

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of Library and Information Science (LIS) in building social justice, through facilitating increased citizen participation in politics. It considers potential barriers to the ability of LIS to apply recommendations from educational and political theorists in practice.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper identifies a problem with levels of political participation in the United Kingdom and explores both the reasons for disengagement and ways to improve levels of participation. Giroux's theory of critical pedagogy is explored to seek explanations and solutions for the decline in political participation identified. Concepts of information and critical literacies are explored in relation to political information and whether citizens possess the skills required to find information, assess its accuracy and reliability as well as the ways in which texts may seek to influence the reader, and critically and meaningfully apply the knowledge they gain from the information they have encountered. Emphasis is placed on the importance of public libraries as free and accessible public spaces where citizens can access information that is relevant to their needs, support in their information seeking endeavours and engage in discussion about issues of social justice.

Findings: Current systems of management and policy are counter-productive to aims of developing services to actively tackle social injustice through increasing citizens' literacy skills. Neoliberal management practice, with its emphasis on the market and consumerist agendas, has damaged the progressive element of library services, and current changes to the education system are unlikely to herald the introduction of a critical literacy agenda.

Recommendations: Information literacy as a LIS topic must focus more deeply on critical perspectives of information to ensure that it is about more than the development of skills to simply locate information, but enables individuals to fully understand information within various contexts.

Introduction

A developed democracy depends on information, knowledge and education (Gorman, 2000, p.160), and citizens who wish to meaningfully participate in democratic processes (Milner, 2002). Political participation is vital for building social justice through representative democratic systems. In order to effectively participate, and in order to ensure that citizens are able to understand and appreciate the needs and views of others, citizens require access to information and the ability to understand the information they encounter, through the application of skills and techniques including effective information seeking, cognitive processing skills and the ability to think critically.

Research shows that political participation in the United Kingdom has been in decline for several years (Hansard Society, 2012; Henn & Weinstein, 2006; Baston & Ritchie, 2004), with declining voter turnout rates in both local and national elections. Reduced participation in formal political processes is detrimental to the democratic system in several ways, including reduced perceptions of legitimacy for actions taken by the government and a reduced likelihood that the decisions made by those in power reflect the needs of citizens, particularly those who do not participate, who are more likely to be of lower social class, marginalised and/or vulnerable (Hansard Society, 2012; Henn & Weinstein, 2006).

This paper will explore areas in which library and information sciences (LIS) can encourage political engagement and knowledge acquisition in order to support political agency and strengthen the democratic system. It discusses some of the challenges faced by LIS and the importance of overcoming these problems for the benefit of the democracy and social justice. Giroux's theory of critical pedagogy is explored to seek explanations and solutions for the 'crisis of democracy' that society faces.

The Importance of Political Participation

Political participation is important in order to legitimise democracies and reflect the needs and views of citizens (Bellamy, 2008, p.12). To be able to participate meaningfully and effectively, citizens need to be well informed about and engaged with political issues. Research has found that those who are more knowledgeable and informed are more likely to be engaged, have consistent attitudes and vote 'correctly' (i.e., in line with their policy preferences) (Martin et al., 1993).

How People Participate

There are many methods of political participation, including forms which are considered more traditional, such as voting, signing petitions and attending protests, and less traditional, including engaging in political discussion through online forums and social media. The internet has made political communication far more widespread and easily accessible which is undoubtedly of benefit to democratic systems, where deliberation and discussion bolsters civic strength, but there are some concerns that the internet also increases the likelihood of people engaging in selective exposure and limiting the kind of

content and views they engage with to those which match their personal belief systems, which can lead to even more social fragmentation (Larson, 2010, p.6; Sunstein, 2000, p.75).

Although there are many ways for people to participate in the political process, a lack of participation does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest or desire to be involved. Blythe (2010, p.17) considered the results of the 2005 MORI survey for the Electoral Commission, which found that of those who did not vote, 13% described themselves as “very interested” in politics and 43% were “interested”. Furthermore, he suggests that non-voters share the same concerns as voters, such as crime, health and money, but do not necessarily see these issues as being related to what they conceive as being “political”. When asked why they do not participate in politics, the respondents to the Hansard Society’s Audit of Political Engagement survey (2009) gave reasons such as disillusionment, not seeing a point in participating, not believing that involvement would make any difference, bad past experiences, not being knowledgeable enough to make an informed decision and believing that the electoral system is flawed. This suggests that the current model of governance does not meet their needs for participation in some way (Blythe, 2010, p.18).

Developing Participation through Discussion

One solution often suggested to make the political system more relevant to people’s lives and therefore increase involvement is to encourage people to participate more through discussion and deliberation in order to make sure the voices of the typically unheard get through and ensure that the government’s decisions reflect the needs of everyone. A benefit of deliberative processes is that discussion raises awareness of the rationale behind oppositional views, which increases people’s support for the civil liberties of those with whom they may have ideological disagreements (Mutz, 2006, p.67).

However, the idea that simply encouraging people to talk about political issues, thereby increasing levels of discussion, will result in a strengthened democracy, is flawed (Wolff, 2006, p.90-92). Individuals need to have some degree of knowledge about the issues they are discussing in order to better perceive the public good (Wolff, 2006, p.97), as well as the ability to meaningfully and constructively communicate topics which can be both complex and sensitive. Furthermore, it is beneficial for people to understand that the nature of deliberation can be problematic in itself because it is inherently encased in power structures:

It is fine to say that democracy must be deliberative and reasonable, that there are principles that should guide public discussion. But it’s simply not true that such idealizing principles actually grow out of speaking, deliberating, or being active in the public sphere, which is exactly the contention of discourse ethics. In fact, something more like the opposite is closer to the truth. Speaking is encased in language games. Deliberation is a second-order decision, which does not challenge but elaborates presuppositions. (Alexander, 2006:16)

It is therefore necessary for individuals to develop certain skills to be able to navigate not only the wealth of information available about political topics, but also to understand the context and the economics of the process as well as the ways persuasive messages are created and sustained (Muir, 2008, p.57).

Literacies

Functional literacy is an important element of understanding the world through information, but this is only a very basic starting point. It is a tool that can only be used effectively within a society that supports freedom of expression and enables the widespread dissemination, availability and preservation of that free expression (Gorman, 2000, p.160). It is also only relevant to certain aspects of information; decoding the meaning of symbols within political communication involves more than being able to read text. Critical thought is a skill required in order to be able question assumptions, evaluate evidence and assess the conclusions present in the political information to which one is exposed.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is an aspect of critical pedagogy, a philosophy of education described by Henry Giroux as an “educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, and connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action” (Giroux, 2010, p. 116).

In his text *Education and the Crisis of Public Values*, Giroux argues that the dominant pedagogical practice is outcome based, corporate in nature, and has no place for critical thinking or developing a sense of civic responsibility among students (2012, p.x). Students have been stripped of their capacities to be “critical agents” (p.118). He advocates for the need for reform, which must support the notion of engaged citizenship and democratic modes of governing. There needs to be a genuine belief in freedom, equality and justice. This reform, he argues, should take the shape of critical pedagogy, which requires students to engage in a “culture of questioning” and offers young people the chance to develop the “knowledge, skills, and sense of responsibility needed for them to participate in and exercise the leadership necessary for them to govern the prevailing social order” (p.116-7). This will make politics more effective, he argues, by enabling people to become critical agents and have more of a sense of their social responsibilities and need to participate (p.121).

Emphasis must be placed on the point that critical literacy and pedagogy does not aim to politically indoctrinate young people, but insists that education in its very nature cannot be neutral, and is in fact “eminently political” (p.118). The practice of teaching critical literacy cannot be reduced to method, but must be defined by context and should be seen as a project of individual and social transformation.

Information Literacy

Information literacy can be described as “ability to access, evaluate and use information” (Bruce, 2003 in Andersen, 2006:214). In the context of information that is used to make political choices, it is important that this information is accurate and comes from reliable sources. As Gorman writes, “Democracy benefits from an informed citizenry; a misinformed citizenry damages it” (2000, p.166).

Much research has been conducted into the information literacy skills of young people, the findings of which tend to indicate that young people lack a number of important abilities. There appears to be a prevailing educational view that undergraduate students have incomplete cognitive thinking skills, which creates difficulty in discerning between valid and invalid information. For example, research into the information search behaviour of the millennial generation found that young people “proceed erratically through the information search process making limited attempt to evaluate the quality or validity of the information gathered” (Taylor, 2012). The study concluded that young people do not consider the verification of information sources to be of importance, which indicates a non-critical view of information (online in this instance, but this could also apply to physical information resources). Other authors have argued that young people also lack concern or ability to discern the authority of sources and quality of content (Williams & Rowlands, 2007; Hirsch, 1999; Grimes & Boening, 2001; Lorenzen, 2001 in Taylor, 2012).

To be information literate requires the individual to develop skills beyond those needed to merely locate information, and that it inherently requires the ability to take a “critical stance” toward information issues, which is a socio-political skill:

Locating an understanding of information literacy in a broader discursive framework requires us to rethink our hitherto concepts and understandings of information literacy as socio-political skills and not mere technical search skills. (Andersen, 2006:213)

Some authors argue that increasingly, young people view information as a product and have a consumerist approach to education (Taylor, 2012; Giroux, 2012). This neoliberal social view is a suggested cause of problems with young people’s information literacy, in that there may be a focus on a search product rather than the process of evaluating and verifying content (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This idea resonates with Giroux’s belief that neoliberalism depoliticises citizens and denies individuals the opportunity to think critically (Giroux, 2012, p.32).

The Role of Libraries

Libraries have an important role to play in building social justice, as providers of information. The major sources of information about politics are the mainstream media, including television and radio, and the internet. The information people find through these sources may be unreliable, misleading and not illustrative of the full picture. As well as seeking to ensure that individuals develop the skills necessary to understand this through formal education channels, public libraries are able to act as a resource that increases the chances

that people will use more reliable information, both through the provision of high quality information and support for information literacy development. This may alter the relationship between the information seeker and the political process in a positive way. Citizens are often considered 'consumers' of media:

Governments in both Britain and the USA have allowed our dominant information and entertainment source – television – to be increasingly defined by the rules of commerce and less by the goals of public service...Advertising clutters the landscape, from billboards and posters to shop fronts and the sides of buses and even the clothes we wear. It has turned the Internet from primarily a public information service into a consumerist tool. (Lewis et al., 2005, p.131)

Libraries are non-commercial spaces where individuals are treated as citizens, not consumers. Their motives lie in education, not profit, and in this way they can offer a way to improve levels of political knowledge, participation and critical literacy skills.

Public Space

In addition to providing information resources, libraries serve a valuable function as spaces for deliberation and discussion. They are often regarded as the epitome of public sphere as defined by Habermas (Buschman, 2005). Gorman (2000, p.45) writes:

They are places that embody learning, culture, and other important secular values and manifestations of the common good, and there is a need rising from our common humanity to visit such places.

Such public spheres are important to social justice in democratic societies, not only because they keep public values alive and embody the ideals and promises of substantive democracy (Giroux, 2012, p.x). As well as providing a space for citizens to gather, they hold "the recorded knowledge and information necessary to fuel the discussion" (Gorman, 2000, p. 164). They are places in which tolerance and pluralism can be stimulated (Audunsun, 2005). These resources provide the opportunity for creating transformative learning spaces, which Eryaman suggests meet Giroux's ideal for radical democracy:

Giroux argues that a radical democracy indicates the need for transformative learning spaces in which disadvantaged groups can gain a sense of themselves as public actors while developing connections to the broader world. Indeed, public libraries as alternative spaces for democratic education and development may be critical to initiating and sustaining public action and social change. That is, public libraries as alternative spaces can become protected spaces in which members of disadvantaged groups can work together – formal and informally – to develop new ideas and creative solutions to collective problems. (Eryaman, 2010, p.134)

However, the UK public library system faces a number of barriers to building social justice through education and participation, three of which will be explored in this paper.

Neutrality

Neutrality is a quality often cited when justifying the value of public libraries (Smith, 2010, pp.21-23). Their presence in communities as universal services, free at the point of access, means that they are often seen as 'neutral' spaces. However, the policy decisions made by library services and local authorities means that under the surface, they cannot be described as neutral – every stock selection decision made, for example, is inherently political. In adhering to traditional library values such as avoiding prejudice (McMenemy, 2008, p.42) or dealing with issues of censorship (p.44), library services make political, non-neutral choices.

If libraries were to develop policies to actively tackle social justice issues, such as programmes and methods of service delivery to encourage political participation, they could no longer promote themselves as the 'neutral' establishments that they often claim to be. Policy directions of this nature are inherently political and the decision to actively tackle an issue such as disengagement is too obvious to mask under a cloak of neutrality, with respect to political engagement. Justifying and promoting an agenda so progressive in nature would be particularly difficult for library services in more conservative authorities. However, if carefully managed and supported by a strong and transparent policy, it may still be possible to ensure that the physical space of the library is seen by those using it as a non-judgemental space which they are free to use for educational, recreational and community purposes.

Involvement in complex, political issues should not be avoided by library services for the sake of an easy life. To do so would be to neglect their social duty, and would be a failure to provide an important part of the service to the citizens they are built to serve:

Perhaps the time has come for more libraries to move from passivity to intervention in politics – not in the sense of taking political sides but in supplying the information and recorded knowledge citizens need and encouraging informed and knowledgeable discussion of public policy. (Gorman, 2000, p.163)

Volunteers

An emerging issue in UK public libraries is the replacement – directly and indirectly – of paid staff with volunteers. This signals the insidious undermining of the role and value of professional, qualified and trained staff and the value of libraries as a public service. There is a very real risk that the use of volunteers to attempt to make underfunded library services viable and sustainable has already resulted in a drop in service standards. Concern has been expressed that the professional relationship between librarian or library assistant and library user will be lost when volunteers replace paid staff. The formal education librarians receive about issues such as information literacy will be lost, and as a result the public will receive a lower quality of service. There may also be real or perceived ethical and security threats concerning data protection, user confidentiality and censorship, for example, if volunteer

policies and training fail to address these issues. These problems could have a severely detrimental effect on the public's perception of libraries as "safe, welcoming, neutral spaces open to all in the community" (DCMS, 2010, p.9).

Privatisation

Local authorities have so far tended to take the volunteer library approach rather than introducing private firms to run the services on their behalf. Although some companies have entered bids to take on library contracts, these have (in the vast majority of cases) been unsuccessful and the companies appear to have scaled back their ambitions for the time being (Dutta, 2011). However, if privatisation is to occur in the long-term, which is likely when unsustainable volunteer libraries fail and local authorities are still required to provide a "comprehensive and efficient library service" (Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964), there are ethical concerns which must be raised. For example, there are concerns around selling patron records for marketing purposes and the profit motive of private firms (Klinkow Hartmann, 2011, p.7), which reflects a loss of the commercial neutrality provided by public services. These concerns, and the loss of non-commercial, public spaces, could, as with volunteer libraries, have a detrimental effect on how the public view their local libraries, and prevent people from using them as places for civic education, community discussion and deliberation.

Conclusion

Current systems of management and policy are counter-productive to aims of developing services to actively tackle social injustice through increasing citizens' literacy skills. Neoliberal management practice, with its emphasis on the market and consumerist agendas, has damaged the progressive element of library services, and current changes to the education system are unlikely to herald the introduction of a critical literacy agenda.

In order to build social justice it is important for people to develop skills and abilities to participate meaningfully in the political process. These skills involve various literacies, including critical thinking and information seeking abilities. The active introduction of these literacies to formal and informal educational institutions is inherently political, which poses a challenge to library and information services. Although libraries have a natural role to play as providers of information resources and facilitators of literacy development, it may be difficult to justify a radical agenda within the current local and national political climates. Libraries face many challenges, both pragmatic and ideological, which must be overcome through a realignment of core values and restatement of their place in society.

Information literacy as a LIS topic must focus more deeply on critical perspectives of information to ensure that it is about more than the development of skills to simply locate information, but enables individuals to fully understand information within various contexts. Again, it is likely that ideological barriers will need to be overcome in order to embed such values within the discipline, but it is an important step towards social justice that must be taken.

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