

The Meeting Room: Libraries as Community Centers for Culturally Diverse Populations

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate what role libraries play as a space within a community. This paper examines library usage by ethnic minorities in the United States and Denmark, and looks at how a library's space can function as a meeting room for cross cultural exchange. The method used in this study is a literature review. Sources consulted ranges from library science journals to newspaper articles. The time span of the materials consulted is from 1969-present.

This paper urges librarians to be advocates on behalf of their minority patrons and ensure open access to the public library. By rethinking how to conceptualize the community of patrons a library serves, this paper suggests that libraries can better function as an arena in which all members of the community can meet and exchange ideas.

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Central to the concept of the public library in North America and Western Europe, is the belief that the library offers a space for education, socialization and debate, which is open to all members of the public. The library space is unique because it has traditionally been free from commercial, economic and government interests and has provided access to materials without charge to the general public. These values of universal accessibility and equality among users are the foundation upon which the library rests. Since the library possesses these characteristics, the space of the library can be examined using Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere. In light of increasing transnational immigration in the twentieth century, the library has become a contested public space.

In the United States the question of whether illegal immigrants have the right to use the library has promoted some townships to attempt to limit access to the public library (Lauer, 2007, p.A12). In Denmark, recent conflict between natives and non-natives illustrates the underlying tension between these two groups, and brings into question what role the library should play as an integrative force in society. This paper examines how the library functions as a critical link between members of immigrant and native populations in two countries with pronounced integration problems: Denmark and the United States. As a cultural bridge, the library must use its space to facilitate exchange and understanding between all members of its community regardless of their native or immigrant status.

Theory

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas first explored the idea of the bourgeois public sphere in his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas (1995) argues that a public sphere must have universal access, disregard the rank of those who use the public sphere and allow for rational debate within the public sphere (Habermas, 1995, p.238). For the past half century, Habermas' theory has underscored the discussion of the library as public sphere. Indeed it is almost impossible to read an examination of the library as public sphere without some reference to Habermas. However, his theory is not without its flaws, and before applying it to the library, the shortcomings of the theory must be examined.

A main criticism made by Thompson (1995) of Habermas is that the bourgeois public sphere he describes, the coffee house in the 18th century, was limited to males who were of a certain economic and educational level (Thompson, 1995, p.253) Thus, the very sphere that Habermas discusses inherently excludes certain members of the population, such as women, people of low economic and educational standing and minority populations. The question that must be considered is whether it is even useful to use Habermas as a basis for the discussion of the public sphere, since his coffee house example necessarily leaves out the very population of people this paper will examine. Despite the flaws in his theory, Habermas' delineation of the necessary attributes of a public sphere is useful in creating a framework in which to examine the ethical considerations for what constitutes a public sphere.

The library as a public sphere is a critical component of society because of the social interactions it facilitates. As Alstad and Curry (2003) quote Robert Holub as stating in his 1991 book, the public sphere "is a realm in which individuals gather to participate in open discussion; no one enters into discourse with an advantage over another" (qtd in Alstad & Curry, 2003, section V). In the public sphere, individuals are exposed to a broad cross-section of society. As Fred Kent (2003), founder of Project for Public Spaces says "when you enter a public space, you're making yourself available for chance meetings, conversation" (*How to become*, 2003, p.71). In addition, as Anne Goulding (2004) states libraries "offer space and facilities for groups or people to meet and undertake a variety of activities, meaning that users will often encounter and interact with those outside their usual social circle" (Goulding, 2004, p.4). In an increasingly suburbanized car-driven culture, it is becoming easier to limit interactions to only those who fall within specific social and economic classes. However, this isolation from people of diverse backgrounds comes at an expense. As Alstad and Curry (2003) state "the loss of civic space and the resultant lack of unmediated social interaction is damaging to a democracy. How can we develop tolerance and acceptance of difference in an increasingly diverse society without provision of space for democratic intermingling?" (Alstad & Curry, 2003, section 1). The library is not only a source of information, but it is also a social destination for diverse members of the population. The social interactions that take place within the space of the library are critical for furthering understanding and tolerance of those of different cultural, social and economic backgrounds.

The public sphere

The public sphere is disappearing in the modern day. As Given and Leckie (2003) discuss, traditional public spheres such as "...boulevards and promenades, the market square, parks and public gardens..." are increasingly being replaced by such pseudo- public spheres as shopping malls (Given & Leckie, 2003, p.367). These fake spaces cannot be considered a public sphere when viewed through the lens of Habermas' theory. As Williamson (2000) states the "infiltration of capitalist and economic concerns" alters the public sphere so that rational debate can no longer occur because of the presence of these outside influences (Williamson,

2000, p.181). Thus, once a space adds a commodity exchange, it necessarily forfeits its status as a public sphere because those who do not take part in the economic exchange are not welcome in the space. In addition, pseudo public spheres do not contain the universal access or disregard of rank that is critical to the public sphere. Those who are not of a certain economic level, such as the homeless, are not welcomed in such spaces. In addition, these spheres are not neutral since they have commercial interests and thus community members may not be welcome to browse and stay as long as they like if they do not make a purchase.

With the destruction of such traditional public spheres and their replacement with fake or pseudo public spheres, the library becomes an increasingly important space within society. The position of the library as an impartial public sphere is critical when discussing the library as a meeting place between immigrants and natives. To examine the library as a facilitator of cultural exchange, this paper will examine library service to ethnic minorities in Denmark and to Latino immigrants in the United States. Clearly these two countries are drastically different from one another; one has an ethnically diverse population with long history of immigration and the other has an extremely homogenous society, which has only recently experienced significant immigration. Despite these differences, Latinos in the United States and minorities in Denmark face many similar problems in their respective host countries. Both groups face hostility from their adopted country's government, as shown by proposed anti-immigration laws in Denmark and the United States. In addition, both groups have encountered intensive assimilation programs. This emphasis on assimilation is illustrated by Denmark's requirement that all immigrants learn Danish and by the continued proposal in the United States to make English the official language. Despite these unwelcoming measures, legal and illegal immigration continues in both countries. The library is one of the main spaces immigrants come to fulfill their information seeking needs and to learn about the society in which they live.

Denmark

Denmark, as previously stated, is a highly homogenous country. As Berger (2002) states, only 7 percent of the country's population is foreign born (Berger, 2002, p.79). Beginning the 1960's Denmark experienced an increase in immigration from Turkey, Morocco, Yugoslavia, and Pakistan; these immigrants were typically referred to as guest workers because the assumption at the time that they would eventually return to the country of their birth (Berger, 2002, p.79). However, many of the "guest workers" remained in Denmark and immigration continued. In addition, as Thorhauge (2003) states, refugees from conflict zones increasingly sought asylum in Denmark (Thorhauge, 2003, p.309). However, as "expressed by the Danish minister for integration: all is not well with the integration of ethnic minorities in Denmark" (Thorhauge, 2003, p.309). Social problems that were experienced by immigrants to Denmark decades ago continue to be encountered by later generations (Thorhauge, 2003, p.309).

As a result of the increase in immigration, libraries in Denmark were faced with the challenge of serving a diverse and growing minority community. The Danish National Library Authority in conjunction with the Danish Ministry of Interior as well as the Aarhus Public Libraries and the State and University Library in Denmark released a report in 2001 titled *Refuge for Integration: A Study for how the Ethnic Minorities in Denmark use the Libraries*. As the report illustrates, the minority community in Denmark makes extensive use of the library. In fact, Denmark's minority population uses the library "to a much greater extent than the population in general" (Danish, 2001, p.4). Minority patrons use the library for a variety of tasks including learning Danish and increasing their education in general (Danish, 2001, p.13). The report found that libraries lack strong collections in the native languages of their

users. Respondents to the survey asked for larger collections of books and music in their native language (Danish, 2001, p.15). Providing access to material in the native tongue of library users is an important aspect in maintaining the library as a public sphere. Users of the library must be treated with equality regardless of their status in society, and thus the library must provide equal resources proportional to population size and needs. The library serves the immigrant population in important ways, such as providing materials free of charge and also providing information about the host society. These functions facilitate an immigrant's adjustment into a new country (Elbeshausen & Skov, 2004, p.133). However, the library must take an active role in facilitating cultural exchange within the library space between members of native and non-native communities because of tendencies to self-segregate (Elbeshausen & Skov, 2004, p.134)

The report states that the library is used as a meeting place for members of the minority population, but these exchanges take place primarily among self-segregated groups. The library is used by older men as a place to read newspapers and socialize, much as they did in tea and coffee houses in their home country (Danish, 2001, p.16). The report cites that the "open and obligation-free environment" of the library is a large part why the library is a gathering point for these men. Younger members of the ethnic minority population also use the library, both for its computer access and as an alternative youth center, which causes conflict among those patrons who wish to use the library space as a study area (Danish, 2001, p.16). As illustrated by this report, the public libraries are an important meeting, socialization and learning area for a variety of age ranges within Denmark's ethnic minority population. However, much of the interaction that takes place in the library is intra-community communication rather than inter-community. Thus, when members of Denmark's minority population come to use the library space, they use the area primarily to socialize with other members of their community, but not with outsiders. As the report states "several people express frustration that it is difficult to get in contact with Danes without implying that the library should play a role in changing this situation" (Danish, 2001, p.16). Despite the fact that the library is an open public space used by all members of society, cross-culture communication is not occurring in the library.

United States

The United States has historically been a destination for immigrants, but despite this, the nation does not openly welcome them. During the early twentieth century, the United States experienced a surge in immigration from primarily Eastern Europe, Italy, Greece and Asia. During this period, librarians struggled with how best to serve these new immigrant communities. As Novotny (2003) discusses, library journals at the time carried many articles on whether it was the role of the library to "Americanize" immigrants (Novotny, 2003, pp.345-7). One impassioned librarian wrote "we cannot Americanize our residents of foreign birth by taking them by the throat...Patriotism, so called, of this sort is worse than foolish, since it makes rebels instead of citizens" (Untitled, 1919, p.275). Although written in 1919, this sentiment is still salient today as the United States struggles to find a balance between assimilation, integration and exclusion. Immigration to the United States continues to grow, and many communities have experienced a significant increase in their Latino population.

According to the 2000 census there are 35.3 million Latinos in the United States, an increase from 22.4 million in 1990. (Guzman, 2001, p.1-2). Despite this growing population and the accompanying need for library services to Latinos, some communities in the United States are taking aggressive action to reduce or eliminate library services to their Latino community.

In Prince William County, Virginia, Lauer (2007) reports that the Board of County Supervisors has submitted a resolution that among other things would make it a criminal offense for an illegal immigrant to check a book out of the library (Lauer, 2007, p.12). The proposed law seeks some of the most severe restrictions in the nation. This proposed law violates a cornerstone principle of the public library: access to all. Returning to Habermas' theory of rank and the public sphere, the status of an individual, whether an illegal immigrant, a legal immigrant, or a native of the country, has no bearing on determining whether the individual should be accepted or excluded from the public sphere. Thus to deny access to the library based on the political status of a person is to fundamentally deny the library's place as a public sphere. In addition, the library is a critical place for newly arrived immigrants to gain access to information about their host country. As Cuban (2007) states "new immigrants, some of whom never had access to libraries in their own countries, often first become aware of the library as an important resource even before they arrive in the United States" (Cuban, 2007, p.13). Thus, by excluding illegal immigrants from accessing the library, the community denies this user group crucial information, such as how to become a legal resident of the United States. In addition, this exclusion leads to the library becoming a homogenized zone and not a place of cultural exchange or understanding.

Another county in the United States has also taken steps to prevent its library from being a space of cultural exchange. Gwinnett County in Georgia has a growing Latino population; one out of every six residents is Latino. Despite this large Spanish speaking community, the *St. Petersburg Times* reports that the library will cease purchasing adult fiction in Spanish (Grisham en Espanol?, 2006, p.4A). As Jarvie reports, library board member Brett Taylor said "The discussion was that we didn't need to be buying Spanish material for a population that needed to be encouraged to speak English," (qtd. in Jarvie, 2006, p.A17). This belief that the library hinders an immigrant's integration into mainstream society by providing foreign language materials is a commonly held belief (Cuban, 2007, pp.7-8). However, as Cuban (2007) illustrates, immigrants use the library for a variety of purposes including "to improve English" and "to form community affiliation" (Cuban, 2007, p.7). In addition, according to a study commissioned by the American Library Association in 1996, 58 % of the Latinos surveyed reported using the library in the past year (Lynch, 1997, p.64). Despite the fact that this survey occurred over ten years ago, its results are still relevant to today's library service to Latinos. Not only do members of the Latino population use the library, but they look to the library to help them build community and to become better English speakers. Libraries cannot effectively serve their communities if they do not provide, or provide only in limited quantities, materials in the native language of their minority patrons. To become a cultural bridge in the community, the library must treat all patrons with equality.

How to get there

Creating the library as a cultural bridge between the diverse ethnic populations within a community is a multi-stepped process. First, the library cannot force immigrants to immediately adopt the values and beliefs of the host country. As stated in the 1919 edition of *Library Journal*, forceful assimilation creates a negative reaction. Second, librarians must become activists, or as Pateman (2002) suggests, become wrathful (Pateman, 2002, p.22). Librarians must protect the space of the library by ensuring that every community member has an equal access to the library. In addition, librarians must advocate that the library provides equal materials to its diverse populations. Third, the library must facilitate cultural exchange between its ethnically diverse populations. The library cannot, as Skot-Hansen (2002) states, "function exclusively as 'quiet integrators'" it must become active in the community (Skot-Hansen, 2002, p.12). By creating an inviting physical space within the

library, expanding programming at the library to include a variety of cross-cultural issues, and increased networking and outreach with community organizations, the library can begin to transform its space into a bridge between cultures (*How to Become*, 2003, p.72, Skot-Hansen, 2002, p.13).

Analysis and conclusion

The discussion of the library as a public space is a large and interdisciplinary subject, and thus this paper is unable to address all of the issues surrounding this topic. Given more time, this author would like to expand this paper to include an examination of the branch libraries in the United States that serve a specific ethnic population. In addition, this author would like to further examine the Danish Central Library for Immigrant Literature. Furthermore, if given more space and time this author would address the potential drawbacks in conceiving of the library as community center rather than as a traditional library as discussed by John Buschman and Anne Goulding (Goulding, 2004, p. 5, Buschman, 2003, pp.96-99, 113-115).

In spite of these limitations, this paper endeavors to provide a framework, which Danish and American librarians can use to transform their public library space into a space of cultural exchange. Since both of these nations have experienced expressed animosity between members of their native and non-native communities, a space which facilitates understanding and tolerance is needed in both countries. The library, with its history of free access and equality is an ideal environment to establish this exchange. As the public sphere slowly disappears from society and becomes replaced by fake-public spheres, it is increasingly important that the library assert itself within its community as an open space where all are welcome. By using the space of the library as a community center, the library will be able to increase cross-cultural exchange and thus help to lessen the tensions between ethnically diverse communities in Denmark and the United States.

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