Wake Up the Nation: Public Libraries, Policy Making, and Political Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries are heavily affected by political and policy-making processes that shape the funding, activities, and roles of libraries in society, with the explosion of information policy decisions in the past two decades significantly increasing the responsibilities of libraries while also increasing limitations on their activities. Research in library and information science, however, has paid scant attention to these issues over time. If libraries are to be able to effectively advocate for the interests of their institutions, patrons, and communities, researchers need to more strongly engage problems of politics and policy making that impact libraries. With greater amounts of data and analysis in this area, libraries will be better situated to advocate for their needs in political and policy-making processes, as well as better able to articulate their positions to members of the public.

Public libraries are entities strongly affected by political discourse and policy making at all levels of government, with decisions shaping budgets, freedom of access, intellectual property, and management perspectives, among many other core elements that determine the extent to which libraries can successfully serve their communities. The interrelationship between policy, politics, and public libraries is evident in the current recession. Politicians campaign on cost cutting and aggressively cut budgets of libraries and other institutions of the public good, while the members of the public negatively affected by previous policy decisions that weakened the economy are driven to public libraries to apply for jobs and social services as well as recreational materials (Bertot, Jaeger, and Greene 2012; Sigler et al. 2012). The net result is a vicious circle in which libraries struggle to keep up with dramatically increasing usage while having their budgets reduced. We live in a political world, and public libraries are not immune.

Library scholarship would better serve libraries and librarianship if it were to place greater emphasis on studying the impacts of politics and policy making—separately and in unison—on

public libraries. In using the term "politics," the meaning is intended to focus on the impacts of political discourse and the positions asserted in political processes on public libraries. The suggestion here is not to study those issues as a means to promote the active endorsement of specific politicians or political parties by libraries. "Policy," on the other hand, denotes the process of creating government directives to address public problems through decisions, actions, and options that will be acted on by individuals, organizations, and the government itself. Policies can be created by legislation, executive orders, agency memos, rule making, signing statements, and a range of other measures at the government's disposal—at the local, state, and federal government levels. Individually and in tandem politics and policies have enormous impacts on the operations of public libraries and the services and resources they can provide patrons.

Based on the scholarship about libraries, however, one could be forgiven for thinking that those who study public libraries are generally unaware of connections between libraries, policy, and politics. In David Shavit's 1986 book *The Politics of Public Librarianship*, he bemoaned the fact that the last major engagement with the intersections of politics and public libraries had been written by Oliver Garceau in 1949 as part of the Public Library Inquiry. Currently, we are now more than sixteen years on from Edwin Beckerman's *Politics and the American Public Library* (1996), the last significant work to look seriously at the political process and libraries. While a very few other books dealing with libraries and politics in more limited ways were written during this time span (e.g., E. J. Josey's *Libraries in the Political Process* [1980], a collection of essays about advocating for funding for libraries in thirty-six different parts of the country), there have only been the slimmest number of texts with a specific book-length focus on libraries and politics in more than seventy years. In short, our scholarship and professional literature tends to focus on services and meeting user needs and is nearly devoid of considering the policies and politics that frame how public libraries serve their communities.

Direct engagements with the impact of policy making on public libraries are even scarcer in larger works, and of the books focusing on information policies—those that most significantly shape the contents and functions or libraries—there appears to be a general disinclination to deal with library issues. As with books about libraries and politics, not that many information policy books have been written, and many of those are of the same vintage as the Beckerman book (e.g., Burger 1993; Hernon, McClure, and Relyea 1996). The book edited by Peter Hernon, Charles R. McClure, and Harold C. Relyea, for example, includes only a single essay on the impacts of information policies on public libraries. A rare exception, Jean B. Wellisch, Ruth J. Patrick, Donald V. Black, and Carlos A. Cuardra's *The Public Library and Federal Policy* (1974) actually examines what the title suggests it does, but it dates from nearly four decades ago.

Journal articles that deal with libraries and political processes and/or policy making seem equally rare in the research about public libraries. A decent number of articles address certain issues of policy or politics, but rarely do they draw the policy or political issues into the broader

contexts in which these issues exist. When articles do engage these issues, they more commonly seem to focus on the policy dimensions of a situation rather than the political dimensions or both. While policy research can provide data "to better understand the political context in which programs and services operate" (McClure and Jaeger 2008, 263), it is not the same as directly investigating the political dimensions of a situation. The limited focus on issues of policy and politics in library journals in recent years is also tied to the constriction of outlets that publish library research, as many journals have disappeared or rebranded themselves as information science journals, pushing library research to the margins or completely outside of the scope of the remaining journals.

It is true that the practical implications of the intersections between policy and politics are often neglected in many fields (Hacker, Mettler, and Pinderhughes 2005; Braman 2006). Yet political science has firmly held for nearly a century that "new policies create a new politics" (Schattschneider 1935, 288). In turn, politics is the process through which society decides who gets what, when they get it, and how they get it (Lasswell 1958). A general disengagement in policy making, political processes, or both may not be unique to library and information science research, but it is particularly problematic for a field devoted to the study of public institutions to look past the intersection of politics and policies. To the extent that the implications of these intersections literally determine what public libraries are able to do, however, there seems to be a greater incentive for libraries, as compared to institutions in many other fields, to directly engage these intersections.

Politics, Policy, and the Public Good

These earlier major works on libraries and politics or policy seem genuinely charming after the events of the interceding years. Changes in political discourse have created an electoral environment that is markedly less hospitable to public libraries than any of the authors of twenty, thirty, or forty years ago could have imagined. Similarly, the explosion of federal policies related to information mean that federal policy has much greater relevance to public libraries than at any time in the past, though public libraries are rarely considered in such policy debates. In the past fifteen years or so, among many other mandates, federal policy has given public libraries:

- The USA PATRIOT Act and the rights of government agencies to collect a wide range of libraries' physical and electronic records and observe a wide range of patron behaviors in libraries;
- The Homeland Security Act, with its capacities for government agencies to limit the government information available and to take information out of library collections;
- The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) requiring the filtering of Internet access for all library computers—and thereby reduce the information patrons can access—in order to receive certain types of funding;

- The E-Rate Funding Program, which requires libraries to complete a byzantine application process in order to receive support for library technology;
- The Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DCMA), raising serious issues for libraries in providing electronic resources through their own services and through interlibrary loan;
- The E-Government Act, which ultimately encouraged many government agencies to offload the training and support for use of their online services to public libraries; and
- The Federal Communication Commission's 2010 Broadband Plan, which suggests defunding libraries to promote private sector growth of broadband access.

These policies—particularly the first three—were primarily produced in reaction to ideas that were extremely popular in the political arena. For public libraries, the impacts of policies and the impacts of politics are very closely linked in many cases.

In both 1974 and 1996, the vast majority of the discussion regarding federal policy was devoted to funding issues, primarily the Library Services and Construction Act. In a world of warrantless wiretaps, mandated filtering, and worries about copyright in interlibrary loans, a focus on federal policy as a purely economic issue seems truly appealing. Unfortunately, public libraries are now heavily affected by policy making in much more than economic policy spheres at local, state, and federal levels. The combination of policies and politics of the recent years has placed libraries in the position of having to defend both the "public" and the "good" aspects of being a public good.

As John E. Buschman (2003) has thoughtfully examined, public libraries have suffered considerably in society as a result of the changes in political and economic philosophies that were ushered in during the Reagan administration. Deregulation, changing tax and social priorities, spending cuts, and the emphasis on documentable contributions from organizations have had the most significance for entities that were previously considered to exist purely for the public good. Along with libraries, schools and social service providers have scrambled to do more with less support, while trying to convince policy makers of the value of their social contributions. This philosophy puts libraries in the near-impossible position of trying to place an economic value on knowledge and learning or on literacy and inclusion (Jaeger et al. 2011, 2012). These changes have also fueled the trend of libraries viewing patrons as consumers, which has only served to reinforce the notion that library functions exist for a purpose other than the public good (D'Angelo 2006).

As such, the tidal wave of federal policies that place new limits or burdens on libraries has coincided with the institutionalization of philosophy of governance and policy making that runs contrary to the notion of publicly funded entities that exist to benefit the public. The fact that library activities and contributions to their communities cannot be easily translated into monetary terms makes them easy targets for budget cuts, which has been all too apparent

throughout the prolonged economic downturn that began in 2008. While the president of the American Library Association (ALA) in 2009 could state with no uncertainty that "public libraries have been America's first responders to the economic crisis" (Rettig 2009), this public support role has led to the foisting of many more responsibilities onto libraries with no additional funding.

As this prolonged economic downturn continues, public libraries have become particularly vulnerable in terms of support. Most libraries rely on local property tax revenues for a large portion of their funding, and such revenues have fallen considerably as the housing market has collapsed. At the same time, as governments at all levels look to reduce their overall spending in reaction to falling revenues, public libraries, which continue to struggle with defining their value in economic terms, have been a particularly appealing target for extra revenue decreases.

One manifestation of this political philosophy in policy making has been the advent of the idea of privatization, the bidding out of government responsibilities to private sector companies to perform the same function, presumably at lower cost. Some public libraries in the United States, as well as in other countries that have embraced this philosophy of governance, are now facing the prospect of being privatized by their local governments. The ALA recently published a book called *Privatizing Libraries* (Jerrard, Bolt, and Strege 2012), which begins by stating the strong opposition of the ALA to privatization. A recent implementation of a privatized public library is in Osceola County, Florida, which in December 2011 was transitioned to management by Learning Systems and Services (Breen 2011), a move projected to yield savings of $6 million over five years.

The current situation is one in which libraries must convince an increasingly skeptical audience of their value to the communities they serve. Given the crisis mode in which many libraries find themselves operating, it is of little surprise that they have been unable to present a unified voice in the political and policy debates that have far-reaching implications for their future. Their failure to carve out a role in these ongoing dialogues, however, has equally far-reaching implications.

The Disservice of a Disorganized Discourse

Library professionals, educators, and researchers have not been extremely successful in engaging in these political and policy debates that have led to the enactment of the laws listed above. A general misunderstanding of a law or policy has fueled a disorganized or counterproductive response, while a lack of awareness of a law or policy has resulted in a rather muted response. In both types of case, the result has frequently been the implementation of a law or policy that limits the ability of libraries to guarantee access and equity. Recent laws and polices that have the largest impact on libraries have been ones that typically serve to constrict the information that libraries can make available, notably CIPA, the USA PATRIOT Act, and the

Homeland Security Act. And, more recently, the policies surrounding copyright in an era of e-content becoming the primary source of library materials gets at the very core of what libraries do.

The disservice to access and equity that results from disorganized and underinformed political and policy discourse in librarianship is aptly demonstrated in the reaction to the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act. In the immediate aftermath of the passage of the law, much of the professional discourse focused on resistance to the law—advocating for wholesale shredding of physical records and deleting of electronic records, computer usage information, and patron check-out records—with some even advocating that librarians should be willing to go to jail to oppose the law. While the USA PATRIOT Act and the Homeland Security Act did raise, and continue to raise, significant issues for libraries (as discussed in Jaeger, Bertot, and McClure [2003], Jaeger et al. [2004], Jaeger and Burnett [2005], and Gorham-Oscilowski and Jaeger [2008]), the actual impacts of the laws and the reactions to them in the library community have not been sufficiently connected. Perhaps as a result of this disconnect, the vehemently negative initial reaction a decade ago to the provisions of these laws has been replaced by an apparent lack of discussion about them.

Another example can be seen in a current policy debate. There are different initiatives being considered to revise Title 44 of the US Code, which governs the operations of the Government Printing Office (GPO) and the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP). With the vast majority of government information being distributed electronically through channels other than the GPO and the FDLP, policy reform that leads to changes in their missions and operations is inevitable. Notwithstanding a range of available approaches that libraries could suggest in the policy debates to promote the conversion of these programs into valuable contributors in the age of e-government (as discussed in Bertot et al. [2009], Jaeger, Bertot, and Shuler [2010], and Shuler, Jaeger, and Bertot [2010]), the reaction in the field has been one of utter fragmentation, with Federal Depository Library Council meetings devolving into impasse and inaction. Even the presentation of potential futures envisioned for the program can lead to strong negative reactions, arguing that no change is needed in response to the advent of e-government. In all likelihood, such fragmentation will lead to a policy solution that does not effectively meet the needs of the FDLP libraries or their patrons.

The insufficient amount and breadth of policy and political analyses to serve the library profession comes at a particularly inopportune time, as policies that are introduced, both by the legislature and the executive, are becoming increasingly confrontational. Proposed policies related to copyright and telecommunications, as two examples, have become increasingly one-sided in recent years. Whether due to successful pressure from certain groups, policy makers' ignorance about technologies and their implications, or a combination of both, policies related to both copyright and telecommunications have increasingly focused on the interests

of only one stakeholder group rather than balancing—or at least considering—the needs of all stakeholders in an issue.

The very recent tussle over the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA), which was ultimately withdrawn from consideration in Congress, emphatically demonstrates this trend. SOPA was strongly supported by content creators, such as the movie, television, and music industries, and it was strongly opposed by the content providers, including the large Internet companies. The proposed legislation would have entirely benefited content creators by giving them the right to shut down any website deemed to have facilitated copyright or trademark infringement before any such infringement is proven, thereby prioritizing the rights of one stakeholder entirely over another. A more balanced proposal would have not been so controversial and might have been passed by Congress, but it would have been out of step with the general current trend of confrontational policy making.

It is perhaps impossible to ascertain whether policy making has become inherently more confrontational due to the agendas themselves, to strong increases in partisanship in the political parties, or to a general dissipation of the traditional stakeholder-based approach to policy processes. Regardless of the reason, public libraries now face a policy environment where, if the library community wants their perspectives to be interjected into debates of policy and politics, the responsibility for advocacy of library perspectives is entirely on the library community.

Political and Policy Research Serving Libraries

The past few years, then, serve as a microcosm for the interrelationship between public libraries, policy making, and political processes. The political realm has given rise through electoral successes to a new governance philosophy that judges public goods in economic terms. Subsequent policies have been crafted from this philosophy to defund the support structure for public libraries, while other policies have been created around major information issues—copyright, security, access, expression, e-government—without any thought to the impacts on libraries. The end result is a set of interrelated pressures on public libraries that are unlike anything that existed for the vast majority of the history of public libraries in the United States.

Given the recent proliferation of books prognosticating on a perceived demise of libraries or a death of library education, it is not unreasonable to wonder if the policy and political pressures on libraries are wearing on the psyche of library researchers and educators. The policy and political issues may appear so big that they seem too complex to fully grasp and too all-encompassing to confront. The resulting response is one of quietly waiting for the end of the relevance of libraries. It does not have to be this way by any stretch of the imagination. A far more robust scholarship devoted to policies and politics that affect libraries would empower the field by imparting insights into the issues to change practices for the better, ad-

vocate for laws and policies that will support libraries, and understand the roles of libraries within the broader political and policy contexts in which they operate.

The library community's insufficient understanding of policy and politics is evident in both the practical and philosophical ways in which libraries engage within these arenas. The ill-fated legal challenge to CIPA provides a practical example. The intent of the law—to protect children from harmful materials online—was very popular. Yet, by requiring the placement of filters on all computers, not just those accessible to children, the law is clearly unnecessarily broad. The library community's decision to challenge the law on its face and in absolute terms, rather than waiting for it to be implemented, was ill-advised. By challenging the law in this way, libraries relinquished the opportunity to make their case based upon actual incidents in which people were unable to reach information due to the expansiveness of the law or cases of problems with filters under the law to demonstrate its overreach. Instead, the Supreme Court was able to rule entirely in the abstract and produce an opinion that evidenced a lack of comprehension of both technology itself and of the operations of libraries. A more robust policy and politics discourse in the field would have better prepared libraries to advocate for a different approach in the law while it was being written and would have enabled them to develop a strategy for challenging the law if and when such action was deemed necessary. At a more philosophical level, a greater discourse on the policies and politics that shape public libraries would help library educators and researchers more clearly see to the need for consistent, direct engagement and advocacy as a part of scholarship and teaching. As many policy and political decisions of recent years have served to constrain public libraries, an important foundation for empowering faculty, students, and practitioners in such an environment is an ongoing rich discourse on these issues of policy and politics. Along with providing data and analyses, however, the policy and politics discourse must also create support mechanisms for finding and engaging the policy materials, and for understanding the political processes, that determine support of and responsibilities for public libraries and that shed light on the roles that libraries play in society as a whole.

To return to an example noted earlier, as local and state government budgets have dwindled in the prolonged economic downturn, most public libraries have received proportionally decreased funding. The decreased funding fits within a new governance perspective of treating public goods as consumer enterprises. And the same economic downturn has led more people to visit libraries for help with applying for government benefits, searching for jobs online, and finding free entertainment. This particular confluence of policy and politics has enormous consequences for the public libraries, library professionals, and patrons, but these political and policy-making decisions also have powerful long-term consequences for society as a whole.

Reduced funding means fewer hours, fewer resources, fewer services, and fewer staff members able to provide assistance and education in the library. Diminished hours, resources, services, and education mean that libraries will not be able to provide the level of service to the

public that they both need and have come to expect. The paucity of digital literacy training and free Internet access within certain communities has sizable implications for people with limited literacy and access, resulting in growing disparities in access to education, civic, social service, health, employment, and other forms of information, while simultaneously reducing opportunities for many members of society to become equipped to participate in the digital age and digital economy. These policy and political consequences are not just felt within the four walls of public libraries; they reverberate throughout the entire nation.

Wake Up the Nation

By seriously focusing on the impacts of policies and politics on public libraries, library research can increase awareness of the importance of these issues throughout the library profession. In turn, library professionals can wake up the nation on the impacts of these policy and political choices related to public libraries. But this outcome is only possible if library research places far greater emphasis on issues of policy and politics that affect public libraries and if the community of library professionals pays greater attention to such research.

There are several ways to facilitate these outcomes. Most obviously, there is a need for more research on the impacts of policies and politics on libraries by current scholars who are willing to commit to work on these issues. This research area is vast and continues to expand in scope, as the incessant developments related to the Internet pose endless new questions related to information. A strongly related need is for the research conducted at the intersection of libraries, policy, and politics to focus on the problems within larger policy and political contexts. Too often research that occurs in this area focuses on a single policy issue—and, less frequently, a single political issue—rather than reviewing the issue as part of a larger continuum of interrelated debates of politics and policy that impact public libraries.

Inspiring and developing more young scholars specifically interested in the policies and politics that shape libraries is another important step. If every MLS program offered—or even required—courses in this area, both future practitioners and future researchers would be attuned to these issues and better enabled to understand the implications of future debates. These issues could also be built into the doctoral curriculum far more than they are at this time. Too often considerations of policy and politics seem to be treated as a less than essential area of study for doctoral students, notwithstanding the fact that the future success of public libraries depends in no small part on a better ability to engage in related policy and political debates and having the research to effectively understand the implications of these debates.

Increased attention needs to be paid to the issue of achieving more effective dissemination of research in these areas to professionals and to other researchers. While the overall trend of fewer journal outlets interested in library-centered research has lessened the distribution of many kinds of research in recent years, research about policies and politics can be particularly hard to place. A genuine commitment to this area of research from both the journals that are

primarily used by researchers and those that are primarily used by professionals would significantly facilitate this discourse. Similarly, library professional organizations can promote awareness of the relevant policy and political issues and dissemination of related research through increasing the amount of information sent to members and offering a greater number of workshops and other training sessions to its members that address these issues directly.

Professional organizations, by working with their members and by collaborating with one another, can also help to create a unified response from the library community to debates of policy and politics. The SOPA debate demonstrated that a coordinated clear message from a professional perspective can significantly alter the fate of a piece of legislation, as the Internet companies were able to rally popular support to their opposition to SOPA.

In April 2012, the Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act of 2011 (CISPA) passed the House. The primary purpose of CISPA is to "provide for the sharing of certain cyber threat intelligence and cyber threat information between the intelligence community and cybersecurity entities." Despite being dubbed "SOPA 2.0" by some outlets, this piece of legislation has garnered support from a number of entities that spoke out against SOPA (e.g., Facebook, Verizon). Regardless of the eventual outcome of CISPA with a new Congress, the impact that these entities make upon the debates surrounding the issues that most affect them is undeniable. In contrast, the simpering and dithering of the library community in response to Title 44 reform is currently resulting in libraries having no meaningful contribution to the debates. Paralysis and inaction will not sway debate on an issue, nor will it likely lead to a positive outcome from the library perspective.

In the end, the current political and policy-making environment makes it the responsibility of all library professionals, educators, and researchers to be more aware of and engaged in the policy and political debates that have consequences for public libraries. More policy research in this area can promote better advocacy and engagement in politics and policies, but that hinges on more researchers embracing these issues and every member of the library community committing to becoming more knowledgeable about policy research and the implications of policy and political decisions for public libraries. From such a position of strength, the field will be better able to advocate for decisions that support the public library mission and meet the needs of patrons, as well as become better situated to advocate these positions to members of the public, who may in turn become better advocates for public libraries. Waking up the nation seems like a far better path for promoting a future with vibrant public libraries than remaining disengaged from politics and policy and hoping that the wrecking ball never arrives.

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