

# ODZIVI KNJIŽNIC V ZDA NA IZZIVE DRUŽBENE ODGOVORNOSTI IN VPRAŠANJA, POVEZANA Z DIGITALNO DOBO

**Assoc. Prof. Terry Weech, PhD**  
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, ZDA

**Povzetek:** Po kratkem pregledu prizadevanj knjižnic v zadnji četrtini 20. stoletja, da se soočijo z izzivi družbene odgovornosti do skupnosti, ki jim služijo, prispevek predstavlja in kritizira stanje obstoječih strategij za vzpostavitev in vzdrževanje izobraževalnih in socialnih programov. Sredi 20. stoletja je neko poročilo o družboslovni raziskavi prikazalo podatke, kdo uporablja knjižnice, in o tem, kako se zadovoljijo informacijske potrebe večine ljudi; priporočilo je, naj se javne knjižnice v ZDA osredotočijo na storitve za majhno skupino pogostih uporabnikov knjižnic, ki so v vsaki skupnosti, nehajo pa naj se truditi za neuporabnike, kar pomeni za večino možnih uporabnikov. Ob koncu 20. in v 21. stoletju so knjižnice začele skrbeti za digitalna razmejitev. Ta je opredeljena kot razlika, ki jo ustvarjajo ovire, kot so pomanjkanje denarja ali tehničnih sredstev, zaradi česar ljudje ne morejo uporabljati elektronskih virov. Postala je pomembna za družbeno odgovornost v knjižnicah, ko je bilo vse več informacijskih virov dostopnih samo digitalno. Vprašanja družbene odgovornosti so začela usmerjati odprta vprašanja, povezana s socialno pravičnostjo, saj se je pokazalo, da doseganje dostopnosti omenjenih digitalnih virov za tiste, ki so potrebovali znanje, opravljeno v njih, lahko pomaga pri doseganju socialne pravilnosti v demokratični družbi, ki temelji na načelih svobodnega trga in tržnega gospodarstva. Razvoj interneta in svetovnega spleta je povzročil, da se je družbeno odgovornost v mnogih knjižničnih sistemih premaknila od zagotavljanja pomoči ljudem, ki so potrebovali dostop do tiskanih virov informacij, k zagotavljanju pomoči pri krepitvi sposobnosti ljudi izboljšati družbeni in finančni status v skupnosti in k pomoči pri dostopnosti in uporabi digitalnih virov na spletu. Ta prispevek prikazuje več primerov prehoda k temu fokusu javnih knjižnic z družbeno odgovornostjo v digitalnem obdobju; hkrati kritizira uspehe in neuspehe takih poskusov. Predlaga spoznanja, ki bi morda koristila drugim poskusom v drugih okoliščinah, vključno z družbeno odgovornostjo v Evropski uniji.

**Ključne besede:** družbeno odgovornost, knjižnica, Javna knjižnica v Čikagu, izobraževalni in socialni programi knjižnic

## LIBRARY RESPONSES IN THE USA TO SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY CHALLENGES AND ISSUES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

**Abstract:** After a brief review of the efforts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the part of libraries to meet the challenges of Social Responsibility to the communities they serve, the status of current strategies to establish and maintain educational and social benefit programs are presented and critiqued. In the mid-twentieth century a social science research report after reviewing the data on who makes use of libraries and how most people have their information needs met, recommended that public libraries in the USA focus on serving the small group of frequent users of libraries found in most communities and cease attempting to serve those identified as the “unserved” which was a majority of many potential user populations. - In the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, libraries became concerned with the digital divide. The digital divide is defined as the division created by barriers such as the lack of the financial and/or technical resources to avail themselves of electronic resources. The digital

divide became relevant to Social Responsibility in libraries when more and more of the information resources were accessible only in digital form. Social Responsibility issues began to encompass issues related to Social Justice as it became evident that by making these digital resources available to those who were in need of this digital based knowledge would assist in achieving social justice in a democratic society founded on the principles of the free enterprise system and a market based economy.

With the development of the internet and the world-wide-web, Social Responsibility in many library systems shifted from providing assistance to individuals needing access to print information resources to assist in their abilities to improve their social and financial status in the community to providing assistance in access to and the use of digital online resources on the web. This paper presents a number of cases that present the transition to this focus of Social Responsibility in libraries in the digital Age, and critiques the success and failures of these efforts and suggests lessons learned that might benefit other efforts in other contexts, including the context of Social Responsibility in the European Union.

**Key words:** social responsibility, library, Chicago Public Library, educational and social library programs

**Introduction:** In the mid-twentieth century in the U.S. the library profession called for a review of the services and missions of public libraries in the post-World War II years. One result of this effort was research done by Bernard Berelson, a noted American behavioral scientist specializing in mass communication and media studies. The report he authored in 1949, *The Library's Public* listed some surprising findings and drew from these findings conclusions which proved to be controversial when first published and are still considered controversial today by many in the U.S. (Berelson, 1949) The following represent some of the findings of the report:

Book readers tend to be heavy users of other media

Regular uses of public libraries (at least once a month) are 10% of Adults and 33% of children.

The public library has little relevance as a source for information for most people.

Best Predictors of public library use are:

Age (young more than old)

Education

Gender (women more than men)

Marital Status (Single use more)

Urban status (Libraries serving communities of 25,000 population or more)

Heavy concentration of use among a small group of frequent users

One Recommendation of the Report:

Libraries should concentrate on serving the Heavy Users (the Change Agents)

The above recommendation from the 1949 report proved to be controversial because concentrating on the frequent users meant that the mission of the public library would not be service to all, but rather service to the select few who in most communities would be those of the higher educational, economic and social level (the 10% of most populations, sometimes identified in social science research as the “change agents”) who were the people the rest of the population turned to for information and advice.

From the early days of the establishment of public libraries in the U.S., they were an institution that was seen as central to the democratic principles of the U.S. providing opportunities for users to take advantage of

opportunities to improve their education through the use of the resources of the library which was at times described as the “people’s university,” open to all. But in *The Library’s Public* it was suggested that given limited resources available to the public library in most communities, the library needed to focus not on those who were not currently among the user population (those with less education and fewer financial resources), but rather on those who were already the frequent and heavy user of the library (the small group of the population with more education and financial resources).

Despite this 1949 finding and recommendation, libraries in the U.S. continued to establish programs to serve the “unserved” in an effort to reach people who were not using libraries. Yet follow up studies throughout the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century confirmed the findings of the 1949 study that frequent library users represented a minority of the population served by the library. In fact there seemed to be a large group of citizens in many communities, who while supporting the existence of libraries in their communities, expressed no need to personally use the library on a frequent basis. This confirms earlier studies that found most people obtain their information and entertainment from sources other than a library; and even those who frequently use the library are also heavy users of other sources of information and entertainment. For over fifty years prior to the digital revolution, libraries had established “outreach” program to expand services to the underserved and unserved despite the results of studies that suggested they should do otherwise, confirming a commitment to principles of Social Responsibility on the part of libraries and their leadership. The strategies used to meet these socially responsible goals ranged from mobile libraries taking resources to the non-user using everything from horses and donkeys in rural areas to book carts and satellite book stations in urban areas. The bookmobile, much like a bus stocked with library resources and staff, were widely used in both rural and urban areas. Branch libraries serving the anticipated needs of specific neighborhood were often developed with special grant funds intended as demonstration projects to show what might be accomplished if continuing financial support could be obtain to continue the projects, all in the name of “social responsibility” to meet the needs of people who were not frequent users of libraries. While some of these projects succeeded, many failed after the project funding ended. But libraries continued to try to reach the unserved and underserved with these efforts throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### The Responses of Libraries in the Digital Age:

With the development of the worldwide web and the web browser with graphical interface capability in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a significant shift from print and analogue information and entertainment sources to digital sources. This shift often required costly infrastructure such as computers and search skills to retrieve the digital resources. One of the early efforts to adjust information based social responsibility projects to the digital age was the “Free-net” movement. According to the article in *Wikipedia* on “Free-nets” the first of these community computer networks providing access to digital information on the internet began in 1986 (“Free-net”). They expanded throughout the 1990s. But by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many had shut down. Similar to early “social responsibility projects” involving libraries, many of these free-nets dissolved when external project funding ceased and local financial support could not be found. In Champaign, Illinois, for example, the local free-net, “Prairie Net” was sustained by the University of Illinois for several years after the federal government funding had ceased. But eventually, the University pulled the plug of the funding support and Prairie Net shut down. Some of the functions of the free-nets were assumed by local public libraries in terms of expanding the number of public access computers made available in the libraries and in the provision of special computer use and information literacy skills to populations on the deficit side of the “digital divide” as part of the continuing interest in and commitment to Social Responsibility in libraries.

One of the early transitions in the Social Responsibility focus of the library from traditional resources to digital resources occurred at the Chicago Public Library. In 2011 it was reported that nearly 90,000 patrons were assisted under a program involving volunteers working with individuals coming to library branches to gain access to information found in digital resources, including the internet. (Urban Libraries Council, 2014) These volunteers are called “CyberNavigators” and are trained by library staff to assist users in accessing digital information through the library computers. The website for the CyberNavigator program can be found at [http://www.cplfoundation.org/site/PageServer?pagename=invest\\_future\\_learning\\_cybernav\\_co](http://www.cplfoundation.org/site/PageServer?pagename=invest_future_learning_cybernav_co)

Other similar programs can be found at other libraries, but the Chicago Public Library Program does benefit from an assessment of the program in 2012 by Kate Williams, a professor at the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science (Williams, 2012). Williams reports in the summary of her findings that the CyberNavigators are successful in assisting people in looking online for jobs and to overcome fears they had toward using computers. Some have become CyberNavigators themselves after being assisted at the public library. The utilization of volunteers in libraries to assist in the expanding digital literacy to library users continues to expand to libraries serving both rural and urban areas in the U.S.

#### The Establishment of Education Programs in Community Informatics:

Community Informatics has become a specialization or focus of students in many graduate programs training information professionals in the U.S. At the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science, students may elect to obtain a specialization in community informatics by taking a sequence of three courses. You can find details about the program at <http://www.lis.illinois.edu/academics/degrees/specializations/ci>. As noted on the website, the program prepares students by providing

- Ways that diverse communities work to address their problems,
- Theories that adequately account for the complexity and diversity of distributed collective practice,
- Tools to mediate work on concrete tasks within communities,
- Effective processes for developing shared capacity in the form of knowledge, skills, and tools.

Students may apply their skills in Community Informatics in public and school libraries as well as cultural heritage groups, municipal government programs as well as other government and nonprofit organizations. The program also notes that applications are encouraged from populations traditionally underrepresented in graduate study and research. Thus Community Informatics in institutions educating future information professionals may be way to expand the number of underrepresented ethnic and social groups in the information professions. This strategy is also supported by research that suggests that the most successful Social Responsibility programs in the traditional information fields are led by those sharing similar ethnic and/or social backgrounds with the people they intend to serve.

#### Community informatics Conferences in Prato Italy

Since 2004, an international conference on Community Informatics has been held on nearly an annual basis. The first conference was in Prato, Italy, as have most of the subsequent conferences. The conference is organized by CIRN, which is the Community Informatics Research Network. Information on the 2015 conference in Prato, Italy can be found at <http://cim.wikispaces.com/Conference+2015>. The theme of this 12<sup>th</sup> conference in the series will be Privilege, Information, Knowledge & Power: An endless dilemma? While presenters at the CIRN (Community Informatics Research Network) conferences represent a wide variety of academic and professional disciplines, library and information science is usually well represented. The international participation in the CIRN conferences in Prato also point to the expansion of Social Responsibility concerns beyond the local scope in specific national venues to an international level and many of the topics discussed relate to an interest in Social Justice shared by many in the information professions.

### Social Responsibility and Social Justice:

Social Responsibility is often perceived to focus on the necessity of organizations to reach out to under-represented groups and/or to provide education and access to the public at large to permit individuals in such groups to reap the benefits of the social system that they are part of. Social Justice implies an even more activist role to change the social culture and society that individuals find themselves in to provide them with opportunities to share the resources and benefits of a society that may not be available to all.

The role of Social Justice in the information professions was the theme of the 2015 Conference of ALISE (The Association for Library and Information Science Education) held in Chicago in January of 2015. (<http://alise2015.sched.org/>). The specific theme of the conference was “Reflections on Social Justice and Re-Imaging LIS (Library and Information Science) Education.” Nearly 400 LIS educators, researchers, and doctoral students participated in this discussion at the conference, indicating the centrality of Social Responsibility and Social Justice issues in Library and Information Science education.

The American Library Association (ALA) is one of the oldest (founded 1876) and largest (over 60,000 members) organizations of librarians and other information professionals. For nearly fifty years the Social Responsibility Round Table (SRRT) of ALA has provided a platform for librarians to promote Social Responsibility in the library profession. (<http://www.ala.org/srrt/about-srrt>) This round table continues to challenge information professions, and specifically librarians, to consider their mission to provide access to information in all forms and formats from a Social Responsibility perspective.

### Summary and Conclusion

In the past fifty years the focus has shifted from information professionals attempting to reach those without access to information and skills needed to improve their status in society through mobile libraries and branches in targeted communities to a focus on the importance of skills and resources to retrieve information found on the internet in digital form. In the past twenty-five years, the focus has evolved from community free-nets to expansion of broadband and wireless internet access to neighborhoods that were the target of earlier outreach programs. Lyndsey Gilpin summarizes a number of these projects in a 2014 post on the internet. (Gilpin, 2014). One group, the Gigabit Libraries Network (GLN), is described by Gilpin as “...a global network of projects that promotes libraries as natural technology hubs for the communities they are located in, as well as promoting free, open source information in these communities through White Space broadband.” The GLN utilizes broadband and wired/wireless infrastructure in their collaboration with local school, public and academic libraries to provide community access. The GLN project is expanding internationally in coverage. (McCann, 2014) It thus appears that the information professions, including librarians and teachers, is continuing the commitment to Social Responsibility to provide information to those who have limited opportunities for access and/or limited skills to effectively retrieve the information needed. The opportunity to expand the commitment to Social Responsibility programs into the digital age promises to make the information professions even more important and hopefully even more essential in future years.

### **References:**

American Library Association. "Social Responsibilities Round Table" <http://www.ala.org/srrt/> (accessed 15 February, 2015)

Berelson, Bernard. *The Library's Public*. Columbia University Press, 1949.

CIRN Commons [Community Informatics Research Network] Conference 2015  
<http://cirn.wikispaces.com/Conference+2015> (accessed 15 February, 2015)

"Free-net" *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free-net> (accessed 14-2-2015)

Gilpin, Lyndsey. "White Space Broadband: 10 communities doing big projects." 19 March, 2014.  
<http://www.techrepublic.com/article/white-space-broadband-10-communities-doing-big-projects/> (accessed 14-2-2015)

McCann, Bailey. "Gigabit Library Network Expands White Space Broadband Project." 17 February, 2014.  
<https://civsourceonline.com/2014/02/17/gigabit-library-network-expands-white-space-broadband-project/> (accessed 14 February, 2015)

Urban Libraries Council. "The CyberNavigator Program at CPL [Chicago Public Library].  
[http://www.urbanlibraries.org/the-cybernavigator-program-at-cpl-innovation-133.php?page\\_id=45](http://www.urbanlibraries.org/the-cybernavigator-program-at-cpl-innovation-133.php?page_id=45) [2014] (accessed 15 February, 2015).

Williams, Kate. "Informatics Moments: Digital Literacy and Social Capital in Civil Society and People's Everyday Lives." *Library Quarterly* January 2012