

Civil Commitment and the Role of Public Librarians

Hilary Yerbury^(✉) and Maureen Henninger

University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia
{hilary.yerbury, maureen.henninger}@uts.edu.au

Abstract. Western culture has developed based on notions that truth, by overcoming falsehood, underpins democracy. Libraries and librarians have played an important part in the provision of information to support democratic processes. This study explored information services offered by the small number of public librarians whose role is to provide information services to employees of local governments, elected representatives and to the general public in Sydney, Australia and their perceptions of their role in supporting the potential for civic literacy to contribute to the quality of public policies and democracy. In the interviews, librarians emphasised the importance of awareness-raising of their role in providing information; some perceived opportunities to highlight existing partnerships or to develop new ones; and community discussions of fake news were seen to give scope for repositioning the services of librarians. The regime of truth relating information access to democratic principles has not yet been replaced.

Keywords: Civic literacy · Information literacy · Local government
Public libraries

1 Introduction

Western culture and democracy have developed based on notions that truth, by overcoming falsehood, underpins democracy, supported by wide dissemination of information. Democracy, as a form of social organisation, is based on notions of truthfulness and rightness, which are used in rational debate to achieve agreement on an issue. Harsin [1] claims that we are currently undergoing a shift from a regime of truth to a regime of post truth (ROPT). “Regime of truth” is a phrase used by Foucault to refer to “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements” [2, p. 133]. In the late 1970s, when he first began to explore this idea, the responsibility for a statement and the authority of the person making the statement were clear and there were relatively few competing messages, each of which could also be linked to sources of authority and institutions trusted to verify and validate claims. A regime of post truth, according to Harsin, begins to emerge with the fragmenting of sources of information and audiences, including the shifts in expectations that time and space will no longer be barriers to retrieving information; the proliferation of information sources is accompanied by a proliferation of claims and counter-claims about what should be accepted as true, leading people to a

point where they accept that there is no way to verify truth, and they are prevented from thinking about the bigger issues of social justice and democracy. This study examines the descriptions specialist public librarians give of the work they do, providing services to local government employees and elected representatives at the local level, to explore how they support democratic processes in the community and whether there is any evidence that a regime of post truth is developing in this context.

2 Public Libraries, Local Government Employees, and Democratic Practices

2.1 Public Librarians and Democratic Practices

Libraries and librarians do not exist separate from the rest of society. If Rettig [3] can claim that libraries are a “trusted forum” in contemporary society, it is because they have long been accepted as organisations that are part of a regime of truth, related both to the support of democratic practices and to management of access to scientific literature. Their professional associations usually have a statement similar to that of the Australian Library and Information Association which emphasises this role: “Public libraries have an important role in the development and maintenance of a democratic society by giving individuals access to a wide and varied range of information, ideas, opinions and skills”. In the wake of the outcome of the European Union Exit Referendum in the United Kingdom, where some Leave voters subsequently felt they had believed information which was not true [4], and the inauguration of Donald Trump as President of the US where Kellyanne Conway offered alternative facts as an excuse for statements which were patently wrong, there has been an increase in interest in how librarians can provide access to information and support democratic processes. Information literacy in particular has been proposed as a tool which librarians can use to support people not just in their educational processes but also in decisions related to everyday life [5, p. 15].

Public libraries have traditionally been seen to have a significant role in ensuring that people in local communities are well informed, and able to play an active part in the decision-making in their communities. To achieve this, they provide a range of services, from access to a variety of resources, including the World Wide Web as well as local resources, to reference services providing answers to complex questions, to in-house community programs and hosting community forums. They may also be involved in programs intended to develop information literacy [6].

Willingham argues that libraries are “civic agents creating civic agency” [7, p. 97]. The notion of civic literacy emerges from an American view of democracy and engagement in community and society, with its purpose often being stated as increasing participation in the electoral system [e.g. 8]. More broadly, it should be considered in the context of engagement with community and society and its importance in the development of civic agency. Branson [9] suggests that civic literacy can contribute to the quality of public policies and of democratic processes in a community. She notes the importance of public libraries, their collections and their services, in developing civic literacy in members of a community. Information literacy can be seen as

fundamental to civic literacy, through its emphasis on understanding and evaluating information presented. Although employees in any level of government, along with elected representatives, are an integral part of civic agency, there appears to be little consideration of the relationship between public librarians and local government employees and the understandings that public librarians might have of it. This study sets out to address this gap.

2.2 Local Government in Sydney and Its Employees

The metropolitan area of Sydney in New South Wales (NSW) currently covers thirty local government areas, generally referred to as councils. Local government is in a state of flux since 2015 when the NSW State Government proposed a series of amalgamations across the state, to reduce the number of councils. This proposal was hotly contested, and although some mergers have gone ahead, others are still before the court. Many councils do not currently have elected representatives (councillors), with their mayors and councillors having been removed in 2016 and the councils put under administration by the State Premier, pending the settlement of the mergers and elections to be held later in 2017. Each local government area previously had its own independent public library service; in councils where amalgamations have taken place, a review of library services is being undertaken. Thus, in almost every council area in metropolitan Sydney, there is uncertainty about the structures and processes of local government, sometimes with an end in sight and sometimes with no indication of when decisions will be finalised.

Each council employs a number of staff with a wide range of responsibilities, which can be divided into four classes of occupation: corporate services and governance, engineering and infrastructure, human and community services and planning and environment [10, p. 8]. Two factors about council workforces are important for this study; the first is that local government employees are generally more highly educated than the general workforce [10, p. 32] and the workforce is older than the general workforce, with 37% of employees aged over 50 (compared to 29%) [10, p. 9]. Across Australia, the number of staff employed by each council varies, as does the number of elected representatives, although the average is around ten.

Some public libraries have established services especially for council employees, although all would provide services on request. These special library services are known as corporate library services. One of the first in Australia was the City of Melbourne's Corporate Library, set up in 1987 to provide services to staff and councillors of the City of Melbourne [11]. In New South Wales, corporate librarians were appointed by a number of councils from the early 2000s, some responsible for collections of materials and others not. The introduction of these services came at a time when public libraries had increasing access to online data bases whereas the council employees did not necessarily have easy access to the internet. Over time, the number of corporate librarians appointed has decreased, for a variety of reasons, including universal access to the internet for council employees with Google seen to remove the need for specialist assistance in searching; changes in organisational structure; shifts in local priorities and the non-replacement of retiring staff.

2.3 Librarians and a Regime of Truth

The professional education of librarians has been positioned within a long-standing regime of truth, incorporating understandings of the authority of information, from reputable publishers and the peer review process, techniques for clearly identifying bibliographic items, the development of search strategies intended to retrieve relevant and appropriate resources, tools for understanding the needs and expectations of groups of information users and of individual enquirers and principles for assuring the quality of information and information resources. At the heart of their practice, or as some would put it at the core of their being [12], has been the provision of resources.

In a context of post-truth and alternative facts, providers of authoritative information across the world have re-asserted the importance of verifying the content of resources before using them. The International Federation of Library Associations has worked with Wikipedia [13] to use the skills of librarians to strengthen the resources posted on Wikipedia, and overcome the criticisms of its user-generated content. Its collaboration with Factcheck.org has led to a poster available in 30 languages, entitled “How to Spot Fake News” [14]. This poster, intended for display in libraries and community centers, provides a set of ideographs which represent an abbreviated form of traditional principles for ensuring the retrieval of quality information.

The emphasis in these concerns with post-truth and alternative facts has largely been on school and academic libraries and their relationship with students and the development of information literacy, and on public libraries and their need to develop an understanding that much that purports to be fact is fictitious. There appears to be no discussion of the information services provided to policy-makers at the local government level, that is, employees of local government and elected representatives.

3 Methodology

Using a practice theory approach [15, 16], in 2017, this study has interviewed the small number of specialist public librarians whose specific role is to provide information services to employees of local governments, elected representatives and to the general public. Six librarians were interviewed, and two more provided written responses; all are women, with at least twenty years professional experience. The purpose of these interviews was to understand the practices of these librarians through their descriptions of their tasks and interactions. Questions elicited responses about the ways these librarians describe their activities, the relationship of the information services provided to broader democratic processes and they also sought to identify possibilities for supporting democratic processes that librarians might wish for. Some questions were framed as an adaptation of Nicolini’s interview to the double [17], with participants being asked to describe how they would describe what they do to a public librarian unfamiliar with the concept of the corporate librarian. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min, and the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis aimed at identifying key features of the practices of these librarians, in particular those related to elements of civil commitment and information literacy. Approval for the study was given through the Human Research

Ethics Committee of the University of Technology Sydney, with the condition that no participants were to be named and the local government area in which the public library was situated was to be anonymised.

4 Findings

4.1 Practices – a Regime of Truth

The comments of these librarians reveal that their practices are very similar and that these practices are affected by the same external factors. To some extent this is not surprising, because they see themselves as having a group identity, they meet together and have an identity in the wider professional community. On the other hand, the areas in which they work are diverse, affected differently by the current process of mergers.

As a group, they maintain a wiki, whose purpose is describing for other librarians the tasks that make up their work. Here, they identify six tasks: promoting the work of the corporate librarian; involvement in council staff induction sessions; building relationships with staff in council departments; developing a working relationship with individual councillors, developing policy for library services to councillors and council staff and monitoring local government issues. In the interviews, participants provided insight into how they talk about these tasks.

“I provide information and resources to council staff to help them with their work” (L4) is a statement which all participants would acknowledge. Some manage a special collection of material, but most respond to requests for a book or a journal article or a factual answer by using the range of resources available to them through the public library. Most of the requests are “really basic” (L1, L4), although sometimes they fulfil requests for more complex searches (L1). All the librarians mentioned that they provided a current awareness bulletin, usually through using the staff intranet (L4) or as FAQs online (L6), “the modern version” (L5). Much of the work done by these librarians is re-active rather than pro-active (L5, L7), answering expressed needs.

A key part of their practice is verifying information, “sorting quality from dross” (L8) or making sure that council staff have information that can be substantiated. “We can provide “facts” that have been produced by different sources... pointing to different conclusions and can only expect that policy makers will weigh the merits of all the ‘facts’ and decide appropriately” (L7). In the context of post-truth, “things haven’t changed” (L5), “it’s not like it’s a new thing that libraries are doing” (L2), “we know... to fact check things before we put them on [the staff intranet]” (L1). For L3, it was important to maintain an “emphasis on the local, to know what’s happening and have ‘the facts right’”. Some of the participants expressed concern with how one can understand the notion of ‘fact’. Mostly, they reflected that a fact is something that they or council staff “can just look up” (L2), but they make a distinction between the way that they might conduct a search and the way that a member of the council staff might: for a search done by a librarian “they can know that the information is going to be trustworthy” (L5) and by a council staff member on Google, “It’s not like quality, is it?” (L4), because the information comes from a source lacking in “authority” (L5). On the other hand, L8 referred to some Google information as being “fit for purpose”

although in other cases, she might want staff to recognise that “what they need exceeds what they can find for themselves”. For L3, answers to questions which can be substantiated or which come from research-based resources are “actual facts”. L4 makes a distinction in the type of question someone might ask in order to explore the idea of fact, when she says: “You know, they might say: we are looking up how this street came to be named... do you have anything in your vertical file? They’re kind of solidly [sic] facts aren’t they? Do you know what I mean? It’s not like: ‘we’ve heard this, is it true?’” Only L2 refers to a broader context reported recently in the Australian media: “a lot of the information has been politicised... it’s how you actually [say] that a politician going ‘Yeah, I went out in a boat and looked [at bleaching on the Great Barrier Reef]’, isn’t the same as scientific explanations” (L1).

While all librarians offer information literacy services to council staff, the ways they do it vary. Some are actively involved in induction programs “to new staff” and post information in the relevant intranet page (L4). Whereas L1 notes that it is difficult to get council staff to take part in information literacy programs: “It’s not like in the university where staff will come for training ... I don’t get many people ask” [about information literacy training], L3 reported: “Every now and again, we run information sessions for staff on the corporate library and what’s available... So a lot of the time, we can teach them how to access the information themselves or how to use the databases.”

4.2 Democratic Processes

All the librarians were able to conceptualise the information services they provide as contributing to the democratic processes in a community, but L7 noted that her manager would have responded “They don’t [contribute]”. Raising awareness that information exists was seen as fundamental to the democratic processes and to this end, all libraries provided some level of specialist resources for council staff “that’s background information for policy” (L4), and this allowed the General Manager in a council dealing with a major issue, to ask: “How did it get to this?” (L3).

L4 and L5 both saw that the public library is involved in the democratic processes of the council itself through its hosting of public exhibitions about changes to council policy, especially planning regulations. L4 had considered hosting a community forum on a contentious issue in the community, but had thought better of it when she realised that “[t]here’s ‘security guards’ at council meetings”, presumably to maintain order. Participants also saw the importance of empowering local residents to understand not only local issues but the workings of the decision-making processes, such as “what are the processes for talking at council meetings?” (L2), because “[y]ou’re still on your own as a community member to navigate all this stuff” (L1).

Participants identified what they saw as “key trusted partnerships” (L2) in ensuring a well-informed community, and whilst most identified the local newspaper as one of these key partners, other partners listed included local chambers of commerce, key community groups and non-government organisations.

In providing information services to elected representatives, everyone noted that in the past, interactions with elected representatives were easier. The interpretation of the Local Government Act and the introduction of a Code of Conduct (L1) made it “complicated [to be] able directly to interact with councillors” (L2). L3 said she was

“not allowed to deal directly with the councillors” and L8 noted that “they don’t deal with staff at my level”; L4 described how they used to hand deliver current awareness bulletins to councillors but now have to work “at arms’ length” (L1), with the councillors putting in a request to the General Manager or another contact person and L7 noted that “council policy requires councillors to direct their questions through their contact point”. The consequence of this is that these specialist librarians no longer have an unmediated relationship with the elected representatives and the best they can do is to provide content for the induction of new councillors after elections or produce a section in the intranet, describing the services they can provide.

4.3 Changes to Practices

“In the past but not so much now”, this phrase from L1 was echoed by all participants. There was a common refrain, that in the past, these specialist librarians had had stronger interactions with the council staff and with the elected representatives – councillors. This was clearest in the references to information literacy. “The information literacy part, it has really died off.” (L4). Two reasons were given for this, one relating to the skills sets of council staff and the other to easy access to the internet. L8 mentioned that most staff now were tertiary educated and better able to do their own searching. L3 talked about a time when information literacy training was in quite high demand: “it was that change over period where older staff were having to learn” and L4 noted “when we started, people didn’t have access to the internet... then people got savvy”. She went on to say that when the council arranged access to specialised resources for all staff, it was no longer “the corporate librarian’s realm” (L4). On the other hand, L1 reflected: “I think we’ve sort of almost let that [information literacy] go” and the current situation is one that can prompt these corporate librarians to say: “well hang on one minute, this current news environment is really highlighting basic skills that we can impart to people”.

L3 observed a change which for her was a potential threat to the role of the public library as a trusted part of a democratic society. She noted that “we’ve had to ban a few customers recently. They’ve done the wrong thing, but this is a place for them.... They can’t get help from a lot of [other places in the community].” L4 indicated an anomaly in her council’s policy on use of the internet: “[If] you’ve got your own device, it’s free but if you don’t...”. For L5, “the people who don’t [have their own mobile technologies] are probably those who can least afford [to pay for use of the facilities in the public library]”.

4.4 And for the Future

Asked to express one wish for something that might enable them to support the democratic processes in their community, a context that L2 described as living “in diverse societies [...] where you all don’t think the same... [and] there’s more than one point of view that’s valid,” L7 wanted “a way of dispersing the hive mind/mass hysteria and forcing people to think for themselves”, and similarly L4 just “want[ed] people to think to ask”, to question what they were hearing. L3 and L5 both wanted “access for everybody to information”, “for free”; L6 wanted “an injection of funds” to assist in the

process of re-focusing public libraries and their staff and L8 wanted “more resources”. L2 sought “a better understanding for [librarians] about how [elected representatives] work and how we, as both individual citizens [and] a collective group of citizens, can constructively and ethically influence change”. L1, continuing her emphasis on access to evidence-based resources said: “I would just love it if we did a partnership with [the nearby university] and all our staff got a library card... that’d be great”.

5 Discussion

These findings suggest at one level that these librarians are working within the long-standing regime of truth. As Byrne [12] suggested, providing resources is at the heart of their practices. They emphasise the significance of appropriate documents and responses from well-founded resources in answering requests and appear to hold a clear sense of what constitutes quality or truth in these circumstances. They are concerned with access to information for council staff and elected representatives and also with ways to ensure that residents in their local community are well-informed about local issues and engaged in local forums. Kemmis [16] however, encourages researchers to look at the context in which practices occur, in particular at policies and conditions at a broader level in the community or society that may impinge on a set of practices.

These librarians are working within a context of trust, where they accept their responsibility for supporting democratic processes leading to empowerment within their community. They show an awareness of their potential to contribute to the quality of public policies, both through provision of information to council staff and through working with staff and community organisations to bring local issues to the attention of residents. However, they are disappointed by their lack of ability to develop what Branson describes as civic literacy [9] to the full, because of the barriers to direct engagement with elected representatives and in some instances because of the contentious nature of local issues which has led to security guards being present at council meetings, a situation out of keeping with the notion of the library as a democratic space.

Another indication of a lack of trust could be perceived in the prohibition of direct contact between these librarians and the elected representatives, spelled out in the codes of conduct for their particular council. Librarians as the providers of information to support decision-making perhaps were seen as having a privileged relationship, protected by the power of the information they provided to support the democratic processes. However, the Councillor Handbook, published by the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet in cooperation with the Local Government Association of NSW and the Shires Association of NSW in a section on access to information and resources in a chapter entitled Code of Conduct and Acting Ethically, states [18, p. 46] that “Access to council staff expertise must happen through the general manager, or in accordance with a system that is put in place to facilitate and coordinate councillor requests for information or action”. Clearly, that privileged professional relationship between information and its use in democratic processes has now been replaced by one where the notion of a personal relationship is more significant and potentially damaging to the democratic process.

Information literacy, seen as fundamental to the development of a well-informed public [6], is both a relatively new practice emerging with the automation of online information services and the popularisation of the Internet and already a skill which these librarians are no longer needed to teach because the skills are well established in the community. Familiarity with the Internet and the search capacities of Google and the appointment of younger university-educated staff has rendered the development in council staff and elected representatives of information literacy by these librarians redundant. Going hand in hand with these developments of increased information literacy among staff and elected representatives and universal access to the internet is the loss to the librarians of their role as gatekeepers over quality information.

Librarians recognised tensions between expectations for current activities and the way they may have performed their tasks in the past. They note the potential conflict between the need for timely responses and in-depth research on a complex issue and the issues arising from the multiplicity of messages in social media and the control over the content of a message from a source deemed authoritative. On the other hand, they also recognise that their professional background has given them a foundation for developing good systems for finding and managing relevant resources, the ability to work across a range of resources and formats and the ability to recognise the information needs of the particular staff member. Further, they are clear that a fundamental ability to evaluate the quality of information resources has not changed, although it may be tested by the often-expressed perception of council staff and councillors that they can identify relevant and appropriate resources themselves.

6 Conclusion

Two factors make it difficult to claim that the established regime of truth is changing significantly, the continued emphasis of these librarians on the provision of well-founded resources related to local issues and their knowledge of how to identify trustworthy resources. However, the blows to the notion of the trustworthiness of the public library and its place as a safe, neutral space for the expression of a variety of ideas may signal a shift towards a new regime of truth. The public library has been one of the institutions upholding the longstanding regime of truth in Australian society. But these factors and the uncertainty surrounding local government area mergers and the position of elected representatives may be threatening this position, especially as they appear to have acted as a deterrent in the uptake of services to support civic literacy.

The emphasis these librarians have given to the importance of awareness-raising of their role in supporting democratic processes and the perceived opportunities to highlight existing partnerships or to develop new ones and to be active in community discussions of issues of local concern were seen to give scope for repositioning the importance of civil commitment and information literacy. The findings of this study imply that all librarians have a role in developing the literacies fundamental to a democratic society. If this means championing a changing regime of truth, this process will include articulating clearly the principles and criteria for judging the trustworthiness of information, including the differences among and between opinion, experience and evidence, and collaborating with others consolidating the new regime.

References

1. Harsin, J.: Regimes of posttruth, postpolitics, and attention economies. *Commun. Cult. Crit.* **8**(2), 327–333 (2015)
2. Foucault, M.: *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Pantheon Books, New York (1980)
3. Rettig, J.: New technologies, citizen empowerment, and civic life. In: *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries: Theory and Applications: Proceedings of the International Conference on QQML2009, Chania, Crete, Greece, 26–29 May 2009*, pp. 191–197. World Scientific Publishing, Singapore (2010)
4. Somin, I.: Brexit, “Regrexit,” and the impact of political ignorance. *Washington Post. Opinion*, 26 June 2016
5. Smith, L.N.: Information literacy as a tool to support political participation. *Libr. Inf. Sci. Res.* **40**(123), 14–23 (2016)
6. Kranich, N.: Civic partnerships: the role of libraries in promoting civic engagement. *Resour. Shar. Inf. Netw.* **18**(1–2), 89–103 (2005)
7. Willingham, T.L.: Libraries as civic agents. *PLQ* **27**(2), 97–110 (2008)
8. Milner, H.: *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work*. University Press of New England, Hanover (2002)
9. Branson, M.S.: *The Role of Civic Education: An Education Policy Task Force Position Paper with Policy Recommendations*. Center for Civic Education, Washington, D.C. (1998)
10. Hastings, C., Ryan, R., Gibbs, M., Lawrie, A.: *Profile of the local government workforce 2015 report*. Sydney Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government, University of Technology Sydney, February 2015
11. Cameron, R., Bellamy, M.: The City of Melbourne’s corporate library. *Australas. Public Libr. Inf. Serv.* **4**(2), 94 (1991)
12. Byrne, A.: Possibility and imagination: a personal exploration of research and librarianship. *Libr. Manag.* **38**(2), 11–19 (2017)
13. IFLA: Presenting the IFLA Wikipedia Opportunities Papers. Webpage, 17 January 2017. <https://www.ifla.org/node/11131>
14. IFLA: How to Spot Fake News, Infographic, 27 January 2017. <https://blogs.ifla.org/lpa/files/2017/01/How-to-Spot-Fake-News.pdf>
15. Schatzki, T.R.: A primer on practices: theories and research. In: Higgs, J., Barnett, R., Billett, S., Hutchings, M., Trede, F. (eds.) *Practice-Based Education: Perspectives and Strategies*. Practice, Education, Work and Society, vol. 6, pp. 13–26. Springer, Rotterdam (2012). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-128-3_2
16. Kemmis, S., Edwards-Groves, C., Wilkinson, J., Hardy, I.: Ecologies of practices. In: Hager, P., Lee, A., Reich, A. (eds.) *Practice-Theory Perspectives on Professional Learning. Professional and Practice-based Learning*, vol. 8, pp. 33–49. Springer, Dordrecht (2012). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4774-6_3
17. Nicolini, D.: Articulating practice through the interview to the double. *Manag. Learn.* **40**(2), 195–212 (2009)
18. *Local Government and Shires Associations of New South Wales*. Department of Premier and Cabinet. Division of Local Government: Councillor Handbook. Division of Local Government, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Nowra, NSW (2012)