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Out of Information Poverty: Library Services for Urban Marginalized Immigrants

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Abstract

This paper provides an analytical overview of the literature on information poverty and the strategies of reducing such poverty for urban marginalized groups from cultural and structural perspectives. Focusing on the urban immigrants in the United States, this paper discusses their informational needs with respect to literacy skills, technology support, cultural awareness, and information resources. In addition, the paper evaluates the library services demonstrated by the selected urban libraries that supply diversified education programs and civic engagement activities in an attempt to establish a more equitable and harmonious community.

Keywords: information poverty; urban marginalized groups; immigrants; library services; literacy skills

Introduction

Serving urban marginalized groups and reducing information poverty is vital in promoting community well-being. In general, information poverty can be defined as groups and individuals who do not have adequate and equal access to quality and quantity information.

The rapid development of new technologies has promoted information searches that are faster, easier, and more efficient than ever. However, this development has at the same time brought challenges and barriers to certain marginalized groups who stay information poor. In light of the inadequate resources, shortage of updated equipment, and lack of basic training to retrieve effective information, many disadvantaged groups fall behind in the midst of new information development as a result of deprivation of opportunities. The public library as a social institution is competent in bridging the gap between the information rich and the information

poor, in sustaining cultural assimilation and in promoting social justice through information services, learning programs, and civic engagement activities.

This paper provides an analytical overview of the literature on information poverty and the strategies of reducing such poverty for urban marginalized groups from cultural and structural perspectives. Focusing on the urban immigrants in the United States as one of the key sectors of the information poor, the paper discusses the informational demands of the urban immigrants, including their needs with respect to literacy skills, technology support, cultural awareness, and information resources. In addition, the paper evaluates the library information services demonstrated by the selected urban libraries that supply diversified programs in an attempt to promote social equality and integration for all.

Literature Review of Information Poverty

The literature on information poverty can be summarized through the discussion of four key issues. First of all, the concept and definition of information poverty have covered a variety of areas with solid scholarship. As Liangzhi Yu (2006) indicates, "information inequality has been an area of great interdisciplinary concern since the 1960s" (p. 242). After intensive study, Yu (2006) points out that information poverty should be similar to information deprivation, information inequality, information divide, and information gap (p. 230).

According to Yu (2006), other scholars have made remarkable efforts to define the information poverty. Sweetlan interprets it as "lack of information access, information overload and self-imposed information deprivation" (as cited in Yu, p. 231), while van Dijk and Britz define it as "the inequality in the possession and usage of information and communication sources," as those who "do not have the requisite skills, abilities or material means to obtain efficient access to information," and as the unfair "distribution of information among individuals or groups," including unequal access, skills, content, values and context (as cited in Yu, p. 231). Furthermore, Britz (2004) added another perspective that information poverty is a serious moral concern and a matter of social justice (p. 192).

In addition, Diener (1986) claims that "informational poverty is not simply a malady of the economic poor or the politically disenfranchised" (p. 73). Van Dijk (2005) also emphasizes that it is not a technologic problem; it is a social and political problem (p. 3). This statement is supported by Hong (2005) who argues that the fundamental reasons for human poverty are the poverty of social rights, "the limitation or deprivation of rights to individuals and/or groups" (p. 726). Obviously, information poverty is part of the poverty of social rights other than the poverty of economic and technological resources.

Along with the definition of information poverty, scholars have identified and addressed the specific groups who usually suffer from information poverty. Kagan (2000) outlines the characteristics of the information poor in five ways: "1) the economically disadvantaged populations; 2) rural people who are often geographically isolated by lack of communication and transportation systems; 3) those disadvantaged by cultural and social poverty, especially the illiterate, the elderly, women, and children; 4) minorities who are discriminated against by race, creed and religion; and 5) the physically disabled" (p. 28). Haider and Bawden (2007) meanwhile connect the information poor to social inequality, and state that information poor as a problem "threatens the equality within society" (p. 545).

The third area of the information poverty literature focuses on the causes for information poverty. While some scholars address the economic determination because "material poverty and information poverty go hand in hand" (Cawkell, 2001, p. 56), others focus on the technology determination with analysis of the "lack of (affordable) access to the internet" which "leads to an exclusion from this society and is thus interpreted as a state of deprivation" or "information poverty" (Haider & Bawden, 2007, p. 546). Parker (1970) suggests that new information utilities or technologies would intensify the information divide between technology haves and have nots (p. 53). Logically, Mammo (2003) believes that "not using the Internet can only widen the gap between the 'information rich' and the 'information poor'" (p. 100). A 2010 study for the FCC in the United States by the Social Science Research Council found that "low income communities are marginalized without access to broadband – and they know it" (Broadband Commission, 2011).

The theory on literacy determination, on the other hand, argues that illiteracy is another critical factor affecting information poverty because, obviously, "if you cannot read and write effectively you cannot use a PC" (Hendry, 2000, p. 333). As a result, those having a high level of the traditional literacy also possess a high level of "informacy" (van Dijk 2005, p 82). Similarly, the "inability to understand a tax bill or welfare check leaves the individual at the mercy of others and can lead to situations in which the individual is not informed enough to make his or her own decisions" (Thompson, 2007, p. 96). Other scholars, furthermore, refer information poor to "have low information processing skills," including low literacy or language ability, physical disability, or poor social communication skills (Childers & Post, 1975, p. 32). So, giving someone a computer and an internet connection dose not actually solve the problem of information poverty (van Dijk 2005, p.5).

The literature also discusses the solution to reducing information poverty. According to Yu (2006), nearly all related studies agree that the fundamental solution needs for the government "to interfere with the deep-rooted factors which have directly or indirectly caused this situation" (p. 235). Based on Britz's (2004) view, reducing the information poverty should emphasize four approaches. The first one is the connectivity approach, which means the provision to the information

poor with the access to modern information and communication technologies. The second is the content approach, which focuses on the availability of quality information and sufficient access. The third one is human approach, which addresses human skills, experience, and education (p. 194). The last one is the justice approach, which maintains that the information production and dissemination need to “be underpinned by social justice principles” (p. 197).

The literature of information poverty has provided three instrumental directions for this paper. First, information poor is part of the poverty issues related to social rights and citizen rights which are beyond the conventional concept of economic poverty. Second, urban marginalized immigrants are one of the key groups that are in need of efficient information in order to extract themselves out of poverty. Third, libraries should and could play a unique role in engaging the marginalized groups, developing and maintaining an interactive relationship with the immigrant communities, providing equal access to the information poor in order to create a more equitable, efficient, and harmonious community.

Demands of the American Immigrants for Information Services

As an immigrant country, the number of immigrants in the United States hit a new record of 40 million in 2010, representing approximately 13% of the U.S. population. Los Angeles, San Jose, New York City, and San Francisco have the highest concentration of immigrant share, which is 40%, 38%, 37% and 36% of their respective populations (New York Public Library, 2012). As for their economic status, 23 % of the immigrants and their U.S.-born children (under 18) lived in poverty.

The urban marginalized immigrants usually are defined as those who do not have adequate literacy, English language skills, and technology skills, and who live in the cities with low income (Ashton & Milam, 2008, p. 1). In particular, those immigrants who “arrive as adults with relatively few years of schooling” and “live in poverty” (Camarota, 2012, p. 2) and most of new immigrants are information poor who have been “denied access to the tools needed for self-sufficiency” (Mayer, 2003, p. 2), and as U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS, 2006) reported, have “fewer resources to facilitate integration, such as English language instruction or citizenship preparation courses” (p. 1).

Needless to say, to provide specific information requested by immigrants in the US, it is critical to create long-term strategies attracting marginalized user groups and to provide them with equal access to all common tools, particularly equal information, education, and responsive support systems in order to reduce information poverty (Mayer, 2003, p. 2). Therefore, it is necessary to understand what they demand and what they are interested in. In doing so, libraries must conduct the immigrant needs assessment through consulting with other libraries,

meeting immigrants, and consulting with local community agencies. Besides, libraries should make intensive efforts to reach out to the local community in order to investigate where immigrants live and work.

In addition, it is helpful to recruit immigrants to serve on the library board and publicize the library's services for immigrants. For instance, the Minneapolis Public Library has six bilingual outreach liaisons that make regular contacts with other organizations to inform their new programs and services in order to improve the library's visibility and publicity (USCIS, 2006, p. 5). The libraries in Los Angeles appointed a multicultural librarian to serve patrons with cultural diversity. These proactive and progressive efforts "make their cities stronger by welcoming and integrating new residents from all over the world" (Ashton & Milam, 2008, p. 4).

Obviously, the immigrants' interests and demands closely relate to their experiences, socioeconomic status, and levels of education. First of all, the basic English communication skill is one of the most critical issues facing immigrant adults in their communities. Most new immigrants from Latin America and Asia are English deficient. 46.0% of Hispanic immigrants and 21.8% of Asian immigrants have little English speaking ability (Camarota, 2012, p. 40). The language barriers create difficulties in adapting to a new community and a new culture psychologically and socially. In addition, immigrants without adequate literacy significantly lose their opportunities for obtaining social welfare, public education, legal rights public health care, and for participating in elections. Thus, English learning opportunities are extremely needed for immigrants, for they are essential in overcoming English language barriers, linguistic isolation, and communication separation.

Second is access to computer and internet and skills and abilities to obtain efficient access to information, that is, "skills to search, select, process, and use information in the complex environment of the computer world" (van Dijk, 2005, p. 73). The lack of basic information literacy and information technology literacy skills has discouraged them from retrieving access to information that is designed and available for them.

Meanwhile, immigrants are strongly interested in library services and deem the local library as information provider and a learning and social space. The public library is their connection to the local community, school system, and health services, social welfare, legal information, job opportunities, and much more. Accord to Shoham and Rabinovich's (2008) research on Mexican/Latino immigrants residing in Santa Ana, about half of them visited the public library personally, and "they perceived the library as a neutral place, open to all, and providing free services, including video watching" (p. 23). The library has built its positive reputation as a safe place that contributes "significantly to the well-being and absorption of immigrants in their new country" (Shoham & Rabinovich, 2008, p. 30)

and was used to cope with a difficult life situation characterized by emotional stress, isolation, and loneliness (Audunson, Essmat, & Aabøp, 2011, p. 224). Also, historically, "urban and metropolitan libraries provide the crucial ingredients of intellectual and cultural growth, along with practical and necessary information needed to prosper in a new culture" (Ashton & Milam, 2008, p. 5). The role of the library is irreplaceable in welcoming and instructing immigrants and reducing information poverty for marginalized immigrant groups.

Supply of Information Services to the Urban Immigrants

In light of the specific demands demonstrated by urban marginalized immigrants, the library is responsible for providing basic training programs to improve their knowledge of computer and literacy through "forming educational partnerships for English-language instruction, adjusting their collections and services for residents not yet proficient in English, and enrolling multicultural, multilingual employees, volunteers and customers" (Ashton & Milam, 2008, p. 5). In Ashton and Milam's (2008) view, "the integration of these millions of new residents into the fabric of American life is a major undertaking," which helps them overcome cultural and information barriers and makes their American dream come true (p. 5).

There is no doubt that public libraries in the United States have a long history and tradition in serving underrepresented groups. Many urban librarians have planned and implemented a variety of effective services and programs to reach out to immigrants and make information available for them. The most significant program that libraries have provided is English literacy program. To meet immigrants demand, a number of public libraries have designed and facilitated different levels of English literacy programs that are essential for improving immigrants' opportunity to assimilate into the mainstream American culture and, in long run, they can produce a whole range of social capital effects ranging from trust in others to generating possibilities for further education to finding a better paid job (Varheim, 2011, p. 12). The library's English language learning program in New York City has enrolled immigrants from more than 70 countries. In addition to English classes, libraries also design various learning mechanisms to encourage active learning. For instance, Austin Public Library is offering the Talk Time program designed to host weekly sessions of Talk Time in English during the spring and fall semesters. Queens Borough Public Library provides the Family Literacy class where parents and children learn English and other coping skills together. Some public libraries are offering various types of afterschool and evening programs, such as workshop on English grammar for students or a library tour for parents (USCIS, 2006, p. 2).

While providing English learning programs, libraries also assist immigrants to understand and interact with American culture, government, and educational system "in order to empower individuals and communities to obtain access to

essential information" (Britz, 2004, p. 197). For instance, Queens Library established the New Americans Program as early as 1977 to offer workshops aimed at helping immigrants adjust to life in their new country, including those on immigration law, public health, job search, women's issues, parenting, education, and others. The Library also distributes "Help" booklet and bookmarks to assist immigrant library patrons (Queens Library, n.d.). The ESL coordinator at the Jones Library in Massachusetts answers questions about the naturalization process and offers practice interviews to help learners prepare for their naturalization interviews (USCIS, 2006, p. 4). A more interesting project, "We Are New York," was established by the Mayor's Office of Adult Education and the City University of New York to help immigrants improve their language and literacy skills. The project offers free instructional materials based on the Emmy award-winning TV show, "We Are New York," which helps adult immigrants practice English and gain valuable information about healthcare, domestic violence, education, money management, and living in NYC in general (New York City, n.d.).

Despite these innovative and instrumental roles played by urban public libraries in improving immigrants' lives, however, they have been underfunded and understaffed for years. Public libraries that serve large immigrant populations often face the demand for ESL class and other services that far exceeds their available resources. To maximize and sustain the capacity of services, it is necessary to recruit volunteers and work in partnership with other institutions, immigrant-serving organizations in particular, to bridge the resource gap. The ESL Center at the Jones Library in Massachusetts, for example, recruits, trains, and supervises volunteer tutors who work one-on-one with adult immigrants. Similarly, Austin Public Library offers three new immigrants center libraries in partnership with Austin-area providers of ESL classes to provide English classes at their locations. The Queens Library regularly invites lawyers, teachers, counselors, and other professionals to offer invaluable tips to enhance immigrants' culture awareness in the community's main immigrant languages (USCIS, 2006, p. 3).

Given the fact that "one-third of all Americans, disproportionately low-income and minority, remain excluded and increasingly isolated from our digital society"(Connect2Compete, 2012) and "public libraries are vital community technology hubs that millions of Americans rely on for their first and often only choice for internet access" (American Library Association, n.d.), it is necessary to set up libraries as community information centers which are "equipped with multimedia PCs and relevant software to enable even those who are illiterate to use computers using icons and the mouse" (Parvathamma, 2003, p. 37). According to the Public Library Funding and Technology Access Study 2011-2012, besides computer workstation and internet access, many public libraries also offer laptop and wireless (Wi-Fi) access. Additionally, 63.2% of urban public libraries design formal technology training classes to "a large pool of people who are new to computers and need the most basic level of training" and other users (Hoffman, J.,

Bertot, J.C., & Davis, D. M., 2012, p.19). Furthermore, bilingual training resources for immigrants are implemented. The San Jose Library, for instance, offers internet courses in both English and Spanish. The Queens Library in New York has installed at 63 internet stations access languages other than English (Shoham & Rabinovich, 2007, p. 23). The Austin Public Library provides free public computer classes to the public in both English and Spanish. They are taught by a combination of volunteers and staff (Austin Public Library, n.d.).

Meanwhile, it is imperative to organize regular cultural awareness activities and programs. As Caidi (2006) indicates, libraries are playing a role as supporting institutions for community building and individual capacity building and empowerment by investing “in people and communities (rather than in books and technologies)” (p. 209). Overall (2009) stresses the need for developing the cultural competence of librarians as a key factor for meeting the needs of immigrants and underserved population groups. Equally important, public libraries can provide assistance in integrating “into the democratic, economic and social life of the host country, while at the same time expressing their current cultural needs, in order to create equality and justice for both longstanding residents and immigrants” (Shoham & Rabinovich, 2007, p. 23).

Finally, to provide effective and useful information to the new immigrants, it is constructive to establish community partnerships and global collaborations. For instance, the Queens Borough Public Library in New York worked with the Queens Health Networks to deliver monthly “coping skills” workshops designed to give tips regarding public health and job opportunities (Queens Library, n.d.). Topics include citizenship information, job training information, advice on helping children learn, as well as information on available social services (Gitner & Rosenthal, 2008). The Fairfax County Public Library partner with Liberty’s Promise designed a unique program, An American Future: Library Service Opportunities for Immigrant Youth, which is supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. This program recruited 90 immigrant youth from low-income families for 10-week paid internships in the library introducing immigrant youth to the role of the public library as well as potential library careers (Fairfax County, n.d.). Public libraries can also develop collaborations with state and local governments to enhance comprehensive broadband deployment and adoption strategies, and develop collaborations between job seekers, employment support services, workforce development, and small business development agencies.

In addition to domestic partnerships, global collaboration is effective in providing information services to new immigrants. Queens Library, for example, partners with libraries in Shanghai, Paris, Prague, Cairo, and St. Petersburg in order to facilitate obtaining library materials in languages other than English and to exchange professional knowledge (Queens Library, n.d.). Moreover, many libraries have expanded the collection for immigrant groups by acquiring additional

periodicals, newspapers, music and audio resources, books, and dictionaries in multiple languages, particularly Spanish and Chinese materials as they will serve the two largest new immigrant groups (USCIS, 2006, p. 3).

Conclusion

Information poverty remains a social problem polarizing between the rich and the poor and widening the socioeconomic disparity in the 21st century. The information poverty literature since the 1960s has contributed intellectual power in defining the concepts, identifying the groups, explaining the reasons and providing the solutions and directions in dealing with information poverty. As one of the key information poor groups, urban immigrants are affected by the lack of English proficiency, education, technology skills, and equal access to information. The reality of information poverty affords both challenges and opportunities for public libraries to provide equitable collection of information, equitable access to information, and equitable distribution of resources.

Therefore, public libraries as an educational, cultural, and social institution must shape and reshape their priorities to address the policies and services in reducing information poverty for urban immigrants and other marginalized groups as a whole, and to maximize the equality in people's opportunities and abilities to retrieve information for a better life and future. Rendering effective services through learning programs, cultural awareness, diversified collections, local partnerships as well as global collaborations is becoming one of critical responsibilities for public libraries.

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