff, and library users.

Caravan gathered community members in a public library to generate ideas for how to design an application. In the example Webb gave, participants turned their ideas into posters, which were then hung on the library's walls. Library visitors were given ballots they could use to vote and comment on the ideas. Once a winner was crowned, Caravan found a developer and built the winning app. By bringing design thinking to libraries, Caravan hopes to encourage librarians to become advocates for this approach. In Brazil, libraries are museums and theaters as well as repositories for books, and librarians traditionally have the roles of promoting literacy and preserving cultural knowledge. Webb said the *Feito Na Biblioteca* project showed promise as a way to innovate and support librarians to learn nontraditional skills, helping to empower their communities. However, there were challenges: Participants spent a lot of time trying to understand the process and translating it to work for them. She also noted a feeling of "mission creep" among librarians and the Brazilian government.

In another example from South America, Luis Santana of Chile's Universidad Adolfo Ibañez discussed how civic engagement can require librarians to provide more than space. In some cases, they go out to the community to find out about issues and then lead the discussions on them. Santana raised the question of whether it is appropriate for librarians to act as advocates and sociologists. Some library staff do not have the training for such expanded roles, and some staff and members of the public are resistant to public libraries moving beyond their traditional roles.

Some other examples of outreach came from the United States. Amita Lonial, principal librarian at the San Diego County Library, discussed projects designed to break through people's individual "bubbles" and bring them together to converse on topics on which they might not agree. For example, the Uni Project in New York City brings pop-up art, reading materials and hands-on activities to people in underserved locations ("The Uni Project," 2017); and the Free Black Woman's Library is a mobile installation that uses books to build community, explore the intersections of race, class, culture and gender, and celebrate the voices of black women and girls in literature ("The Free Black Woman's Library," 2017). In San Diego, Lonial's library conducted activities during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign to promote civic engagement. She noted that there were challenges of bringing people from different generations and different political perspectives together, and of presenting public libraries as safe, neutral spaces while simultaneously taking a more active stand for equality and against oppression.

In each of these cases, the participants noted that there was trepidation both internally and sometimes externally over whether librarians were overstepping by moving beyond their traditional roles. Civic engagement can empower librarians, but also can raise questions about their identity as professionals and the identity of the public library as an institution. Comfort levels were higher when the impetus for advocacy came from members of the community rather than from librarians, something that only happens when librarians are sufficiently engaged in their communities and patrons are sufficiently aware that libraries are available as platforms for civic engagement.

3.3 Opportunities for engagement

Participants at the workshop focused on a few areas that offer fertile ground for libraries to introduce programming that promotes civic engagement.

3.3.1 'Calling BS'

Jevin West, an assistant professor at the University of Washington Information School, spoke about how public libraries could help combat the "fake news" epidemic. The curriculum of his "Calling Bullshit in the Age of Big Data" course is designed to equip a broad audience – not only college students, but also high school students, journalists, librarians and the general public – with the tools to spot misinformation and caution others against spreading it. By teaching people how to distinguish reliable information from "BS," West said, public libraries can help reach a much broader audience and carve out a role as key players in the fight against "fake news."

West said he sees a huge opportunity for libraries in this space to reach different audiences than the college classes he teaches, but the question is how to engage them. There is a need for intermediaries to disrupt the one-way flow of information in which people tend to accept things that confirm their beliefs

without checking to find out whether they are true. “Everyone is a publisher right now. What if libraries played that role as well?” he asked.

Programming that addresses misinformation could be a bridge for public libraries to civic engagement. It’s become second-nature for some people to pass along unverified information in social media, but there is a substantial part of the population that cares about misinformation, and an opportunity for libraries to break those social bubbles.

3.3.2 Web literacy

An-Me Chung, a senior fellow with the Mozilla Foundation, spoke to the need for web literacy skills and the potential for library programming to promote them. Mozilla has identified 14 core web literacy skills required to read, write and participate online. (“Web Literacy,” 2017). These skills are as basic as math or writing and are necessary for civic engagement. While digital skills programs focus on how to use hardware and software, web literacy programs focus on the skills people need to read, write and participate online. Chung said challenges vary by geography. In some parts of the world, people express doubts that they need web literacy skills. Libraries can take a leading role in convincing people that such skills are necessary and have an opportunity to equip them through library programs.

With funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, Mozilla has partnered with six public libraries and the University of Washington Information School to develop a pilot program of web literacy skills, including curriculum and training for both library staff and patrons. By providing this training, libraries become central to efforts to develop web and information literacy skills around the world. Chung wrote: “Equipping library staff with robust and evidence-based web literacy skills is a critical first step towards providing patrons with the opportunity to develop skills pathways to improve their lives, whether it be through education, workforce, or civic engagement.”

3.3.3 Libraries and civic tech

Digital literacy, in all its dimensions, is key if civic technology is to realize its potential to promote open governance through more open, transparent sharing of information. When we add digital tools to the mix, along with the physical presence of libraries with their expertise in curating information, it creates a powerful combination for civic engagement.

Among those tapping the potential for libraries to use digital tools is Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia. Diego Merizalde, the program coordinator there, cited a project with Historypin that asked people to take pictures to record the history of their municipalities. As of December 2017, the project had gathered nearly 17,000 images in an online collection (Historypin.org). This project has had a tremendous impact on changing the national conversation about ethnicity and diversity as it brought voice to minority populations in the country. This project was one of the few examples shared at the workshop of libraries capitalizing on the potential to bring people together and amplify the conversation online. The combination of the physical space of the public library at a local level with an online component that carries the conversation to a regional or national level could be a powerful pairing for civic engagement.

Meanwhile, libraries continue to have a growing role as enablers of innovation via tech labs, classes, and makerspaces. Elliot Harmon, an activist with the Electronic Freedom Foundation, wrote that organizations like his can help librarians share information with the public about legal and policy issues that surround innovation. He wrote: “Two specific issues that come to mind are patent trolling and manufacturers' use of digital rights management technologies to shut out innovation. Helping patrons

understand these pitfalls helps them more effectively move from passive users of technology to active ones.”

3.3.4 Threats in a digital world

Jason Griffey, an affiliate fellow with the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society, suggested that libraries can take a lead role in fighting major threats to civic engagement and to society in general by designing programming that helps people navigate the threats posed by modern technology. The threats include:

- Artificial intelligence and automation, which are poised to disrupt the economy and eliminate middle-income jobs in areas such as delivery and trucking. Librarians’ jobs are also in danger, as are those of people in many professions at every income level.
- The Internet of Things, which pose an ever-growing security threat. As computers permeate our cars, homes and businesses, we become increasingly dependent on technology that is vulnerable to hacking.
- Manipulation of our civic institutions. Data experts are now capable of influencing elections, both through nefarious and legitimate means. Cambridge Analytica, a data-mining firm that claims to have up to 5,000 data points on more than 230 million Americans (“The CA Advantage,” 2017), specializes in using data science to help political candidates. The firm worked with Donald Trump’s 2016 U.S. presidential campaign and may have played a pivotal role in his victory. Meanwhile, investigators continue to probe Russian efforts to use technology to undermine U.S. elections.

Either on their own or through partnerships with civic-minded organizations, libraries have an opportunity to design programming that equips people with the tools to recognize these threats and protect their information security.

The consensus of the group was that digital literacy and civic engagement go together, hand-in-hand. Our civic institutions will be stronger if community members can recognize “fake news,” navigate and participate online, and take action to protect against technological threats. With the right civic engagement efforts, public libraries might become the recognized leaders in distinguishing fact from fake and promoting digital literacy.

3.4 Community-centered design: promoting community agency

As we have noted, public libraries have changed in recent years to become more externally focused, listening to community needs and addressing those needs cooperatively. Programs developed with the community help cultivate a sense of community agency and ownership. In the same way, libraries’ civic engagement efforts will succeed only with the buy-in of their communities.

The effectiveness of digital literacy programs or other civic outreach can be hampered, however, if we are preaching to the choir – reaching those who are already informed and active and failing to include those who are not. Any good civic engagement program will need to make inclusion an overriding goal.

To represent the community, such programs need to include a cross-section of people from different backgrounds, ages, races, and socioeconomic statuses.

During the panel discussions, C. Davida Ingram, public engagement programs manager with the Seattle Public Library, spoke about how the library is working with community members on outreach activities to ensure the library's priorities reflect those of the community, even though the library lacks a significant number of people of color in leadership roles. SPL's Social Justice Change Team is creating public programming that underscores local and national conversations on race, social justice and civic engagement.

Bringing a diverse cross-section of the community together in a single room to talk is one way in which a library can promote community agency. Similarly, any civic engagement efforts will only be effective if the community is empowered by an outside-in approach. A sense of culture and belonging is needed for any type of civic engagement to work, because people are willing to act when they feel involved and connected.

The intersectionality of power must be considered when approaching civic engagement. Issues like racism, homelessness, and marginalization all come into play when thinking about a civic engagement program in a public, open space such as a library. Such programs have to be designed to account for power dynamics and give a voice to the voiceless. Real work can't be done unless the target populations are represented with a seat at the table.

For public libraries, the need to reflect their communities is paramount. The ways in which they go about civic engagement are more important than the particulars of any such programs.

3.5 The question of neutrality

Public libraries have traditionally been sanctuaries where everyone can go, no matter who they are or what they believe, where critical thinking is encouraged and ignorance is definitely *not* bliss. Libraries have been sanctuaries for Syrian refugees arriving in Germany, for residents of Ferguson and Baltimore during periods of unrest, and for people displaced by natural disasters such as 2012's Hurricane Sandy.

As employees at government-funded institutions, librarians have been reluctant to get involved in policy questions. That reluctance means libraries lack a voice in shaping public policy, even as the rise of authoritarianism around the world poses a threat to libraries and other public institutions. Several of the conference attendees raised variations of the same question: At what point is neutrality no longer an option?

UNESCO's stated goals for public libraries are to encourage inclusion and democracy, but these are not neutral values. In the United States, efforts to form a more inclusive society are fighting political headwinds. As one attendee said, "We need to recognize libraries are reacting to the political environment. Libraries are reacting quickly to the U.S. presidential administration, and people need to know about it." With democracy in crisis around the world, some argued, libraries should not be afraid to set a bold and ambitious vision for the future.

Yet, neutrality is a source of strength for libraries, and many librarians are loath to see that value compromised. There can be a fine line between civic engagement and activism, and we need to be aware that while some librarians are ready to erase that line, others would be uncomfortable with activities that

venture into advocacy. If public libraries increase their civic engagement efforts and try to raise the profile of those efforts, they will need to be prepared for accusations of political bias and the potential for political backlash.

Regardless of where they stand on activism, one place where libraries can stake out a middle ground may be in basic civic instruction. As noted earlier, the American Library Association's "Libraries Transform Communities" is providing guidance for librarians looking to enhance such efforts. An-Me Chung mentioned that U.S. libraries could look to partner with civic-minded organizations such as the MacArthur Foundation and iCivics to promote basic civic education and help community members understand how the Founding Fathers tried to design a democracy that would succeed. Programming could help people understand why governments become corrupt and how American democracy is intended to protect against that.

As with other civic engagement efforts, civic instruction and pro-democracy programming need to originate at the ground level to succeed. While some librarians may be ready to lead advocacy efforts, many will be much better equipped to facilitate than they are to lead the charge themselves.

3.6 Challenges to the practice of civic engagement

If public libraries are to become stronger platforms for civic engagement, it presents challenges in the way libraries operate. Along with existing the challenges to civic infrastructure identified above, such a shift creates numerous collateral issues. Among them:

- **Lack of civic skills among librarians:** As noted previously, several participants raised the issue of librarians lacking training in civic engagement. If skills and competencies in civic engagement were to be built in to library and information science curricula, new librarians would gain the skills; however, it would take a significant amount of time for academia to shift in this direction and even longer for the impacts to be felt. Meanwhile, those who have already entered the profession would still lack the skills. Swift development and deployment of a civic engagement curriculum for working professionals would be needed.
- **Professional challenges:** Some librarians may be eager to branch out and lead civic engagement efforts, but some are uncomfortable working outside their traditional roles. Civic engagement can represent a challenge to what it means to be a librarian. As Luis Santana noted in the panel discussions, library leaders need to consider whether it is worth pushing reluctant librarians in this new direction.
- **Political perception:** Civic engagement can push the boundary between outreach and advocacy. Public libraries generally want to be seen as neutral and nonpolitical. Even library staff who share progressive goals may not want their views "outed" at work.
- **Scope creep:** Even those who love libraries have to recognize that they may not always be the best ones for the job. Arguments can be made that libraries, particularly in some communities, are best-served by leaving civic instruction and activism to others.

- **Marketing challenges:** Fifteen years ago, libraries worried about how they marketed themselves in the age of the internet. Civic engagement presents a different kind of perception issue – about changing the institution’s role and the roles of professionals in communities. Libraries will need to be ready to tell their stories in order for their engagement efforts to succeed and to create a positive perception of them.
- **Difficulty measuring success.** There are no hard numbers to measure whether librarians’ efforts have the desired effect of a more active and engaged citizenry. Voting turnout or attendance at city council meetings might increase, but libraries would not be able to claim all of the credit.

3.7 Civic practices: key takeaways

While public libraries fit naturally as part of the infrastructure for civic engagement, their role in practice is far murkier. We need to apply a critical lens to their role instead of assuming that libraries are best-suited for the job.

In some political contexts, civic engagement inspires discomfort among librarians, patrons and government officials alike when librarians venture beyond their traditional roles. Meanwhile, even in democracies, not all libraries and librarians share a common set of values and beliefs.

However, libraries do universally provide part of the social fabric that makes people feel involved and connected with their culture. A sense of culture and belonging is needed for civic engagement to succeed and inspire people to improve their communities.

If libraries are to embrace civic engagement, they must provide professional development in this area, and academic institutions and professional development programs will have to respond quickly to the demand. They will need to collaborate with experts in the field; they will need to continue to promote web literacy and community agency; they will need to guard against existing power dynamics by seeking out diverse voices; and they will need to project an image that their communities continue to embrace.

Libraries and librarians may be better-positioned to act as facilitators. While they don’t advocate directly, they enable people to do so by providing a space and appropriate programming for their communities. Public libraries’ role as platforms for civic engagement is less about what exactly they do and more about how they go about doing it. When their efforts consciously reflect the values and needs of their communities, they help strengthen our institutions and improve our quality of life.

4.0 Conclusion: the road to greater civic engagement

If there is to be an expanded role for public libraries in civic engagement, it is key to define the **contexts, circumstances, and conditions under which they are the right places for this activity**. For effective action to promote civic engagement at public libraries, the discussions from this conference point to some possible action items:

1. **Define the desired outcomes.** If we stipulate that there is an urgent need to act on behalf of democratic institutions, some measurable possible outcomes of civic engagement by public libraries include: greater web literacy and media literacy skills; greater knowledge about civic institutions; and improved participation in the democratic process, be it through active involvement or even simply by voting. If librarians consider neutrality vitally important, such efforts need not compromise that value. Civic engagement is neither pro-right nor pro-left on the political spectrum; it is pro-democracy.
2. **Conduct outreach** such as the examples of activities highlighted by panelists at this conference, in order to stoke the fire in communities. Through these activities, librarians can measure participation and gauge whether there is indeed an appetite for their continued involvement. Public libraries can start the conversation and provide physical spaces, but the impetus for continued civic engagement needs to originate in communities themselves.
3. **Attract diversity** by establishing fellowships for librarians who will conduct civic engagement efforts that reach out to underserved portions of the community.
4. **Collaborate with civics organizations.** Librarians need not start from scratch; they can engage the MacArthur Foundation, iCivics, or any such politically neutral, civic-minded organization to bring basic civics instruction to public libraries. They can work with the Mozilla Foundation to bring web literacy curricula to their communities, or work with academics such as Jevin West to help give people tools to sniff out misinformation. While many librarians may be civic-minded, there should be no expectation that they are experts in civic engagement, for which they generally lack training and experience.
5. **Embrace civic technology.** Invite the use of civic tech tools for civic engagement. Innovative programming such as tech labs and makerspaces illustrate how libraries can promote civic engagement by taking advantage of both digital tools and a physical presence – a powerful combination.
6. **Modify the role of librarians.** Much as the internet disrupted traditional librarianship in the 1990s and 2000s, threats to democracy are shifting the world around them in the 2010s. Librarians should expect their roles to change in response. For civic engagement to become a long-term piece of librarianship, it must become a piece of their academic and professional

- development. Institutions would need to develop curricula aimed at both future librarians and existing ones.
7. **Share programming.** Civic engagement is a global issue. Public libraries that are active in civic engagement could share their successes and provide the basis for a common initiative at libraries worldwide. Such an initiative would share how successful approaches are modified to suit the needs of different communities or different cultures.
 8. **Start at the top:** Ensure that library leadership, including administration and governing bodies, is visibly committed to the critical role of libraries in civic engagement. If libraries raise the profile of their civic engagement efforts, communities may be more likely to embrace them as platforms for such activities.
 9. **Raise awareness.** If their efforts are successful, libraries need to ensure that people are aware of their expanded role in civic engagement. For all their efforts to modernize, public libraries still face an image problem. They need to tell their stories, perhaps through a coordinated campaign.
 10. **Conduct research** and measure success in terms of increased participation, improved media literacy, and improvement in overall health indicators for democracies.

Recognition

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