

# Demystifying Community Librarianship

A review and synthesis of scholarly and professional  
literature on community librarianship

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## Introduction

My interest in the concept of community librarianship was first sparked when I attended the Canadian Library Association's annual conference in Winnipeg last year. There, I attended a session on the community-led work being performed at the Edmonton Public Library (EPL). I was inspired by EPL's approach and some of the measures they had taken to better serve the needs of their users. Perhaps the most innovative of these measures is that they have hired social workers as part of their library staff (Sinnema, 2013). The notion of having social workers (as well as other non-library professionals) in public libraries is not necessarily new; however, having these individuals hired as part of the library staff does represent a shift. As members of the library staff, social workers are physically present in the library more often than they otherwise would be. This not only means that they have more availability and flexibility to serve library users, but also allows them to perform an important role in training and educating library staff. I have since learned that this is just one example of the innovative work being done through the application of a community-led approach to librarianship.

My passion for developing dynamic learning environments, supporting life-long learning, and promoting access to information is what inspired me to study librarianship – all of these concepts are elements of community librarianship. Though this this something that I knew when I began my studies, I could not have necessarily qualified it as such. To me, achieving success in developing dynamic learning environments, supporting life-long learning, and promoting

access to information is completely dependent on understanding the needs of the people you are working with. Therefore, when I learned about the approach of community-led librarianship, it seemed like the most logical approach for public libraries to take in serving their users. What I did not realize was how complex and varied the approaches to community librarianship are.

In the following discussion, with the support of scholarly and professional literature from this field, I will attempt to demystify the notion of community librarianship. To do this, I will first explain the historical and social context within which public libraries, as cultural and educational institutions, exist. I will then describe the roles of libraries in the communities they serve. Building on these roles, I will discuss libraries and their relationship with social justice and supporting socially excluded community members. The next part of this discussion will analyze various types of community librarianship – civic (McCabe, 2001), needs-based (Pateman & Vincent, 2010), and community-led (Working Together Project, 2008). Next, I will discuss outreach and its relationship to the approach of community librarianship. Following this, I will briefly identify some of the perceived and real challenges associated with applying a community approach to librarianship. And, finally, I will conclude this discussion by reflecting upon the importance of community librarianship for libraries today.

## **Historical & Social Context**

Libraries have existed in various forms, storing information in a number of formats for thousands of years; however, it is believed that the first American public library was established in Massachusetts in 1790 (Edwards, Robinson &

Unger, 2013, p. 221). Since then, public libraries' roles and services have changed in a number of ways. In order to fully understand the concept of community librarianship, it is important to first understand the historical and social context within which public libraries exist.

In *Civic Librarianship: Renewing the Social Mission of the Public Library*, author Ronald McCabe (2001) argues that the political and social events that occurred decades earlier, beginning in the 1960s, led to the existence of the community movement in the 1990s (p. 19), which has an effect on public libraries. Based heavily on the theories of sociologist Amitai Etzioni, McCabe provides an overview of this context: outlining the strong social commitment and responsibility of the 1950s, the growth of what had previously been the non-predominant culture during the 1960s, which was followed by the notion of individualism in the 1970s and 1980s (2001, p. 18).

Out of a mistrust of government (beginning in the 1960s) and apathy with regards to public duties (in the 1970s and 1980s) comes the community movement, which “believes there needs to be a balance between individual rights and [societal] responsibilities (McCabe, 2001, p. 55). McCabe sees the potential for libraries to benefit greatly from the principles of the community movement, in particular with regards to the belief “that society has the authority and the duty to educate individuals concerning their social obligations as well as their rights (2001, p. 55)” – one of the roles of public libraries that will be discussed further later in this discussion. Furthermore, McCabe links the community movement to

his concept of civic librarianship; a community librarianship approach that, again, will be discussed in further detail later in this paper.

In their qualitative study of the key elements of community engagement in public libraries, Sung, Hepworth and Ragsdell (2012) support McCabe's notion of the importance of the community movement on public libraries by pointing to literature produced since the late 1990s through to the date of publication. In addition to increased research interest in topics related to community librarianship, the authors point to library programs and initiatives in Canada and England which demonstrate an increased interest in community engagement in libraries (Sung et al. 2012, p. 206-207). These include needs-based library service in England and community-led librarianship in Canada, two concepts which will be outlined later in this paper.

Since library programming and services do not exist in a vacuum, the community librarianship approaches of community-led librarianship in Canada and needs-based librarianship in England could certainly be linked to the social context of the community movement. Pateman and Williment (2013) also point to the notion of localism to further explain the context within which community librarianship currently exists in Canada and England. Similar to the goals of the community movement, described by McCabe (2001), localism seeks "to shift power away from central government to the people, families and communities" (Pateman & Williment, 2013, p. 204). In particular, the authors emphasize localism's 'community right to challenge', an aspect of this political philosophy that gives citizens the ability to challenge how local governments deliver public

services, like libraries. Pateman and Williment (2013) propose that this demand for an increased role for communities in the operations of civic society, places libraries in the position to create significant and long-lasting relationships with community members.

Another factor that has greatly altered the social context, and thus the field of librarianship, in the last few decades has been the development of new technologies. Within the context of discussing the community-led service model, Martinez and Williment (2012) point to specific technological innovations that have changed the roles of librarians. In addition to providing libraries with the opportunity to help their users build greater digital and computer literacy skills, the authors argue that these innovations have allowed librarians to shift their time from performing tasks that can now be automated or assisted by technology, to creating and building significant and long-lasting relationships with library users (Martinez & Williment, 2012). In my opinion, new technologies also provide libraries with the opportunity to engage with library users in new and exciting ways. Finally, we must also recognize that the concept of community librarianship exists today not only because of technological developments and its historical and social context described above, but also due to the fact that community librarianship encompasses many of the traditional roles of libraries and librarians.

## **Roles of Public Libraries**

Throughout my research of public libraries and specifically the approach of community librarianship in these institutions, the notion of the library's role within

its community was described several times. Although there is some variety, three roles appeared repeatedly: supporting education, facilitating civic engagement, and building community. These roles are not mutually exclusive and some overlap does exist between them. In the following section of the report, I will describe these roles and how they relate to the concept of community librarianship, while also recognizing the qualities that tie them to one another.

### **Supporting Education**

The library's role in supporting education is one of the founding principles of our profession. One of the many achievements and advancements in the field of librarianship championed by Melvil Dewey was his strong belief in the library's role in supporting continuing education and learning. In his view, libraries are a critical component of an individual's learning; in an address given at the forty-eighth annual American Library Association meeting in 1926, Dewey argued "we must make the public understand that the things that center round the library are just as much a part of the education as the schools" (p. 310). Further to this, McCabe (2001) argues that the traditional library's role in supporting education is linked to the "[Enlightenment's understanding of education in] support for the individual's free and purposeful pursuit of truth, a process that benefits both society and the individual" (p. 8). From this, we can identify how the library's role in providing free access to resources and materials to allow individuals to further and continue their education is also connected to the library's role in fostering and promoting an individual's civic duty.

## Facilitating Civic Engagement

One of the more debated roles of the public library that identified itself from my research is the library's role in facilitating civic engagement. McCabe (2001) offers some analysis as to why this role has been considered controversial – listing arguments from Romanticism to Puritanism to Utilitarian Individualism and Expressive Individualism. These philosophies question an individual's civic duties and any institution's role in educating others and promoting civic engagement (McCabe, 2001, 83). To support my understanding for why I believe that this role is currently controversial, I point to a quote from David Silver, co-founder of the September Project, who said: “any idea that encourages us to be citizens rather than consumers is highly political” (Silver quoted in Edwards et al, 2013, p.135). Although I agree with Pateman and Vincent's (2010) notion that localism has revitalized our interest in local government and social services, in this statement Silver illustrates what I believe to be another part of our current social context: the influence of a strong consumer culture on personal identity.

However, despite its controversy, public libraries do play an important role in promoting the importance of an individual's civic role and facilitating library users' participation in community life. DeFaveri (2005) describes this role as having two parts. The first part refers to the inclusive nature of public libraries, which make them open and accessible to all (DeFaveri, 2005). She then explains that once inside the library and exposed to its resources, users “begin to enrich and empower their lives [making them] more likely to participate in the

community and become active, able citizens” (DeFaveri, 2005, para. 11). More specifically, Edwards et al. (2013) outline how some of the resources offered in libraries do this, pointing to library activities like “voter registration and education programs [and] hosting political debates” (p. 133). These activities and resources, as well as existence of libraries as free, public spaces facilitate civic engagement. Another aspect of public libraries which Martinez and Williment (2012) propose places the library in a position to promote civic participation is its ability to involve its users in discussions and decisions about the library – giving library users the opportunity to contribute to how the library operates. This concept is tied very much to the notion of community librarianship and the role of libraries in building community.

### **Building Community**

The final role of libraries that I will discuss is the public libraries role in building community. Building community can take many forms; and, in my opinion, links to the connection between libraries and the local culture. In *Equity and excellence in the public library: Why ignorance is not our heritage*, Bob Usherwood (2007) identifies some of the ways libraries help build and sustain local culture; as an example, he explains that “most librarians [in Germany] tend to think of themselves as cultural workers” (p. 11). This emphasis on people and culture is key to community building. Kathleen de la Pena McCook discusses the library’s role in building community in great detail in her book, *A place at the table: Participating in community building*, which was published in 2000. She argues that “partnerships and interaction with civic

networking movements are [...] facets of community building that librarians can foster as we seek to bring librarian values and commitment to information access into the new century” (McCook, 2000, p. 78). In a study of the role of public libraries in building community published in 2011, Rachel Scott of the Seattle Public Library states “that the past twenty years have brought a shift back to the roots of libraries as community builders” (p. 193). Both Scott (2011) and McCook (2000) urge libraries to re-focus their energy and resources on better understanding and serving their users and by truly committing to our role as community builders.

## **Public Libraries and Social Justice**

Tied to the roles of libraries and related very much to the approaches of community librarianship is the relationship between public libraries and social justice. In the *Encyclopedia of Community*, Patricia Erickson defines social justice as “the fair distribution of a society's benefits and burdens among its respective members” (2003, p. 1310). Libraries have a long history of attempting to achieve and promote social justice, particularly through the ways in which they support education, facilitate civic engagement, and build community with and for all members of a community, including and sometimes particularly those who are socially excluded. Social exclusion is defined as “what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health, and family breakdowns (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001, quoted in Pateman & Vincent, 2010, p. 7-8). It is believed that social justice breaks the cycles of social exclusion

(Pateman & Vincent, 2010). Within in the mission of many libraries is the institutional responsibility to serve those who are socially excluded through a social justice mission.

In the book, *Public Libraries and Social Justice*, authors John Pateman and John Vincent (2010) emphasize that the relationship between libraries and social justice is not new, but has been at the roots of library service for many years. Further support of this relationship comes from McCabe's (2001) discussion of the Boston Public Library trustees report of 1852, which states that "above all, while the rightful claims of no class [...] should be overlooked, the first regard should be shown [...] to the wants of those, who can, in no other way supply themselves with the interesting and healthy reading necessary for their father education" (p. 29). This demonstrates the public libraries long mission to provide access to all, especially those who may be socially excluded.

However, it is never enough for an organization to simply state its mission. A mission must be supported by the values, people, structure, culture, and activities to enable and maintain its continued success. Many approaches to community librarianship (McCabe, 2001; Pateman & Vincent, 2010; Working Together Project, 2008) are as a result of the belief that, despite its efforts, libraries have failed in its mission to truly serve those who are most socially excluded within our communities. Next, I will outline some of these community approaches to librarianship and describe how they seek to resolve this problem.

## **Types of Community Librarianship**

As outlined throughout this paper, community librarianship is a concept that is based in a historical and social context; it is also tied to the fundamental roles of librarians and libraries in our communities. However, it also responds of the understanding that as public institutions with the aim at serving all members of our communities, as professionals and organizations we have failed in part to support this mission. As outlined by a number of authors writing on this subject (McCabe, 2001; Pateman & Vincent, 2011), community librarianship represents a return to the roots of public librarianship, but also details new strategies for its implementation. In the following section of this paper, I will present three types of community librarianship – civic librarianship, the needs-based library service and the community-led mode I– and investigate their relationship to one another.

### **Civic Librarianship**

In conjunction with the theories and philosophies of the community movement, McCabe (2001) developed the concept of civic librarianship, which “seeks to strengthen communities through developmental strategies that renew the public library’s mission of education for a democratic society” (p. 77). McCabe (2001) outlines the ways in which libraries can change to adopt this concept; these include: “restoring the confidence of public librarians and trustees in exercising social authority” (p. 79); renewing the public library’s historical mission of education for a democratic society” (p. 80); developing the public library as a center of the community” (p. 80); developing strategies to build communities through public library service (p. 81); “utilizing services and

collections to meet social as well as individual needs” (p. 82); and “strengthening the political efforts of public librarians and trustees” (p. 82). Throughout his book, he outlines these ways in great detail, leaning heavily on philosophical and sociological theories to support his argument.

In his discussion of strategies for building community, McCabe (2001) identifies the need for library staff to develop networks and build relationships with other members and organizations within their communities, emphasizing how these connections will help libraries develop new approaches to serving users and solving problems (p. 116). This element is found in all of the community librarianship approaches discussed in this paper. However, the method of relationship building and networking between civic librarianship and those discussed below represents a difference between these approaches.

Both needs-based librarianship and community-led librarianship are explicit about the need for librarians to let go of their roles as experts and educators in order for them to build authentic relationships with community members (Pateman and Vincent, 2010; Working Together Project, 2008). Whereas, part of the mission of civic librarianship is “[renewing] the public library’s mission of education for a democratic society” (McCabe, 2001, p. 77) and this language suggests that this requires librarians to act as educators. This could simply be a semantic difference, but I believe that it is larger than that. Libraries are certainly educational institutes and supporting learning is an essential part of the profession; however, both the needs-based (Pateman and Vincent, 2010) and the community-led (Working Together Project, 2008) models

urge librarians to do this from as facilitators, rather than teachers – connecting users with resources, with one another, and with other community services to advance their learning.

## **Needs-Based Librarianship**

The concept of needs-based librarianship comes from England and was developed by John Pateman and John Vincent. According to Pateman (2005), the foundation of needs-based librarianship is the assumption “that each potential user or community has unique information needs, and thus the needs-based service must have appropriate strategies, structures, systems and culture to enable it to identify, prioritize and meet community needs (p. 268). Rather than approaching library service from the perspective of the library, this approach bases all library activity on the needs of its community.

Pateman and Vincent (2010) assert that in most communities, over half of the citizens are non-library users and within the remaining group, less than half are active library users, with the remaining group representing individuals who may have used the library at some point, but no longer do so on a regular basis (p. 11). This means, that even if the library has a complete understanding of its current library users’ needs (which may or may not be true), this knowledge represents an understanding of less than a quarter of the total’s community’s needs. To truly apply a needs-based approach to library service, libraries must develop a better understanding of their community, including those individuals who are socially excluded.

There are four pillars to the needs-based service model, with each reflecting the library's commitment to social justice and dependant on community engagement: strategy, structure, systems and culture (Pateman, 2005, 'p. 270). Developing a strategy is the first step in this approach; this strategy should be created with members of both the library and the larger community (Pateman & Vincent, 2010). Once this has been established, the next step is to build service and staffing structures that reflect the vision of the strategy; "staffing structures need to be made flatter [and] professional skill sets need to be replaced with more people-and community-focused skills" (Pateman & Vincent, 2010, p. 11). These skills are similar to those that McCook (2000) calls the qualities of community builders: "understanding the community", "sincerity in commitment", "a relationship of trust", "organizing experience", and "flexibility and adaptability" (p 52-53). I believe that valuing these qualities in staff will also support the final step in this process, culture, discussed below.

Next, systems and procedures must be re-evaluated and likely changed or eliminated. Numerous writers (Campbell, 2005; DeFaveri, 2005; Edwards et al. 2013; McCabe, 2001; Pateman & Vincent, 2010; Williment, 2009) point to the damaging effects that library systems, policies and procedures have on community user's library experiences; these include: the requirement of proof of address, fines and other fees, restrictions on the number of items users can borrow, library-specific language, and confusion about how the library is organized. Again, a review of systems and procedures should be based on an understanding of users' needs with the input of community stakeholders, not the

library tradition. The final step that must be taken to apply a needs-based approach requires shifting the organizational culture to represent the library's new strategy (Pateman & Vincent, 2010). Changing an organization's culture is not an easy task, but I believe that, using Pateman and Vincent's model, it can be achieved. Including all library staff in the creation and diffusion of a needs-based approach implies that each of these individuals understands its importance and was involved in not only its development, but the development of a new library culture.

### **Community-Led Librarianship**

Modelled after the needs-based approach in England, the community-led approach to librarianship was developed by a group of librarians in public libraries across Canada. Beginning in 2003 and funded by the Canadian government, the Working Together Project was led by Vancouver Public Library, who partnered with Halifax Public Libraries, Toronto Public Library, and Regina Public Library (Working Together Project, 2008). The project began for similar reasons as other approaches to community librarianship: both research and personal experiences of library staff reflected "the concern that libraries were no longer serving poor and socially excluded people" (Working Together Project, 2008, p. 4). With this concern as its catalyst, the Working Together Project had two objectives.

The project's first objective "was to use community development approaches and relationship-building in socially excluded communities so that socially excluded people, rather than library staff, could define their own needs

for library service” (Bird & Olsen, 2013, 10). Muzzerall, McLeod, Pacheco and Sharkey (2005) outline that in order to realize this objective, library workers must “let go of the role of teacher or expert, recognizing instead that people are experts on their own needs” (p. 267). From their experiences, the Working Together Project (2008) developed the community-led planning model, which I have referred to as community-led librarianship. This model is similar to traditional library service models in its structure, but differs greatly in its approach; this approach involves community members (as well as library staff) involved in each step of the process, leading to a greater understanding the community’s needs and experiences with the library and its services (Williment, 2009, p. 6). This model is based on creating connections with other community organizations and building relationships with community members, specifically those who are socially excluded.

The project’s second objective “was to identify systemic barriers to library use that kept those who are socially excluded from accessing library services, and to examine library policies and procedures through a community-led lens to remove barriers to service” (Bird & Olsen, 2013, 10). When the Working Together Project libraries began looking further into the issue of social exclusion in libraries, they reached a roadblock: many library staff members felt that they were supporting the needs of socially excluded people through their current services and operations (Working Together Project, 2008). As mentioned throughout this paper, libraries often appear to be serving all members of a community through their services, values and mission. However, the Working

Together Project libraries learned that those of us who feel welcome and comfortable in libraries do not see them in the same way as people who are socially excluded (Campbell, 2005, 272). Although there are some barriers to library service which can be easily identified and perhaps resolved across library systems — like fines and policies that require library users to have a permanent address — the Working Together Project (2008) concluded that there are many barriers that prevent people, and not just those who are socially excluded, from accessing the library services. Moreover, they explained that these barriers change from one community to the next, and the Working Together Project (2008) argues that the best way to resolve these barriers is to work with members of the community: by developing relationships, listening and then changing services based on the users' needs.

A number of learnings came out of the Working Together Project; those outlined by Martinez and Williment (2012) include the creation of a community-led service planning model and flexible community engagement techniques. Through its research, publications, reports, and speaking sessions at conferences, the Working Together Project has encouraged a number of library systems across Canada to adopt a community approach, including the Edmonton Public Library, which was discussed at the beginning of this paper. Libraries across Canada have developed innovative services and formed new relationships as a result of the community-led approach (Working Together Project, 2008). I would argue that, even though the Working Together Project

technically ended in 2008, the effects of this project continue to inspire change and mark the beginning of a new approach to public library service in Canada.

## **Outreach & Community Librarianship**

In any discussion of community librarianship it is important to discuss its relationship to the outreach services and programs offered in many public libraries. Outreach services in public libraries have existed for many years; Melvil Dewey is believed to be one of the first to offer outreach services in the United States through his traveling libraries initiative in the state of New York beginning in 1893, which was similar to the bookmobiles of today (Passet, 1991).

In their article entitled *Radical Reference: Socially Responsible Librarianship Collaborating With Community*, Melissa Morrone and Lia Friedman (2009) outline the recent history of outreach public libraries in the United States. The authors point to legislative amendments made in the 1960s and 1970s that demanded action from public services in response to issues of poverty and social exclusion; more specifically, they describe an amendment to the Library Services and Construction Act “in 1970 that called for an ‘emphasis on service to the disadvantaged’” (Morrone & Friedman, 2009, p. 377). Morrone and Friedman (2009) then outline how the action taken by many libraries, following these legislative amendments and the funding that supported them, was the approach of designing and implementing specific library programs and services for these users. For the most part, these programs were developed with little input from the users themselves and existed as activities outside of regular library operations that could easily be discontinued, should funding end (Morrone & Friedman,

2009). As outlined throughout this essay, this disconnect between libraries and the diverse, often socially excluded, community members they seek to serve remains today.

Brian Campbell, one of the founding library members of the Working Together Project, wrote about the differences between outreach and a community approach to librarianship in his article entitled, *"In" versus "with" the community: Using a community approach to public library services*. Here, Campbell (2005) describes how working *in* the community is when libraries take current library services outside of the library walls to serve users in different locations – like many outreach services. He considers this in contrast to community approaches to librarianship, which are developed *with* community and based on their needs (Campbell, 2005). I would imagine that most libraries will find that after applying a community approach, outreach services will continue to be an important element of library services. It is important for libraries to understand that outreach activities can and may certainly be an element of a community approach; however, it is crucial for these outreach activities to be filtered through a community-lens and delivered only if they respond to the needs of the community.

## **Challenges**

Like any concept, the approaches of community librarianship are not without their challenges, debates, and concerns from the library community. The following part of this essay will identify those challenges and first examine whether or not they are valid, then propose solutions for handling them.

One of the challenges that I mentioned earlier in this report when discussing the Working Together Project is the notion that many libraries and library workers feel that they are already applying a community approach to their work. Numerous writers have written about this obstacle (Campbell, 2005; McCook, 2000; Scott, 2011; Working Together Project, 2008). I would imagine that in some cases this is true and some library workers are working from a community approach; however, as outlined throughout this essay, one of the key elements of applying a community approach successfully is that it be supported and implemented by all members of the community, in every role. It is not enough for some library workers to operate through this service model, rather all library members should apply a community approach to the work they do.

This challenge relates to another: applying a community approach to librarianship will require change – and change is hard. Pateman and Vincent (2010) point to this challenge in their discussion of the needs-based service mode pillar of culture. Here the authors argue that the library's culture must change to reflect the organization's strategy based on social justice (Pateman and Vincent, 2010). Earlier, I argued that this change would come more easily through their model because library workers are involved with developing the strategy. Supporting library workers concerns and questions around change is also part of the model; however, it must also be mentioned that should some library workers oppose to operating through a community approach, Pateman and Vincent (2010) refer to Tom Peters' famous quote: "if you can't change

people, then you have to change the people” (p. 12). This is certainly one solution to the challenge presented by change.

Next, I will move from discussing two organizational challenges to reviewing one of the challenges associated with performing the work associated with community approaches to librarianship: building relationships with socially excluded community members. A number of librarians who were part of the Working Together Project (DeFaveri, 2005; Muzzerall et al., 2005; Williment, 2009) have written extensively on the challenges associated with building relationships with people who are socially excluded and made recommendations for doing this based on their experiences. One reason why building these relationships can be challenging is that “the majority of marginalized people have had negative experiences with institutions [...] with rules and regulations that do not respond to their needs and in fact create many barriers to service” (Muzzerall et al., 2005, p. 266), like libraries. Beginning the conversation with socially excluded community members requires libraries to leave their traditional roles (Muzzerall et al., 2005), step out from behind the reference desk, and go to the places where these people are (Williment, 2009). Once librarians have been connected with these community members, often through relationships developed with other social service providers, the next step is to commit time to listening and building trust (Muzzerall et al., 2005). “Relationship building occurs by developing trust and mutual respect” (Williment, 2009, p. 7) — a process that cannot be rushed and must be approached with sincerity.

From the descriptions above, it is clear why an approach to community librarianship challenges libraries. Not only does embarking on this process require a significant amount of time and librarians with specific skill-sets and personalities to effectively do this work, but it also requires libraries, which are primarily risk-adverse institutions, to take risks (Pateman & Vincent, 2010). Other challenges certainly exist when applying this approach to librarianship and this discussion presents only a small sampling of those that have been suggested. However, as a supporter of this method, it is my belief that many of these challenges can be overcome and that the benefits of community librarianship far outweigh its obstacles.

## Importance

At this point, perhaps readers who are less passionate about the library's mission to support all members of our communities and especially those who are socially excluded may be questioning the value of the community approach to librarianship. In response, I would argue that, first and foremost, we must be true to our mission. As outlined throughout this paper, public libraries have existed *with* the support of our communities *to* support our communities. In the words of Bob Usherwood (2007), "it is certainly not fitting for professional librarians to go along with the [...] culture of ignorance [which] excludes people from full participation in a democratic society" (p. viii). By ignoring our duty to all members of our communities, we ignore social exclusion and assist in perpetuating its cycle.

If that argument did little to sway you, then perhaps my second argument will. As anyone with an interest in libraries knows, libraries, like many other institutions, are experiencing a period of questioning and change. This period has been driven in large part by the technological revolution of the past thirty or more years. The invention of the Internet, Google, e-books, and many other technologies have called into question the library's role. In response, libraries have changed in many ways – adapting programs, resources, and physical spaces. Anyone who has a relationship with libraries has come to understand that it is not only possible for these technologies and libraries to co-exist, but that these technologies can improve the way libraries work and also offer them a new opportunity: helping to bridge the digital divide through the development of digital literacy skills (Martinez and Williment, 2012).

However, it is not the quarter of a community – those identified by Pateman and Vincent (2011) as having a relationship with their library – who questions the library's role within their community. It is the community members with whom libraries have not built relationships. Those who support and advocate for community approaches to librarianship (cited throughout) propose that, rather than continuing to operate through a traditional model and hoping that libraries are relevant to their communities, public libraries should take this opportunity to engage with the larger community, connect with other organizations, build relationship with community members who do not visit libraries, especially those who are socially excluded, and include these community members in library services and planning as partners – therefore,

working within these communities to guarantee the relevance of public libraries today and in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Through this discussion, I have defined the notion of community librarianship through an examination of the historical and social context, an analysis of the roles that libraries have held in their communities, an investigation of the public library's relationship to social justice, by outlining three approaches to community librarianship, by distinguishing this model from outreach services, by presenting some of the challenges associated with this approach, and, finally, by outlining the significance of community librarianship for public libraries in the twenty-first century.

To conclude, I would like to introduce a new argument and one that would certainly require further analysis and research. Although the community approach to librarianship was developed within the context of responding to the needs of socially excluded community members in public libraries, I believe that, since it is based on developing an understanding of user's needs through relationship building, this model has the potential to support all types of libraries and library workers in better serving all of their existing and potential library users.

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