

Risks and benefits of visibility: librarians navigating social and political turbulence

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Introduction

The impetus for this paper, and indeed for this session, came from vivid images of a South African public library taken after it had been burnt to the ground. In March 2012 violent community protests, prompted by complaints of poor municipal services and corruption, erupted in Ratanda, a ‘township’¹ in Gauteng province, South Africa. On Monday 19 March the local offices of the municipality were burnt down. On the following day, the clinic was looted and both the centre for disabled people and the library were burnt down. This was during South African Library Week, just before South Africa’s Human Rights Day (De Wet, 2012a, 2012b). Closer scrutiny revealed that since 1994, when South Africa emerged from apartheid as a non-racial democracy, at least twenty public libraries have been burnt down in violent community protests (Van Onselen, 2014). Against the background of the idealism and optimism that was so evident at the time, this comes as a shock and a great disappointment.

The burning of books and libraries is, sadly, nothing new. From the great Library of Alexandria to the Bosnian National and University Library in Sarajevo, libraries have been casualties of warfare, revolution and social upheavals. But the burning of public libraries as part of community protests in peacetime in a democratic state should give librarians pause for thought. It may come as a surprise that such incidents have also occurred in Western democracies such as France, where 70 libraries were burnt down between 1996 and 2003 (Merklen, 2013). In France the phenomenon has led to serious scholarly reflection (Merklen & Murard, 2008, 2013; Merklen & Perrot-Dessaux, 2010; Merklen, 2013). In South Africa, too, questions are being raised about what this says about how communities perceive their libraries, and how the library profession should respond to this (Lor, 2013).

An event such as the burning down of a library is shocking precisely because it is unusual and unexpected. For the most part libraries are not very newsworthy. Indeed, in many countries they are largely invisible. In others they may be valued community agencies that are taken for granted and only attract public attention when they are threatened by cutbacks or closures due to government austerity measures, or when things go badly wrong. The visibility and invisibility of libraries in the political arena confer risks as well as benefits. In this paper, which is intended as an introduction to the session of the Section of Library Theory and Research on “Libraries in the political process: benefits and risks of political visibility” I explore some aspects and implications of the visibility and invisibility of libraries in the political space. By the ‘political space’ I mean formal political forums at various levels of government, mass and local media and social media. I must emphasize that this is an exploration, not a full-blown theory.

¹ In South Africa the term ‘township’ refers to “a suburb or city of predominantly black occupation, formerly officially designated for black occupation by apartheid legislation” (Oxford dictionaries, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/township>, accessed 2013-08-17)

Libraries on a continuum: from invisible to visible

As a framework for this discussion I suggest that libraries can be conceptualized as being located in the political space on a continuum, from invisible to highly visible. This is depicted in Figure 1.

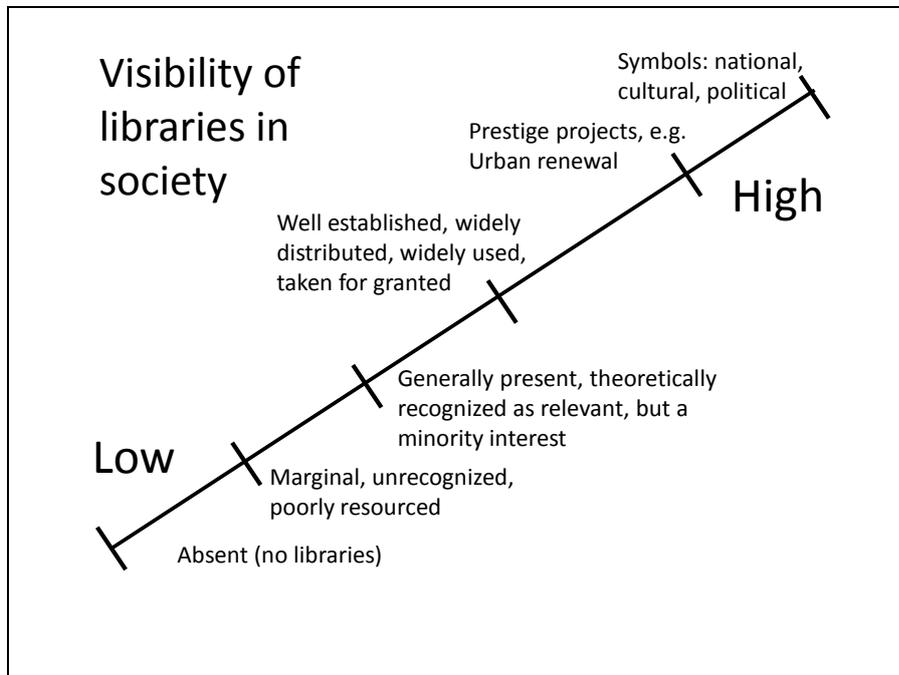


FIGURE 1: Visibility of libraries in society

Figure 1 suggests that libraries of different kinds, at different times and in different countries can vary widely in visibility. In poor countries with low literacy rates and other adverse circumstances libraries may be virtually absent, or at best few in number, unrecognized, poorly resourced, and playing a marginal role in society. In other countries libraries are present in larger centres if not everywhere and they may be recognized as having value for society. Such recognition may be largely theoretical or limited to a small proportion of the population, and not accompanied by the allocation of significant resources. A higher level of visibility is reached when a society has a well-established, widely distributed network of libraries, which are used by a significant proportion of the population. Here libraries are seen as a normal and necessary amenity of every community, and they may be taken for granted in the same way that paved roads, water-borne sanitation, schools, clinics and other amenities are assumed to be there. In a survey in the United States, where almost 9,000 libraries with 17,000 branches and bookmobiles (American Library Association, 2014) serve a population of around 318 million, it was found recently that over 90% of respondents over the age of 16 said that the closing of their library would have an impact on their community, although the percentage of people actively using libraries is lower at around 69% (Zickuhr, Purcell & Rainie, 2014). A yet higher level of visibility is found where libraries are established or renovated as prestige projects. Here one thinks of the American presidential libraries, and of the building or renovation of libraries as part of urban renewal programmes, such as the Bibliothèque Publique d'Information at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. At the highest level, we find libraries that have become or are perceived as national, cultural and/or political symbols – for example the “Black Diamond” of the Royal Library in Copenhagen, the “Très Grande Bibliothèque” built on the left bank of the Seine to house the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, or the new quarters of the National Library of South Africa in Pretoria.

Is there a relationship between visibility and risk?

Some reflection on events that bring libraries to public attention lead to a first hypothesis that there may be a direct relationship between the visibility of libraries and the risks of damage and destruction (by human agency – natural disasters are not considered here) to which they are subjected. An obvious instance is the National and University Library of Bosnia, which is reported to have been destroyed because of what it was: a symbol of a state in which different ethnicities lived together in relative harmony, and the bearer of collective memory. This library and others in Bosnia and elsewhere stood in the way of ethnic cleansing (Riedlmayer, 1995; Civalero, 2007). However, counter-examples, such as the deliberate burning of quite small and insignificant community libraries in South Africa and public library branches in suburbs of Paris, suggest that this relationship is not necessarily linear. In Figure 2 I have depicted risk as a curve. The shape of the curve is merely notional, being partly determined by my limited drawing skill:

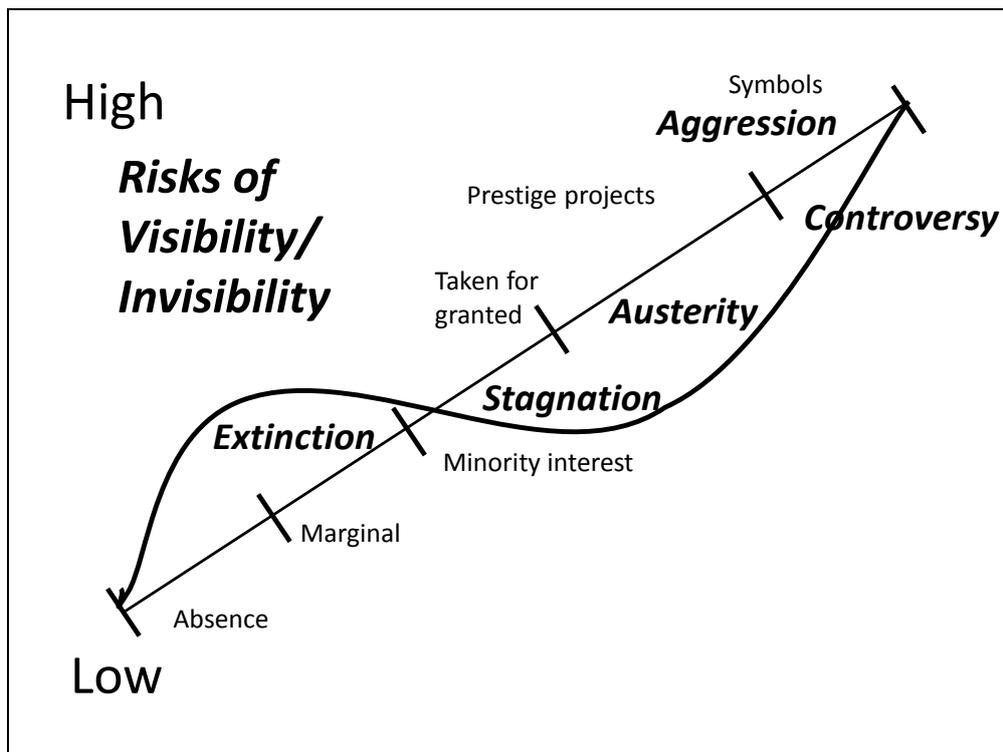


FIGURE 2: Risks of visibility/invisibility

The curve in Figure 2 suggests that libraries at the low visibility pole of the continuum are at relatively high risk. This is because libraries that are of marginal relevance to their communities are at risk of *extinction* (being unable to continue and closing down). Libraries in the middle of the continuum, where they are generally present but not of concern for the majority of the population, are at risk of *stagnation*. Those that have developed a wider support base and require substantial funding may be affected by *austerity* measures, such as the reduction of opening hours or closure of branches in spite of being well used and appreciated by their communities. In American school libraries, which are very highly developed, it is not unusual to see retrenchment of library staff or their redeployment to teaching duties, leading to erosion of service quality. Finally, the curve suggests that the most highly visible libraries may be at greatest risk, particularly in times of war or violent civil strife, when they may fall victim to *aggression* if seen of symbols as one of the parties to the conflict. But such violent conflict is fortunately uncommon. More commonly, highly visible libraries may receive much negative attention when problems of leadership and management or unpopular building renovation

plans provoke public *controversy*. Cases in point are the controversial buildings of the British Library² and the Bibliothèque de nationale de France in the 1990s (Kessler, 1994), recent leadership problems at the Libraries and Archives Canada³, and the planned and now abandoned remodelling of the New York Public Library's Schwartzman building.⁴ Library directors will recognize that there is no foe as furious as a dissident Friend.

This brief outline indicates that we need to look more closely at the quite diverse agents and mechanisms of risk to libraries. These can be divided into two categories: those internal and those external to libraries. I deal with the latter first.

Risks in the external environment

Risks in the external environment can be seen, ironically, as arising from either too little or too much attention to libraries, i.e. too low or too high visibility. Lack of visibility holds a number of risks. In South Africa there is evidence that libraries have been set on fire not because they were libraries but because they were accommodated in municipal buildings that were targeted by community members protesting about municipal corruption and mismanagement. In reports of such disturbances there is some evidence that persons leading the protests may have approved attacks on libraries because they were seen as less essential than other amenities such as schools (cf. De Wet, 2012a). Here libraries may have been what military men refer to euphemistically as 'collateral damage'. But violent actions arising from conflict are not the only causes of destruction and damage to libraries. Given enough time sheer neglect will have the same results. Opinion are divided as to whether the ancient Library of Alexandria was destroyed by the Romans, Christians or Arabs (Hannam, 2012), but Newitz (2013) blames "budget cuts". That may be too simplistic, but I suspect that as the Ptolemaic Empire and the city of Alexandria declined over the centuries, neglect, declining resources, lack of maintenance and the gradual deterioration of physical facilities played a role as well. Empires and kingdoms rise and fall, and with them aqueducts, ramparts, palaces, temples and theatres crumble. The invading barbarians need only give the *coup de grace*. In modern times austerity measures and privatization can lead to the degradation of a nation's information infrastructures; the managerialist barbarians are already within the gates.

High visibility may occur when libraries are affected by severe budget cuts, leading to curtailment of services and closures. On the positive side, the public may respond and take action to "save" their libraries. Major campaigns, as in the USA⁵ and the United Kingdom⁶ may generate a great deal of public interest, even when their success is not always certain. The American Library Association (ALA) has an Office for Library Advocacy to provide support for people engaged in advocacy on behalf of libraries.⁷ During the presidency of Kay Raseroka the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions identified three "pillars" as fundamental to IFLA's strategies; the first of these, the "Society Pillar", "focussed on the role and impact of libraries and information services in society and the contextual issues that condition and constrain the environment in which they operate

² Prince Charles famously (but I think unfairly) compared the reading room of the British Library building to "an assembly hall of an academy for secret police" (New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/19/world/europe/19london.html?_r=0, accessed 2014-05-14). However, the construction of the new library was also plagued by delivery problems and cost over-runs. See <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/what-took-them-so-long-the-british-library-saga-has-precedents-jonathan-glancey-looks-at-other-building-marathons-1413100.html>, accessed 2014-05-14.

³ See the website of the Canadian Association of University Teachers that is devoted to this controversy: <http://www.savelibraryarchives.ca/issues.aspx>, accessed 2014-05-14

⁴ <http://www.bdcnetwork.com/new-york-public-library-scraps-drastic-renovation-plans>, accessed 2014-05-15

⁵ Many links to the websites of such campaigns can be found at <http://www.ala.org/offices/cro/getinvolved/saveyourlibraries>, accessed 2014-05-15.

⁶ Cf. <http://www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/campaigns/what-can-you-do/>

⁷ <http://www.ala.org/offices/ola>, accessed 2014-05-13

across the world.”⁸ IFLA’s current programme of Building Strong Library Associations (BSLA)⁹ recognizes the importance of library associations in enhancing the visibility and relevance of libraries in developing countries.

Heightened visibility holds other risks. If libraries are obscure and unobtrusive, not much attention will be paid to their contents. If they are visible and heavily used they are likely to come under closer scrutiny. Here I think of censorship initiatives (by individuals, groups, and governments) which want libraries to hold only materials that reflect a limited world view. In the United States vast amounts of professional energy and resources are devoted to challenging censorship actions that affect school and public libraries in particular. The ALA has a well-resourced Office for Intellectual Freedom.¹⁰ Every week, the ALA’s electronic magazine, *American libraries direct*, carries reports on vigorous and often combative responses to censorship attempts. These are also reported in local newspapers, radio and television, no doubt raising the profile of libraries there. Sometimes the concerned parents and residents are depicted as narrow-minded and their objections as mildly amusing, which I think is unfortunate as it exacerbates divisions within the community. It would be interesting to find out whether vigorous resistance to censorship that emanates from conservative community groups incurs risks to the locally-based funding of public libraries.¹¹ The vigorous resistance to censorship seen in the USA is not so common in countries where libraries have a more marginal position in society and where civil liberties are not respected to the same extent. In countries with recent, hard-won democratic freedoms, librarians may be prepared to take risks to fight for freedom of political information but not necessarily to fight censorship of sexually explicit materials or materials that portray gay relationships in a favourable light. I suspect that in developing countries equitable access to information across the “digital divide” and the barriers imposed by the international intellectual property regime may well be more fundamental concerns than moral censorship.

As a counterpoint to free libraries that are challenged by ideologues there is the co-option of libraries and their absolute control by totalitarian regimes or intolerant ideological or religious movements. In Nazi Germany (Stieg, 1992) and the former Soviet Union (Neubert & Klim, 1998; Knutson, 2007) impressive networks of libraries were rolled out, ensuring that no citizen was out of reach of a library and at the same time ensuring the dissemination of the regime’s ideology. These were cases of high visibility and high risk to libraries. The imposition of ideological purity is risky in the long run. The risk is to the society itself, as much as to the libraries which are made instruments of propaganda.

Most frightening, and also most newsworthy, are those cases where libraries are deliberately targeted in civil and military conflict. In these cases the common factor is the presence of fractures within communities and societies, the lines of cleavage coinciding mostly divisions along religious, ethnic, linguistic, socio-economic, class, gender, age and/or ideological lines. In India and Sri Lanka ethnic, caste and religious conflicts have been blamed for the destruction of rare and irreplaceable library holdings, for example, those of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune, India (Caswell, 2009), and the Jaffna Public Library in Sri Lanka (Knuth, 2006). In South Africa it is not clear whether public libraries have been deliberately targeted because they were libraries. In France, on the other hand, Merklen (2013) has asserted that suburban libraries in poor neighbourhoods were targeted as symbols of a culture of the book and of an education system based on books and reading which excludes and marginalizes the young people of immigrant origins.

⁸ <http://www.ifla.org/three-pillars>, accessed 2014-05-14

⁹ <http://www.ifla.org/bsla>, accessed 2014-05-14

¹⁰ <http://www.ala.org/offices/oif>, accessed 2014-05-13

¹¹ Although news reports in American media indicate that censorship battles do have political repercussions at the local level, e.g. in West Bend, Wisconsin, a cursory database search failed to turn up any systematic research on this topic. There is, however, a great deal of discussion on the effects of conditions attached to federal funding for libraries. For example, the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) public libraries and schools that accept federal funds to block websites that contain material considered harmful to children. See for example, <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2014/03/404-day-day-action-against-censorship-libraries-and-schools>, accessed 2014-05-15.

While the destruction of libraries in military conflict, as in Iraq and Bosnia, does on occasion attract considerable media attention, the burning down of libraries in South African townships rarely rates more than a passing mention in South African media. So many protests take place and there are so many other casualties that libraries are not so newsworthy. The best way to find out about ongoing “service delivery protests”¹² seems to be to listen to daily road traffic reports on the radio, where protests are mentioned when they affect the flow of traffic. Similarly, in France Merklen (2013) expressed surprise that there was so little mention in the press of the more than 70 French libraries that had been subjected to stoning and arson.

Thus, even when bad things happen to libraries, they do not feature much in the media. Occasionally things happen inside libraries, or librarians take actions that heighten their visibility.

Risks within libraries

This brings me to factors internal to libraries. As mentioned above, major libraries with devoted users are at risk when changes are introduced. The decision of the British Library Board to move its reader services from the hallowed round reading room in the old British Museum building to the new library at St Pancras raised the ire of many scholars and the resulting controversy generated considerable press coverage, as have the more recent travails of Library and Archives Canada and the New York Public Library. Generally, apart from cases where libraries are hit by man-made or natural disasters, the most media attention is generated in cases where the public is mobilized to resist managerial actions that are feared will reduce access.

Occasionally crimes are committed in libraries: confrontations, assaults, even murders, not to mention thefts of rare and valuable materials. Sometimes – and this is mildly newsworthy – there are reports concerning librarians or library employees who have stolen rare books or embezzled library funds. When library directors are caught stealing, as in the recent case of the director of the Girolamini Library in Naples¹³, this provides juicy material for the media. But despite the textbooks, courses, workshops and conference sessions on library promotion and despite the advocacy efforts of national library associations, in the general scheme of things, libraries seldom emerge as major political issues. Libraries feature in local news and cultural pages, but the political economic issues of library services are not sufficiently visible.

This leads me to a reflection on the responses and initiatives of librarians to enhance the visibility of librarians and how this relates to risk.

Librarians in relation to their communities: navigating turbulence

Here I return briefly to the continuum of library visibility which I depicted in Figure 1, superimposing on it some generalized observations on how librarians see themselves and their institutions in relation to the communities and societies they serve. In Figure 3 I depict the relationship and attitudes of librarians to their communities and society along the continuum of visibility developed earlier. I draw upon personal recollections and impressions of public library development in South Africa. This account of it is admittedly subjective and superficial, but serves to illustrate the concepts.

¹² These events are commonly referred to as “service delivery protests”, but sociologists point out that the protests are not only about municipal service delivery. See Alexander (2010) and Mottiar and Bond (2012).

¹³ http://www.stolen-book.org/eng/presentation/Book_Thefts_Girolamini_Library.html, accessed 2014-05-05.

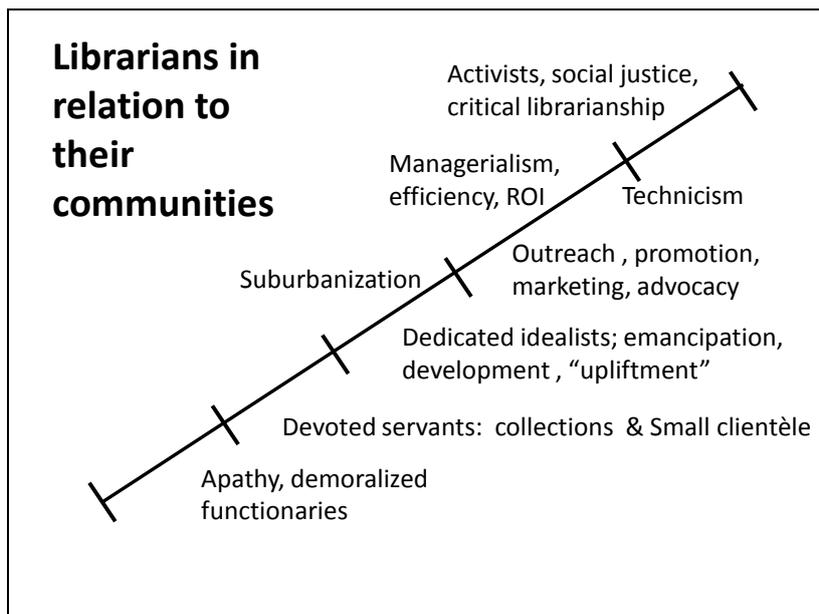


FIGURE 3: Librarians in relation to their communities

Taking the figure from bottom left to top right I identify the following typical situations:

After a possible initial enthusiasm has waned, the embattled librarians of small, marginalized and barely visible libraries in some developing countries are often characterized, by apathy. They may see themselves primarily as functionaries of the agencies employing them. In a more positive scenario we see the librarian as the devoted servant, caring primarily for a collection, but also developing a loyalty to a small élite clientèle.

Next we see the emergence of the dedicated idealist, one devoted to the use of libraries for the "upliftment" of his/her community or people. In South Africa a strong public library movement arose during the 1930s and 1940s. While one should not underestimate the important role of a number of British librarians, the public library movement received considerable impetus from the cultural and political movement of the Afrikaner people who were striving to free themselves from British imperialist domination and anglicising pressures. In a period during which language, culture and politics were inextricably intertwined, libraries were seen as instruments of emancipation. After the Second World War this movement resulted in the establishment of free provincial library services – initially for white persons only.¹⁴ Public library branches were set up in each province and they were supplied by book trucks bringing books from provincial headquarters. In the Free State Province this provincial service was initially headed by Dr S. H. Pellissier¹⁵, an Afrikaner educationalist and cultural leader. He saw to it that the book trucks were provided with an old fashioned bugle such as used in past days by post coaches. The librarian of the book truck was expected to sound this bugle as the book truck entered each village¹⁶ – a quite literal means of enhancing the visibility of the new public library service.

As the Afrikaner community became more affluent and educated thanks to the policies of the National Party government, the Afrikaners moved into the suburbs, and the public libraries followed. The emphasis on upliftment faded away as libraries became suburbanized. This was reflected in the library displays promoting books on such themes as flower arrangement and cake decorating. These were

¹⁴ To be fair, the various provincial library services later introduced services for members of other "population groups" as well, but in most cases on a much smaller scale.

¹⁵ The Afrikaans Wikipedia has an entry on Pellissier: http://af.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Henri_Pellissier, accessed 2014-05-15.

¹⁶ M. H. C. du Preez, personal communication.

reported in local media along with other typically middle class activities such as book talks and the exploits of local bridge clubs and dramatic societies that met on library premises. There were notable exceptions, but the impact and relevance of the suburbanized public libraries declined, along with their visibility. Given the repressive National Party regime, this low-profile avoidance of South African realities appeared a low-risk strategy. But inaction in the long run can hold very high risk: the risk of libraries' being associated with a discredited old regime and consequently being perceived as irrelevant if not reactionary agencies,

While the missionary spirit of the early Afrikaner library pioneers faded away, an emancipatory movement was alive and well in the "locations" and "townships" to which South Africans of colour were confined by apartheid. Archie Dick (2007a, 2007b, 2012) has documented the use of books and libraries under apartheid. During the 1980s soul-searching by white librarians (e.g. Zaaiman & Roux, 1989) on the role of libraries coincided with the growth of a creative and innovative community resource centre movement that had emerged within the anti-apartheid trade unions and community-based organizations. I shall come back to them shortly. But it is not the purpose of this paper to trace the history of library development in South Africa, and I must interrupt that story here to emphasize that the survival of libraries is inextricably linked to their relevance. To survive, libraries need to be relevant, and they need to be seen to be relevant.

The striving for relevance is at the heart of public librarianship. Outreach to un-served communities and groups through promotional activities and marketing contributes to the visibility of libraries, as does advocacy that highlights the role of libraries in development (e.g. their role in reaching the Millennium Development Goals) and in specific areas such as information literacy. They feature prominently in our professional literature, education and conferences. However, I have a concern that the rhetoric of marketing and the glitz of promotional events may seduce our profession and cause us to lose sight of our values. Is there a problem in the relationship between a library and its community – as for example when members of the community set the library on fire? There follows a knee-jerk reaction to step up our marketing and promotion, where we should be seeing, listening, feeling and thinking.

This critique is not so say that what libraries, especially public libraries, do for their communities at this level is not admirable and valuable. Helping people to compile their curriculum vitae and apply for jobs or social benefits online using the library's public workstations, to fill in income tax forms or to sign up for Obamacare, all the while imparting basic information literacy skills, is clearly beneficial. This is especially the case where those being helped are poor and marginalised and have few opportunities because they lack adequate formal education. But these services are essentially *palliative*. Here public libraries serve the 99%, but do not seek to change the proportions or the power relationships between the wealthy and the poor.

Similarly, information and communication technologies (the Web, social media, mobile devices, etc.) have great potential for increasing the visibility of libraries, but also for superficiality, as the promise and challenges of adopting and keeping up with rapidly evolving technology distract us from other concerns. One has only to look at recent conference programmes of the ALA and at *American libraries direct* to see what a large chunk of professional attention has been absorbed by e-books. Too many in our profession turn to ICTs for solutions before the problems have been identified. In Figure 3 I have referred to this as technicism. Managerialist and technicist trends become most marked in larger library systems, where overheads are high, costs are scrutinized by unsympathetic municipal officials and library managers are under constant pressures to reduce costs. In an increasingly managerialist scenario, libraries are run by professional managers with non-library backgrounds. They are numerate, they demonstrate dexterity in calculating return on investment (ROI), and their core value is efficiency. But while they are able to contribute valuable skills, they may lack a sympathetic understanding of what a library is about. In large organizations I see a growing disconnect and clash of values between the library managers and coal-face librarians who are more attuned to the needs of individuals and groups in the communities they serve. This is the origin of the bubbling discontent

that emerges – library visibility! – from time to time in high profile libraries, to the surprise of the general public who perceive our profession as undemanding and pleasantly free of stress.

It is in reaction to the growing managerial mentality, for decades alternative groups of “progressive librarians” have arisen on the fringes of the library profession to question the assumptions of the establishment. Proponents of “critical librarianship” (Samek, 2007:7), armed with critical theory, deconstruct establishment librarianship and find it wanting. They take apart hallowed notions such as “the myth of neutrality that divorces library and information work from participation in social struggle” (Samek, 2007:10). Library neutrality, the idea that the library in its collections and services should be neutral and have “no religion, no politics, no morals”¹⁷ is seen by progressive librarians as a cop-out, a fine principle based on an assumption of level playing fields in societies where, structurally, the odds are stacked against the poor. Instead of a *palliative* agency they want the library to be an agency of *transformation*,¹⁸ if not subversion, of the status quo.

Here I return to the resource centre movement in South Africa (Berghammer & Karlsson, 1988; Kaniki, 1994; Ngubeni, 2004). The resource centres were a living expression of alternative or critical librarianship. Rejecting the old notions of library neutrality, the activists in these grass-roots initiatives aligned themselves explicitly with the struggle against apartheid, embracing the principles of democracy, non-discrimination, and redress of past injustices in a unitary South Africa (National Education Policy Investigation, 1992). In solidarity with the working class they preferred to call themselves library workers. This is reflected in the name of their organization, the Library and Information Workers Organization (LIWO).¹⁹ It is important to note that, in contrast with the traditional liberal notions of public library service, which emphasize the information needs of individuals, the resource centres were engaged in a class struggle. The resource centres worked largely outside the ambit of the formal library structures. Some operated on the fringes of legality, being subjected to raids, harassment, intimidation and arrests by the apartheid state. After all, they were struggling for regime change. Theirs was a high-risk strategy.

But the risk in alternative or critical librarianship is twofold. The first, to which I have just alluded, is suppression. Suppression can range from condescension, criticism or negation on the part of the traditional library establishment, to heavy-handed, even murderous repression on the part of the state. The second risk is that of long term sustainability and relevance. Progressive librarians’ movements have an important contribution to make, but although they may be vocal, they are often small and ephemeral. They are also prone to using rather impenetrable theoretical jargon, which impedes communication with the mainstream profession. In South Africa, another factor reduced their impact. When apartheid ended, much of the funding on which many resource centres had relied, dried up as foreign agencies redirected their aid to the newly legitimate government. The activists dispersed, some into jobs in the formal library sector and library schools, some into NGOs, others into positions in the new government. Several emigrated, ironically, after regime change. To my knowledge LIWO was never disbanded and may still exist in a formal sense, but to all intents it has disappeared. This to my regret, as I feel that the burning of so many public libraries under South Africa’s new democratic dispensation is evidence that we are in need of insights from activist librarians and critical librarianship.

¹⁷ This quotation comes from the title of a talk by D.J. Foskett (1962) that was published as a pamphlet by the (British) Library Association. It is often quoted out of context. As Brewerton (2003:48) has pointed out, Foskett’s point was that the librarian should not impose his/her own political, religious or moral outlook on library users, not that the librarian should lack political, religious or moral values. Indeed, the role of the librarian calls for dedication.

¹⁸ The library as an agent of transformation is not the same thing as libraries transforming as they adapt to changes in their communities (Fiels, 2004), desirable as that may be.

¹⁹ LIWO members were not limited to resource centre workers but also included other progressive librarians in the “formal sector”.

Conclusion

This brings me back full circle to the images with which I started this paper and to the question whether there are both risks and benefits to the visibility and invisibility of libraries. The academic in me says, “Yes and no. It depends.” The short answer is, “Yes.” Benefits and risks can be found at both poles of the continuum of Figure 1. This is depicted in the following matrix (Figure 4).

	Risks	Benefits
Visible	Aggression Censorship Co-option Austerity Suppression	Appreciation Resources Public mobilization to defend libraries
Invisible	Ignorance Neglect Lack of resources Stagnation Extinction	“Below the radar” Shielded from political pressures; Some freedom?

Risks and benefits of library visibility

FIGURE 4: Risks and benefits of library visibility

To survive and to contribute to society, libraries need to be visibly relevant. Clearly, being visible has significant benefits for libraries: wider appreciation in their communities should in the normal course of events translate into the allocation of resources. If well-loved or iconic libraries are threatened or attacked, the public can be mobilized in their defence. In attempting to achieve visibility librarians also run some risks, such as those of being targeted as symbols of an enemy, beings subjected to censorship or co-option by repressive regimes, or to austerity measures by cost-conscious managers. Where libraries explicitly align themselves with the underclass or the oppressed and become agencies of transformation, they may be shut down by repressive regimes.

The risks incurred by lack of visible relevance include ignorance on the part of the community and neglect. Lacking resources, these libraries risk stagnating and ultimately disappearing. Are there any benefits to limited visibility? This question may appear naive and nonsensical to the adherents of library marketing and promotion. For them, “any news is good news” in that every opportunity can be seized to make the public aware of libraries. In the case of the South African example to which I referred at the beginning of this paper, the media release on Ratanda issued by the Library and Information Association of South Africa contained substantial text on South African Library Week.

The main benefits of invisibility are the avoidance of risks associated with visibility. Librarians operating “under the radar” are less likely to be subjected to censorship pressures by the “religious police” and other groups. Libraries that are not visible as national or cultural symbols are at lesser risk of being targeted by opposing forces during wars and revolutions. Being shielded from public scrutiny and political pressures may confer some freedom from state scrutiny. A library may, exceptionally, be invisible but relevant.

In the long term, I believe that the risks of invisibility outweigh those of visibility. But this is not weighed mechanically. The critical thing is the awareness of the profession. We need to ask ourselves:

How discerning or politically naive are librarians? How do librarians see themselves? Do they see themselves as part of the ruling elite or as part of the people? To whom do they owe allegiance? What is the role of professionalism, the professional ethos, and ethical codes? Is the code of ethics a fig leaf to cover up for lack of engagement and commitment? Is “neutrality” possible – and who is served by neutrality? Do librarians seek to evade these troubling questions by taking refuge in technology and managerialism?

These are some of the questions that I hope will be addressed in this session, which falls within the framework of ongoing discussion and research in the library profession about the future of libraries, particularly in respect to how these institutions and their librarians relate to the communities in which they are located, against the backdrop of the digital age and of social stress and conflict. They are appropriate questions for IFLA, and for the Section of Library Theory and Research.

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