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Role of libraries in developing an informed and educated nation

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Abstract

Purpose – Libraries of all types have often been called on to take on challenges ranging from information literacy and developing a reading culture to promoting social justice. In recent literature they have been challenged to contribute to the development of informed and educated nations – a big issue in developing countries. Sometimes even to empower people. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness for this call as important for developing as well as developed nations and the numerous issues, role players and lenses they need to bear in mind. As an opinion piece it can merely scratch the surface of raising awareness.

Design/methodology/approach – This contribution builds on the literature of library and information science, education and politics to present an exploratory viewpoint and a nascent model to support further work. It intentionally touches on a diversity of issues that may seem at odds with each other, but that in the opinion reflect the enormous scope to address and diversity of individual, institutional and global input and lenses that can make a difference.

Findings – Many obvious approaches to achieve the object of an informed and educated nation with empowered individuals can be noted such as focusing on information literacy, digital literacy and information fluency. However more awareness is required of the need to take a holistic view of issues to focus on such as tolerance and ethics, and the information behaviour and information practices of people in various contexts, and how changes in the awareness of needs to address and the need to seek information and support from diverse sources, can contribute. A first step would be to note the diversity that might contribute towards a holistic view of a global problem to which libraries can contribute.

Originality/value – There are limited publications on the topic in the library and information science literature although “developing an informed and educated nation” features in the mission and vision plans of some countries, and empowerment is sometimes specifically noted in publications on user education and information literacy. This paper offers an exploratory viewpoint to raise awareness to consider various approaches and threads to the topic and to not think only in terms of education and information literacy, but to recognise the full role libraries and librarians can play – also in reaching out to other role players such as users, governments and grant providers.

Keywords Libraries, Education, Empowerment, Social responsibility, Library functions, Informed nations

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

The need to move forward, to address social exclusion and to ensure social justice and access to information for all is globally acknowledged (Igiomoh and Ogunwemimo, 2013; Jaeger *et al.*, 2016; Stilwell, 2016). It concerns health, jobs, human rights and especially education, and many other things. Calls for empowering and educating nations, and the importance of an educated nation has often been raised (Hart and Nassimbeni, 2013; Maswabi *et al.*, 2011; Mgina and Lwehabura, 2011). In fact – centuries ago Napoleon Bonaparte already said: “Give me the educated mothers and I would give you an educated nation” (Mali, 1989). Jane Fonda proclaimed: “We can no longer waste time and money. Every day, more than 2,000 girls in America, age 15-19, give birth – in the wealthiest, most educated nation in the world! Neither you or I should



accept this statistic” (Fonda, 2009), and according to Matilda Amissah Arthur “A reading nation is an informed nation” (Addo, 2014).

Many benefits have been noted for educated nations such as strength, power, wealth and richness (Maswabi *et al.*, 2011). There are many ways to work towards, and to achieve, global and educated nations. Some refer to steps; others to pathways to be taken. Most important in making progress, is recognising the value of ripple effects: educated parents can contribute to educated children, improvement in quality of life and life-long learning (Maswabi *et al.*, 2011). National visions, goals and missions can provide structure and direction (Nkwocha, 2011). Some countries have openly set specific goals and visions working towards an empowered and educated nation, e.g. Vision 2016 in Botswana (Maswabi *et al.*, 2011), as well as the Tanzania Development Vision 2025 (UNESCO, 2000). The ultimate aim of an empowered informed and educated nation – apart from learning organisations that have been noted for many years, should be learning societies, communities of practice, collaborative learning and information seeking, ethical conduct under all circumstances, the building of community resilience and health, improved self-efficacy (i.e. the belief in one’s own abilities) amongst citizens and those leading the process, and support for people to develop and build social capital (Ash-Argyle and Shoham, 2014; Britz, 2008; Bronstein, 2014; Ellison *et al.*, 2014; Okada *et al.*, 2012; Poortinga, 2012). Tall orders – that need to build on literacy, digital literacy, media literacy and education (Rix and Paige-Smith, 2011) amongst others. UNESCO (2015) offers a good example of an online media literacy course.

Libraries and librarians can play a prominent and successful role in developing informed and educated, as well as empowered nations. They, however face many realities and challenges: poor infrastructures, lack of funding, lack of well-trained staff, policies and government support. Means need to be found to address these; some options/solutions have been reported (Khan and Bhatti, 2012; Real *et al.*, 2014), but very few references could, however, be found when searching specifically for the phrases “informed nation”, and “educated nation” in Library and Information Science databases such as Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA), Library and Information Science Source, and Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts (LISTA). The focus in the library and information science (LIS) literature is on the related and underlying issues.

This paper will explore the role of libraries in developing informed and educated nations by addressing different lenses to consider the challenges faced. It will consider the words associated with “informed and educated nation” (to enrich awareness of the deeper problems), as well as taking a people’s perspective to address the challenges. In conclusion it will present a nascent model that can guide further work from both a theoretical and practical perspective. This contribution developed from a conference paper delivered at the Library Management Conference, 30 September (Johannesburg, South Africa). The paper was titled: “Developing an informed and educated nation”.

2. Different lenses to consider the challenge

How we look, and where we look for problems and solutions determines what we see. From the perspective of art (but also of value here with regard to a complex challenge), Berger (1990, p. 1) posits: “Yet this seeing which comes before words, and can never be quite covered by them [...] what we see is brought within our reach [...] Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are”. Libraries’ contribution to “educated

and empowered nations” can be addressed from different points of view – using different lenses. Noting, admitting and pursuing these lenses is the first challenge for librarians. From a pragmatic point of view the focus can be on physical solutions such as information and communication technologies (ICTs) and infrastructures (Okonedo *et al.*, 2014). From a people’s point of view the focus can be on the policy makers, managers, users and non-users of public libraries – human beings, and their information behaviour and practices. The challenge can be addressed as a social outreach initiative, setting the agenda on ensuring social inclusion and eliminating social exclusion with the current focus specifically on digital inclusion (Mervyn *et al.*, 2014; Thompson *et al.*, 2014), or it can be addressed from an educational lens from the Learning Sciences (Hollins, 2011; Nieto, 2010) or a collaborative learning/work/information seeking lens (Taber *et al.*, 2010). Social inclusion as well as the other issues noted here can be strengthened by a perspective lens and reflection which is widely written about and noted as a vital aspect of continuing professional development (Rix and Paige-Smith, 2011). According to Rix and Paige-Smith (2011) practitioners such as librarians need to reflect upon their understanding of the developing context of which we form, and out of which we can form, an informed and educated nation. It can provide librarians with a tool to reflect upon their own assertiveness towards the collective nature of human development, education and learning. Thus encouraging the consideration of a nation’s underlying beliefs, values, knowledge, practices and assumptions (social inclusion) as they arise within the collective social, cultural, educational and situational development of a nation (Rix and Paige-Smith, 2011).

Taking an information behaviour lens can reveal the importance of considering contexts and the barriers that inhibits information seeking, use and sharing and the possibilities for collaborative information seeking (Case, 2012; Hansen *et al.*, 2015). A learning sciences lens can support foci on collaboration (Sawyer, 2006). There is also information literacy lenses that can stress the importance of pursuing critical information literacy (Dold, 2014; Smith, 2013; Tewell, 2015) and in combination with information behaviour, guided inquiry lenses (Hepworth and Walton, 2009; Kuhlthau *et al.*, 2015).

3. Words associated with an “informed and educated nation” ... and the realities to face

The words that are often associated with informed and educated nations can also shed light on the issues to consider when working towards this, and taking a holistic view. Such words include: open, democratic, accountable, prosperous, productive, innovative, educated, informed, moral, tolerant, united, proud, compassionate, just, caring, safe and secure (Maruatona, 2011; Maswabi *et al.*, 2011; Newnham, 2009). Building an informed and educated nation is not just about increasing productivity and strength. It is also about issues such as addressing lack of prejudice. These words indicate the ultimate ideal(s) for an informed and educated nation, but before getting to these, libraries need to note and acknowledge many challenges.

The realities faced by nations and societies are really overwhelming. Apart from challenges already noted, there are many deeply serious issues such as poverty, poor education and low levels of literacy (Maswabi *et al.*, 2011; Sawaya *et al.*, 2011). Some countries first need to re-dress the social issues and injustices of the past, e.g. women’s education, and the needs and rights of marginalised and excluded groups. There is increasing emphasis on patient participation in health decision making (Oshima and Emanuel, 2013; Veroff *et al.*, 2013), changes in societies (the USA was, e.g., once

considered the most educated nation in the world) (Morrell, 2010; Thifa, 2012). These are only a few of the challenges faced by libraries setting out to contribute to national plans to work towards an informed and educated nation (Hart and Nassimbeni, 2013; Maswabi *et al.*, 2011; Mgina and Lwehabura, 2011). In general they need to operate with insufficient infrastructures such as insufficient physical space and ICTs, as well as insufficient numbers of skilled staff members and especially staff members who are trained to train others such as library users and members from the community, insufficient finances, and insufficient government commitment and support. Library staff who are well trained can have a ripple effect in training others. The same applies to community members (Maswabi *et al.*, 2011).

4. Addressing the challenges through different lenses

The challenges are overwhelming – it raises the question of how do you eat an elephant? Bit by bit – by starting somewhere. This can be done by addressing problems from different points of view; through different lenses and focusing on different issues. For purposes of discussion only three lenses are covered (Sections 4.4-4.6).

4.1 *Points of departure*

Building an informed and educated nation requires many things to be addressed, such as literacy including information literacy, adult literacy, digital literacies, media literacy, multicultural literacies and critical literacy (Morrell, 2010). It also requires that collaboration skills, education in healthcare and information literacy as well as education in ethical issues and cyber security are addressed. There is also education in responsible citizenship, addressing emotional intelligence and especially the importance of affect and emotion (Fourie and Julien, 2014). And many more

Libraries can start to address challenges by requiring better infrastructures, better access to information resources, especially free information resources and resources available through open access. They can require better broadband and internet access, and especially expertise in exploring the potential of mobile access (Moahi, 2013). They need to address training in literacy and information literacy skills, the training of staff, lobbying for funding and government support, advocating for and contributing to the development of government portals (Hart and Nassimbeni, 2013; Moahi, 2013).

4.2 *Even more is required – a people's point of view*

In the subject literature there are many reports on how libraries can address challenges regarding infrastructures, collection building, training and continuing professional development (Katz, 2015). What is neglected is to consider the people who need to address the challenges and the people affected from a people's point of view (a social and psychological point of view). Effective change regarding an educated and informed nation needs to start with the policy makers, managers, librarians, users and non-users of libraries, and especially teachers. Their information behaviour, and styles in learning and decision making, and their worldviews need to be considered since these influence their seeking and use of information and problem solving. Often library research focuses on "other" people and determining their efforts, attitude and commitment to things considered important, e.g. their attitude to information literacy or preferences for electronic information resources. Librarians who want to make a difference in contributing to an informed and educated nation need to start with the "self" as portrayed in work by Bronstein (2014), Fourie (2006) and Rix and Paige-Smith (2011).

They need to study their own information behaviour, learning and thinking styles, habits of reflection and worldviews; their own perceptions of self-efficacy. Thus starting with the self – the “you” in Figure 1, and working for a ripple effect.

All people involved, but especially the key role players such as policy makers and managers, need to consider what they see in a country’s vision, goals and aims. How, if at all, they go about to learn from other countries, and what has been reported about the successes and problems experienced by other countries, their own institution’s visions, goals and aims, and what can be learned from other institutions. Thinking and reflection is important – as have been often reported in the library and information science and also educational literature (Rix and Paige-Smith, 2011; Sheridan, 1990). From an individual point of view, e.g. as an individual librarian, it is even more important to capture your “sense making” in print (or digitally) so that you can read and reflect on it again. What are you making of the challenge to develop an informed and educated nation, the efforts of the LIS sector, and your own efforts? Many studies on information behaviour and information communication acknowledge the work of Brenda Dervin (Case, 2012). Perhaps a sense-making approach towards studying the information behaviour of politicians, educators and librarians should become more prominent.

The people who can make a difference have skills and shortcomings; gaps in their abilities to address the challenges in building an informed and educated nation. Such skills need to be audited; programmes need to be designed to address shortcomings. Collaboration is important and especially the ability to make the most effective use of available skills. There are many techniques that can be used for this, such as SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats), PESTLE (political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental), PRIMO-F (people, resources, innovation and ideas, marketing, operations and finance), SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely) (Morrison, 2013; Tracy, 2015). Techniques need to be explored to get input from everybody, and to negotiate amongst stakeholders on addressing challenges.

Means need to be developed to maintain existing library users and to recruit new users and explore their potential input, to learn who they are and what their needs are, and how they can get involved in community capacity building. Dorner *et al.* (2015) provide innovative ideas on determining user needs.

Furthermore means need to be explored to reach out to non-users. Who are they? How can they be identified, and how can librarians reach out to them and understand their

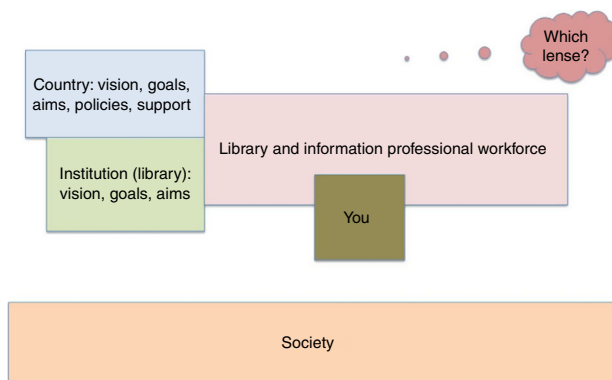


Figure 1.

A nascent model for libraries contributing to an informed and educated nation

information needs? There are many studies reported on information behaviour and information practices that can serve as point of departure (Case, 2012). What can be learned from these – relevant to libraries who want to contribute to the building of an informed and educated nation? The available literature might be explored for idea generation, and alternative techniques of data collection – both exercises in their own right.

When dealing with education, capacity building and empowerment it is important to acknowledge that we are dealing with human beings, and that we as researchers, staff members, managers or policy makers are human beings. Issues that becomes important and that requires consideration will then be motivation, enthusiasm and self-efficacy.

4.3 *Some examples of efforts*

Although there are many examples of efforts from libraries, not many of these are reported on in the subject literature. Examples that can be noted include the Sesigo Project in Botswana, aligned with Vision 2016 (www.vision2016.co.bw) and the Global Libraries Initiatives Projects supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (www.gatesfoundation.org).

4.4 *Taking different lenses – an information behaviour perspective*

The importance of understanding information behaviour and information practices has often been noted in the literature (Ford, 2015). It can also inform attempts to develop informed and educated nations. Information behaviour is an encapsulating term for all human behaviour related to information, such as recognising and expressing information needs, information seeking, information searching, information retrieval, information encountering, browsing, information avoidance, information use, and unawareness of information needs (e.g. definition by Tom Wilson) (Case, 2012). Information practice is a related term – often associated with everyday life and “mastery of life” (e.g. the interpretation by Reijo Savolainen) (Savolainen, 2007).

Studies of information behaviour and practice can be of great benefit to libraries. It can reveal the information needs and preferences, and more about information-related activities.

Libraries need to consider user patterns for viewing information, for listening to information and for reading. They need to note generational differences, changes over time, etc. There are many standard methods for collecting data to understand information behaviour such as questionnaires, interviews, focus-group interviews and observation (Pickard, 2013). But other methods also need to be explored such as motivational interviews, action research and participatory action research, the Delphi method and slow-Delphi method (Poirier and Robinson, 2014). Although a lack of sufficient staff, and especially staff with training and research skills have been noted for libraries there should be efforts for ongoing research, and empowerment. Informed and educated librarians should be empowered to work towards nations to become informed, educated and empowered.

Much has already been published about the preferences of library users – on whether they prefer free newspapers, using mobiles, social networking sites, games and gamification (Phetteplace and Felker, 2014). Ellison *et al.* (2014) noted how the utilisation of social networking sites can enable greater access to resources, knowledge building, co-learning and social interactions. Librarians can draw on this to promote social learning and self-directed learning (Ellison *et al.*, 2014; Okada *et al.*, 2012). Through reflection they can explore solutions to reach users.

4.5 Taking different lenses – information literacy perspective

An information literacy perspective, specifically work on guided inquiry (i.e. the process of carefully planned and supervised intervention by a teacher to guide students throughout the process of inquiry to construct a higher-level of thinking and personal understanding) can be applied in various contexts (Hepworth and Walton, 2009; Kuhlthau *et al.*, 2015). In information literacy training there need to be recognition of feelings, emotions and uncertainties. These can link to many of the words that are typically associated with an informed and educated nation (Section 3) – tolerant, safe and secure. The work of Vygotsky (1978) (zones of proximal development) and Carol Kuhlthau (2004) (zones of intervention), and allowing people to have “fun” when learning new skills can come into play. So can noting the importance of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

4.6 Taking different lenses – Learning Science perspective

Libraries need to be safe spaces for people to learn and work with information. Insight from the Learning Sciences can be useful. “Learning sciences is an interdisciplinary field that studies teaching and learning. The sciences of learning include cognitive science, educational psychology, computer science, anthropology, sociology, neuroscience, and other fields” (Sawyer, 2006). Librarians need to further their educational roles. They need to consider pedagogic and andragogic approaches in reaching out to children as well as older people amongst minority groups, the poor, women, and people with disabilities and special needs.

In creating safe and pleasant learning spaces librarians need to take a holistic view – recognising the complexities and the opportunities. They can rethink alliances between different library types (e.g. public and academic libraries) and with scholars who might have better infrastructures and access to information resources. It might be good to map stakeholders from the national as well as international community that can contribute to specific actions.

5. From informed and educated on to empowerment

More than informing and education is however required for success and sustainability. The focus should also be on empowerment ... to give somebody control over their own life and the situations they are in. Participation in the development of information services and training initiatives and addressing self-efficacy is especially important, e.g. through participatory research and specifically participatory action research. Improving self-efficacy and social connections (i.e. social capital) then becomes more important.

Self-efficacy refers to an individual’s belief in his or her own capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977). It reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one’s own motivation, behaviour and social environment. Self-efficacy has been noted with regard to information behaviour and learning, as well as the use of information technology. Librarians needs to start by noting the importance of their own self-efficacy, e.g. as in the study by Bronstein (2014) with library and information science professionals. Social capital concerning the expected collective benefits derived from networking and cooperation, means to exchange and share information, and online communities and connections for all age groups and issues become important.

According to Poortinga (2012, p. 287), social capital, “as reflected in social trust, reciprocity, and civic participation”, is connected to advanced levels of a community’s health. As a result, Poortinga (2012, p. 287) puts forward the five capital model. Librarians can utilise

this to promote the sustainable development of a resilient and empowered community, through providing a composed combination of economic capital (e.g. income), built capital (e.g. access to services), natural capital (e.g. access to green space), human capital (e.g. skills and education) and social capital (e.g. social networks and relationships) resources.

6. A nascent model to guide further work

Libraries attempting to develop informed and educated nations face a complex but also rewarding challenge. Figure 1 presents a simplistic nascent (still developing) model which can serve as point of departure for adding details when working in an individual context. Six key issues need to drive libraries' efforts: first, determining and working from the country's vision, goals, aims, policies and government support towards an informed and educated nation; second, setting visions, goals and aims for the specific library or country-specific library and information sector; third, addressing the library and informational workforce's skills, attitude, motivation, self-efficacy and social capital; fourth, selecting a lens to explore the problem and to find solutions, e.g. an information behaviour perspective or a Learning Science perspective; five, considering the challenges and trends in society at large – national as well as international; six, working on individual self-efficacy (i.e. the “you” in Figure 1), awareness to the environment (society) and reflection skills to trigger a ripple effect that can contribute to libraries' roles in developing informed and educated nations.

7. Conclusion

Contributing to an informed and educated nation is possible and manageable – even with limited resources. There are boundless opportunities, with the secret ingredients being information, collaboration, reflection, and including and reaching out to all citizens, and not to expect immediate perfect results.

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