

Libraries and Civic Engagement

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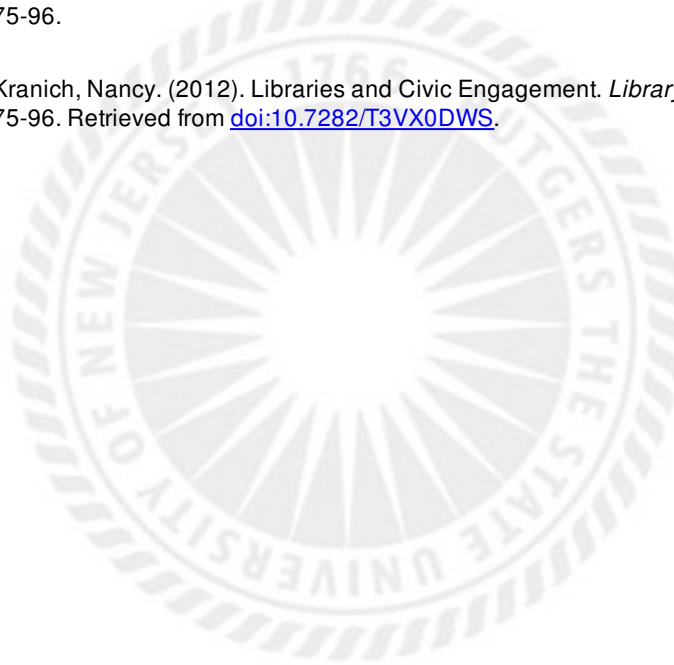
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Article begins on next page

Libraries and Civic Engagement

Nancy Kranich

For the first two-thirds of the 20th century a powerful tide bore Americans into ever deeper engagement in the life of their communities, but a few decades ago—silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century. (Putnam 2000, p. 27)

Americans are more disconnected from each other and from the institutions of civic life than ever before. Over the last 40 years, many citizens stopped voting, curtailed their work with political parties and service organizations, and attended fewer community meetings and political events. They have even diminished their pleasurable get-togethers, with fewer people entertaining friends at home. Americans are also less public spirited, giving fewer dollars to charities. Without a sustained, broad-based social movement to restore civic life and participation in our democracy, we will not reclaim our nation's civic culture.

Librarians share concerns about the erosion of civic engagement¹ and participation in our communities. With a burgeoning movement to engage citizens, libraries—school, public, and academic—are taking advantage of new opportunities to extend their reach further into the realm of civic activities. Libraries have long recognized their role in promoting access to a diversity of ideas, serving as depositories for government, community, and other useful information. But many are also expanding that civic role by facilitating the exchange and sharing of those ideas. Why? Because libraries uphold and strengthen some of the most fundamental democratic ideals of our society; they not only make information freely available to all, but also foster the development of a civil society. They also provide comfortable, inviting, neutral, safe civic spaces conducive to democratic discourse—spaces where citizens can work together to solve public problems. As Ray Oldenburg (1989) describes in *The Great Good Place*, libraries are places essential to the political processes of democracy; places that reinforce the notion of association. Many use their public spaces to host programs that offer people a chance to learn together, frame issues of common concern, deliberate about choices for solving problems, deepen understanding about others' opinions, and connect citizens across the spectrum of thought.

Nationwide, libraries are undertaking new approaches to engage communities and assist them in meeting today's most pressing civic challenges. Their efforts are rekindling civic engagement, connecting citizens, boosting citizen participation, and encouraging increased involvement in community problem solving and decision making. These new services increase social capital—the glue that holds people together and enables them to build bridges to others (Putnam 2000, pp.

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22–24). They also help libraries garner greater community support and position libraries as even more essential community-based institutions.

The State of Civic Engagement

In the words of Robert Putnam (2000), Americans are “bowling alone.” They simply have too few opportunities that expose them to people with different views and engage them in authentic dialogue about pressing problems, as documented by Diana Mutz (2006). And dialogue about possibilities declines as people flee the public square. At forums in 2006 titled “Democracy’s Challenge: Reclaiming the Public’s Role,” participants reflected on Putnam’s and Mutz’s findings, lamenting that there was something dreadfully off track in the nation. They expressed feelings of alienation from politics and community affairs and powerlessness to do much about them. They also said they had become consumers in democracy, rather than citizen proprietors—bystanders rather than active members with a sense of ownership in their democracy. Others saw themselves as local but not national participants, like citizens of city-states rather than of a national democracy. Forum participants expressed concern about the loss of public space where citizens meet informally to discuss community problems and political issues. In short, they saw the average citizen as unrepresented and voiceless.

At the same time, forum participants recognized that the nation faces a variety of economic, moral, and political issues—among them improving schools, expanding job opportunities, combating crime, reducing poverty, and determining America’s role in the world. These require engagement in democratic discourse in order to understand the issues, determine options for action, and choose among competing policy alternatives. But too often, participants felt, these civic responsibilities are abrogated to politicians and professionals, making citizens passive spectators in the political process. Nevertheless, participants also felt that increased public engagement could rejuvenate hope and public-mindedness. They concluded that they had a significant role to play, recognizing that democracy’s challenge is “our” problem and not “their” problem (Doble 2006).

Reinvigorating Citizen Participation

To Vaclav Havel (1997), “Civil Society . . . means a society that makes room for the richest possible self-structuring and the richest possible participation in public life.” After the collapse of the Soviet Union, civil society began to blossom in Havel’s Czech Republic and other parts of Eastern Europe. At the same time in America, the associations and activities that had created the glue that strengthened civil society—notably described by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* in 1835—and that ensured a structure and climate for active citizen participation were declining. Widespread acknowledgement of the crisis prompted social scientists to propose new models to invigorate a weakened democracy and to encourage more active citizen involvement with governance.

Among the early voices was that of Benjamin Barber, who prescribes “strong democracy” as a remedy to incivility and apathy, where “active citizens govern themselves in the only form that is genuinely and completely democratic” (1984,

p. 148). Barber claims that “community grows out of participation and at the same time makes participation possible,” and that “strong democracy is the politics of amateurs, where every [person] is compelled to encounter every other [person] without the intermediary of expertise” (1984, p. 152). From his perspective, “citizens are neighbors bound together neither by blood nor by contract but by their common concerns and common participation in the search for common solutions to common conflicts” (1984, p. 219). In a later work, Barber calls for “a place for us in civil society, a place really for us, for what we share and who, in sharing, we become. That place must be democratic: both public and free” (1998, p. 38).

David Mathews applies practical techniques to this active citizenship model, engaging lay citizens in deliberation about issues of common concern. As president of the Kettering Foundation, he has developed a national network for civic forums that teaches citizens to frame issues, make choices, find common ground, and act in their community’s best interest (1999; Mathews and McAfee 2001). James Fishkin has also helped pioneer this framework for citizen deliberation (1995; 1997; 2009), joined by Daniel Yankelovich and his colleagues at the public opinion research and public engagement organization Public Agenda (1991; 1999; Yankelovich and Friedman 2010). Harry Boyte (1989; 2004; Boyte and Evans 1986; Boyte and Kari 1996), another political scientist instrumental in developing theories of active citizenship, has advanced new models for reinvigorating communities through the creation of free spaces or commons for public discourse and deliberation. These civil society theorists were joined by a rash of other scholars in the last two decades (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Elkin and Soltan 1999; Skocpol 1999; Putnam 2000; Fong 2004; Gutmann 2004; Dzur 2008)—scholars who are strong proponents of citizen participation in public life. Echoing these theorists is a cadre of librarians advocating a broader new “civic librarianship” where libraries strengthen democracy by building and renewing communities, and by engaging citizens in public work (Molz and Dain 1999; McCook 2000; McCabe 2001; Kranich 2001; Schull 2004).

Stages of Public Engagement

A question Americans have debated since the early days of the republic is: What role should the public play in a participatory democracy? The answer lies in the “stage” of involvement they wish to have with their government. Citizens in the “Information Stage” (OECD 2001) of involvement maintain only a one-way relationship in which government compiles and delivers information to them. These informed citizens—referred to by Michael Schudson (1998; 2003) as “monitorial” citizens—only pay attention when things go wrong. While Schudson believes citizens need to know what their government is doing, he also expects them to “know what they need to do with what they know” (p. 311). Barber (1984) considers this informed citizen model of governance as “thin democracy” dominated by representative institutions with relatively passive citizens.

In the “Consultation Stage” (OECD 2001), citizens interact in a two-way relationship with government in which their voices are heard through public opinion surveys and commentary about proposed policies. During this stage, citizens express their preferences—a stage that Barber (2003) refers to as “plebiscitary democracy.”

In the third stage of involvement, “Active Participation” (OECD 2001), citizens engage directly in the decision making and policy making process by proposing policy options and shaping policy dialogue. Barber (1984) calls this “strong democracy,” where citizens “regard discourse, debate, and deliberation as essential conditions for reaching common ground and arbitrating differences among people in a large, multicultural society” (Barber 2003, p. 37). As a remedy to incivility and apathy, Barber contends that this stage enables active citizens to “govern themselves in ‘the only form that is genuinely and completely democratic’” (1984, p. 148). A more active, participatory citizenry depends upon an information environment that Leah Lievrouw describes as shifting from “informing” to “involving” (1994, p. 350). And, according to Paul Jaeger and Gary Burnett, it also depends on a policy environment that relies on “Libraries, as established guardians of diverse perspectives of information . . . to protect and preserve information access *and exchange* [italics mine] in this new policy environment . . . facilitating and fueling deliberative democracy” (2005, p. 464).

Educating Citizens for Democracy

Since the days of John Locke, political philosophers have stressed the importance of civic education to the success of democracy. John Dewey (1910; 1916) recognized the value of small groups deliberating to make choices in problematic situations. In the 1920s and 1930s a public forum movement emerged that educated voters through discussions embodying democratic principles and practices (Keith 2007). Like Dewey, Eduard Lindeman (1935) articulated the need to educate adults about their civic responsibilities through discussion groups, an approach later affirmed by Norman Nie, Jane Junn, and Kenneth Stehlik-Barry (1996). Jürgen Habermas contends that citizens pursue “the rationally motivating force of achieving understanding” (Habermas 1992a, p. 80) to seek agreement through a democratic process that depends on hearing all relevant voices, based on everyone having knowledge of different perspectives and deferring to others with better arguments (Habermas 1992b). Learning to act democratically, then, requires citizens not only to learn and apply deliberative decision making processes but also to navigate through the contradictions and tensions of democracy.

Little is understood about the informal civic learning required for citizens to participate effectively in the processes of democracy (Schugurensky 2006). But evidence suggests that when citizens participate in deliberation and decision making, they learn how to take responsible social and political action, particularly at the local level. Carole Pateman observes that “Participation develops and fosters the very qualities necessary for it; the more individuals participate the better able they become to do so” (1970, pp. 42–43). This shift from what Daniel Schugurensky calls “passivity to the feeling of agency” (2006, p. 172) helps individuals become public, and not just private, citizens, while they develop a political culture that eliminates exclusive control by political elites. Hence, public participation in political discussions builds citizens’ capacity for self-governance and political efficacy, enabling them to go beyond spectators to become actors, to move from occasional voters to participants in the deliberative act of making choices together.

Concerns about declining civic engagement have prompted educators to consider how best to prepare more-active citizens. Many schools are renewing

their civic mission and helping “young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives” (Gibson and Levine 2003, p. 4). Colleges and universities have also reaffirmed their once vital tradition of civic education (Boyte 2000, p. 46). Many have incorporated public engagement into their overall institutional mission, following the leadership of higher education organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and Campus Compact. Adult learners also need opportunities to learn civic skills and responsibilities. As John Gastil asserts, “Adult lives are already immersed in rich community contexts, which are replete with (often missed) opportunities for public action” (2004, p. 309). The need to impart the skills to participate in a strong democracy provides ideal opportunities for libraries in schools, on campus, and in towns not only to inform, but also to educate and engage today’s and tomorrow’s citizens in a safe, neutral environment.

History of Libraries and Civic Engagement

Benjamin Franklin founded the first public lending library in America in the 1730s. His idea of sharing information resources departed from much of the rest of the civilized world, where libraries were often the property of the ruling classes and religious institutions. Public tax-supported libraries were organized in the mid-19th century as supplements to the public schools as well as “civilizing agents and objects of civic pride in a raw new country” (Molz and Dain 1999, p. 3). Later in the century, public libraries continued “the educational process where the schools left off and by conducting a people’s university, a wholesome capable citizenry would be fully schooled in the conduct of a democratic life” (Ditzion 1947, p. 74). By the 1920s libraries became recognized as informal education centers where all could gain access to ideas needed for self governance (Learned 1924).

Following World War II librarians joined civic groups, politicians, and educators to rejuvenate the democratic spirit in the country. The New York Public Library sponsored a series of discussions about the meaning of the American democratic tradition. These programs, according to Ruth Rutzen, chair of the American Library Association’s (ALA’s) Adult Education Board, offered libraries ideal opportunities to assume a leadership role in their communities, proclaiming, “Let us all make our libraries active community centers for the spread of reliable information on all sides of this vital issue and for the encouragement of free discussion and action” (Preer 2008, p. 3). In 1952 ALA, in conjunction with its 75th anniversary, sought to increase political support for libraries by launching the American Heritage Project, which enabled citizens to consider the issues of the day through discussions at their local libraries (Preer 1993). In the words of Jean Preer, “the group setting [in libraries] offered an experience of democracy as well as a consideration of it” (Preer 2001, p. 151). Just as important, libraries defined themselves as agencies that promoted not only access to but also engagement with a diversity of ideas.

Paralleling the decline of civic participation in America in the late 20th century was the suspension of democratic discussion groups in local libraries. Following the social upheaval of the 1960s, public libraries shifted away from the democratic process of group life toward broadening information access for a greater

number of individuals. Ronald McCabe suggests that public libraries adopted a more utilitarian purpose where “usefulness is a function of effective planning that ensures responsiveness to the information needs of individuals” (McCabe 2001, p. 37). That diminished focus on community engagement is reflected in a 2006 report by Public Agenda that found libraries were among the most trusted public institutions, but needed to “look carefully at opportunities to strengthen their role in addressing serious problems in their own communities” (p. 13).

Engaging Citizens Through Libraries

After a hiatus of several decades, libraries around the country are undertaking a vast array of engaging programs that bring citizens together to share interests, concerns, and decision making. The challenge for libraries in the digital age is to extend their reach well beyond educating and informing into a realm where they increase social capital, rekindle civil society, and expand public participation in democracy. Nancy Kranich (2005/6) has documented civic initiatives under way in school, academic, public, and special libraries over the last decade and has found it useful to group them into the following seven distinct categories:

- 1 *The Library as Civic Space.* Libraries offer safe, neutral spaces where citizens can turn to solve personal and community problems. Over the past two decades, communities, schools, colleges, and universities have refurbished or built exciting new spaces for their libraries—spaces that also serve as public gathering spots that anchor neighborhoods, downtowns, schools, and campuses. A good example is the Salt Lake City Public Library, which built a dramatic new facility designed by Moshe Safdie—an award-winning facility considered the community gathering place where “citizens practice democracy” (Berry 2006, p. 32).
- 2 *The Library as Enabler of Civic Literacy.* Children and adults alike must learn a broad range of 21st century literacy skills if they are to become smart seekers, recipients, and creators of content, as well as effective citizens. School libraries, academic libraries, and, increasingly, public libraries—long committed to enabling information literacy—can extend their offerings into the realm of civic literacy² (Milner 2002; Partnership for 21st Century Skills n.d.) so that their constituents can gain critical thinking skills along with a sense of civic agency³ (Boyte 2007, 2009). Different approaches to civic literacy all encompass active engagement with the civic life of communities, helping civic actors to apply skills for participation in civil discourse. An example of a civic literacy initiative used by an academic library is the application of James Fishkin’s (2010) deliberative polling technique at Kansas State University Libraries. Donna Schenck-Hamlin (et al. 2010) used the technique to measure whether students think more complexly and revise their opinions after a deliberative dialogue about the death penalty.
- 3 *Library as Public Forum and Conversation Catalyst.* Many school, public, and academic libraries host public programs that facilitate the type of discourse that offers citizens a chance to frame issues of common concern,

deliberate about choices for solving problems, create deeper understanding about others’ opinions, connect citizens across the spectrum of thought, and recommend appropriate action that reflects legitimate guidance from the whole community. Libraries that sponsor deliberative forums see benefits in connecting them more closely and deeply to their communities. These forums and community conversations often follow the formats developed by such organizations as the Kettering Foundation’s National Issues Forums Institute, Study Circles (now called Everyday Democracy), Choices, Conversation Cafes, the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, and others. Libraries are among those offering deliberative public forums in State College, Pennsylvania; Johnson County, Kansas; and Des Moines, Iowa. Topics range from democracy and immigration to energy and health care and involve citizens holding different perspectives in learning and participatory democracy. Librarians in Virginia Beach, Virginia, helped citizens collect and assess community concerns about redevelopment, learn about civic action, participate in democratic discourse, and develop civic leadership skills (Caywood 2010). In Des Plaines, Illinois, librarians joined forces with community partners by framing and deliberating the question “What does it take to meet the needs of Des Plaines residents?” These community conversations resulted in greater awareness of local services and new collaborative approaches for taking action (Griffin 2006). In Youngstown, Ohio, community conversations helped the public library gain more knowledge of citizen’s aspirations and apply it as agents for change, thereby strengthening community ties as well as public perceptions about the library that resulted in a successful tax levy referendum that increased the library’s budget in November 2010.

- 4 *The Library as Civic Information Center.* Using both electronic and print technologies, libraries now deliver numerous local databases and Web sites about vital services within their communities. Joan Durrance (2004) and her colleagues at the University of Michigan School of Information have identified and evaluated successful civic library projects in communities throughout the country that help immigrants and minorities, teach youth to participate in community problem solving, and pull together essential information and communication resources that might otherwise be difficult to identify or locate. Beyond access, libraries are also facilitating e-government services (Bertot et al. 2006; Jaeger 2005; Horrigan 2004). A good example is Florida’s Pasco County library system, which helps people transact government business, search for jobs, and file online forms for food stamps, Medicaid, unemployment compensation, and more through its extensive e-government program.
- 5 *The Library as Community-Wide Reading Club.* For many years, school, public, and academic libraries have hosted community-wide “one-book” reading initiatives. The idea was launched by the Seattle Public Library, but Chicago advanced it considerably, promoting reading by “giving a ‘public voice’ to what is usually considered a private activity . . . to discover or build unity in a diverse city” (Putnam and Feldstein 2003, p. 53). The Kentucky State Library linked with Kentucky Educational Television to launch a highly successful statewide reading effort with outreach and

engagement activities involving a mix of 130 partners (Pennsylvania State University Public Broadcasting 2002). Other libraries offer shared reading experiences through the Civically Engaged Reader program (Project on Civic Reflection, n.d.), a diverse collection of provocative short articles designed to inspire contemplation about the central questions of civic life. With a grant from the Fetzer Institute, the ALA Public Programs Office is training librarians to use this reflection technique as part of its “Building Common Ground: Discussions of Community, Civility and Compassion” project (ALA Public Programs Office n.d.).

- 6 *The Library as Partner in Public Service.* Pennsylvania State University (2002) launched Partners in Public Service (PIPS) in 1999 to demonstrate how collaborative projects between public broadcasting stations, libraries, museums, and educational institutions could enhance services to participating communities. With support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), PIPS produced a useful guide with case studies on how to undertake these institutional partnerships to help communities revitalize by utilizing digital technologies and fulfilling unmet needs. Considered a vision for a “community as a learning campus,” IMLS built upon the PIPS idea by funding numerous collaborative civic projects around the country that bring libraries, museums, and public media together. An example is a collaboration between the Princeton (New Jersey) Public Library, AllPrinceton.com, and Princeton Community Television that “applies the power of digital media to the civic, cultural, and commercial life of Princeton” (AllPrinceton.com, n.d.).
- 7 *The Library as Service Learning Center.* Service learning combines meaningful public service with curriculum or program-based learning. Schools, colleges, and universities use service learning to strengthen academic skills, foster civic responsibility, and develop leadership abilities. Today, many require students to participate in service learning in order to graduate. An example of a school library involved with service learning is at the Urban School in San Francisco, which works with faculty and students to facilitate their co-curricular community-based research and engagement projects (Urban School n.d.). Even though one-third of college students now participate in service learning activities (Campus Compact, 2010), Lynn Westney (2006) found academic library contributions to service learning sparse. A number of MLIS programs do incorporate service learning into their curriculum. These include the University of Texas School of Information project to create a National Virtual Museum of the American Indian and a University of Wisconsin–Madison Jail Library Group student project to provide reading materials for incarcerated adults (Roy 2009; Riddle 2003). Another, based at the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science program in Community Informatics, involves students interested in the experiences of underserved groups in Professor Ann Bishop’s class onsite at Paseo Boricua Community Library Project in Chicago (Bishop, Bruce, and Jeong 2009).

Opportunities to Partner and Participate

Public Libraries

Public librarians aspire to realign their civic mission, embed their services in their communities, convene community conversations, and build partnerships that deliver impact and results (Hill 2009; IMLS 2009; Lankes et al. 2007; Putnam and Feldstein 2003; Urban Libraries Council 2005). Kranich (2010a) has written and spoken extensively about the importance of public librarians engaging community members in democratic discourse and community renewal. Likewise, in 2011, the Urban Libraries Council issued a leadership brief on community civic engagement, calling on public libraries “to shape and lead discussions, decisions, and strategies that encourage active and purposeful civic engagement.” The brief recommends that librarians identify new roles that move them “from supporting players to valued leaders in today’s civic engagement space . . . [that will] broaden their impact as the go-to resource for building a culture of enlightened, engaged, and empowered citizens” (Urban Libraries Council 2011).

Numerous national and community-based organizations look to public libraries as partners in civic activities. Such dialogue and deliberation organizations as the National Issues Forums Institute and Everyday Democracy provide resources and training for deliberative forums that are conducted in many libraries around the country. AmericaSpeaks is another national group that has involved libraries in national conversations, including the 2010 Our Budget/Our Economy (OBOE) dialogue hosted in 19 locations around the country, including the Johnson County (Kansas) Library. Teams from Grand Forks, North Dakota, and Columbia, South Carolina, both included representatives from their public libraries. Locally, libraries are partnering with community groups related to particular issues under discussion. For example, in Johnson County and Kansas City, the libraries worked with United Community Services, Kansas City Consensus, and the Kansas Small Business Development Center for a dialogue about the economy. Johnson County has also partnered with the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, University of Kansas School of Public Administration, Kansas City Public Television (KCPT), St. Luke’s Health System, the Center for Practical Bioethics, community nonprofits, Mid America Regional Council, and the League of Women Voters Johnson County. In Des Moines, the public library collaborated with Pioneer Hi-Bred and the Iowa Council for International Understanding on international dialogue issues. In State College, Pennsylvania, the Schlow Regional Library worked with the school district’s community education department, the Centre Daily Times, and the local community foundation to sponsor its dialogue series, in conjunction with such groups as the United Way, the League of Women Voters, and various Penn State units. Finally, in Virginia Beach, the public library has teamed up with the mayor’s office, the League of Women Voters, the Hampton Roads Center for Civic Engagement, and others to spur community redevelopment and subsequent initiatives.

Academic Libraries

In colleges and universities, academic librarians are promoting deeper engagement by embedding services in the teaching, learning, and research processes, as

well as becoming more involved with their communities (ACRL 2007; ARL 2009; Lougee 2002; Westney 2006; Williams 2009). Kranich (2004) and her colleagues (Kranich, Reid, and Willingham 2004) have encouraged academic libraries to “play a critical role in kindling civic spirit by providing not only information, but also expanded opportunities for dialogue and deliberation as a practice ground for democracy” (Kranich 2010b).

Recognizing that a robust democracy and the public welfare depend on an engaged and informed citizenry, colleges and universities endeavor to strengthen both the study and practice of deliberative democracy in a diverse and interdependent world. In 1946 President Harry Truman created a Commission on Higher Education for Democracy, which published a report the following year (U.S. President’s Commission on Higher Education for Democracy 1947). The commission considered the principal goal for American higher education “a fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living” (p. 8). It also called for the integration of democratic principles into the active life of the American people, noting that such an integration “is not to be achieved merely by studying or discussing democracy . . . [but democracy] must be lived to be thoroughly understood. It must become an established attitude and activity, not just a body of remote and abstract doctrine—a way for men to live and work harmoniously together, not just words in a textbook or a series of slogans” (p. 14). The report also stated that “The democratic way of life can endure only as private careers and social obligations are made to mesh, as personal ambition is reconciled with public responsibility” (p. 10). Finally, the commission concluded that college graduates of the day may have acquired career-oriented competencies, but they “fall short of that human wholeness and civic conscience which the cooperative activities of citizenship require” (p. 48).

Decades later, in 1999, the presidents of American colleges and universities challenged higher education to re-examine its public purposes and its commitments to the democratic ideal (Campus Compact 1999) and programs have sprung up on campuses around the country to motivate young people toward lifelong participation in civic life. The following year, academic leaders proclaimed:

We believe that our institutions serve not only as agents of this democracy, but also as its architects—providing bridges between the aims and aspirations of individuals and the public work of the larger world. To that end, we commit our institutions to wide-ranging examinations of our civic and democratic purposes through curricula and extracurricular activities, socially engaged scholarship, civic partnerships, and community-based learning and research (Kellogg Commission 2000, p. 24).

Nationally, college and university libraries can participate in efforts to stimulate deliberative democracy by working with organizations committed to revitalizing democracy, such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) American Democracy Project, the American Association of University Professors, Campus Compact, and the Democracy Imperative. On many campuses, public engagement is now a critical part of the overall institutional mission—with faculty incorporating civic content into their curricula and encouraging students to participate in socially responsible extracurricular activities. According to Nancy Thomas of the Democracy Imperative, “Practicing the arts of democracy can be infused across disciplines, and it can be built into nearly all structures on campus, such as student

clubs and activities, athletic programs, cultural and intellectual events, residential life, and volunteer opportunities. There are no venues on campus that could not be practice grounds for democracy” (Thomas 2007, p. 7). Civic engagement initiatives on campus offer a perfect opportunity for libraries to fulfill their traditional roles of promoting civic literacy and ensuring an informed and engaged citizenry. They can also deepen understanding of the relationship between liberal education and civic responsibility, helping students to look beyond the classroom to the world’s major questions and encouraging them to apply their analytical skills and ethical judgment to significant problems around them.

Beyond their local campuses, a number of academic libraries are collaborating with public libraries and other organizations to advance regional or statewide civic initiatives. For example, as participants in the American Democracy Project at Illinois State University, librarians are working with other libraries in the area to sponsor deliberative forums. Likewise, at the University of Georgia Russell Library, archivists convene deliberative forums in collaboration with the Carter Presidential Library and public libraries throughout the state, while Kansas State University librarians who are affiliated with the Kansas State University Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy are training librarians throughout the state to host forums about the future of broadband in their communities.

School Libraries

In schools, librarians seek to collaborate closely with teachers and engage more directly with students by integrating their resources and services into the curriculum (Darrow 2009; Loertscher 2008; Loertscher, Koechlin, and Zwaan 2008). As she has done with academic librarians, Kranich (2006) has called upon school librarians to join forces with organizations such as the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools to provide substantial opportunities for young people to participate in civic activities and learn skills for democratic deliberation. Beyond redesigning facilities, collaborating with teachers, and developing resources, school librarians can enhance civic participation by teaching students sophisticated information literacy skills to live, learn, and work in the digital age as well as to carry out the day-to-day activities of citizens in a developed democratic society.

Ever since the days of John Dewey, educators have recognized the vital role of education in teaching civic understanding and active citizenship (Burstyn 1996; Gutmann 1987; Westbrook 1991). When librarians facilitate the development of critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving, students develop the necessary skills to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. States Jerilyn Fay Kelle, “. . . if we don’t afford students the opportunity within their schools to live in and be active members of a democratic community, they will not become active participatory citizens in the wider society” (1996, p. 63).

Like colleges, universities, and local communities, schools are undertaking major initiatives to teach students the skills for active citizenship. In the early 1990s the Center for Civic Education (CCE) (1991; 1994) laid out a framework along with standards for teaching civics in schools, stating, “The aim of civic education is . . . not just any kind of participation by any kind of citizen; it is the participation of informed and responsible citizens, skilled in the arts of effective action and deliberation” (CCE 1991, summary). Shortly thereafter, a number of leading education organizations, including the Education Commission of the

States, the American Federation of Teachers, and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), joined the call for enhanced civics study, launching the National Alliance for Civic Education.

NCSS has declared that “a primary goal of public education is to prepare students to be engaged and effective citizens. It has defined an effective citizen as one who has the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to assume the ‘office of citizen’ in our democratic republic.” It then went on to commit the organization to “revitalizing citizenship education in our schools and to empowering all students with a positive vision of their role as citizens in a democracy” (NCSS 2001). A few years later, the education community reached a consensus on the need for national action sparked by publication of a report, *The Civic Mission of Schools* (Gibson and Levine 2003; Levine 2006). The report recommends that schools help “young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives” (Gibson and Levine 2003, p. 4), and encourages communities and local institutions to collaborate to provide civic learning opportunities. Subsequently, more than 40 organizations joined forces to launch the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (n.d.) while numerous advocacy organizations have begun their own civic engagement initiatives for youth.

The most recent gauge of progress is reflected by *The Nation’s Report Card: Civics 2010* (National Assessment of Educational Progress 2011), which measured only limited progress in the mastery of civic skills over the last decade. Although civic education falls outside the focus of No Child Left Behind and is threatened in an era of strong standards and accountability measures, Donovan Walling (2007) predicts that a comeback is in sight with hopeful signs from a rebound in youth volunteerism and increasing political engagement. Thanks to the efforts of the campaign and organizations like the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), many states have ramped up their civics requirements for schools, providing substantial opportunities for young people to participate in civic activities and learn skills for democratic deliberation. School librarians are ideally positioned to bolster these fledgling initiatives, following the example of a school librarian and social studies teacher (Eastman and McGrath 2006) who collaborated to promote civics and media literacy by engaging high school students in a voluntary, out-of-school course called Primary Research Through the History of Beverly, Massachusetts.

Library Education

If librarians are to embrace their role in engaging citizens, they need both formal and informal training that offers conceptual and practical approaches. Diantha Schull (2004), in her study of “The Civic Library,” found little formal training at the master’s and doctoral levels or in professional development. Neither did she uncover much of a pedagogical base for school librarians about democratic values or civic roles. She laments that “Graduate programs offer courses on community information networks, digital communities, community information systems, and outreach to local communities, but almost nothing that offers the background required for new professionals to actualize the civic value of their library” (Schull 2004, p. 60). Nevertheless, a number of library educators are leading impressive (although scattered) efforts to teach civic librarianship. Noteworthy is Ann Bishop,

who leads the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science program in Community Informatics, a program that is mentoring students eager for a career that gives them the opportunity to contribute to their communities (Bishop, Bruce, and Jeong 2009). At the University of Michigan, Durrance and her colleagues (2004) started the Libraries and Community-Engagement Initiative to study information needs and use in communities, community informatics, and community-focused library services. Kathleen de la Peña McCook’s (2000) research and teaching at the University of South Florida have focused on libraries as community builders. And, finally, Lorlene Roy at the University of Texas has spearheaded new models for service learning in LIS education (Roy, Jensen, and Meyers 2009).

National Library Organizations

Much evidence indicates that librarians across the nation are working together to enhance their role in developing the civic capacity of citizens in an effort to revitalize communities and strengthen democracy. A number of ALA presidents have spearheaded these efforts, beginning with Sara Long, who focused on libraries building community in 1999. She was followed by Kranich, whose initiative on libraries and democracy has seeded subsequent civic initiatives. Leslie Burger in 2006 led an effort titled “Libraries Transform Communities” that helped inform Molly Raphael’s 2011 initiative “Empowering Voices,” which encourages community engagement.

Beyond its leaders, ALA has worked for more than a decade to foster public deliberation through library forums using materials produced by the National Issues Forums Institute and others. The association has hosted moderator training sessions and other programs relating to community building and engagement. In 2004 several ALA members formed a Membership Initiative Group—Libraries Foster Civic Engagement (ALA Libraries Foster Civic Engagement n.d.)—to provide an official presence within ALA and to create a learning community. In 2010 ALA launched the ALA Center for Civic Life (CCL) (ALA Center for Civic Life n.d.) in conjunction with the Kettering Foundation in order to play a more visible role in promoting community engagement and fostering public deliberation through libraries. The center is building the capacity of libraries and librarians to help citizens get more engaged in the civic life of their communities. It is documenting the growing involvement of libraries with deliberation and the challenges and opportunities they face in conducting a nationwide program that supports local public institutions such as libraries. Members of the center’s advisory committee worked with the ALA Intellectual Freedom Round Table to frame and design an issue map for deliberative forums titled “Who Do I Trust to Protect My Privacy?” as part of the Office for Intellectual Freedom’s Privacy Revolution initiative launched in spring 2010 (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom n.d.). CCL is also forming national partnerships with organizations such as AmericaSpeaks and AASCU, as well as helping local libraries identify and link with partners pursuing similar civic goals.

Many librarians are also taking part in the annual September Project—which is designed “to break the silence following September 11 [2001], and to invite all people into libraries for conversations about patriotism, democracy, and citizenship” (The September Project n.d.). In April 2011 librarians, journalists, and

civic-minded citizens attended a workshop titled “Beyond Books: News, Literacy, Democracy for America’s Libraries” where they explored what is possible for communities and democracies. Participants ended their conversations by issuing a consensus statement that commits them to: “work together to create informed, engaged communities and advance 21st century democracy . . . Journalists and librarians are well positioned to join with the public to strengthen community networks that engage and empower people. Together, we can fill a deficit in the information ecology of 21st century communities” (Beyond Books 2011).

Related developments in the library community include a study supported by ALA’s Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP) and authored by then OITP fellow David Lankes titled “Participatory Networks: The Library as Conversation” (2007). More recently, Lankes (2011) extended that study by calling on all libraries to shift conceptually from focusing on the collection of artifacts to the facilitation of knowledge creation through conversation in a safe environment. David Carr (2011) has made similar recommendations based on his work with IMLS, encouraging both librarians and museum curators to move beyond the documentation of the past to reinventing their institutions as places for the expression of American voices—for open conversations as the public mode of learning in museums and libraries. Finally, IMLS (2011) has focused its 2012–2016 strategic plan on the civic role of libraries, with a mission statement that calls on IMLS to “inspire libraries and museums to advance innovation, learning, and cultural and civic engagement by providing leadership through research, policy development and grant-making.”

Conclusion

Leaders across the library profession recognize the need to engage, embed, and integrate libraries into the life of their communities, schools, and universities if they are to remain relevant and appreciated in the digital age. No single approach can work for every library. A plethora of relevant efforts provide role models and stories that can create a new professional narrative that resonates with colleagues and community members alike. But without a critical mass of public, academic, school, and special libraries seizing opportunities to engage their communities in authentic, meaningful ways, libraries will not emerge as widely acknowledged institutions that foster strong democracy. Libraries need to realign their programs and services strategically to reflect the civic attitudes and concerns of their specific communities and increase their impact. In the words of Chrystie Hill, “If we stay focused on our users, stakeholders, and their needs, and continually design to them, we’ll be better positioned to stay engaged with our communities no matter what’s taking place around us” (2009, p. 53).

Efforts abound that encourage more active citizenship. They offer libraries ideal opportunities to engage with their communities and to join forces with the many organizations and institutions already committed to strengthening participation in democracy. All types of libraries can forge civic partnerships with other organizations and individuals that extend their reach and help them achieve their mission. These partnerships can also establish new constituencies that widen and deepen public support, broaden and diversify sources of funding, and strengthen public involvement with local affairs.

Repositioning libraries as informal civic learning agents fits the theory and practice of community inquiry conceived a century ago by John Dewey (1916). Dewey believed that people need the opportunity to share ideas through multiple media in order to understand and solve everyday problems together. To this formulation, libraries bring their role as trusted boundary spanners. Whether face-to-face or virtual, libraries build learning communities that bring people with mutual interests together to exchange information and learn about and solve problems of common concern. Civic librarians need to become more aware of their assets as public conveners and more intentional in developing programs, services, and spaces that promote public engagement, infused and embedded into the mainstream of everyday practice and professional training. Through the facilitation of community conversations, libraries can deepen their involvement with their constituents, serving not only as agents but as architects of the civic life of their communities.

Librarian of Congress Archibald Macleish (1940, p. 388) once avowed that “Librarians must become active not passive agents of the democratic process.” With renewed interest in promoting civic literacy and deliberative democracy around the country, libraries are poised to grasp this cause, build civic space, and reclaim their traditional role. If they are to fulfill their civic mission in the digital age, libraries must find active ways to engage community members in democratic discourse and community renewal. Working closely with a rich and diverse array of partners, libraries of all types can rekindle civic engagement, promote greater citizen participation, and increase community problem solving and decision making. For, as Putnam has stated, “Citizenship is not a spectator sport” (2000, p. 342).

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Notes

1. The term civic engagement takes many forms, but for this paper, a definition from the American Psychological Association will pertain: "Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern." (APA n.d.).
2. Henry Milner defines civic literacy as "the knowledge and ability of citizens to make sense of their world and to act as competent citizens" (2002, p. 3). The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (n.d.) considers civic literacy: (1) Participating effectively in civic life through knowing how to stay informed and understanding governmental processes; (2) Exercising the rights and obligations of citizenship at local, state, national and global levels; and (3) Understanding the local and global implications of civic decisions.
3. Harry Boyte (2007, 2009) uses the term "civic agency" to mean: "the capacity of human communities and groups to act cooperatively and collectively on common problems across their differences of view."