

Matthew Kelly:

## **Unchain my heart and set me free: A new civil society library model.**

### **Abstract:**

A new model of the public library is outlined that explicitly links it to its role in support of civil society. The model argues that the ongoing “chaining” of public libraries to direct government oversight and control is deleterious to their ability to actualize their potential. Collateral argument is made that that it is the civil society character rather than the simply free nature of these libraries which needs to be harnessed to help move the conceptualization of the sector away from a reactive model of client service toward a dynamic approach that integrates with the life experiences of clients.

### **Author:**

Matthew Kelly

- Department of Information Studies, Curtin University
- matthew.j.kelly@curtin.edu.au

## Unchain My Heart and Set Me Free: A New Civil Society Library Model.

The future for public libraries might be bright but just as easily it may be that the institution becomes outdated, outmoded and, especially, outcompeted in the race to stimulate, educate and inform. The really crucial factor which will decide what the next 20 years holds for the sector is how we define the community with the need for the services public libraries can, and might, offer. If we define this community better there is a much improved chance that what will result is a vibrant and relevant institution. If we do not, we face the likelihood that other information providing institutions will emerge which will fill communities' needs better.

Why is the crucial issue about definition of the community of need important in helping to put public libraries on the right path—the path back to relevance? It is because there are so few definitions of what the public in public library means that we lose our way, both in terms of how we identify resource needs and in terms of how we match these with information users. We lose our way when we misunderstand that a public library is just a free library. We lose our way when we think of the public as the “average person” or the demographic delineation of community. We lose our way when we forget that there is no single model for organizing the public library, just as we lose our way when we refuse to look to the broader information landscape within which the library operates, that is that when we deny that things might be better if done differently.

I have argued elsewhere for a deeper conceptualization of what we mean when we discuss the public library and have used the term civil society library to help to get to grips with this issue of definition (Kelly, 2014). When we conceive of this type of library we conceive of it as having a separate role to private corporate libraries but we conceive of it, especially, as being different to academic libraries. Educational institutions’ libraries have a fairly well-recognized task to hold information which aids students’ educational accomplishment and supports professional researchers. Civil society libraries have no such requirement. Civil society libraries have an obligation to meet the information needs of all members of society. But, what is this civil society and how can defining it better aid in improving the responsiveness of the institution?

Civil society, potentially, includes everyone within a community and can be defined at many levels, both in terms of size (a town or a city) and in terms of the political community (within the frameworks of a nation state or internationally). Civil society operates to help constitute governments but at a quite fundamental level the definition is inoperable when formal government (executive, legislative or administrative) mechanisms are in operation. Civil society is *not* government and government, while constituted by civil society, is not civil society. Using this definition the common government-supported, government-administered public library is not a civil society library. Public libraries are often government libraries designed to meet the needs of civil society. Where civil society institutions such as library boards, empowered to manage independently of government, are in place there is a good argument that a sort of civil society library is emerging. I argue that these organizational and governance arrangements, despite some advances being made in some jurisdictions, are yet to achieve the requisite form to enable civil society’s libraries to reach their full potential.

In order to make the argument that the simplistic free library definition of a public library is inadequate, and that it is necessary to sever the ties from government to fully realize the potential of the sector, there needs to be a case made that the funding for the civil society library ought to be freed from the direct oversight of bureaucrats. While public monies always demand accountability and audit, we need to ask if there are models of sectoral funding that allow civil society entities to operate sufficiently at arm’s length to enable a culture of independence and self-regulation to occur. While it is not possible to generalize across the globe, many universities are substantially funded to achieve their mission by governments but retain their self-accrediting status and are functionally autonomous in terms of governance. By way of example, Australia’s major universities (which I am familiar with) have often been established by legislative acts but are not state universities as such. Vocational education colleges in Australia, by contrast, are state institutions.

The argument for civil society libraries is not that they become mini universities, nor that they reinvent themselves as educational institutions, but that their worth is in a special competency that they have, through their librarians, to fulfil a well-recognized demand from the community. Where universities teach and accredit the learning of domain knowledge, civil society libraries would, I argue, primarily, organize and disseminate

domain knowledge. When looked upon in this way there is no reason that we cannot sever the public library from immediate government oversight and the limitations that accrue from this inhibitory, shackling, inappropriate relationship.

The immediate benefit of librarians organizing their own institutions, rather than being framed as workers within government institutions (the implicit and false assumption in such a framing is that the state is the only vehicle for provision of libraries), is the opening up of the civil society library to greater freedom to plan and to innovate. While I would not advocate either, there is no intrinsic reason that a civil society library might not decide not to hold fiction any longer or, even, to move itself entirely to a fiction-only collection. The civil society library might offer more services to patrons who could afford to pay for them. It might engage in partnerships with businesses. It might offer accredited or short term educational courses to help fund services. It might commence a publishing venture or engage in web development. These examples attempt to define the limits we place on the potentiality of civil society libraries today by hinting at the boundaries that currently exist rather than to advocate change for change's sake.

While I believe it is necessary to sever the ties to government oversight (continued government control will lead to the death of civil society libraries) as the precursor to a renewed role in alignment with the changes in the information landscape, this is not just an exercise in building new organizational models but is about putting in place the conditions required to stimulate an adequate response to civil society's changed demands for a knowledge repository. Civil society continues to demand that its knowledge repositories be authoritative. In the digital age this requires that the library be capable of interfacing and negotiating with commercial and academic knowledge-creating entities and that while some filtering takes place, this is not primarily what users want librarians to do. Civil society continues to demand that its knowledge repositories be comprehensive, that they take the lead in ensuring that the representation of knowledge appropriate to their needs is as widely cast as possible. Civil society continues to demand that its knowledge repositories be accessible. Following the identification of core knowledge, and a core collection, libraries should facilitate patron-driven acquisition using an equity-based model. Finally, civil society continues to demand that its knowledge repositories be understandable. This would mean that the library works with whatever system of knowledge organization stimulates use of collections (bibliographic, textual, subject or relevance) and that it adopts digital strategies that harness artificial intelligence, perhaps in the commonsense knowledge tradition and in reinforcement learning, to dynamically link resources (the available and the potentially available) to people.

While we want an adequate response to the new challenges of changes to information culture that build on the best that the information disciplines have developed, we also need to see a transformation in librarianship from a reactive approach toward one that is both more provident and more sagacious. This would incorporate such themes as better understanding of the philosophy of information, information ethics, the hermeneutics of information and the broader schemata of knowledge organization. All of these would help to feed into a growth in the profession which would see a consultancy approach fostered, one worthy of the esteem of scientific, cultural and civil-society communities. It is not that far-fetched to make the prediction that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the librarian's role will have moved as dramatically as the barber-surgeon's did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (which was from ameliorative dilettante to scientific miracle worker). While librarians are far from being dilettantes there are precious few miracles that we can honestly attribute to them given the reactive paradigm currently prevalent.

In coming decades we could choose to continue to focus on the fetishistic and animistic aspect of the public library as temple to civic virtue, and to continue to worship (and subsidize) the cult of literary culture, or, we could look to the potential that the institution has to be transformed and to, in turn, transform our relationship with knowledge, the data-informatic and our lifelong journey to both engage with learning and to negotiate an ever more complex world of information resources. Picture this: when we commence our elementary school education we are assigned a personal information consultant (a librarian for all intents and purposes). This person stays with us on our journey through the negotiation of information resources until we reach high school at which point they pass the responsibility to a person with greater familiarity of the information needs of teenagers. The process would end with a third tier consultant who would aim to assist with information research, advice and referral throughout our lives when we leave school. Obviously the parallels with teacher

librarianship and the existing information literacy tradition are there at the level of the child's and youth's advisors but there is no real model in existence that I know of that is equivalent to the role designed to assist adults with their information needs.

Any such role, and this is the fundamentally poor construction of the librarian's role today in the civil society context, is one that can only be conceived of as supporting deficit rather than talent, ignorance rather than knowledge. Until this deficit reduction mindset is balanced by a positive program (this pertains as much to our library collections as it does to how we conceptualize the librarian's role) we will continue to see the flight of knowledgeable people away from libraries and into hybrid information culture groups that are aloof from the public/communal resource-sharing model. This flight from libraries will continue to be caused by the inability of libraries to meet their more mature demands.

The corollary benefit of this broader program (to give it a working name we might call it "the culture of information integration") is that by raising the bar higher across society in how we expect to, and do, work with information, there are likely to be dynamic, positive educational outcomes. A massive investment in human capital is called for to support this and is unprecedented in recent times. It would match the social transformation that occurred with industrialization and portend social change in line with the mass urbanization that occurred in the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that continues to characterize patterns in human cultural adaptation (2007 was the first year most people on Earth lived in urban environments).

These changes are largely well-recognized but they are not being adequately planned for. We all recognize the changes afoot—the move from communication consumer to digital producer, from passive reader to active researcher, from information subject to information actor (or even digital citizen)—all these will result in significant changes in cultural mores, modes of labour, production, innovation and entrepreneurship. What is important to consider for the public library, and all we hold dear in its communitarian model of making expensive information resources available to all and showcasing the benefits of learning and culture, is that without a change of model that radically reformulates the user-centered paradigm so that this is more than mere cant, more than simply window dressing, more than simply pandering to the populist impulses of ill-informed politicians and their functionaries for demands of proof of life (circulation statistics), we will make little headway in achieving our core mission. Such a change to the user-centered paradigm takes a socially progressive lead on issues of access to knowledge and the data-informatic. It requires that the model for user-centerism in information be human-centered rather than just a technocratic salve, that it relies on a hermeneutic model of information to support its claims to legitimacy and to ensure that it does not degenerate into a form of psychologism which focuses only on "deficit reduction" (that having an information need in some way exemplifies a cognitive gap) or that there is a measure that can be articulated in sociological terms for adequate minimums or averages relating to how civil society participants can "manage," "cope with," or "absorb" information.

What I would wish to see, rather, is a paradigm that looks to how we deal with information as symptomatic of other more intentional states of knowing (and seeking to know). While information science need not be separated entirely from a methodological naturalism which sees much to be gained when all empirical sciences worship at the same altar (hypothesis, deduction, testing against data), this approach should be qualified in the sense that when we deal with meaningful behavior we need to take into consideration a lot, lot more. A civil society library is nothing if it is not a vehicle for helping to advance the quality of meaning in a person's life and, at the risk of stating the patently obvious, significant in how we formulate this is how we attribute meaning to various types of information. The relationship between how we represent scientific knowledge and humanistic knowledge remains of crucial importance.

Public libraries will have a bright future if they can be reinvented as civil society libraries. The name will not change for patrons/clients/users but for practitioners and theorists the role of the public library needs to be reinvigorated beyond the "merely public" and toward an orientation that takes account of the role the institution plays in the life of civil society. While precious few will have access to the wonders of the academic library for more than a couple of years, we all have access to the civil society library for life. The civil society library must become more sophisticated to meet this need for a changed social setting; technological wizardry will only go

so far in helping to make the connections between people and resources and the real changes are in how we conceptualize the library's place in society, raising the bar in terms of resources and the relevance of our advisory capability. Should the library/information profession venture to take this more responsible role in society, and should the argument be made and won for greater independence and autonomy of the institution from government, the beneficiaries will be a society better educated, better informed and, all together, inherently more capable of engaging with the responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society. As it stands, too many people are falling through the cracks and missing the benefits of the digital revolution, paralyzed by a quasi-information literacy that is technically focused and a culture of shallow engagement with the potentiality of the information universe (engaged in simple networking). This lack of participation in the life of learning, of knowledge and of culture bodes ill for civil society as the constitutive sector underpinning democracy and a fair society. It is now time for civil society to unchain its libraries and allow them to embark upon the program that they are uniquely qualified to pursue; that is, to ensure that the digital revolution is not a precursor to a more anodyne culture but rather a liberating force, opening up the possibilities for human understanding, empathy and co-operation.

## References

- Kelly, M. 2014. Assessing the relative value of domain knowledge for civil society's libraries: The role of core collections. Proceedings of the Libraries in the Digital Age 14 Conference, June 2014, University of Zadar, Zadar, Croatia. <http://ozk.unizd.hr/proceedings/index.php/lida/article/view/127>*