Information as currency, democracy, and public libraries

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to endorse the notion that information is the currency of democracy and explore the question of the public library’s role in promoting democracy through the provision of access to information.
Design/methodology/approach – A review of the literature and a case study are used.
Findings – From the early days of the public library, there has been a certain democratic paternalism in librarians’ views on public libraries, and ambivalence about the extent to which these libraries have provided information to the whole population. Despite this finding, the paper explores the public library’s role in providing information; the currency of information. Public libraries can contribute to the renewal of a democratic public sphere by providing free and ready access to knowledge and information, as well as safe and trusted social spaces for the exchange of ideas, creativity, and decision making.
Originality/value – The paper examines material from the dawn of the public library to current concerns about the role of these libraries in providing access to information, in revitalising citizenship and fostering democracy. It draws on the well-known example of the birth of democracy in South Africa and on discussions of public library neutrality and activism in contemporary France, describing limits on the achievements of libraries in these countries in the context of some current, promising examples from the USA, Britain, Denmark, and Australia.
Keywords South Africa, France, Democracy, Information, Public libraries, Neutrality
Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction
The notion that “Information is the currency of democracy” is attributed to Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the US Declaration of Independence. Drafted in 1776, it is regarded as the first formal statement by a nation’s people of their democratic right to choose their government. It has been influential beyond the USA, notably during the French Revolution (Declaration of Independence, 2009).

During the Second World War when the future of democracy was in jeopardy, Franklin D. Roosevelt referred to the role of libraries in democracy: “Libraries are directly and immediately involved in the conflict which divides our world,[…] because they are essential to the functioning of a democratic society[…]” (cited by Ditizion, 1947, p. v). The exercise of democratic rights, however, is based on certain preconditions such as having educated citizens, and access to the information which is needed to inform and exercise such rights.

Access to information was given a boost in the 1850s with the birth of the public library movement in the USA and elsewhere. The rates-based tax-supported public library became the commonly accepted model and was linked to the movement for universal schooling (McCook, 2001). In 1949, Shera (1949, p. vi), a notable proponent of the democratising function of the public library, summed up this relationship: “The modern public library in large measure represents the need of democracy for an enlightened electorate, and its history records its adaptation to changing social requirements”. Ditizion (1947) documented the role of public libraries regarding education and democracy in education after formal schooling. Libraries provided “a people’s university” and “a wholesome capable citizenry
would be fully schooled in the conduct of a democratic life” (p. 74). McCook (2001, p. 10) affirmed this role: “for librarians, democracy is our arsenal, our cornerstone, our beacon, our strongest value”.

As early as the 1850s, however, a certain “democratic paternalism” regarding the free public library was evident in newspapers in Boston. The library was seen rather unrealistically as a magic wand for social reform, and a bulwark against “tendencies to dissipation [...]” (Ditzion, 1947, p. 24). Ditzion (1947) sums up this attitude as providing public libraries “for the masses in order to forestall any notion the said masses might get to invade the reading rooms of the chosen few” (p. 28). He adds “books and libraries were said to be efficacious not only in soothing the savage breasts of labour’s men of action, but also in controveting some of the troublesome social philosophies which were beginning to attract the American worker” (p. 135).

In addition, a certain ambivalence is evident in librarians’ views at that time, for example, Worcester librarians were gratified to see “rude manners and vulgar practices” gradually disappear from their popular reading room (Ditzion, 1947, pp. 114-115). At the 1894 Conference of the American Library Association (ALA), opponents of providing daily newspapers in public libraries claimed that the “great unwashed” class was coming to the library for warmth and comfort as well as for the daily paper (Ditzion, 1947, p. 189). The well-known library leader, Melvil Dewey, despite his many notable contributions, was charged in the library context with anti-Semitic practices and allegations of racism against him were never disproved (Ditzion, 1947, p. 171).

While librarians generally drew on democratic and humanitarian principles in seeking to contribute to the self-realisation of the broad mass of the people (Ditzion, 1947), it is fair to ask to what extent public libraries have embraced their role in the provision of information to the whole population. To what extent have the democratic principles apparently espoused by library leaders and librarians been applied in practice? Until the New Deal initiatives of the 1930s, few African-Americans had library services and by 1941 only four states had integrated library services for all. McCook (2001) points out that the southern states did not allow African-Americans to use public libraries and segregated services were established in Charlotte, Houston, and Memphis. In 1922, apart from the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library, very few libraries employed African-Americans or made particular efforts to serve them.

This paper recognises the importance of access to information for democratic processes and endorses the notion that information is the currency of democracy. It explores the question of the extent to which the public library fulfils its role in promoting democracy through the provision of equal access to information for all. This paper is based on a review of the literature. Key sources are Ditzion’s (1947) book, Needham (2008) on the erosion of the public sphere, Ostrom (2000) on the crowding out of citizenship, McCook (2001) on poverty, democracy, and public libraries, and Blewitt (2014) on the future of libraries. A case study demonstrating the importance of information in achieving democracy is presented from the recent history of South Africa. This method is appropriate when the research addresses questions such as what happened, or how or why did something happen? (Yin, 2004). South Africa, despite current setbacks, is regarded as an example of the peaceful achievement of democracy and it is one with which the author is well acquainted. The paper also draws on recent political events in France around the Je Suis Charlie phenomenon and Hyper Cacher attack. These events raise questions about library neutrality, librarians as activists, and the provision of information for democracy.

2. Information, democracy, and currency
Capurro and Hjorland (2003) explain that what counts as information depends on the question to be answered. It is knowledge that has been communicated, and public library
functions from the generation and collection through to the dissemination and transformation of information underpin the democratic role of the library in providing information in society (n.p.).

Democracy is “a system of government by the whole population, or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives” (*English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, 2017, n.p.). It includes the practice and principles of social and other forms of equality; information must be available equally to the whole population.

The term currency takes this requirement further. Currency has two meanings of significance for this paper: first “the fact or condition of flowing, flow”, or the course, in other words, information as the course or flow, which could be interpreted as the current flowing within democracy which makes it work, and second “the fact or quality of being current as a medium of exchange”, or circulation (William *et al.*, 1972, p. 440). Information is the essential medium of reciprocity within a system of democracy that makes it possible.

This paper endorses both interpretations of the term currency. This latter meaning is evident in the literature of community information services and community librarianship which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. By the late 1980s, they were well established in Canada, the USA, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. They concentrated on providing survival information for health, housing, economic opportunity, legal protection, and political rights, and citizen action information needed for effective participation in social, political, legal, and economic processes (Bunch, 1993). Stilwell *et al.* (2016) comments on community librarianship’s rejection of “the traditional, apolitical stance of librarians”; how it prioritised “services to the disadvantaged with the aim of assisting the redistribution of wealth” (cited in Stilwell *et al.*, 2016, p. 104). Community information is needed for participation as a full and equal member of society, it “assists individual and groups with daily problem solving and with participation in the democratic process” (Stilwell, 1991/1992, p. 19). It entails a positive decision to empower people and requires a radical definition of public library purpose.

This meaning is also found in policy documents of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), for example, in assertions that public libraries, are “an important foundation of democracy” (IFLA, n.d., p. 1). IFLA affirms that “public libraries worldwide play an essential role in supporting development through equitable access to quality assured information”. IFLA (n.d.) continues: “public library services are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or social status. Specific services and materials are provided for those users who cannot, for whatever reason, use the regular services and materials, including the aged, people with disabilities or people in hospital or prison” (p. 1). Among their many roles public libraries:

- “Contribute to an inclusive and diverse community”.
- “Enable good citizenship” and “ensure equality of access to information for all”.
- “Foster innovation, economic development and prosperity” (adapted from IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, cited in IFLA, n.d., p. 1).

In the digital age with the availability of e-government services, public libraries provide an essential portal. IFLA (n.d., p. 4) claims that “the digital divide – the gap between people who are confident IT [information technology] users and those without digital literacy skills and access to computers at home – is lessening due to the availability of technology and trained staff in libraries”. Examples from the current literature, however, reflect a mood of caution about the role of public libraries in democracy and urge awareness of complex realities in the digital age. Blewitt (2014, p. 84) states that in the current climate of “an increasingly market-dominated economy and marketised[1] society” the increasing use of digital formats has led to the widening of the digital divide between the information haves and have-nots.
This gap has implications for the flow of information within modern day democracies. McCook (2001), for example, examines the role librarians can play in providing opportunities for poor people to participate in democracy. She explores the library’s role within the socio-economic context of poverty and notes shifting levels of emphasis in the interpretation of “openness”. McCook (2001) argues that “open doors are very different from proactive service” (p. 28). In 1990, the ALA adopted the policy, “Library Services for the Poor” (ALA, 2008), which urged libraries to “recognise their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies”. McCook (2001) identifies some of the difficulties of serving the community despite such policy tools. She points out that the ALA has reaffirmed democracy as a central library value at policy level but citizen input and the librarian’s connection to the community are crucial. There is great potential to for “misstep” and “the total community is not easily involved […]” (p. 6). A pertinent example is found in contemporary South Africa.

3. Achieving access to information in South Africa

Information was not freely available to all in apartheid South Africa. Stringent censorship and discriminatory legislation enforced segregation of people and services along racial lines. Public libraries faced countless obstacles to the provision of information and equitable service (Dick, 2013). Despite these impediments, some public libraries opened to all races in the mid-1970s, 20 years before the country became a democracy[2]. In the 1980s, the notion that information is the currency of democracy was also embodied in the actions of voluntary associations or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that established resource centres to serve the information needs of the Mass Democratic Movement[3]. These centres tackled inequalities and censorship in information provision and addressed the challenges of democratic participation in the apartheid state (Stilwell, 1997). Through the resource centre forum, they influenced the transformation of library and information services for the new democracy (Stilwell, 2001; Lor, 2016). In 1990, activist grassroots librarians also launched the Library and Information Workers’ Organization (LIWO) to represent library workers who did not identify with the more mainstream, racially comprised associations[4].

In 1990, South Africa had 120 NGO-linked resource centres, but the diverting of foreign donor funding away from the formerly oppositional NGOs to the new government after 1994, as well as the loss of charismatic leaders to the ranks of government, resulted in considerable attrition. By 1999, only half of the centres remained (Stilwell, 2001). After 1994, public librarians sought to realign their libraries to the needs of the new democracy but the badly skewed distribution of public libraries under apartheid posed immense challenges. Despite librarians’ participation in policy formulation structures in the 1990s, libraries were neglected by the first democratically elected government. It appeared unmindful of the library’s potential in democracy.

In the late 1990s, motivated by concern over deteriorating service levels and severe budget cuts, the Library and Information Association of South Africa submitted a report to parliament (Lor, 1998). Eventually, in 2007, the national Department of Arts and Culture addressed the provision of new and revitalised services in previously unserved areas. It introduced a system of assisting the nine provinces with additional funding via a conditional Community Library Services Grant (South Africa, Department of Arts and Culture, 2012/2013). The grants would enable the upgrading or installing of IT infrastructure, and provide staff training, literacy initiatives, books, and e-resources. By 2015, however, despite some progress (Stilwell, 2016), South Africa had only 1,627 public libraries (Portfolio Committee on Arts and Culture, 2014) for a population of 54.9 million (Mudzuli, 2015) – approximately 30 public libraries for every million inhabitants.

Amidst this struggle for equality of access to information for the new democracy came a bewildering series of events – the destruction of libraries by acts of violence from 2005 to 2017.
A total of 26 libraries were destroyed and of these 21 were public libraries (Van Onselen, 2013; Dick, 2015; Withnal, 2016; Zulu, 2017). Among the commentators who have sought to explain this destruction, Allan and Heese (2013) identify rapid urbanisation, unemployment, marginalisation, poor communication, and, significantly for this paper, a lack of access to information about municipal matters as root causes of protests. Von Holdt et al. (2011, p. 6) focus on contestation over social and political inclusion. Nonplussed by the burning of public libraries in three of the eight towns, they studied Von Holdt et al. (2011, pp. 26-27) and asked “is burning down a library a taken-for-granted social practice in communities?” They found ambivalent views, for example, that a library was destroyed because it was not “a proper library” – nothing in it had allegedly changed since 1994. Van Onselen (2013) suggests that many people responsible for the destruction of public property experienced legitimate anger: “a library is no more a sacred symbol for human potential, than a temporary convenience which, when set ablaze, might generate some small attention” (p. 5) or, using local symbolism, it could serve as “the smoke that calls” (Von Holdt et al., 2011, p. 1), attracting the attention of disinterested political leaders.

Public libraries, provided by three tiers of government: national, provincial, and local, are usually located close to local government offices. Libraries are associated with municipalities and the destruction of municipal property is “often irrational, targeting clinics, libraries or the mayor’s house” according to Meyer (cited in Dick, 2015, p. 17). The commonly held view is that this destruction is linked to dissatisfaction with the delivery of services by government. A finer analysis of the situation is required and what is apparent is that the libraries do not seem to have been perceived as worth defending from protesters by the communities they purport to serve. There are, however, glimmers of hope in the responses of professional librarians and the wider community to this crisis. In Gauteng Province, three public libraries have been re-built and funding for the upgrading of two others made available. In another instance, in 2015, after the destruction of a community library in Randfontein, students living in congested dwellings created an “underground” library to provide study space with electric light for themselves (Dick, 2015).

The battle for the provision of information equally to all in a just social and democratic order has not yet been won in South Africa despite 23 years of democracy. Recent events hold out little hope of change. The dissolution of LIWO and the decline of the resource centre movement left a huge gap in critical librarianship[5]. Lor (2016) sees a shortage of activist librarians and political savvy in the profession in South Africa more generally. Public librarians need far more support than is currently available to them via their professional structures.

4. Neutrality – a limit on access to information

In yet another celebrated democracy, France, there is emphasis in recent articles on equality of access to information, library neutrality, and the role of the public library in situations of conflict (Bats, 2016; Merklen, 2016). The notion that the library’s collections and services should be neutral and have “no religion, no politics, no morals” (Lor, 2016, p. 11) can be seen to be an impediment between information and those who need it. Citing Brewerton (2003, p. 48), Lor explains that this quotation from the title of a talk by Foskett (1962) is often quoted out of context and that Foskett’s point was “that the librarian should not impose his/her own political, religious or moral outlook on library users, not that the librarian should lack political, religious or moral values. Indeed, the role of the librarian calls for dedication, itself a professional value” (Lor, 2016, p. 124). The current paper endorses the view that “in conditions of social injustice traditional library neutrality is effectively an endorsement of the status quo” (Stilwell et al., 2016, p. 95). A more critical stance and greater engagement with issues of social justice on the part of librarians is required.
Merklen (2016) explored the role of the library as a French political institution and throws light on the issue of neutrality. In 2013, he examined violent conflict between public libraries and the inhabitants of banlieues in the poor, outlying districts of French cities (Merklen, 2013). Over the last 15 years, Merklen (2016) has seen an acceleration of violent conflict related to social, cultural, and political change. He portrays librarians trying to make sense of this conflict, caught as they are between the concepts Démocratie (Democracy), République (Republic), and the social aspects of libraries epitomised by conflict in which the classes populaires (working classes) are the central characters. He charts the role of local libraries which has changed from being working class to becoming agencies for simply promoting reading. Libraries have moved from the control of civil society to that of local government: “No longer poor institutions but strong ones, with budgets, rich collections and qualified staff” (Merklen, 2016, p. 7). He observes that librarians are no longer activists who typically were members of social, political, or religious organisations but are now state employees with their own ethical codes, including the duty of neutrality (Merklen, 2016).

Bats interrogates the requirement of neutrality which arises from the mission of the library, republican values, and the duties of librarians as public servants in France and reflects on limitations on librarians’ political independence. She analyses the actions of public libraries and the reaction of French librarians to the 2015 attacks on the satirical newspaper, Charlie Hebdo, and kosher supermarket, Hyper Cacher. She examines these tragedies to understand the political role that public librarians assumed at that time, reconciling “their own requirement of neutrality with their desire to take part in these highly political events” (Stilwell et al., 2016, p. 96). Bats offers a view of librarians who ventured beyond neutrality to align themselves with a nationwide movement at a time of crisis, and she concludes by advocating the rekindling of the librarian’s activist vocation.

The South African case study and these articles from France raise the critical question of location of responsibility for public libraries, the events, and processes that lead to their establishment, or neglect their inclusiveness and the attitudes of those who staff them. Hart (2012, pp. 42-43) suggests that the contribution of libraries to social inclusion is not widely understood. She cites the Library and Information Services Transformation Charter’s (South Africa, Department of Arts and Culture/ National Council for Library and Information Services, 2014) vision for the future that libraries will be “within reach of all”, “places for everyone”, and “forces for social cohesion and justice”. Hart and Nassimbeni (2016) see the Charter enabling an integrated system, and access to information and libraries as a fundamental right. In the USA, McCook, however, has illustrated the difficulties of translating policy at the national level via citizen input and librarians’ connections to the community into realising the core library value of democracy. As she points out, there are “many levels and layers of communities in any given community” and adds that it is difficult to get poor people to the meetings at which vision statements are formed: they are also “simply working too hard to be able to exercise their chances to participate in the democratic process in a way that is sustained enough for their voices to be heard”. To develop comprehensive community involvement by the poor and working classes in planning takes special efforts.

5. Where to now?

In another article from France, Belletante (2016) explores the library’s changing role. He sees the deliberate burning of libraries as crises that provide opportunities for French multimedia libraries, or médiathèques, to conceptualise the library of the future. Belletante (2016) exhorts libraries to use the social media to provide support to individuals and provides positive new directions.

Blewitt (2014, p. 84) is also concerned about the future of the public library. Like Needham (2008, p. 1), he sees the public sphere, “in which we make arguments based on
non-market criteria”, as being eroded. Ostrom (2000, p. 13) cautions that “[…] much of contemporary policy analysis and the policies adopted in many modern democracies crowd out citizenship. They do this by crowding out norms of trust and reciprocity and by crowding out the knowledge of local circumstances and the experimentation needed to design effective institutions. Crowding out citizenship is a waste of human and material resources and challenges the sustainability of democratic institutions over time”. Needham (2008) warns that “citizenship becomes dislocated from the experience of using public services. If people are encouraged to think of themselves as customers of those services, then issues of democracy and the public good become as peripheral for the public sector as they are for the private” (p. 11). In 2012 in Britain over 200 public libraries were closed, large numbers of library professionals were made redundant, and volunteers now keep some services running (Blewitt, 2014). This massive cutback represents a great loss of sources of all kinds of knowledge and information, especially the knowledge of local circumstances needed to enable experimentation by citizens in free, trusted social spaces.

For many, libraries are seen as less important in the digital age but access to the internet and the World Wide Web also bring impediments to information access. Blewitt (2014, p. 87) reaffirms the role of the library at this time: “the utopian idea that the Internet would become a global cultural commons, almost anachronistic in its egalitarian and democratic potential” is fading as censorship, copyright, and commercial concerns proliferate in cyberspace. What is clear is the crucial role played by professional librarians in facilitating access and “helping to make sense of what is ‘out there’”. Kwanya et al. (2015) argue for the librarian’s role as intermediary or apomediator, needed increasingly to facilitate access to online and other information.

Blewitt (2014) explores attempts by librarians and other players “to reinvent and reimagine” the purpose of the public library (p. 84). Like Merklen (2016) and Belletante (2016), he sees that the library needs to re-establish itself as a cultural commons and a public democratic space. It must be rooted in a concept of the city as a place of “democratic experimentation, of conviviality, participation and appropriation by free and socialised citizens”. It must be a free, safe, and trusted public space (Blewitt, 2014, p. 87). This paper follows Blewitt’s assertion that public libraries can help strengthen and revitalise democracy and the public sphere. Contemporary examples of libraries playing this role in an imaginative way – promoting access and the exchange of information needed for democracy are Herring Bibliotekerne, in Copenhagen and Dokk 1, a public library in Aarhus (Denmark), Chattanooga Public Library (the USA), and Logan City Council’s Libraries (Australia). Their significance for this paper is summarised here:

- Herring Bibliotekerne in Copenhagen, once a grocery store, now serves as a vibrant multiuse space for community members and has knowledgeable library staff.
- Dokk 1, a public library in Aarhus, juxtaposes a community meeting place with traditional library services and programs, television studios, restaurant and café, space for fine arts, and spaces specially designed for different ages and needs. Dokk 1 hosts services for driver’s licence, passport, healthcare and marriage issues, knitting groups, gamer’s tournaments, seminars, musical performances, spaces for meditation, and play areas (Wilansky, 2017).
- Chattanooga Public Library’s fourth floor is a public laboratory and educational facility focussing on information, design, technology, and the applied arts. This 12,000 plus square foot space hosts equipment, expertise, programs, events, and meetings. It supports the production, connection, and sharing of knowledge by offering tools and instruction (IFLA, n.d.; Blewitt, 2014).
- Logan City Council’s Libraries work with other agencies to offer workshops aimed at mature age job-seekers with a primary focus on the digital literacy skills required to...
re-enter the workforce. Services target high unemployment areas and users include mothers returning to work outside the home, former business owners, and older, unemployed workers (IFLA, n.d.).

Blewitt (2014, p. 94) describes such initiatives as follows: “These new public library buildings, as public spaces, are seeking to be open, democratic, sustaining and sustainable, striving to enable a host of active participatory engagements that create and reproduce the cultural commons in both its real and virtual dimensions”. Funding is a key issue and the article confirms that both public and state funding is needed in these initiatives. Nordic public libraries do not face the financial pressures of libraries elsewhere (Blewitt, 2014). Public monies mainly fund the Chattanooga Public Library but a trust comprising private sector trustees mostly funds the Library of Birmingham. As Blewitt (2014, p. 96) cautions: “it remains a concern for many whether this access to learning, democracy and sociality is open to further privatisation, and whether public space may be further marketised”.

6. Summary

This paper maintains that information is the currency of democracy and that public libraries are crucial vehicles for the delivery of access to information. In creating a democratic future, people need to learn from the past and Blewitt (2014, p. 96) cites Habermas’s (1991) reference to the eighteenth century when “newspapers in coffee houses, book clubs, reading circles, and subscription and circulation libraries all helped establish a bourgeois culture of rational-critical and literary debate”. For Blewitt (2014) public libraries can help to “reinvigorate citizenship, openness, democracy” and conviviality. They can renew a democratic public sphere. Basic requirements are free and ready access to knowledge and information. This access is a core ingredient of the freedoms of expression and assembly, and democratic decision making. Safe, trusted and free public spaces where knowledge and information can be discussed by assenting and dissenting voices, make for informed judgments (p. 96).

From the early days of the public library, there appears to be certain paternalism, and ambivalence in the extent to which public libraries embraced their role in the provision of information to the whole population. Drawing on the examples from South Africa and France, the paper identifies impediments to the public library’s role in ensuring access to information as the currency of democracy. Among these are the decline of the public sphere, social and political inequalities, the destruction of libraries by the disaffected, library neutrality, and a lack of activism among librarians. In counterpoint to these examples the paper offers positive initiatives and suggests a way forward. Useful pointers summarised from the paper are recognising that (adapted from Wilansky, 2017, n.p.):

- People need libraries to be more than information repositories.
- Libraries are sources of knowledge of local circumstances to enable experimentation by citizens in free, trusted social spaces.
- Libraries play a leadership role in revitalising and sustaining communities.
- Libraries play a key role in preserving and strengthening democracy.
- The ways in which librarians perceive and interact with the public is important.

Being prevented from participation in the political life of the community is a major deprivation (Sen, 1999) and access to information, the currency of democracy, is a crucial ingredient in political participation. Who is better to provide this access than activist librarians in the free public library, trusted, safe, and creative social spaces.
Notes

1. Needham (2008, p. 10) described marketisation as “a shrinking of the difference between the public sector and the private”.

2. The example of Johannesburg Public Library (Walker, 1994) and the Natal Society Library, Pietermaritzburg (McKenzie, 1995) was followed by other public libraries and in 1990 the repeal of the Separate Amenities Act meant that public facilities opened to all races.

3. The United Democratic Front (UDF) was a significant anti-apartheid movement. A non-racial coalition group formed in 1983 and comprising 400 church, civic, and student organisations, it had a membership of close to three million. In 1989, it formalised its association with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and launched the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM). The MDM organised national campaigns against the apartheid government’s state of emergency (Mass Democratic Movement begins their Defiance Campaign, 2017).

4. The African Library Association of South Africa (ALASA) and the South African Institute for Librarianship and Information Science (SAILIS).

5. The term critical librarianship is linked to the publication of Samek’s (2007) book. It is rooted in the US progressive library movement and intellectual freedom discussions of the 1930s, and became manifest in the ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table in 1969 and Progressive Librarians Guild in 1990. The term situates librarianship within a critical theory framework that is epistemological, self-reflective, and activist, and interrogates the ways in which librarians support systems of oppression, both consciously and unconsciously. It is a librarianship that endeavours to transform the status quo, empower communities, and challenge both power and privilege (Garcia, 2015, n.p.).

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