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# Libraries as Pivotal Community Spaces in Times of Crisis

## Renate L. Chancellor

### Abstract

Over the past several years, society has witnessed an unprecedented number of tragedies. From the Paris bombings to the shooting of an unarmed man in Tulsa, Oklahoma, civil unrests have become a part of our everyday life. Consequently, these disturbances have had a far-reaching impact on our global and local communities. In communities in the United States, police shootings and public protests in urban cities have resulted in crises that have been particularly hard-felt, but, more significantly, they live vividly in our memories. Libraries in these communities often serve as safe havens in times of crisis. This paper presents two examples of how libraries in urban communities modified their services and programs to accommodate their constituents to address their information needs during times of crisis.

**Key Words:** Social Movements, Protests, Libraries, Community, Safe Spaces

### Introduction

It has been well documented that in times of crisis, libraries and other information centers have engaged communities to provide assistance and information. For example, contested space was the focus of Archie Dick's (2007) investigation of the role libraries played during South Africa's struggle to end apartheid. Contrary to the belief that public libraries on the Cape Flats were "inadequate, passive, and politically indifferent to social change in South Africa in the 1980s," Dick finds that township libraries were "places for ideas and debate, *spaces* [emphasis added] in working-class areas with low levels of literacy where the books, as props, supported oral discourse" (p. 710). Libraries facilitated meetings and covert actions, and became safe places for political education in addition to providing traditional library services. The residents used the libraries "and invested them with meaning and identity to cope with memories of forced removals, to confront state-imposed violence, and to foster a sense of community" (Dick, 2007, p. 710). As a result, these public libraries became contested, but shared, spaces.

In their book, *The Library as Place: History, Community, and Culture*, co-editors Buschman and Leckie (2007) shift the focus from the library as *space* to an exploration of the library as *place*. Grounded in theory and presented through an

impressive collection of papers from practitioners and scholars, the book is concerned with the impact of the physical library on cultures, individuals, and communities. This type of engagement is also evident in many modern-day community crises, where libraries were the only public centers that remained open to the community during and following devastating events. In some instances, such as in Ferguson, MO, following the grand jury verdict of Michael Brown, which ignited protest, looting and rioting, public schools were closed and students were moved to libraries, so that classes would not be interrupted (Cottrell, 2015).

Nevertheless, these difficult topics are rarely addressed in Library and Information Science (LIS)—despite the fact that the expedient nature of information sharing is a significant aspect of this issue. While there is a plethora of LIS literature that has focused on information services during community disasters (Zach, 2005; Zach and McKnight, 2010), little research explores recent events, such as the impact of the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida or the shooting of twelve-year old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio that have highlighted the travesty of systemic racism in our communities. Is the library profession being true to community engagement if we avoid tackling these issues? If we position ourselves as stewards of social justice, do we owe it to these communities (and ourselves) to address these hard issues? Since urban areas often bear the burden of the fallout when chaos occurs, should libraries in urban communities position themselves as sources that inform responses to civil unrest? The ongoing debate on libraries as neutral spaces is an interesting framework to explore these questions.

## Neutrality

The American Library Association was founded in 1876 with the goal of “providing leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship for all” (ALA, 2017). The professional ethics and values of the ALA were formed early in the institution’s history and are enshrined in the *Code of Ethics of the American Library Association*, adopted in 1939 and amended in 2008 (ALA, 2017). From the beginning, the ALA touted neutrality as one of the hallmarks of the profession. It has been seen as a virtue among librarians who pride themselves on not being guided by their own personal viewpoints, but rather to make available to library users resources covering a broad range of perspectives. “We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources” (ALA, 2017).

Through intellectual freedom, librarians espouse that libraries should be places where citizens can have access to materials, including those that have minority or controversial views. In other words, libraries support diverse collections of reading

materials, and the creation of reading guides on topics like anti-censorship, privacy rights, FOIA, First Amendment, and the like. Yet libraries have been slow to engage in contemporary societal issues like police brutality and the Black Lives Matters (BLM) movement. The author argues that librarians and the institutions for which they work have never been socially or politically neutral (Jaeger and Fleishmann, 2007; Jensen, 2004). So why is the profession resistant to tackling these issues? And is neutrality an option given the impact of these issues on our communities? Meredith Farkas (2017) contends that neutrality is not only unachievable, it is also harmful to oppressed groups in our society.

Notwithstanding libraries' continued value as essential community centers, the American library profession has long had a difficult relationship with actively engaging communities of color. According to Cheryl Knott (2016), racial tensions in librarianship have resembled larger public battles over race and racism, with national governing bodies pushing local library systems to be more inclusive. Despite the profession's reluctance to address many of these contemporary issues related to race, many LIS professionals and researchers (e.g., Bourg, 2014; Hathcock, 2015; Vinopal, 2016) have begun to address social justice and human rights issues such as race and feminist rights in their research by challenging the concept of neutrality. This challenge contends that neutrality is a form of disengagement from crises in urban communities. When neutrality is framed as disengagement, libraries can recuse themselves from engaging with social movements and other crises that occur in communities of color. The author contends that given the times we live in—where civil unrests have become a part of our everyday life—silence or neutrality on critical issues facing communities is not prudent, nor is it consistent with advocacy and activism that the library profession experienced historically.

## Historical Context

Exploring the broader historical context of American civil rights and the struggle for those rights in the American Library Association (ALA) is critical in understanding the pivotal role of libraries and of librarians in society. Although the civil rights movement initially began in the 1800s, most individuals consider the period between the 1950s and 1960s as the heart of the movement (Lawson, 1991; Franklin and Moss, 2000; Alexander, 2010). Nearly 300 years of inhumane treatment—including slavery, segregation, and discrimination—have been experienced by blacks in the United States. Slavery was outlawed as a result of the Civil War and equal rights for blacks were seemingly guaranteed by the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery. The Fourteenth Amendment expanded the guarantees of federally protected rights, and the Fifteenth Amendment barred voting restrictions based on race (Franklin and Moss, 2000). However, life for blacks remained dismal, as they experienced

discrimination, harassment, lack of opportunity, and poverty. A policy of segregation was widespread in the South during the period of Reconstruction, as an attempt to reorganize southern states after the Civil War and readmit African Americans into society. However, massive resistance by whites led to Jim Crow laws that mandated the separation of use of all public facilities, including libraries (Josey, 1970).

The ALA did not take a stand on discrimination until the 1936 Annual Conference held in Richmond, Virginia. In an effort to obtain a large turnout, black librarians received invitations from the Richmond Local Arrangements Committee to attend the conference. It was not conveyed, however, that the participants would have to endure the segregated conditions of the city. Although African Americans were permitted to use the same hotel entrances as white conferees, they were not allowed access to conference halls or meetings that were held in dining areas in conjunction with meals. Additionally, black members of the Association were given reserved seating in a designated area of the meeting hall, thereby diminishing their capacity to fully take part in the conference. The organization's decision to comply with federal and state laws that denied black librarians equal access to their profession was an obvious example of library neutrality.

As a result of this treatment, protests erupted from many of the conferees, and the ALA Executive Board passed a resolution requiring that future conferences be held in cities providing equal access to meeting halls for all members (ALA, 1937). Hence, signs were posted at future meetings, stating "that in all rooms and halls under the control of the Association for conference use, all members should be admitted in full equality" (ALA, 1937). Although the ALA implemented policy to deal with the issue of segregation of meeting rooms at the 1936 conference, the issue of discrimination in libraries remained dormant until the Sixties (Moon, 1992).

During the 1960s the ALA experienced a period of great dissension and turmoil. At the heart of this upheaval were issues of segregation and discrimination. Mirroring challenges that were prevalent in other professional organizations as well as in the greater society, the ALA grappled with how to handle these problems. The Sixties ushered in a new era in American history. It also gave birth to a new age for American librarianship. During the civil rights movement, African American librarians rallied together to demand for equality and inclusion in the Association. Nevertheless, segregation was heavily embedded in the fabric of American society and continued to be a problem for the ALA.

With the rise of the civil rights movement, blacks would no longer settle for being second-class citizens. African American librarians participated in sit-ins in libraries throughout the South. These events not only influenced the national mood, but also motivated library professionals to fight for equality with the goal of ending

segregation in their profession. Blacks, along with sympathetic whites, placed pressure on the legal and political system to bring an end to state-supported segregation in all public places—including libraries. In fact, several southern library associations refused membership to African Americans until 1964 when activist librarian E.J. Josey forced the ALA to own up to their own values of democracy by successfully passing a historic resolution that led to the integration of southern chapters of the ALA (Chancellor, 2011). Josey (1970) described the victory as “being the beginning of a revolution in the ALA to make the association responsive to all its members” (p.17). Josey was inspired by Martin Luther King Jr. He believed that if King could fight for civil rights within the broader social movement, then he certainly could lead the challenge against segregation in his profession (E.J. Josey, personal communication, March 7, 2001).

Although racial tensions in the ALA have diminished significantly since the 1960s, the library profession continues to struggle with addressing issues of diversity, inclusion, or social justice in consistent ways (Subramaniam and Jaeger, 2010). Efforts have included establishing an office of Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services, and recruiting members from underrepresented groups to the profession. However, it is not clear how much the field has progressed. According to their most recent demographic survey, 86.7% of their members are white (American Library Association, 2017).

## Libraries as Safe Spaces

In the 21st century, African Americans are still experiencing many of the same discriminatory practices as they did in the 1900s. Racial profiling, voter suppression, mass incarceration, and shootings by overzealous police officers of unarmed African Americans are pervasive in today’s society (Alexander, 2010; Porter, 2015). Over the last several years, such shootings have become an everyday act of violence. The Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) was founded in 2012 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi after “Trayvon Martin’s murderer George Zimmerman was acquitted for the shooting and the 17-year-old was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder” (Black Lives Matter, 2016). Opponents of the Black Lives movement have questioned if the movement squashes their rights to free speech. One example is at the University of Houston in March 2016, following the Dallas shooting of police officers. The confluence of mass shootings by vigilantes and police officers, and the rise of protests groups like BLM have created crises in communities and the need for public institutions like libraries to play a major role in helping communities during challenging times.

Since the founding of the American public library movement by Samuel Swett Green in 1876, libraries have been considered safe spaces for civic engagement and public discourse. These public spaces continue to serve as centers “for debate, the

exercise of rights as citizens, and a place where people of diverse backgrounds can meet as a community” (Staeheli and Thompson, 1997, pp. 29-30). However, for many individuals the public library as a physical space has been more:

A public library is free, non-judgmental, and safe. It is open evenings and weekends, centrally located, open to all ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, political and sexual orientations, and interests. It is a true public space and an ideal setting for expression of diverse opinions on political and social issues. (Alstad and Curry, 2014, p.17)

This perception of the library as a physical space that remains open for all members of the community in times of crisis reflects a broader understanding of the library as protecting equal access and fulfilling social responsibility. Here again, *neutrality* (or *disengagement* from community crises) is placed in opposition to active engagement. When a library chooses to remain open and actively support the community with space and information through crisis (rather than closing), the library has chosen to remain nonpartisan, and to actively engage with the community during difficult times. (As mentioned previously, one example of this can be seen in Archie Dick’s (2007) analysis of the role libraries played during South Africa’s struggle to end apartheid.)

The public library, “as a physical place, exemplifies the public sphere.” (Alstad and Curry, 2014, p.11). This was certainly true of the Ferguson Municipal Public Library and the Baltimore Public Library following the police shooting of Michael Brown and the death of Freddie Gray. During the weeks-long protests in both urban communities, civil unrest ensued, and each respective library remained open (Berry, 2015). The following two cases are examples of how libraries and library professionals can take action in times of crises.

## Ferguson, Missouri

Ferguson, Missouri is located in what is considered a suburban town outside of the city of St. Louis. The community has a long history of racial tension stemming back to the civil rights era. According to the United States Census Bureau (2010), the racial makeup of the city is Black 67.4%, White 29.3%, Hispanic 1.2% and Asian 0.4%. Ferguson is geographically located in the outlying areas of St. Louis County. The community is a primarily black community with approximately 23 percent of its residents living below the poverty level.

Population	21, 203
Median Income	\$40, 660
Persons in Poverty	22.7%

Table 1. Ferguson Community Statistics Based on 2010 Census

On August 9, 2014, Ferguson received national and global attention in the news when Michael Brown, a young black male, was shot and killed by a white police officer, Darren Wilson. For about two weeks following the murder, the entire community of Ferguson was shut down, including schools and businesses. Police established curfews and deployed riot squads to maintain order, and the city was designated a national emergency. A grand jury voted not to indict Wilson in November, resulting in intensified conditions that month. The unrest sparked a vigorous debate in the United States about the relationship between law enforcement officers, African Americans, and the militarization of the police.

The event and how the police handled the situation after the shooting were highly controversial. The case ignited protests and vigils as well as looting and rioting, with skirmishes between protesters and police, on-the-scene media, and others in authority. Governor Jay Nixon imposed curfews that were sometimes ignored and he called in the National Guard (Berry, 2015). This ultimately led to the shutdown of the entire city. Nearly every public institution was closed, except for the Ferguson Public Library.

## The Ferguson Municipal Public Library in Times of Crisis

The Ferguson Municipal Public Library was established in June 1930 as a community library and later joined the Municipal Library Consortium of St. Louis County (Ferguson Public Library, 2016). The library is located in the heart of Ferguson and, up until 2014, was unknown to many who lived outside of the city. The staff of the library consisted of part-time employees, volunteers, and the director of the library, Scott Bonner (Berry, 2015). Although schools and most businesses were forced to close during the rioting and looting after the Wilson decision was announced, the library, with limited staffing, remained open and served as an “ad-hoc school” for the people of Ferguson (Inklebarger, 2014). “The library quickly became a safe haven and expressed a peaceful resolve, becoming a critical community anchor” (Berry, 2015).

Bonner explained that he planned to continue building a safe space for the community in the future. “I am hoping to expand the library’s offerings to better meet the public library mission of supporting continuing education, enhancing cultural literacy, and serving as a center or nexus for the community itself” (Abrams, 2014). Because of Bonner’s choice to keep the library open, teachers were able to hold classes in the library, and individuals from the community were able to obtain information about housing, and general information. Community members were able to gather and be in a *space* and *place* where there was calm even though there was turbulence going on directly outside the library’s doors. It essentially became a safe haven to all. In an interview following the Ferguson crisis, Scott Bonner said, “If you can keep open and keep doing what



you’re doing, you are going to be a safe haven” (Inklebarger, 2014). In 2015, the Ferguson Public Library was named by the *Library Journal* as the Gale Cengage/LJ Library of the Year for its service to Ferguson during the crisis. Today, Ferguson serves as a model for other libraries around the nation. It is a great example of how libraries have become spaces where they not only provide traditional services, but has increasingly become a place of refuge for communities in the midst of crisis.

## Baltimore, Maryland

Baltimore is the largest city in Maryland; it has been dubbed “the city of neighborhoods” because of the numerous districts that are contained in the city. According to the 2010 Census, the racial makeup of the city is Black 63.7%, White 29.6%, Hispanic 4.2%, and Asian 1.8%.

Population	620, 961
Median Income	\$38, 731
Persons in Poverty	19.3%

*Table 2. Baltimore Community Statistics Based on 2010 Census*

Baltimore has a longstanding history of racial tensions that dates back to the days of Reconstruction. After the civil war, many African Americans congregated to the city with the hopes of securing jobs. However, they were confronted by whites who feared competition, and African American labor was downgraded to unskilled or no work at all. Jim Crow laws were put into place to suppress and oppress the black citizenry. As a result, there were violent protests in 1968, which marked the beginnings of a deep divide between African Americans and the police, a divide that continues to the present. Given the racial tensions of the past, it was no surprise that the streets of Baltimore looked like a war zone in April 2015 after the funeral of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American man who died when he was transported in a police van after being arrested for possession of a knife. Massive protests against police brutality, some turning violent, plagued the city for days.

Protests of Gray’s murder occurred near the Pennsylvania Avenue branch of Baltimore’s Enoch Pratt Free Library. The CVS drugstore that burned during the demonstrations was directly across the street from the library. Through it all, the library stayed open, a decision that received a lot of attention and praise (Cottrell, 2015). Understanding the pivotal role that the library plays in the community as a resource, and knowing the Baltimore city schools (as well as other public institutions) were closed, Melanie Townsend Diggs, the Pennsylvania Branch manager, and Carla Hayden, CEO of Enoch Pratt Free Library, declared that the library would be open the next day. Diggs describes what she witnessed the day after the verdict, Tuesday, April 28<sup>th</sup>:

...in some ways it was a typical day, with people coming and going. But you also would have seen customers and community leaders coming in and thanking us for being open. A woman bringing us flowers, pastries. The media coming in to charge up their batteries, use the restrooms. You would have seen a young man coming in to fill out a job application online, and then coming back the next day to say that he had an interview scheduled for May 5. All of these things happened. If we had not opened our doors, we would have missed all those things. (ALA, 2016).

This statement by Diggs captures the sentiments of what it meant to the community to have the library remain open during this challenging time.

## Enoch Pratt Library in Times of Crisis

The Enoch Pratt Free Library is a part of the free public library system in Baltimore, Maryland. The library is one of the oldest free public library systems in the United States. It serves the residents of Baltimore with locations throughout the city, and serves the residents of Maryland as the State Library Resource Center. The library was established in 1882 when philanthropist Enoch Pratt offered the city of Baltimore a gift of a central library, four branch libraries, and an endowment of over a million dollars. His objective was to establish a public circulating library that “shall be for all, rich and poor without distinction of race or color, who, when properly accredited, can take out the books if they will handle them carefully and return them” (Enoch Pratt Free Library, 2016). The Cathedral Street Main Library is the headquarters of the entire Enoch Pratt Free Library system, which includes 22 community and regional branches. Up until August 2016, Dr. Carla Hayden was the CEO of Enoch Pratt Free Library and is now the 14<sup>th</sup> Librarian of Congress (Cottrell, 2015). Hayden and the staff of the Pennsylvania Avenue branch were lauded for keeping the library open in April 2015 during the protests over the death of Freddie Gray. Hayden describes her motivation for keeping the library open:

I knew that the libraries are community resources. I knew that they are anchors in so many communities. In a lot of communities in Baltimore, especially challenged ones, we are the only resource. If we close, we’re sending a signal that we’re afraid or that we aren’t going to be available when times are tough. We should be open especially when times are tough (Cottrell, 2015).

Citizens need to feel safe in their communities. Given that Baltimore has a history of racial tension stemming back to the 1960s, it was crucial that the Enoch Public Free Library remained open during this time of unrest. As a

city with one of the highest crime rates in the nation, it is especially important that there are safe spaces within the city of Baltimore for people to congregate during crises. Librarians working in Baltimore and cities like Baltimore cannot afford to be passive and impartial as social issues encircle around them – fortunately for Baltimore, Carla Hayden and Melanie Townsend Diggs refused to be neutral.

## Conclusion

The Ferguson and the Enoch Pratt Free libraries are good exemplars of how critical libraries are in times of crises. The profession of librarianship in the United States has a long and complex relationship with race. Since the founding of the profession, information professionals have grappled with advocacy efforts toward diversity and multiculturalism. On the one hand, the field fervently argues for democracy and social responsibility. On the other hand, there are undertones of the history that plagued the profession in the '50s and '60s. It can be argued that we are seeing today many of the same civil rights issues the United States experienced in the past. African Americans are still being racially profiled, efforts to restrict voting are ongoing, and the rates of mass imprisonment of African Americans are in large numbers. The situation has been characterized as the New Jim Crow (Alexander, 2010). Moreover, the percentage of librarians of color in the profession pales to the majority. In 2015, just 8.5 percent of librarians were Black or African American, 4.8 percent were Hispanic or Latino, and 2.8 percent were Asian (United States Department of Labor, 2015).

Given the history of the library profession, it is no surprise that there are debates about the role of libraries in responding to recent police shootings and terrorist events. Some have questioned whether the library should be a “safe place” or a “neutral space” during times of crisis (e.g., McClain, 2016). When we look at all of the turmoil that is going on in our communities, it is hard to watch and simply do nothing. Fortunately, libraries like Ferguson and the Enoch Pratt Free Library did not “turn a blind eye” to their communities when they were confronted with unrest. They serve as models for other libraries and prove what many in the library profession already know: libraries are pivotal American institutions, always willing to go the extra mile for their users, in times of crisis or not.

This paper began by asking two challenging questions: If we as librarians position ourselves as stewards of social justice, do we owe it to these communities (and ourselves) to address these difficult issues? Since urban towns often bear the burden of the fallout when chaos occurs, should libraries in urban communities position themselves as sources that inform responses to civil unrest? The former question is perhaps more challenging given the history and nature of the profession. This is precisely why there is raging debate about neutrality among library and

library researchers in 2017. The author posits that because of the most recent crises in Ferguson, Baltimore, Cleveland, Florida, Oklahoma, etc., librarians cannot afford to be neutral. They must be bold and take a position on these issues just like they have done in the past with censorship and privacy rights. Regarding the latter question – a resounding yes! Just as librarians must be prepared when disaster occurs and they need to protect their collections and the interior of their libraries, they must also be prepared when there is a crisis in their communities. This involves preparing their staff by training them on how to deal with adverse situations, in addition to keeping open the physical space to accommodate citizens. We have two excellent examples in Ferguson and in Baltimore—let us learn from them!

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