Libraries and Strong Democracy: Moving from an Informed to a Participatory 21st Century Citizenry

By Nancy Kranich

At a recent public forum at a small New Jersey library, local citizens told strategic planners that they were pleased with their access to a diversity of resources and programs offered by the library. But they also voiced concerns about the loss of access to local information now that the community's bi-weekly newspaper ceased publication. Moreover, they expressed a desire to go beyond traditional library programming so they could interact with each other about local concerns no longer communicated through trusted local media. No doubt, forum attendees recognize the essential role of information to participation in community life -- a role well-articulated by the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy (Knight Commission, 2009). In its 2009 report, the Commission stated, "The time has come for new thinking and aggressive action to ensure the information opportunities of America's people, the information health of its communities, and the information vitality of our democracy" (Knight Commission, 2009, p. 1). In an era when citizens yearn for more participation in civic life, traditional news media have abandoned local communities in New Jersey and beyond. Understandably, some have turned to libraries to fill the information and engagement voids left in their communities.

Alienation From Public Life

Despite the fact that Americans have far more access to a diversity of ideas than ever before, many have fled the public square, alienated and removed from the dialogue about possibilities. They claim they have too few opportunities to hear diverse views and engage in authentic dialogue about pressing problems—a concern well documented by Diana Mutz (2006) in her book, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy.* Their hope has unraveled as they lose the capacity to create necessary, believable change. As Robert Putnam (2000) and others have observed, declining public participation begun in the last third of the 20th century continues. At deliberative forums around the country in 2006, participants reflected on Putnam's findings when they considered how to reclaim the public's role in democracy. They expressed alienation from politics and community affairs and felt powerless to do much about them. They referred to themselves as consumers, rather than citizen proprietors--bystanders instead of active members with a sense of ownership in their democracy. They also expressed concern about the loss of public space where they could meet other citizens informally to discuss community problems and political issues. In short, they saw the average citizen as unrepresented, voiceless, and homeless, but they also presumed that increased public engagement would rejuvenate hope and public-mindedness. After careful deliberation, they concluded that they, after all, had a significant role to play, recognizing that democracy's challenge is "our" problem and not "their" problem (Doble, 2006).

Stages of Public Engagement

Since the early days of the republic, citizens have debated their role in a participatory democracy. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provides a three-stage framework for considering this role (2001). The first--the Information Stage--is a one-way relationship in which government compiles and delivers information to citizens. Michael Schudson (1998; 2003) refers to this stage as "monitorial" citizenship, where citizens only pay attention when things go wrong. While he believes that citizens should know what their government is doing, he also expects them to "know what they need to do with what they know" (Barber, 2003, p. 311). Benjamin Barber (1984) considers this stage "thin democracy" dominated by representative institutions with relatively passive citizens.

Stage two--the Consultation Stage--constitutes an interactive two-way relationship between informed citizens and their government, where voices are heard through public opinion surveys and commentary related to proposed legislation and regulations. Citizens during this stage have an opportunity to express their preferences--a stage that Barber (2003) refers to as "plebiscitary democracy." Stage three--Active Participation—occurs when citizens engage directly in the decision- and policy-making process, proposing options and shaping outcomes. Barber (1984) calls this "strong democracy," where citizens "regard discourse, debate, and deliberation as essential conditions for reaching common ground and arbitrating differences among people in a large, multicultural society" (Barber, 2003, p. 37). As a remedy to incivility and apathy, Barber contends that this stage enables active citizens to "govern themselves in 'the only form that is genuinely and completely democratic'" (1984, p. 148).

Barber's strong democratic practice ideals are reflected in the work of several information theorists who recognize that self-governance requires an engaged as well as informed citizenry. To this end, Leah Lievrouw (1994, p. 350) posits the fundamental paradoxical question: "How can it be that American

citizens by and large feel alienated from the very political system they profess to believe in, at the same time that they have an ostensibly unprecedented array of media and information sources at their disposal?" In her essay, she describes an information environment that must shift from "informing" to "involving," contending that an involved—not just informed--citizenry is more likely to participate in democratic political processes. Lievrouw proposed a framework based on a typology developed by social theorist Jurgen Habermas (1979, 1989) and others who espouse that successful democracy requires citizens to go beyond access and voting to engagement in discursive action. In this context, Jaeger and Burnett also underscore the value of engagement and discursive action, and suggest that a policy environment redefining the role of information in society must rely on "Libraries, as established guardians of diverse perspectives of information, …to protect and preserve information *access and exchange* [emphasis mine] in this new policy environment… facilitating and fueling deliberative democracy" (2005, p. 464).

Libraries Foster an Informed Citizenry

Libraries have informed local citizens ever since Benjamin Franklin founded the first public lending library in the 1730s. His novel but radical idea of sharing information resources departed from the rest of the civilized world where libraries were the property of the ruling classes and religion. The first significant tax-supported public libraries, organized in the mid-19th century, were conceived as supplements to the public schools as well as "civilizing agents and objects of civic pride in a raw new country" (Molz & Dain 1999, p. 3). Early on, librarians explored innovative ways to bring books and library services to such underserved populations as the homebound, poor white families in the rural south, immigrants in large cities, sailors at sea, and prison inmates (Freeman & Hovde, 2003). They also worked hard to assimilate new immigrants (Jones, 1999), although it took another century before they integrated African Americans, Native Americans, and other disadvantaged residents into mainstream services (Jones, 2004). In the twentieth century, libraries deployed a number of creative means including mobile and outdoor libraries, packhorse rural delivery, literacy training, and reading to the blind to ensure that everyone in their communities was served. More recently, 99% of libraries provide access to the Internet, ensuring equal opportunity and leveling the playing field for all Americans. In fact, libraries are now the number one point of Internet access for the public outside the home, school, and work, leveling the playing field for those left behind in the digital age (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002, p. 39). Through these efforts, librarians have upheld the most sacred ideals of intellectual freedom, providing resources, services, facilities and enlightenment for all people, representing diverse points of view and safeguarding them from censorship. As stated in the preamble to the American Library Association's (ALA) *Code of Ethics*,

> *In a political system grounded in an informed citizenry, we are members of a profession explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information. We have a special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas to present and future generations (ALA, 2008).*

Expanding upon the ethics statement, Candace Morgan states in the American Library Association's *Intellectual Freedom Manual* (2010) that, "A democratic society operates best when information flows freely and is freely available, and it is the library's unique responsibility to provide open, unfettered, and confidential access to that information. With information available and accessible, individuals have the tools necessary for self-improvement and participation in the political process" (Morgan, p. 37). Indeed, in the information age, librarians have succeeded in fulfilling the fundamental responsibilities consistent with their intellectual freedom values.

Thomas Jefferson's conviction that a healthy democracy depends on an informed citizenry helped articulate the relationship between citizens and self-governance since the early days of the republic. Libraries, colleges and schools were founded to create and sustain an informed populace. For generations, the idea of an informed citizenry has served as a guidepost for librarians, validating their essential role in promoting political, economic and social prosperity and in building the capacity for current and future citizens to participate effectively in the processes of democracy. They have fulfilled this role by amassing diverse collections so that the people can make up their own minds about the issues of the day. The have served as repositories of public documents so that the public can monitor the actions of the government. And they have taught young people the skills necessary so they can find and use information effectively. But, as Richard Brown (1996) suggests, the Jeffersonian definition, meaning and purpose of an informed citizenry, so taken for granted during the course of American history, has changed over time, as more and more information has become readily available to all. The problem is no longer the lack of information but an absence of engagement.

Despite almost universal access to schools, libraries, and information, Americans are no better informed about the issues and choices before them than in earlier days. As local news outlets disappear, citizens disconnect from one another, and new technologies leave many behind in the digital age -- some unable to participate fully in community life.

If libraries are to continue to meet the personal and civic information needs of their communities, they need to reexamine their core beliefs and strengthen their capacity to move beyond the bounds of informing citizens to engaging them more actively in public life. This means not only that citizens are well informed about their government and the issues of the day, but also that "they can participate fully in our system of self government, to stand up and be heard. Paramount in this vision are the critical democratic values of openness, inclusion, participation, empowerment, and the common pursuit of

truth and the public interest" (Knight Commission 2009, p. 2).

Changing the Library Paradigm from Thin to Strong Democracy

Moving from an informed to an involved citizenry necessitates a paradigm shift for those who still cling to a "thin" notion of democracy. Undoubtedly, librarianship has pointed in this direction for a long time, but without officially acknowledging this transformation. If libraries are to remain the cornerstone of democracy (Kranich, 2001), they must recognize that they are moving from an informed, monitorial citizen model of service to an engaged, strong democracy model. Focusing solely on informing citizens is insufficient to equip them to participate in a 21st century democracy. In short, a strong democracy needs libraries to go beyond providing access to information to delivering informal learning opportunities and spaces for citizens to engage in the civic life of their communities.

Contrary to some beliefs, librarians have long recognized the importance of engaging communities in democratic discourse. In the late 19th century public libraries continued "the educational process where the schools left off and by conducting a people's university, a wholesome capable citizenry would be fully schooled in the conduct of a democratic life" (Ditzion, 1947, p. 74). By the 1920s, the idea of libraries as informal education centers that advanced democratic ideals took hold (Learned, 1924). After the troops returned from World War II, the New York Public Library launched a nationwide program of discussions about the meaning of the American democratic tradition and actions on issues of local concern. Such efforts to rejuvenate the democratic spirit in the country were described by Ruth Rutzen, Chair of ALA's Adult Education Board. She described these discussions as ideal opportunities for libraries to assume community leadership roles by spreading "reliable information on all sides of this vital issue and for the encouragement of free discussion and action" (Preer, 2008, p. 3). The American Heritage Project funded during ALA's 75th anniversary in 1952, became a reaffirmation of the importance of intellectual freedom during a period plagued by Cold War censorship as much as an opportunity for discussion groups to consider traditional American values. According to Jean Preer, ALA "demonstrated its belief that loyalty to democracy and commitment to free speech were not only compatible but identical" (Preer, 1993, p. 166). In 1952, ALA also joined a national effort to increase voter turnout by distributing election information and organizing discussion groups and other activities by positioning public libraries to offer what Preer refers to as "an experience of democracy as well as a consideration of it" (2001, p. 151).

A hiatus in these library-sponsored democracy experiments occurred during the 1960s when major demographic shifts and social upheaval left Americans less familiar and trusting of their neighbors. Putnam (2000) and others have painstakingly documented the decline of civic participation in America during that period. Many scholars also focused on new forms of citizen participation that recognize the central role of information to bolster civic engagement. But not until Putnam (2000) published his bestselling book *Bowling Alone* did the importance of reviving community and increasing civic engagement transcend academic discourse and gain widespread public attention.

Echoing Putnam and other theorists were a number of writers who envisioned libraries as central to the revival of civic life (Willingham, 2008; Schull, 2004; Baldwin, 2002; McCabe, 2001; Kranich, 2001; McCook, 2000; Molz & Dain, 1999). These librarians have urged their colleagues to reclaim the library's civic mission by helping constituents learn about complex public issues of local concern and practice deliberative democracy, while providing safe spaces to discuss issues in a non-confrontational, nonpartisan, deliberative manner. More recently, the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS, 2011) has focused its 2012-2016 strategic plan on the civic role of libraries, with a mission statement that calls on IMLS to "inspire libraries and museums to advance innovation, learning, and cultural and civic engagement by providing leadership through research, policy development and grant-making." Two of the plan's five strategic goals, involve civic engagement, stating:

> 1. IMLS places the learner at the center and supports engaging experiences in libraries and museums that prepare people to be full participants in their local communities and our global society.
>
> 2. IMLS promotes museums and libraries as strong community anchors that enhance civic engagement, cultural opportunities, and economic vitality.

Also in 2011, the Urban Libraries Council issued a leadership brief on community civic engagement, calling on public libraries "to shape and lead discussions, decisions, and strategies that encourage active and purposeful civic engagement." The brief recommends that librarians identify new roles that move them "from supporting players to valued leaders in today's civic engagement space…[that will] broaden their impact as the go-to resource for building a culture of enlightened, engaged, and empowered citizens."

After several decades, libraries around the country have resumed the convening of deliberative forums, as reflected by an expanding literature about these programs. Newly renovated facilities offer comfortable, inviting, neutral, and safe spaces conducive for citizens to engage in discourse, learn together, frame issues of common concern, deliberate about choices for solving problems, deepen understanding about other's opinions, and connect across the spectrum of thought. At some libraries, users also enhance their civic literacy--"the knowledge and ability of citizens to make sense of their world and to act as competent citizens" (Milner 2002, p. 3). Incorporating dialogue and deliberation into their civic missions are public libraries in Johnson County (Kansas) and Des Moines (Iowa)

as well as academic libraries at the University of Georgia and Kansas State and Illinois State universities, to name a few. As venues of civil discourse, these libraries are well equipped to serve as active agents of democracy where citizens come together to make tough choices about issues of common concern.

The Virginia Beach (Virginia) and the Des Plaines (Illinois) public libraries have gone even further by positioning themselves as civic agents in their communities. Back in the 1990s, Virginia Beach citizens did not trust their local government. The library was asked to step in as convener of a group of city staff, citizens, and scholars working together with public officials to name, frame, and deliberate about local issues, which helped restore trust in public institutions while creating a cadre of citizens not only better informed, but also more capable of making difficult choices together (Caywood, 2009). In Des Plaines, librarians and other community partners asked the question, "What does it take to meet the needs of Des Plaines residents?" The community conversations that the library framed and moderated led to greater awareness of local services and new collaborative approaches for further action (Griffin 2006). Both of these libraries activated their civic potential by demonstrating their capacity to assume a more active role in local, civil discourse. Examples such as these provide useful models for the profession. But without a critical mass of libraries seizing opportunities to engage their school, campus and local communities in authentic, meaningful dialogue, libraries will not emerge as widely acknowledged institutions that foster strong democracy.

Libraries and Community Engagement

Just as citizens yearn to reconnect with each other through democratic discourse, library leaders across the profession recognize the need to engage, embed, and integrate libraries into the life of their communities, schools, and universities if they are to remain relevant and appreciated in the digital age. For example, academic librarians are promoting deeper engagement by embedding services in the teaching, learning, and research processes (ACRL, 2007; ARL, 2009; Lewis, 2008; Lougee, 2002: Stamatoplos, 2009; Westney, 2006; Williams, 2009). Nancy Kranich (2004) and her colleagues (Kranich, Reid and Willingham, 2004) have encouraged academic libraries to "play a critical role in kindling civic spirit by providing not only information, but also expanded opportunities for dialogue and deliberation as a practice ground for democracy" (Kranich, 2010a). In schools, librarians seek to collaborate more closely with teachers and engage more directly with students by integrating their resources and services into the curriculum (Darrow, 2009; Loertscher, 2008; Loertscher, Koechlin & Zwaan, 2008). As with academic librarians, Kranich (2006) has called upon school librarians to join forces with organizations like the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools to provide substantial opportunities for young people to participate in civic activities and learn skills for democratic deliberation. Finally, in local communities, public librarians are aspiring to build partnerships that deliver impact and results, realign their civic missions and embed their services in their communities (Hill, 2009; IMLS, 2009; Lankes, et.al. 2007; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003; Urban Libraries Council, 2005). Kranich (2010b) has documented the historic and current trends in adult learning through civil discourse in public libraries, encouraging them to find active ways to engage community members in democratic discourse and community renewal. In the words of Chrystie Hill, "If we stay focused on our users, stakeholders, and their needs, and continually design to them, we'll be better positioned to stay engaged with our communities no matter what's taking place around us" (2009, p. 53).

David Lankes (2011) and his colleagues (Lankes, et.al., 2007) are encouraging libraries to move in the direction outlined by the Urban Libraries Council and others. In a 2009 Charleston Conference keynote speech, Lankes (2009) told his audience that the question is not: "What is the future of libraries?" Rather, the questions should be: "What should be the future of libraries and librarians in a democracy?" His answer was to recommend a conceptual shift from focusing on the collection of artifacts to the facilitation of knowledge creation through conversation in a safe environment. David Carr (2011) offers a similar plea to both librarians and museum curators, encouraging them to move beyond the documentation of the past to reinventing their institutions as places for the expression of American voices—for open conversations as the public mode of learning in museums and libraries.

Much evidence indicates that librarians are eager to assume a role in developing the civic capacity of citizens so they can revitalize communities and strengthen democracy. A number of them are participating in ALA's Libraries Foster Civic Engagement Membership Initiative Group (ALA Libraries Foster Civic Engagement, n.d.) and are shaping ALA's new Center for Civic Life (ALA Center for Civic Life n.d.). Many also take part in the annual September Project—a project designed "to break the silence following September 11, and to invite all people into libraries for conversations about patriotism, democracy, and citizenship" (September Project, n.d.). Moreover, a gathering of librarians, library school students, journalists, and civic-minded citizens who attended an April 2011 workshop entitled Beyond Books: News Literacy and Democracy for America's Libraries were eager to explore what is possible for communities and democracies. Attendees ended their conversations by issuing a consensus statement that commits participants

> *"to work together to create informed, engaged communities and advance 21st-century democracy… Journalists and librarians are well positioned to join with the public to strengthen community networks that engage and empower people. Together, we can fill a deficit in the information ecology of 21st century communities" (Beyond Books 2011).*

Moving Libraries From Informing to Engaging Citizens

Strong democracy needs libraries to provide informal learning opportunities and spaces for citizens to engage. Unquestionably, librarians are ready and eager to move from informing to engaging citizens in their communities. And citizens like those in one small town in New Jersey fully expect their libraries to do just that. After all, creating opportunities for citizens to deliberate positions the library at the heart of the local, campus, or school community. But even though libraries are among the most trusted of public institutions (Public Agenda 2006), as well as ideally positioned to span the boundaries of their communities, they are not necessarily well prepared to "look carefully at opportunities to strengthen their role in addressing serious problems in their own communities" (Public Agenda 2006, p. 13). Part of the problem, as reported by Kranich (2008b), is that they are not certain how to proceed. The realm of listening to communities, curating local information, and convening deliberative conversations necessitates the adoption of new competencies as well as a shift from a mission that informs citizens to one that both informs and engages them. The core intellectual freedom tenets of librarianship have "undergone continual change since the late 19th century" (Krug & Morgan, 2010, p. 12). As the nation's great experiment in democracy comes under increasing threat, it is time that librarians recommit to ensuring an informed and engaged citizenry as the basis for intellectual freedom and freedom of access to information. As stated in the Introduction to ALA's *Intellectual Freedom Manual*:

> *Intellectual freedom is freedom of the mind, and as such, it is both a personal liberty and a prerequisite for all freedoms leading to action….It is an essential part of government by the people. The right to vote is alone not sufficient to give citizens effective control of official actions and policies.* ***Citizens also must be able to take part in the formation of public opinion by engagement in vigorous and wide-ranging debate on controversial matters….*** *(2010, p. xvii).*

Today's libraries are well equipped to serve as active agents of democracy if they take intentional, strategic action to ensure the civic health and information vitality of their communities and their democracy. Indeed, they have the potential to become the cornerstones of a strong democracy where citizens can come together to make tough choices about issues of common concern.

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Author:

Nancy C. Kranich lectures at the Rutgers University School of Communication and Information and works on special projects at Rutgers University Libraries. Her theme as President of the American Library Association in 2000-2001 was libraries and democracy. She founded and chairs both the ALA Libraries Foster Civic Engagement Membership Initiative Group and the,ALA Center for Civic Life. She is a former member of the National Issues Forum Institute Board. nancy.kranich@rutgers.edu