

Community Information Services: A View of the Theoretical Foundations

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Abstract

This paper traces the emergence of Community Information Services and describes their theoretical foundations. Terms and concepts are defined. Various types of alternative service and their distinguishing characteristics and functions are described and a case is made for promoting this type of service at the present time.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980s Community Information Services (CISs) were a well-established feature in Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand¹. These services emerged strongly in the 1960s and 1970s. Much of the literature documenting their principles and practice is drawn from the 1970s and 1980s. The late 1980s, however, marked a decline in the fortunes of community information centres particularly in Britain. This article traces their theoretical foundations concentrating on the literature from Britain and the United States. An update is provided with literature from the 1990s mainly from Britain in which, for instance, Usherwood² notes that once again there is growing interest in community information.

2. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS

2.1 Community

Community is a difficult concept to define. Desai¹ suggests that the two basic terms 'community' and 'participation' are useless, and indeed disabling, for clear thought. They are both vague and complex and are

booby-trapped with begged questions. A possible meaning in the context of librarianship is a group of people with shared meanings and shared communication. Giggey⁴ states: 'a community is a group of people who have something in common. This can be their age, education, religion, interests, political affiliation, activities, work, problems, or a combination of two or more of these.'

Thornton and Ramphel⁵ suggest that: communities do exist, but they cannot be assumed. Claiming them in order to legitimate a political programme or to support a plan of action does not create them.' Cohen⁶ sees community as relating to culture which includes maps of meaning which makes life intelligible to its members. These maps are not simply carried around in peoples heads, they are inscribed in the patterns of social organisation and relationships through which people became social individuals. These patterns tend to involve three elements—the extended kinship network, the ecological setting of the neighbourhood and the structure of the local economy.

2.2 Information

Childers⁷ defines information as the raw material that is used in knowing, making

decisions, taking action, thinking, and learning. It is a discrete piece of meaningful data. He limits information to that which can be communicated either orally or in written form. This includes information that could be heard or seen. These latter aspects of the definition are very important in community librarianship in Africa, South Africa and in the South generally. Defining information, Reid⁸ puts forward the concept of information as a process rather than as material. Data only becomes information by the act of imparting it. He reasons that:

"If we wish to provide information services, we have to understand first of all that while the collection and ordering of data—at which librarians are adept—is a prime requisite, it does not in itself provide information. Information is primarily a process, a process which goes on in many different ways... most importantly between people."

This definition includes information in response to a need which may be unexpressed or inarticulate, and questions for which no printed or organised answers exist (ref 8, pp. 35). Everybody has information needs but all people are not equally capable of satisfying these needs⁹. A good reason for setting up an information service would be to facilitate access by individuals and groups to information that could be of benefit to them.

Donohue (*In* ref. 10, pp. viii) identifies two kinds of information provided by a CIS: firstly survival information such as that related to health, housing, income, legal protection, economic opportunity and political rights and secondly citizen action information needed for effective participation as individual or as members of a group in the social, political, legal and economic processes.

Amongst the areas needing urgent attention identified in 1984 by Bunch (ref. 9, pp. 10) are inner cities where multiple deprivation exists (for instance, bad housing and high unemployment); housing estates lacking basic social and other amenities (meeting places, transport and protection from vandalism); rural areas (where facilities were in fact on the decrease in Britain in the 1980s); and groups with special needs (low income families,

disabled people and community and social workers).

Common areas of activity for CISs in the 1990s are indicated in the Community Services Group of the Library Associations' *Informing Communities*¹¹. These areas are: information for people with disabilities; equal opportunities; women's rights; environmental issues; health information; community arts; and fiction services. The focus on the latter seems to be more characteristic of the late 1990s literature although earlier literature did not rule out such provision.

2.3 Community Information Services and Community Libraries

Alternative information services are referred to as community resource centres, community information centres (CICs), CISs and community libraries. In the United States the term CICs tends to be used, while the term 'community library' is used more in Britain. While both terms are used in this article, CISs are referred to mostly.

In defining the concept 'library', it is useful to draw on Rubakin, the Russian bibliopsychologist and adult educator¹². "It is not just a shop where books are to be had; it is an adviser, a guide, a friend. It must go out to the reader, bring him in rather than wait for him to come of his own accord."

A community library is usually a branch library (although it may be a central or mobile service) intended to provide an advice centre function and local information for the whole community, rather than only offering book stock to readers¹³. Barugh¹⁴ commenting on the Community Libraries Project in the British town of Sunderland, identified its starting point as planning of library and information services for actual communities rather than some traditional or imagined audience. In this case community library provision was establishing relevant priorities at the local library and genuinely trying to respond to the problems of the people in the area.

The generally accepted definition today is:

"CISs are those which assist individual and groups with daily problem-solving and with

participation in the democratic process. The services concentrate on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance and on the most important problems that people have to face, problems to do with their homes, their jobs and their rights¹⁵."

A 1997 formulation is provided by Kendall¹⁶: "Community information is defined as being information for the problems and crises encountered by individuals and their independents at different stages in their lives. Also information for groups of people with common experiences seeking improvement in their circumstances, information enabling all to participate in local and national democracy, and information about local groups and societies providing for a range of recreational interests."

A notable addition, as stated above with reference to fiction provision, is the recognition of the need to provide for recreational interests. Green¹⁷ usefully suggests that key concepts are information; access—physical and attitudinal; people, including staff and those in the community; citizen action; communication; co-operation; joint working and community liaison. No library, advice, or counselling service is effective if attention is not paid to these key concepts. In this context Usherwood (ref. 2, pp. 19) usefully refers to Bunch's definition "Community information is more a state of mind than a system."

The literature documenting these services is considerable and a fuller treatment of the documentation from the perspective of the South and South Africa in particular, can be found in Stilwell¹⁸. This article provides a summary of the discussion of some of the central concepts.

3. THE EMERGENCE OF ALTERNATIVE INFORMATION CENTRES

Alternative information centres can be traced back to the Settlement House Movement in the 1890s in Britain which recognised the need for skilled information services in extremely deprived neighbourhoods. Later, others promoted the idea of general advice and information services but there was

little development until 1939 when the first Citizen's Advice Bureaux (CABx) were set up to help people cope with the problems of war-time Britain. By 1943, there were 1060 such information outlets (ref. 2, pp. 20).

Although some librarians have always played an important part in their communities, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the library profession started to take its social responsibilities seriously. As part of the general social order of the times, librarians began to consider the library's social commitment. It can therefore be argued that further impetus was given to the social responsibilities movement in the 1960s when in Western capitalist countries a wide range of movements and institutions were engaged in a struggle for increased self-determination. Similarly there was rapid change in many countries of the South, recently independent, or in the throes of national liberation struggles¹⁹. An integral part of such developments was the work of the theorists Ivan Illich²⁰ and Paulo Freire²¹. The contribution of Illich and Freire in turn was influenced strongly by the intellectual climate of the 1960s which was anti-bureaucratic and anti-theoretical. Both were radical humanists. Radical humanism advocates learning by doing. It emphasises critical thinking which is to be promoted through an analysis of daily experiences and argues that all people are potential leaders and therefore should be involved in all aspects of activity. This is important as it has led, in some instances, to an anti-expert tendency in which the importance of theory has been minimised (ref. 19, pp. 285). Much of the discourse of CISs, while based on identifiable principles, is in essence rooted in practical concerns.

In the 1970s, in the United States, an increasing number of information-related centres lent support to the socio-political movements of the day. People both within and outside librarianship became interested in the use of information for social improvement and for citizen participation in government. These centres became known as alternative information centres because they performed the information tasks left undone by establishment or traditional libraries²².

Three strategic information functions for the public library—reducing barriers to access to already existing information, collecting much needed information which does not now exist; and effecting the widespread dissemination of crucial information not now being distributed (Bundy *In ref. 2*, pp. 21).

3.1 Specific Events that Influenced the Emergence of Alternative Centres

Certain events in the United States and Britain are regarded as central to the development of CICs. These are described below:

3.1.1 United States Public Library Enquiry, 1949

The United States Public Library Enquiry conducted in 1949²³ presented evidence that only a minority of the population actually used public libraries. Users tended to be from a relatively advantaged, educationally-elite group. A 1962 study of economically depressed Cleveland and Baltimore revealed that specifically adapted services could increase use by traditional non-users. The libraries' middle class orientation rather than the inadequacies of non-users began to be questioned²⁴.

3.1.2 United States War on Poverty Program, Early 1960s

In the United States, the War on Poverty Program of the early 1960s aimed at improving the lot of the urban poor. Some libraries set up information and referral (I&R) services. These were neighbourhood-based²⁵ and aimed to assist the enquirer in the two main areas—survival information and citizen action information (ref. 1, pp. 3). The services sought to link the enquirer with an appropriate source of help, preferably within the community^{26 & 27}. It was considered important that the assisting agency should not be the one that caused the problem in the first place (ref. 26, pp. 118). Furthermore, the information had to be readily available in a form accessible to the user. Oral and other non-book sources were therefore appropriate. Childers (ref. 7, pp. 40) suggested that the strong non-print orientation of disadvantaged adults is a primary cause of their

relatively greater ignorance of where to turn for help in problem-solving.

3.1.3 United States Study Access to Public Libraries, 1963

In 1963, a study entitled *Access to public libraries* examined closely the factors limiting free and equal access to libraries (ref. 23, pp. 152). Specific attention was given to restrictions on usage affecting students, black people and non-English speakers. The findings of this study coupled with increasing political pressure from groups that had experienced discrimination influenced the development of community library services in the mid-1960s. Weibel (*In ref. 23*, pp. 152) suggests that the change at this time was not philosophical, but concerned the techniques involved in extending services to the community.

3.1.4 Home Office Research, 1960s

Public library surveys in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s revealed that only 10-15 per cent of the population used the library on a regular basis²⁸. In addition, during the 1960s, research sponsored by the Home Office revealed that many of the problems faced by people required more than access to information. In response, advice agencies supplying advocacy, community action and education were set up in the 1970s. These were known as CISs (ref. 25, pp. 3). The term CIS was first advocated by Durrance²⁹ who called it an umbrella term encompassing all the aspects of this type of service. It included the provision of survival information, public policy information, that is information for everyday participation in the democratic process, and local information of the type usually supplied by a well-stocked branch library.

3.1.5 British Library Association Working Party on Community Information, 1978-79

A significant initiative was the setting up of the Library Association Working Group on Community Information which worked from 1978 to 1979 and produced an excellent publication, *Community information: what libraries can do*³⁰. Martin³¹ regards this document as highly significant: "There can be little doubt about the influence of this

document as a force for the spread of the improvement of CIS in British public libraries." Coleman³² referred to it as "The definitive work on community information in public libraries."

3.1.6 British Library and Information Services Council Paper, 1986

The importance of community librarianship was officially recognised in Britain by the Library and Information Services Council (LISC) in its 1986 paper entitled 'Library and Information Work in a Changing Environment (ref. 31, pp. 23).' The Community Services Group of the Library Association became responsible for implementing the objectives of CISs in Britain (ref. 31, pp. 6) and still plays this role today, although as this article will suggest, in a seemingly closer relationship with public libraries.

3.1.7 Other Significant Issues from Britain, United States & Australia

Public library services in Britain in the early 1980s showed interest in community information³³. Ritchie attributed this to a variety of developments both within and outside librarianship on both sides of the Atlantic. The publication of the Kahn Report in 1966 is regarded by many sources as most significant. In their study of the British CABx, Kahn and his colleagues first coined the term community information. Having analysed the structure and activities of the CABx, Kahn noted that there was nothing similar in the United States and proposed that a service be set up there.

Ironically, Kahn did not mention libraries as possible sites for the provision of such services. Ritchie saw this omission plus the lukewarm reception of the report by social workers, as likely to have stimulated certain North American librarians into discussing and experimenting with library-based CISs. Since then CISs (often referred to as I&R services in the United States) have flourished, to the extent that they are generally regarded as the models British libraries should emulate (ref. 33, pp. 58). Bowen³⁴ argues that librarians in Britain were strongly influenced by the information and referral services introduced in the United States.

The British Community Development Project, established in 1969, had a positive

impact on the development of advice centres in Britain. It sought to stimulate self-help and innovative solutions to the problems of neighbourhoods with multiple social problems (ref 31, pp. 65). A phenomenal growth in the number of informal community-based centres known as Neighbourhood Advice Centres followed. They aimed to address the needs of the information poor in the inner cities. These centres were usually openly partisan, frequently providing a focal point for the community. They fulfilled a valuable social function as places where people could meet informally without prior arrangement (ref 33, pp. 58). The need for such services seemed to be considerable³⁵.

Possibly the best and most complete of the examples of CIS from the United States is a neighbourhood centre project called The Information Place (TIP) in Detroit. Launched in 1973, TIP was taken up as a model by other cities. Martin (ref. 31, pp. 97) saw TIP as: "a shining example of the kind of widespread public acceptance that can be achieved by libraries, given the necessary commitment, effort and imagination."

Jackaman³⁶ has commented on the fact that in 1973 British libraries were largely confined to their traditional passive reference service function, but were increasingly facing pressure to develop an active information service. Ritchie (ref. 33, pp. 53) points out that in Britain in the 1980s many official forms and leaflets pertaining to people's rights as consumers, employees and tenants were unreadable and unintelligible to the average citizen.

The Library Association document (ref. 15, pp. 12), defined community information as:

"Services which assist individuals and groups with daily problem-solving and with participation in the democratic process. The service concentrates on the needs of those who do not have ready access to other sources of assistance, and on the most important problems that people have to do with their homes, their jobs and their rights."

A setback for CISs came in the form of a British government green paper of 1988 (Financing our public libraries: four subjects for debate, ref. 34, pp. 30) which made the

situation more difficult for the proponents of community information in libraries. It indicated that a basic library service was restricted to books with a strong emphasis on response to known demand. As Bowen suggested at the time this point of view had to be challenged.

Amongst librarians, however, since 1975 CISs have been supported increasingly, and the findings of a series of reports on local information provision stress its importance in improving the quality of peoples lives. As stated above in 1992, Usherwood (ref. 2, pp. 23), despite the setbacks of the Thatcher era in Britain, identifies growing interest in community information. He argues that the need for information has become greater as society has become more complicated, both in terms of coping with the everyday business of living and at the level of considering and deciding about great national and international issues especially in the British welfare state or what remains of it. In spite of this support Usherwood describes a situation in Britain in which restraints on local authority budgets, together with the abolition of the Greater London Council and the Metropolitan Counties has had an adverse effect on many community information agencies. He adds: 'In public libraries pressure to charge and/or to generate income could mean that profitable or cost recovery activities such as business information may be resourced at the expense of socially useful CIS.'

The case for information as a basic need in Australia has been argued by Reid. The right to be informed was viewed as a prime constituent of human freedom by Gough Whitlam (then Prime Minister) in his address to the 1975 Conference of the Australian Library Association (In ref. 8, pp. 33):

'Libraries that are free, open, and accessible are just as much bastions of freedom as universities or parliaments. Freedom of speech is a precious freedom but it has a much higher value, a much richer significance when freedom of information goes with it.'

In Australia, community resource centres were developed to meet the challenges neglected by the public libraries. Reid (ref. 8, pp. 33) identified in Australia a group whom he

described as the true alternatives to the public library:

'Shunning the lure of government aid, highly suspicious of established power structures, knowledgeable and informed in their aims of deinstitutionalising society, often achieving prodigies of work on shoestring budgets. Here we find the groups that have produced catalogues and directories to lead their readers to resources and to resource people, the people who have produced, for the joy of it, the very effective *Yellow Pages* and the *Whole earth catalogue* and numbers of directories limited to a particular area or region. These groups set up places to facilitate the exchange of information between people; they provided telephone information and referral services, specialist information centres for particular social groups such as single parents and rape victims. They based their efforts on the self-help principle; attempted highly destructured decision-making, and above all, performed their prodigies because they enjoyed their work (ref. 8, pp. 33).'

Community information centres base their service upon the perception of a fourth right of citizenship, following civil, political and social rights (ref. 1, pp. 5). Childers (ref. 7, pp. 71) argues that it has been acknowledged widely in the United States that the general population has only limited access to and control of information about local, state, and federal government and law enforcement. There was widespread ignorance of actions pending and taken, of the processes of legislation and adjudication, and of the distribution of power locally and nationally. It was not generally known where one should go to find out about such things. In support of a fourth right of citizenship (ref. 15, pp. 7) argued that:

'People will not be able to get their due as citizens of present day society unless they have continuous access to the information which will guide them through it, and where necessary the advice to help them translate that information into effective action; and unless they get their due they are unlikely to recognize the reciprocal obligation that all citizens have to society.'

Ward³⁷ adds to this recognition of reciprocal obligation when he states:

'Being well informed is what makes democracy work. Without information about the rights and obligations of citizens, without advice on how to exercise those rights and to discharge their obligations people are unable to participate fully and equally in a democratic society. Too many people are denied the rights or fail to perform the duties that society has decided are legitimately theirs because they have not got access to the necessary advice and information. Clearly, giving rights to and imposing obligations on citizens without providing adequate access to advice and information about them is irresponsible. It invites frustration and widens the gap between the privileged and the deprived.'

4. KEY CONCEPTS IN COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES

4.1 Concept of the Disadvantaged

The groups requiring special attention are referred to in the literature as the disadvantaged. The problem with the term is that it is frequently associated with negative value judgements about the social role of the groups described. This approach ignores the view that these problems are not necessarily of the individuals or the groups own making and could well be a consequence of aspects of the society in which the disadvantage occurs. The disadvantaged people might not be in a position to start helping themselves. Jordan³⁸ argues that class is a factor in disadvantage: 'To be born into a middle class family opens wide many educational and occupational doors which are scarcely ajar to others.'

Coleman³⁹, seconded to the British Library Research and Development Department as Research Officer in Library Services for Disadvantaged Groups during April 1979 to March 1980, points out that sociologists support this structural view of disadvantage. A lack of access to services and facilities in general, including library services, is seen as

preventing people from playing their full part in society. The report of the Library Advisory Council (England) *The Libraries' Choice* published in 1978 describes disadvantage in purely library terms. The disadvantaged are those who are debarred from the normal use of library services, physically or psychologically, because they need materials or equipment which the library does not traditionally provide. They might need help or encouragement to use the library.

A clear definition of disadvantage is given by Coleman (ref. 39, pp. 11-13). She points out that society discriminates against individuals who have particular characteristics. In this sense the characteristics can be viewed as factors that are responsible for a particular individual becoming disadvantaged. The factors relate to physical or mental condition, social and economic position, and level of educational achievement. These factors interact to a great extent with the strongest link, in Britain, being socio-economic. For example, there is a convincing relationship between poverty and physical disability, old age, ethnic background and single parent status. A significant feature of disadvantage in the rural areas is the degree of physical isolation from services and facilities.

The study entitled, *Knowledge/information needs of the disadvantaged*, commenced in 1972 with funds from the Bureau of Libraries and Learning Resources, United States Office of Education, was a review of the existing literature and aimed to consolidate what had been written about the knowledge and information needs of adults suffering from disadvantage of many kinds (ref. 7, pp. 7). In the final report of the study, Childers (ref. 7, pp. 9) confirms that a major definition of disadvantage is economic in the United States as well:

'If we had to choose a single demographic variable that would be the most powerful descriptor of those people considered to be disadvantaged, economic level would be it. Far and away, poor, poverty and impoverished are used more frequently than any other single label to define America disadvantaged.'

Childers (ref. 7, pp. 8) suggests that disadvantage is relative. It is a function of a particular context. To be disadvantaged means

to be lacking in something that the society considers important. Examples of those considered disadvantaged in the study by Childers were the imprisoned, the undereducated, the unemployed and the racially oppressed. Even poverty is difficult to define as the range of those classed as poor varies from country to country. To a great extent disadvantaged persons are handicapped by language. Reasons for this could be a lack of education, or fluency in a language that is not used by the dominant culture (ref. 7, pp. 78).

Martin (ref. 31, pp. 7) placed the problem decisively in the library context when he perceived social powerlessness and economic inequality as resulting from policies espoused by traditional libraries. These were political neutrality and a concern for general public interest, rather than for discrimination in favour of deprived groups within society. He argued a need for social intervention to give credibility and practical effect to the concept of a public library service. In support of this view Hendry⁴⁰ expressed the need for 'positive prejudice' toward the poor, the unemployed and the dispossessed. Coleman's (ref. 31, pp. 70) conviction is that: 'The problems of the disadvantaged are the librarians' problems. Failure to provide adequate service for the disadvantaged lies not in our stars but in ourselves (ref. 31, pp. 24)'.

It is argued therefore that librarians and libraries have a vital contribution to make in addressing inequalities in access to information and that the onus is on them rather than any other group to remedy this situation. It is suggested in this article that a neutral or passive stance on the part of librarians results in the aligning of librarians with the status quo, implying a tacit acceptance of the existing social and political order.

Green (ref. 17, pp. 15), in the introduction to the first book in the Community Services Group's publishing programme, brought the concerns of CISs up to date for the 1990s when he argued that:

'Despite the social and economic changes over the last 10 to 15 years great inequalities remain in society. These inequalities are heightened for people who for one reason or

another are unable to take full advantage of opportunities. Such people are disadvantaged because of their gender, race, disability, unemployed or low waged status, or socio-economic situation. The Community Services Group has as its prime objective increasing people's access to the services to which they have a right.'

In the 1990s the importance of CIS in the democratic process is given recognition in the publication of the British Office of Arts and Libraries (OAL) *Setting objectives for public library services* (In ref. 2, pp. 20) when it refers to the library as the focal point for information about and for its local community, including information to support the democratic process. Ward (In ref. 2, pp. 28) goes further when he argues 'without the right to information and advice,' the other rights are liable to be hollow shams.

Usherwood sums up: 'Those who don't know, don't get' and Harris notes that information is the currency of democracy. Usherwood suggests that the current economic situation in Britain has increased the need for information and advice. The rise in unemployment has intensified the demand not just for information on employment prospects but increased pressure on agencies dealing with physical and psychological stress.

In assessing the statement that disadvantage is the creation of the society within which the individual exists, Alexander's comments⁴¹ offer insight into the South African situation in which supposed differences in 'race', 'culture' and 'language' were used by the apartheid state to justify inequality: 'Thus groups of people who arrived in South Africa at different times and under different circumstances were divided and kept separately from one another deliberately, as a matter of state policy, because it was in the broad economic and political interests of the ruling class to keep them divided (ref. 41, pp. 2-3).' In this way whites, Africans and Indians were artificially created: For historical reasons almost all the individuals in the ruling class were officially classified as 'white' persons. The working class was divided between a 'white' and a 'black' sector, with white workers forming a privileged group. This group in turn enjoyed

the right to vote. Through two fundamental human rights, the right to form trade unions and the right to vote, this group of workers was able to gain for itself an extremely strong position in the South African social, political, economic and educational order (ref. 41, pp. 2-3). In South African situation it can be strongly argued, therefore, that disadvantage was the creation of the society in which the individual lived. Librarians had a role to play in enabling equal access to information sources. This is in keeping with the view that libraries should be part of the process of addressing the causes of disadvantage.

4.2 Lack of Access to Information and Deprivation

Ward (ref. 37, pp. 126) saw a close relationship between lack of access to information and deprivation:

Not having information provided about services to ensure no one need fall below a certain standard in terms of housing, income, education or health is as much a feature of deprivation as the lack of basic essentials themselves. The success of this country (Britain's) social services still depends to a very large extent on those who need them knowing about them and how to use them.

He pointed out that users of public services experienced more and more difficulty getting what is due to them and that restricted opportunity to get and use information is one of the major causes of deprivation (ref. 37, pp. 126).

4.3 Information and Social Change

Information or the lack of it, affects the outcome of attempts of social change. Bundy (ref. 22, pp. 2) describes information as one of the major power tools employed by all sides in the struggle. Access to information does not in itself give people power over their lives but lack of access to information can render a person powerless in the sense of being unable to exercise intelligent life options (ref. 22, pp. 35). Individuals become trapped in adverse circumstances with few options in life and with none of the available options fostering their best interests. The power of people as

individuals to change social conditions is limited. Establishment institutions tend not to introduce even the most urgently needed changes. These often require systematic, organised citizen action and legal action (ref. 22, pp. 5).

Durrance⁴² states that: 'The most effective response in a democracy is a group response; individuals are generally not effective influencing decisions in a democracy when they work alone'. She continues:

If citizens are to make informed decisions in a democracy, and further, if they are to have the accurate information needed to influence the decisions which affect their lives and those of others—to take advantage of their right to know—they need assistance through a maze of sources.

Ward (ref. 37, pp. 126) sees the ability to find and use information as being affected by many things. These included factors such as one's neighbourhood, one's mobility, the amount of determination and commitment one could generate to solve problems, and one's literacy level, fatalism, and whether previous experiences had been good or bad. All these things could make an enormous difference to the capacity to find and use information. Ward¹⁶ concludes that:

'The least we can do is acknowledge that some people, including many of the most disadvantaged in this country [Britain], experience many more obstacles than others on their way to becoming informed and that steps could and should be taken to remove as many of these obstacles as possible.'

4.4 Access to Government Information

A major part of the struggle for change is to gain access to information which governments and private interests make inaccessible. Durrance (ref. 42, pp. 1) points out that low levels of participation in government processes stemming from a lack of confidence were accompanied by a marked increase in organised citizen activity. Impatience with traditional political processes lead to a situation in which greater emphasis was placed on extra

parliamentary activity. Gibson⁴³ suggests that people who are dissatisfied with the authorities should work together in local government and the voluntary sector by identifying problem and opportunity areas where they can tap into public resources to release and bring into play their own gifts of leadership, perseverance and local knowledge for the general benefit.

Community information should not only be thought of as crisis information in the life of the individual or the community. The educative and generally preventative value of such services is potentially great. Promoting their use in the long term could help people to avoid crises before they happen, or to cope with them when they do, instead of being overwhelmed by them⁴⁴. Facilities in the British city of Bradford have demonstrated the scope for a modest but well-targeted service⁴⁵, a feature of which was a basic information kit. It was found that there was scope for the development of a facility which was open to all, informal, confidential, backed by expertise, and helping people who had either little or no idea where to turn in making decisions which could lead to a happier fuller life.

5. TYPES OF COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES

5.1 Independent Information Centres and Library-Based Services

Broadly speaking the alternative information centres comprise two groups; the independent information centres and those that are library-based. Another distinction can be made between those that serve local communities in the sense of neighbourhood; and those that serve communities of interest based on a shared sense of social purpose and are more geographically dispersed. The former are geographic and the latter functional communities (Clark *In* ref. 8, pp. 30). A specialised service dealing with a particular range of issues, for example, women's issues would tend to use the term information centre or resource centre as it does not claim to serve a community generally. It would, however, serve a functional community on a regional,

national, or international level. Centres differ among themselves in interest areas, activities, social and political views for example. They do share, however, the common characteristic of being unlike traditional or establishment libraries. The types of service offered are not unique to these centres and include aspects common to establishment libraries. They differ in that they offer vital alternatives to entrenched education systems, traditional research and consultation and the establishment media. They have applied, and partially transformed skills from the field of librarianship (ref. 22, pp. 2).

There were nearly 2,000 community information and advice services in Britain in 1986. Most offered a general service which included information and advice in any subject. Others specialised in a particular area of work⁴⁶. Some were well-known nationally, for example, the Trade Union and Community Resource Centre (TUCRIC) in Leeds and the South Wales Anti-Poverty Action Committee (SWAPAC). These centres performed socially useful work and represented models for organising information services in support of social change (ref. 22, pp. 3)

TUCRIC and SWAPAC brought together a range of labour bodies, including trade union branches, shop stewards committees and women's groups. They built up reference libraries and research files to provide a database on the political economy of the region; trained staff to advise and conduct enquiries upon request; disseminated information widely using bulletins and publications; and formed a base for worker education on a range of topics.

Libraries employing alternative information centre principles differ among themselves as to approaches. The British CABx for example, attempt a kind of impartiality unlike the Neighbourhood Advice Centres which are openly partisan on the clients behalf. The latter engage in advocacy, community action and lobbying where necessary (ref. 15, pp. 15-16).

5.2 Urban and Rural Services

A further variation lies in the differing nature of urban and rural centres (ref. 15, pp. 21) Venner and Cotton (ref. 46, pp. 130) stress that there could be no blueprint for the

development of information and advice services to communities in sparsely populated areas. It is possible to set up practical guidelines but the choice of service for local needs should be made locally. Experience suggests that the most successful services are those where a wide range of organisations have been involved (ref. 46, pp. 133). Martin (ref. 31, pp. 94) echoes this:

The South Molton project increased the visibility of the public library service to unprecedented levels; enhancing the role of the voluntary agencies without undermining their independence; making possible the provision of a full-time service which none of the 14 individual community organizations involved could have supported on its own.

Ward (ref. 37, pp. 126) points out that in Britain in 1980 a very large proportion of the population had virtually no access to information and advice services, also that there was great unevenness in the standard of provision where it did exist. Most of the specialist services were concentrated almost exclusively in a handful of major urban centres while large stretches of rural Britain were barren of all services. The information and advice needs of these rural areas were substantially the same as those of people lived in towns but were even more difficult to meet because of problems with geographic dispersion, transport and accessibility. It is not usually possible to maintain the full range of information agencies in small towns (ref. 33, pp. 59). In rural areas in Britain, centralisation, the decline of public transport and the loss of informal sources such as the village schoolmaster, policeman, doctor or clergyman, have contributed to a problem of access to information and advice (ref. 46, pp.4; ref. 2, pp. 29). In the United States, Drennan and Drennan⁴⁷ regard the substantial enclaves of minority groups in rural areas as some of the most deprived people on the North American continent. In rural areas the library may be the central or sole source of certain types of information.

In Britain, Devon County Library's Public Information In Rural Areas Technology Experiment (PIRATE) investigated the use of locally created databases as well as

telecommunications networks in linking libraries in different parts of the country (ref. 2, pp. 33). Information technology such as that used in PIRATE could alleviate the situation in rural areas, particularly with access to the Internet but still only those with the know-how and access to a computer can benefit. There is also the problem of some user's preference for a more personal delivery of the information. The role of the Internet is explored further in section 8.

The work of libraries in rural areas in Britain has been highlighted by the 1997 Library Association/Holt Jackson Community Initiative Award. A nominee was Horley's Local History Centre which is housed in the local library and offers weekly advice sessions staffed by volunteers. The provision of this service has revitalised the library as a focus of the community⁴⁸.

6. CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITY INFORMATION WORK

While there is overlap between public library and CIS provision and while the type of provision differs regionally and internationally, Coleman (ref. 39, pp. 62-63) usefully defines four distinguishing characteristics of community information work.

Firstly it offers materials that are different in both context and nature. The subject matter deals directly with the lives of people and the material is often ephemeral, consisting of newspaper cuttings, pamphlets and leaflets. There are virtually no established library procedures for either obtaining or organising this type of material.

Secondly in community libraries/information services there is a different relationship between the librarians and the user. The degree of interaction needed to establish the exact nature of the user's problem is greater than that usually engaged in conventional reference work.

In the third place community libraries/information services rely on close links with other agencies. The centre is part of an overall network of information and advice

agencies. It will depend on these for information gathering to a certain extent and will need to refer users to them. A CIS cannot operate in isolation. Jordan and Walley⁴⁹ note that in Britain community-oriented librarians viewed their services as one part of the total operation of the local authority.

In the fourth place such a service is overtly political. It is this final point that truly characterises community libraries/information services since the first three could also apply to other types of services. CISs are based on the principle that everyone has a right to equal access to information and to the nations resources. As Ward (*In ref. 39, pp. 63*) argues it is not a service, but is an aid to making democracy work.

The rationale for these centres lies in their perception of an essentially different social purpose. They differ from traditional libraries in that they are proactive about their sense of social purpose. There is a timely anticipation and active seeking out of the information needed to fulfil the services role. It suggests a kind of societal alertness to changes in need patterns and an energy in the pursuit of service. It suggests fearlessness about going ahead with a chosen path. These centres reject the idea of neutrality as being neither desirable nor possible and acknowledge a political connotation to the use of information. They show a radical difference in their approach to defining information needs. Establishment libraries, intentionally or by omission, essentially protect the *status quo* and by default link themselves with the interests perpetuating social inequality and injustice (*ref. 22, pp. 1-2*). Establishment libraries tend to concentrate on 'coping information' whereas these centres gather, organise and seek people with information (not only published sources), with the aim of changing social conditions. In short, CISs reject political blandness and represent a highly active form of social consciousness which verges on militancy (*ref. 31, pp. 96*). Harris⁵⁰ states this position forcefully when he declares that: 'the idea that access to information can be neutral, that information is a some passive resource waiting for people to use, is politically naive and amounts to collusion

in the processes which perpetuate disadvantage.'

The author would add another distinguishing characteristic of CIS: that the management of the centre is democratic and usually a form of participative management is employed. Further, that instead of tinkering with the peripheries of service, say in offering some sort of outreach programme alongside traditional services, radical redefinition of the purpose and function of the service, in a system-wide approach is required. Vincent (*ref. 28, pp. 3*) suggests, however, that CISs are not an absolute complete states to be reached but are in process, constantly re-evaluated and redefined.

Another issue linked to the client/library worker relationship observed by the author, is the need to make potential users aware that they lack information or lack the kind of information that will help ease their difficulties. As Epstein (*In ref. 50, pp. 56*) has noted ... 'it is a very sophisticated leap from merely not having information to being aware that there is something you do not know, that knowing it will help solve your problems, and that therefore you need information.'

Linked to the issue of the range of formats is the practice of using people themselves as important sources of information. Usherwood (*ref. 2, pp. 23*) points out that in communities with a strong oral tradition information is most frequently spread by word of mouth. This recognition is important for giving due emphasis to local indigenous knowledge and the informal networks that convey it. The point has been made (Rosenberg *In ref. 51, pp.147-51 & ref. 52*) that formal information services are unlikely to succeed if the indigenous knowledge system is overlooked.

This does not only, however, apply to the situation in the South. A United States public library has published a *People to people index* to link topics with named individuals in the community. Harris (*ref. 50, pp. 53*) argues that we need structures that support the presentation of communities own knowledge through pamphlets and leaflets, resource centres with desktop publishing, for instance, to provide statements by marginalised groups: 'in such ways it is possible to make the experience

of people in communities more visible, to make their voices more audible, and their knowledge more valid'. It is, however, important to realise that these methods are not sufficient on their own (ref. 2, pp. 23) and that exotic knowledge needs to be brought in and blended with local knowledge systems. In a wider CIS context Kempson⁵³ argued in 1986 that the Western public library model was as inappropriate to the needs of ordinary citizens in all countries whether 'developed' or 'developing'.

Other characteristics of CISs and community libraries of a more practice-based sort are set out in Stilwell (ref. 18, pp. 105-39).

7. FUNCTIONS COMMON TO COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICES

A range of functions can be performed by an information service. Not all of these will be appropriate to a particular service or the community it intends to serve. The main functions are outlined by Bunch (ref. 9, pp. 25-27).

7.1 Self-help

This requires that users find the answers to their own problems. The information service selects appropriate materials, reprocesses information in a form that can be easily understood, packages and arranges these materials in a way appropriate to the user. This kind of service is most suitable where there is a shortage of trained staff to operate a personal inquiry service, for example, in a small branch or mobile centre, or for deposit in an unstaffed centre. Materials are usually produced and assembled in a regional or central office.

7.2 Support for Other Information Services or Groups of Professional Workers

Where information services to the public are adequate, informational support to other organisations and workers may be important, for example, in providing a selective dissemination of information service; in other words, channelling information to meet the expressed subject interests of groups or

individuals. Other aspects of this type of service are current awareness services, keeping a register of problems, a press cuttings service, a loan collection of reference books, providing publicity, educational materials and local information.

7.3 Simple Directional Information

Information giving ranges from supplying simple directional information to providing more complex data. For example, an enquirer might need information about eligibility for a benefit (say housing), or regulations. This could involve guiding the person to where further help or advice could be obtained without making contact with the service oneself.

7.4 Referral

Referral differs from ordinary information giving in that it is a more active form of guiding in which contact is made for the enquirer with an agency that can help. Coleman (ref. 32, pp. 310) gives an estimate of 50 per cent for the number of people who do not follow through on the giving of a name and address without some form of further help.

7.5 Escort

It might be necessary to escort clients who do not have sufficient confidence to make contact with the help-supplying agency, or may be intimidated by officials, or are likely to have difficulty in explaining their case. It is often true that representatives of an information service can obtain information from official bodies that is denied or simply not offered to members of the public.

7.6 Practical Help

This involves, for example, assisting with writing a letter or making a telephone call.

7.7 Advice

This is information tailored to individual need. It can be a fairly neutral activity, such as setting out a course of action or options from which an enquirer must make a choice, or it can involve the evaluation of available information or services, and help with choosing an option.

7.8 Advocacy

Where clients are not capable of obtaining the information, services, benefits or justice to which they are entitled, advocacy is needed. A positive identification is made with the client's case, which is then argued in front of officials, tribunals or courts on the client's behalf.

7.9 Community Education

This type of focus concentrates on educating the community about the services that can help them, their entitlements to benefits or rights, rather than providing an information and advice service on a personal basis.

7.10 Community Action

This can arise out of an analysis of enquiries received when it becomes apparent that there is a lack of a service or facility in the community, or that a programme may be working against certain groups of people. The information service plays an active role in precipitating change either by acting on its own or encouraging individuals or groups to campaign.

7.11 Outreach

In this context outreach is providing information to a wider public than the services usual clientele.

7.12 Counselling

Counselling requires much more time and in-depth probing. At one extreme it covers simply listening to clients who, by externalising their problems, may be able to face them and arrive at a solution. At its other extreme, counselling can lead to diagnosis and analysis, followed by the referral of clients to clinics for treatment. Specialised, professional skills are needed by the interviewer where casework and diagnosis are required.

7.13 A Continuum of Information and Advice Work

It is important to stress that in practice such clear distinctions can seldom be made (ref. 9, pp. 27-28).

Usherwood (ref. 2, pp. 30) refers to the Library Association's phrase 'a continuum of information and advice work' and suggests that there is still discussion within the information profession about what community information work is and which parts of it different agencies should undertake. Bunch (ref. 9, pp. 98) also recognises an information- advice-advocacy continuum, arguing further that someone seeking information or help is really interested in obtaining a satisfactory answer or solution, rather than an information service's concept of its necessary cut-off points. What is important is that if a particular service does set limits it is able to deal satisfactorily with cases that need to be taken beyond those limits. Usherwood (ref. 2, pp. 30) quotes in this context, Bundy's warning of twenty years ago about consequences if: 'Libraries continue to proffer weak, ineffectual, and basically insulting service, no matter what excuses,' concluding that the 'eradication of poverty and the future of people are too important to be left dependent on any institution's willingness to transform itself.'

8. THE FUTURE OF CISOs

Martin⁵⁴ places the argument for community librarianship firmly in its social and political context when he states: 'I believe in public libraries and in their mission as a reforming and interventionist agency. My benchmark is the poverty and deprivation that continue in our society today and the apparent lack of concern about this fact in library circles.'

In spite of the clarity of this vision Usherwood (*In* ref. 55, pp. 215) concludes that in the 1980s a good number of British public librarians, together with many other public servants, seemed to lose their way. Many seemed to shift to the Right to make use of the prevailing winds of political change. This represented a tangible withdrawal from the idealism and social commitment of public librarianship in the 1960s and 1970s: 'Too many in the profession became converts to the idea of market forces and took on board the consumerist approach advocated by the Thatcher government.' The consequence was the commercialisation of library services and the results were often, for example, stock

selection policies that were more concerned with the quantity of issues than with the quality of materials on offer.

Harris and Green⁵⁶ note that problems in promoting the social contribution of public libraries have been the unevenness of activity across the country and the lack of sustainability of many initiatives in this area. Rosenberg⁵⁷ endorses the latter view in the African context when she questions the sustainability of rural community resource centres in Africa.

In the political context both the public library movement and the notion of community have come through difficult times over the last 10-15 years. Harris and Green (ref. 56, pp. 184) suggest that some of the context and values that at that time underpinned 'understanding of the social role of libraries and of 'community'—such as public ownership, and the sense of neighbourhood associated with cornershops and public space have been eroded.' They continue 'The social context for community librarianship as it evolved in the 60s and 70s is irrecoverable. In order to shape new policies for the social role of libraries, library authorities need a platform of research and analysis, a set of demonstration examples and a penetrating debate.'

An important British initiative is the Public Library Development Scheme which was set up in 1988 to encourage new enterprises aimed at extending or improving public library services in England. Activities that are likely to promote co-operation between public libraries and other libraries or organisations in the public or private sector are of particular interest. The scheme is funded by the Department of National Heritage and administered by the British Library Research & Development Department. The scheme provides up to 40 per cent of the funding for projects with the remainder supplied by the library authority or other organisation or its partners (ref. 10, pp. 26-27). A recent book *Understanding community librarianship: the public library in post-modern Britain* by Black⁵⁸ traces the history of community librarianship and reconsiders the role of community librarianship in the late 1990s and beyond. Black reaffirms the importance of the public library using a community perspective when he

cites the Department of National Heritage's phrase, that the public library is 'a major community facility.'

The LA Holt Jackson Community Initiative Award in recent years has recognised library initiatives which provide services which really change the lives of their users (ref. 56, pp. 184) and this too has provided a renewed focus on libraries from the community perspective. The *Library Association Record* reported in 1995 that the concept of community librarianship was to get a boost in November of the year (with Library Associations backing) in the form of guidelines that aim to 'give shape to current developments. The guidelines were produced under the auspices of the Community Services Group of the Library Association and the Home Office-funded Community Development Foundation. Included in the guidelines are examples of good practice, ideas on the roles of various agencies and basic principles such as empowerment, partnership and positive action. They aim to be a practical tool and to provide material for lobbying'⁵⁹.

Harris and Green (ref. 56, pp. 184) suggest that one role the library will be expected to play is in promoting the use of information technology in local communities. An encouraging development is to be found in the provision of community information on the World Wide Web. Kendall (ref. 16, pp. 212) reports that 'Up-to-date answers for community information inquiries can be found through a growing number of World Wide Web resources.' As Kendall quite rightly points out some community librarians in Britain may as yet have no access to the Internet but she suggests that as more public libraries provide individuals with access to the Internet it will be valuable to guide them to sources of information of relevance to their lives. Four British authorities which have established searchable community information databases are Hertfordshire, Islington, Manchester and Norfolk (ref. 16, pp. 212). While the value of making local information available internationally could be questioned 'the multimedia nature of the Web means that community information files can be more easily presented in an attractive way. There are, in addition, community information

resources of national and even international relevance. An example is *Women's health* 'a guide to Internet resources relating to women's health issues which has been set up by Project Earl, a consortium of public libraries formed to support, advise and help in the development of the Internet in British public libraries. The Community Information Group of this project is looking, in particular, at resources for community health information (ref. 16, pp. 212).

A national web site for CABx is not yet available. Through the Internet, however, since 1993 there has been national access to a searchable database on the Web of the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux (NACAB) monthly updates of news on changes in legislation through the efforts of the Manchester bureau (ref. 16, pp. 213). It also provides Cloggie's Advice Column which gives 'a selection of frequently asked questions and answers.' In spite of the obvious potential of these initiatives Kendall³⁹ points out that there is no wish to advocate that the Web replace other ways of providing community information such as face-to-face services. She notes, too, that there are times when people need a more personal service and quotes Usherwood's statement 'a machine can't see somebody cry (ref 16, pp. 213). Another valid observation by Kendall is that access to the Internet needs to be free for community information as the people who need it the most are those who are also likely to be less able to pay.

A factor which has emerged strongly in the South African public and community library situation is the need for stringent evaluation. Bunch (ref. 10, pp. 138) urges continuous evaluation in order to keep the service relevant to the community and he supplies details about techniques to achieve this assessment. Usherwood (ref. 2, pp. 35) states that a CIS must be evaluated in terms of its stated goals and objectives. He argues convincingly that this is an area for future research. There is a need to examine not just what the services are actually doing and what they cost but also the impact of such services on the people and communities they purport to serve. Harris and Green (ref. 56, pp. 184) note the difficulty of meeting the

need to demonstrate in measurable terms that public libraries offer value for public money. This has in fact been done in South Africa in a community library sited in an informal settlement⁶⁰ and the findings are most useful for planning and potentially for convincing local and regional authorities that the library is 'a good thing.' In Britain public libraries and community libraries appear to have reached a closer working relationship in the 1990s. Harris and Green (ref. 56, pp. 184) comment: The public libraries and communities movement is gathering momentum. The rhetoric of library as community asset has been hard on the lips of staff, elected members, researchers, and politicians at cabinet level

This year 'Public Libraries and Community Development' was to be one of the Library Association Umbrella themes at the conference in June and 'Libraries and Communities' is the theme for the journal *New Library World* in November. A new programme of research and related activities 'the social impact of libraries: a research and demonstration programme' is, for example, being promoted by the Community Services Group of the Library Association. Harris and Green (ref. 56, pp. 184) also report that among the significant messages in two recent reports in Britain was 'the need for imagination and commitment in the way libraries relate to their communities; and the perceived importance of the library as 'community asset.'

Now more than ever before as Usherwood (ref. 2, pp. 35) argues, CISs need to be promoted so that politicians, users and potential users develop positive attitudes towards the concept. He gives the example of a number of British advice agencies joining together in 1990 to host receptions at the House of Commons and to organise meetings at major political conferences to draw politicians' attention to the work of community information agencies. In other countries where these services are at risk this example could be emulated and impact studies such as Wyley's lead the way. The closer relationship between CISs and public libraries is an interesting development. Together with these closer links one hopes will come an infusion of public

library practice with the theory and practice of community library and information services. Literature read for this review suggests that in Britain, at least, there is awareness of the need to redefine the new context of the 1990s and beyond for CISs and community librarianship and to provide evidence in the form of impact studies to reassert time and again in a variety of contexts that these services are a 'community asset.'

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