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S. Michele Echols
College of New Rochelle, sechols@cnr.edu

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What Does Black Librarianship Look Like in the Proverbial Information Age?

Linda Bannerman-Martin and Sandra Michele Echols

Public libraries today play an integral part in the community and in the exchange of information and knowledge. The role of the public library continues to evolve to meet the informational and social needs of its customers. The work of black librarians, especially in urban communities, is increasingly varied as it expands to keep up with electronic government information disseminated through the World Wide Web, especially in response to the Electronic Government Act enacted in 2002.

Today’s public libraries are changing as a result of the era of new technology and knowledge, combined with the legislation enacted in 2002, resulting in the public library as a community information center. In addition, tough economic times today have proven pivotal. As evident in the days of Vivian Harsh’s work (Burt, 2009), the role of black librarians has always encompassed the traditional roles of all librarians: collection development, acquisitions, cataloguing and classification, circulation, reference work, preservation, and conservation. However, throughout history, black librarians have maintained close cultural ties to their community, protected historically cultural information from loss and damage, and hence, have added the newly coined term “culture keeper” to the responsibilities of black librarianship. As culture keepers, they remain true and steadfast to the commitment to serve their communities and also advocate for equal access. With the equal right to use comes protection and preservation of information and knowledge to be shared with their communities.

The E-Government Act of 2002 (PL 107-347) was established in an effort to “promote use of the Internet and other information technologies to provide increased opportunities for citizen participation in Government” (American Library Association, 2011). Increasingly, libraries are well positioned to partner...
with government entities to meet constituents online, where they can voice their opinions, influence decisions, democratize information, and transform citizens from passive observers to active participants in a more inclusive conversation. As a vehicle for citizen engagement, libraries help build trust and maximize transparency of government while expanding their civic agency role in local communities. Basically, e-government endeavors to provide customers with access to government services 24 hours a day; seven days a week.

How will this act affect the role of the black librarian in public librarianship? Black librarians in the proverbial information age are agents of change who provide customers with several types of materials from the libraries' vast collections and are also positioned to provide assistance with electronic government sites, which borrows from the role of a social worker during the industrial age. During this era black librarians provided not only books, but also community information to spur racial justice and competition, assisting with literacy, employment, education, skill building, and entitlements. Prejudices still exist and, combined with today's tough economy and high unemployment rate caused by the stock market crash in 2008, many black public librarians are finding themselves "counseling" customers concerning their daily living, financial, and social needs and acting as de facto social workers. Gone are the days of merely providing information solely based on a reference question, research topic, or location of a book. Questions customers have may involve accessing information related to social services. Access is simplified as a result of the E-Government Act of 2002, allowing entry to government sites that are directly related to social services. For example, information concerning the application process for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the Food Stamps program, is available not only through the U.S. Department of Agriculture website, but also through local and state government websites. Recent studies have shown that Internet use has increased tremendously not only to search the web or retrieve e-mail, but also to tap into other resources (seeking employment) and the use of government sources with guided assistance from librarians, as indicated in the numerous studies conduct by the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project.

As noted by E. J. Josey:

The information industry has the technology to control information, but its price tag on information distribution and its profit goal create a bias in what information is made available and how it is dispensed. Only the nonprofit organization, the library, dedicated to a total community service goal with trained experts, librarians, running the operation can provide the full scope of information for the total population in a fair and objective manner. (cited in Berry & Oder, 2009, p. 23)

Reliability must be an integral role for the 21st-century black public librarian. Skills from the past must be combined with the present to assist customers with obtaining adequate information concerning an array of topics from obtaining
basic education skills to job information and how to utilize the information available on the World Wide Web, coinciding with the traditional roles that all librarians provide in the form of collection development and acquisition, cataloguing, classification, reference work, and preservation, and especially with the newly recognized role as culture keepers (Berry & Oder, 2009, p. 2). As changes in technology become more prevalent and accessible, the innuendo, question, discussion, and controversy remain among librarians. Will the information age cause black librarianship in the 21st century to react and perform more in the role of a social worker? The answer is no. They have and will augment the field by enhancing the role of the librarian.

Despite its changing dynamic, especially the reduction of blacks entering the profession, the core aspects of black librarianship remain, which involve developing unique ways to make information available and useful. They still introduce and teach library patrons how to evaluate and use sources. The move from the industrial to the information age presents some challenges for black librarians. History has shown that the role of the black librarian has not only been to provide books to customers but also to outreach to the community in various ways. The commitment to improve library services through introduction of new ideas, programs, and services is not an unfamiliar task for the black librarian within the urban public library. They proactively provide materials in different media and promote, advertise, and support co-sponsorship, and afford the community the limitless potential the library has to enhance life. Outreach within black public librarianship is a role that was perfected by Vivian Harsh, a black librarian from Chicago’s Bronzeville section. As noted by Laura Burt in the article titled “Vivian Harsh, Adult Education, and the Library’s Role as Community Center”:

Vivian Harsh was a pivotal figure in both Chicago’s Black community and the field of library science for her collection and outreach work. She was the first African American branch head in the Chicago Public Library. In her time as Hall library director from 1932 to 1958, not only did Harsh shepherd her branch through the Depression and World War II, but she also established the Hall Library as a vital community center. (Burt, 2009, p. 234)

In conclusion, past experiences, though harsh, and coupled with perseverance and commitment to the continuous struggle for equality, have brought the black librarian to the present age of information and technology stronger, with the advantage of being able to assist customers with prompt, reliable information and assistance. Their most important role, therefore, continues to be even more prevalent: to introduce, teach, train, and assist with maneuvering through the government information maze, as well as impart the critical value of e-government resources and the impact of possibilities access has on helping to improve customers’ lives.

As Marcum (1996, p. 192) stated, “changes are taking place in the library world almost faster than anyone can measure and certainly faster than anyone
can predict.” Along with these changes, the use of electronic government sites is pivotal for the advancement of black librarianship and how this act affects customer service in the 21st century. The challenge for black librarians adopting e-government principles within the community library setting becomes being able to equip the customer with enough information to help prioritize social versus basic needs information and being ready and willing to enhance their bibliographic instruction skills by increasing their knowledge of and remaining updated with e-government resources. The E-Government Act of 2002 requires black librarians to be flexible, trustworthy, and reliable with the information they disseminate to their customers.

REFERENCES


