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Managing barriers: provision of information access for underserved groups

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Abstract:

“Free and equal access to information for all people of the community” is a core value of librarianship (American Library Association Council, 2004). However, some sectors of the community face barriers – physical and geographical, technological, cultural or sociopolitical, and economic – in accessing information. Public libraries themselves also face barriers in their efforts to provide access. This paper will explore these barriers in more detail and discuss some ways in which the library can help to mitigate them.

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Managing barriers: provision of information access for underserved groups

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Information access is the ability to obtain the resources necessary to satisfy an information need (RUSA Access to Information Committee, 1999). The public library can be key in helping patrons access such resources, but some groups are underserved by libraries. Barriers may be physical or geographic, technological, cultural or sociopolitical, economic, or a combination of these. Public libraries themselves also face barriers in their efforts to provide access. This paper will explore these barriers in more detail and discuss some ways in which the library can help to mitigate them.

One physical barrier to information access is location. Although Canada is the second-largest country in the world, most of the population is concentrated near the U.S. border, and the population density remains quite low in other areas, particularly in the Canadian North. For some isolated populations, a digital-only library is a good solution for access provision: for example, the Canadian Forces Virtual Library serves users on remote military bases, which have established infrastructure to support wired and wireless internet access (Toomey, 2008).

Location-based barriers also apply to populations whose mobility is restricted, such as those who are incarcerated, hospitalized, institutionalized, or homebound. Institutional collections, whether run as independent libraries or as a branch of a

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public or academic system, are a common approach to resolving this problem. Deposits – small collections of items from the public library held at an institution – are limited in scope, but can be supplemented by resident requests much like home delivery. For example, the Toronto Public Library maintains collection deposits at 69 care facilities (Makhoul, 2004). The full branch option, where feasible, allows for complete reference services and possibly other programming options. Homebound services, in contrast, respond entirely to direct user requests, requiring users to seek out specific items to satisfy their needs. The Canadian Library Association (2002) suggests that homebound services will need to increase as the average age of the population goes up, and that libraries should adapt their long-range budgetary planning accordingly.

Patrons with disabilities also face physical barriers to accessing library resources. Problems with the design of the library space – such as narrow aisles or head-level signage – inhibit the movement of mobility- or sight-challenged individuals, while a lack of audiobooks or assistive technologies impacts those with perceptual disabilities. Even electronic materials may not be accessible if they are incompatible with adaptive software or if digital rights management protection is in place (Michaud, 2013). The Canadian Library Association (1997) recommends that libraries incorporate input from community disability advocates into the planning process, consider services to this group as essential for the purposes of budgeting, and frequently evaluate both collections and services to ensure they are providing disabled patrons with appropriate access to information. Initiatives like the National Network for Equitable Library Service offer the potential to share accessible materials between libraries, but are only open to registered patrons of partner libraries (Kempthorne, 2013).

Seniors are a growing sector of the Canadian population: those aged 65 and over

are expected to represent 18.5% of the population by 2021 (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2014). As a group, they often face a number of barriers to information access. Some face financial challenges, many have physical disabilities, and some are homebound or institutionalized; however, as Johnson (2014) emphasizes, they have a wide variety of needs and abilities, and each should have their needs met by the library. The Canadian Library Association (2002) proposes that libraries institute a “seniors’ liaison” position to represent the needs of elderly patrons and to consult them on such issues as how to make the library physically and intellectually accessible. This is particularly important given that many seniors are less comfortable with technological changes than their younger counterparts, and so may feel overwhelmed by the proliferation of electronic resources available through the library.

Many rural and Northern populations have reduced information access because of a lack of library services and because these areas also have very limited high-speed internet coverage. These groups are better served by alternative options such as bookmobiles, deposit collections, or books-by mail services. Canada Post currently provides a special postal service (the Library Book Rate) that allows libraries to ship materials between systems as interlibrary loan items, or directly to patrons at a greatly reduced rate compared to what a commercial enterprise would pay. Bookmobile and deposit services face significant funding deficits, and all three service types have problems with efficiency of access (Curry, Green & O’Neill, 2004). This is particularly true in remote Northern communities, where transportation is expensive and mail services are significantly slower.

Technological advances offer new opportunities for information access, but they also present a challenge to those on the wrong side of the “digital divide” – those who lack either access to information technologies or the skills to make use of such

technologies (digital literacy). Decreasing costs and increasing wireless coverage are narrowing the divide by providing more people with ready access to technology, although some populations (particularly in rural or very-low-income areas) remain offline (Marlow & McNish, 2010). Libraries can help to address this disparity by providing free access to networked computers. Libraries can apply to grant programs like Industry Canada's Community Access Program to fund public internet (Julien & Hoffman, 2008), although this program has suffered significant budget cuts (Canadian Library Association, 2012). Public WiFi connectivity in the library further increases access opportunities, particularly for users of mobile devices.

The second cause of the digital divide, technological illiteracy, impedes affected users' ability to make use of even freely available technology (Julien & Hoffman, 2008). Many public libraries offer training programs that teach the basics of computer and internet use, but such training is not a priority due to a lack of budgetary and staff commitment (Julien & Hoffman, 2008). Furthermore, while academic libraries may teach information-literacy skills like source evaluation in conjunction with purely technical abilities, public libraries focus far more on the latter, emphasizing lower-level tasks over source evaluation (Julien & Hoffman, 2008). Given that the internet makes available a diverse range of uncurated resources, evaluation has become an essential component of literacy for the general public.

In addition to technological illiteracy, print illiteracy is also a barrier to information access. Illiteracy not only presents problems with reading and understanding resources, but also with seeking help: those with low literacy report feeling anxiety towards library use and discomfort regarding their information needs (Hull, 2000). Furthermore, while audio and video resources are often available in digital form, the interfaces used to access these materials assume literacy on the part of the user (Deo, Nichols, Cunningham, Witten, & Trujillo, 2004). Librarians must therefore

adapt their usual reference practices for the needs of this group. The Canadian Library Association (1993) advocates that library managers provide training programs for staff regarding services for those with low literacy levels, particularly means of accessing information other than print, and that the needs of this group be considered in collections policies and space designs.

During economic recession, individual book purchases decrease and library usage rates increase (Fitch & Warner, 1998). Low-income individuals and families lack the funds necessary to pay for information access, relying on the library to satisfy their needs; however, even this can present an economic barrier. For example, most libraries charge fines for late items or other misdemeanours, and may suspend patrons who exceed a set fines-owing limit. DeFaveri (2005) notes that this can present an insurmountable barrier to such patrons, who are likely to be embarrassed by their inability to pay, and proposes that libraries offer fee exemptions for certain user groups. Such exemptions, liberally applied, ensure that low-income families in particular retain access to key resources that they would not be able to obtain elsewhere. Partnerships with social services can help to connect low-income users with additional resources to meet their needs, particularly with regards to job-searching and related activities (Auld, 2005).

The homeless population is acutely affected by economic barriers as well as social ones. These patrons face the same problems with paying fines as non-homeless low-income individuals, particularly given that their lifestyle may make it difficult to keep track of items and keep them in good condition (DeFaveri, 2005). Furthermore, as many libraries require proof of residency to apply for a library card, those without a permanent address may be excluded from accessing library resources. DeFaveri (2005) suggests providing such patrons with a Community Card that does not require an address and that is associated with fee exemptions. More generally,

homeless persons are often considered “problem patrons” and are subject to increased scrutiny or even hostility from librarians (Wong, 2009); this can make it difficult or impossible for them to seek help in accessing information. The library manager must carefully balance the needs of this user group with those of other patrons and staff members; in this situation, liaising with social services is also a good solution. For example, the Carnegie Community Centre in Vancouver represents a partnership between Vancouver Public Library and the Downtown Eastside Residents’ Association, and includes not only library services but also a community-run literacy centre and other social-services programs (Campbell, 2005).

Canada has a significant immigrant population, which is vulnerable to sociocultural barriers, particularly a lack of comfort or ability with English. As Picco (2008) notes, there are two classes of services to be offered to this population: services that assist them with integrating into Canadian society, and those that help them to remain connected to their own cultures. English or French as a second language and citizenship education programming are examples of the former, while the latter includes multilingual collections and foreign-language programming. For example, the Richmond Public Library in British Columbia serves a population that is mostly recent immigrants, particularly Chinese. This library has a New Immigrant Orientation program and several other seminars offered with Chinese interpretation, and their large Chinese-language collection represents 30% of the library’s total circulation (Jang, 2003).

While indigenous peoples may not face a language barrier, they often encounter a cultural barrier in accessing information. For example, Kelly (2010) found that not only the collections, but also the cataloguing systems in use, adopted a colonialist approach to indigenous materials; she advocated updating the language used in cataloguing to account for more diverse viewpoints on non-anglophone cultures.

Library non-fiction collections often do not adequately reflect the cultures and achievements of non-whites, decreasing the interest of underrepresented peoples in making use of the collections (Thwaites, 1993).

Sociopolitical and cultural barriers also exist for other minority groups, such as religious minorities. For example, Caidi and MacDonald (2008) found that since the September 11 attacks, Canadian Muslims have perceived an anti-Muslim bias in the media, and have sought a greater variety of sources in order to better evaluate the quality and balance of information. However, study respondents also reported being more wary of what information they seek and paying more attention to privacy due to the perceived reactions of both the government and the general non-Muslim public to their Muslim identities. The authors concluded that libraries should provide collections and services “that reflect the complexity of the issues relevant to this community” while ensuring the privacy of patrons. A similar barrier exists for LGBT people: Simpson (2006) found that LGBT materials were underrepresented in library collections, that those that were present were difficult to locate due to the language used in cataloguing, and that librarians were often uncomfortable in responding to queries about LGBT issues.

Libraries face particular challenges in providing access for children and youth, as social pressures exist to filter or censor the information they receive. For example, Simpson (2006) reports cases of public libraries being told to restrict youth access to LGBT materials and of librarians being uncomfortable with assisting young patrons seeking such materials. The Canadian Library Association’s official position (1985) is that libraries “guarantee and facilitate access to all expressions of knowledge and intellectual activity, including those which some elements of society may consider to be unconventional, unpopular or unacceptable”; however, this principle is often challenged in the context of youth services. A survey of public Canadian libraries

conducted by McKechnie (2001) found that most had policies restricting internet use by children in some way and required parental consent for children to obtain library cards, some had restrictions on either children's access to collections or items collected by the library (for example, excluding school textbooks), and a few explicitly allowed parents to access the child's borrowing record without their consent. All of these policies would have a negative impact on younger patrons' freedom to access potentially sensitive information, particularly concerning sexuality.

Another barrier to providing information access from the library's perspective is a simple lack of awareness among community members about the resources and services that the library offers, and difficulties experienced in converting non-users into library patrons. Schwartz (2013) notes that non-users cannot readily be informed by the methods used to contact active library patrons, such as the library website, and that libraries should devise campaigns to reach these potential users in spaces where they already congregate and are comfortable. For example, advertisements in foreign languages and outreach to newcomers' or cultural organizations can help immigrants and minority groups to become familiar with the library and its services (Kumaran & Salt, 2010).

Lack of awareness among staff members of the needs and concerns of underserved groups is similarly a barrier to effective provision of information access. DeFaveri (2005) noted that those without familiarity or experience with the public library – such as immigrants or the illiterate – may feel that “their lives, their values, and their concerns are not reflected in the culture of the library” (p. 1). Staff may harbour misunderstandings or prejudices about certain groups, impacting their behaviour towards patrons (Miller-Gatenby & Chittenden, 200, p. 320). Training and staff evaluation are important tools in ensuring that patrons can be comfortable with the library and with asking staff for assistance. Wilson (2008) notes that there is

currently an acute lack of staff trained to deal with “Aboriginals, youth at risk, and multicultural groups” in the library.

Careful construction and application of the library’s governing texts – such as policies, goals, and strategic plans – is an essential tool in resolving barriers for many underserved groups, and in preventing the propagation of systemic biases. First, the library’s mission statement should reflect the value of equal access to information for all community members, as advocated by the American Library Association Council (2004) among others. The library manager should consult with representatives of diverse populations in developing the library’s strategic plan, and should be cognisant of the evolving makeup and needs of the community. Libraries must ensure that policies balance the needs of all patrons and are consistently applied by staff (Wong, 2009). These include policies dictating all aspects of library management, from collection development to rules of conduct. As Evans and Alire (2013) point out, originated policies developed in accordance with the strategic plan and in anticipation of potential issues are more effective than more reactive types. The manager should discuss with staff how to address potentially contentious situations, such as complaints about items in the collection that are perceived as being inappropriate, in accordance with the library’s policies.

Finally, perhaps the most prominent concern for libraries in promoting information access is economic. Libraries across Canada are increasingly facing budgetary constraints (Wilson, 2008), in some cases to such an extent that their ability to provide even basic information access is limited. Costs for materials, particularly electronic serials subscriptions, have risen dramatically. In this context, it can be difficult to maintain basic coverage in the library’s collections, never mind to expand collections to respond to the needs of underserved groups. Kumaran and Salt (2010) point out that it is not feasible for the library to collect in every language or for

every need, and that within reason user communities will understand that limited resources will require setting priorities for collection. However, the manager should ideally be planning the budget to allow for collections and programming to serve all members of the community.

One potential mitigation of the economic problem is the continued proliferation of open access. Open access materials are those with

free availability on the public Internet, permitting any users to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of these articles, crawl them for indexing, pass them as data to software, or use them for any other lawful purpose, without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. (Budapest Open Access Initiative, cited in Cryer, 2011)

Because these resources are freely available, they provide a budget-friendly alternative for libraries seeking reference materials in the context of decreased purchasing power (Hill & Bossaller, 2012). The materials can be made more discoverable either by incorporating them directly into the library catalogue or by creating subject guides that includes listings of freely available resources (Cryer, 2011; Hill & Bossaller, 2012). Public libraries have fewer opportunities to promote open-access publishing directly in comparison to academic libraries, but Cryer (2011) suggests that they can also incorporate support for open access in licensing agreements with publishers.

Participation in library consortia or other partnerships also offers opportunities to reduce the material and service costs of individual libraries. They are able to negotiate better contract conditions with publishers and providers than is possible

for individual libraries, but can also coordinate the sharing of resources and services (Tillack, 2014). For example, in British Columbia many resources are shared by public libraries province-wide, including virtual reference services and some licensed electronic databases, and patrons can register to use library cards from one system at any BC library (British Columbia Ministry of Community, Aboriginal, and Women's Services, 2004). Partnerships with community organizations like homeless advocates or social services can augment the library's collections with community resources (Wong, 2009).

Library advocacy can provide for increased library funding. Fitch and Warner (1998) suggest that librarians value the public library according to its economic impact on the community, and use this valuation in requesting additional funding. The provision of information access to underserved groups decreases social burden and in many cases increases their ability to contribute to the economy, by increasing technological and print literacy, improving immigrant language skills and integration, and helping homeless or low-income individuals to improve their situations. As most public libraries in Canada are funded by the provincial or municipal government (Wilson, 2008), valuations that demonstrate a significant public service and/or that complement government services and objectives greatly support continued funding.

The public library has as its *raison-d'être* the provision of access to information for all members of the community, no matter what potential barriers may exist for them. In helping to achieve that goal, the library must consider the needs of a diverse set of populations and how to best address these needs in the context of ongoing technological, social, cultural, and economic change. Approaches for mitigating or eliminating barriers include outreach efforts that specifically target the needs and interests of particular populations, training for staff members, development of plans and policies that incorporate the concerns of underserved groups and can be fairly

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and consistently applied, and addressing budgetary shortfalls in providing access.

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