

UDC 023.4:316

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A Call to Serve: Public Librarians and Social Change

Objective. Social change involves events affecting social, cultural, economic, political, and geographical contexts. Among others, public librarians play a crucial role in mediating this change by promoting literacy, reading, and combating misinformation. With this in mind, understanding the public librarians' lived experiences and insights can further facilitate social change and enhance the librarianship field. The study aims to answer the question, of how public librarians understand and affect social change, based on the lived experiences of Filipino public librarians as information professionals. **Methods.** The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was used and a semi-structured interview was conducted to determine the perceptions of two Filipino public librarians on social change. **Results.** The paper showed that public librarians are motivated by their passion for community service. They also believe that education plays a role in social advancement and emphasized the importance of teaching literacy skills and providing learning resources to children. **Conclusions.** The paper concludes that these librarians perceive social change as helping people through their advocacies, information services, and library programs.

Keywords: public librarians; social change; education

Introduction

Social Change, as defined, is the transformation of a culture over time or a significant modification in the lifestyle of a society (Duka, Pila, & Buraga, 2015; Ferris & Stein, 2009). This change is observed in the ever-changing dynamics of the social, cultural, economic, political, and geographical contexts of society. It impacts numerous aspects of culture or a person's life.

Moreover, individual actors can also become catalysts of social change (Hernes, 2001). Public librarians, for example, are qualified to mediate change in society. This is what Ferris and Stein (2009) refer to as "helping professions," in which every interaction with a person or client is an opportunity to bring about social change. Librarians and information professionals fall under this category since they are often called agents of change in societies (Mathews & Lacy, 1970; Wasserman, 1972; Noyce, 1972; Nkiko & Iroaganachi, 2015; Garcia-Febo, 2016, Epstein, Smallwood, & Gubnitskaia, 2019). This is especially true for public librarians since a public library is considered a public space that can transform society (Haywood, 1997).

Public libraries in the Philippines, like the National Library of the Philippines (NLP), continue to conduct several campaigns and activities to promote positive social change in the Philippines. These activities include a campaign to end Violence Against Women (VAW) by teaching people about it, and storytelling sessions to promote literacy among children (National Library of the Philippines, 2023). Such activities performed by public librarians affect individuals in society. However, such activities are only a fraction of what librarians are capable of contributing.

According to Goldstein (2019), when citizens have the ability to make the most out of the information they have, changes in society can occur. Librarians as information professionals also have a critical role to play in creating an informed society by promoting information literacy which can then help people become responsible citizens (Henninger, 2021). However, the National Library of the Philippines reported that only 3% of the legal minimum makes up the total number of public libraries in the country (Macapagal, 2018). This highlights the importance of public libraries as well as librarians in achieving a better-informed and changed society.

With the numerous challenges that society is facing, including information disorders, communities may have a harder time making informed decisions for themselves. Librarians can help combat the proliferation of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation by promoting media literacy (Banks, 2023). With the help of librarians, people will be equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills that they need to utilize information properly. When people are able to maximize the use of the information at their disposal, society can operate at its full potential (Goldstein, 2019). With that in mind, it is interesting to study how public librarians affect changes in society.

To determine how public librarians bring about change in society is to understand how Filipino public librarians perceive social change through their lived experiences in their own contexts as professional public librarians. It is also important to note how these librarians affect social change through their various advocacies, activities, and programs. Hence, this study aims to investigate the topic of public libraries and social change by examining how Filipino public librarians understand social change through their lived experiences in their own context, and how they affect social change in their institutions or communities.

A Filipino librarian “refers to an individual who is a bona fide holder of a Certificate of Registration and Professional Identification Card issued by the Professional Regulatory Board for Librarians (PRBFL) and by the Professional Regulation Commission” following Republic Act No. 9246 (2004), “an act modernizing the practice of librarianship in the Philippines.” With this in mind, this paper focused on Filipino libraries that have participated in various community outreach activities, programs, and more.

Public librarians serve the community through the information services they provide. Due to the nature of their work, librarians and how they affect and respond to social change have been studied in various literature. Documenting and unravelling their lived experiences on how they understand and perceive social change in their context as professionals will contribute to the field of librarianship on this topic.

The lived experiences of these librarians can help us understand the many ways in which they contribute to making society a better place as well as in affecting changes in their respective communities. Their perceptions and insights on social change will help improve the LIS field and the various ways librarians respond to and affect social change.

Literature Review

Social change influences different people in different ways (Ryder, 1985). Ferris & Stein (2009) believed that social change need not be brought by big occurrences in society, but groups of people, especially in the “helping professions,” may bring forth changes in society. These “helping professions” may include librarians who are perceived as educators, public servants, entertainers, as well as advocates, who can affect change in a community. Librarians do this by providing people with information, library services, and programs (Apolinario, 2023).

Social change and librarians. Literature review shows social changes can directly affect librarians as well as how library practice is done. Mathews & Lacy (1970) discussed that librarians

responded to the post-war social changes affecting libraries by utilizing technology to automate several library functions. Similarly, Zaitsev (1996) documented how political unrest can lead to operational changes in national libraries. With all the social changes happening in society, Singh & Uttam (2012) believed librarians can fight social exclusion through literary and media education at the primary level and technological information at the higher education level. Zalusky (2017) also believed that libraries and librarians rose to the social challenges emerging by promoting and advocating causes, such as freedom to read, media literacy, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

For librarians to keep up with changes in society, the librarianship profession should transition from being conservative to one that is proactive and responsive to social changes (Wasserman, 1972). Noyce (1972) shared the same sentiments when he argued that librarians should work for change in society and not just follow the existing state of affairs. For librarians to be continuously relevant, they should go beyond their traditional roles, welcome the challenges of their communities, and respond to them (Nkiko & Iroaganachi, 2015).

Librarians are also believed to be game-changers and innovators who can advocate for access to information, social inclusion, and the promotion of reading and literacy (Garcia-Febo, 2016). Experiences and stories of various librarians and LIS educators on their roles in promoting social justice, social change, and tolerance were also compiled in a book by Epstein, Smallwood, & Gubnitskaia (2019).

Public libraries and librarians as agents of social change. Public libraries play a role in responding to social changes in their communities. They serve as community hubs by offering equitable access to information resources, technologies, and programs that aim to serve the specific needs of clients. The studies of Sabelli and Maiche (2014), Moxley and Abbas (2016), and Tanasijević (2014) demonstrated how public libraries help marginalized communities by providing them with essential resources and services.

Alvim and Calixto's (2013) study on the actions of Portuguese public libraries amidst political and economic disturbance showed how public librarians become drivers of social change. Despite the economic and political turmoil happening at that time, public librarians were able to carry out their social mission by utilizing Web 2.0 in public libraries. The authors stated that "despite the political and ideological constraints, libraries may design social procedures that help the non-dilution of the citizen's rights, the strengthening of the concept of the common good, and the increase of social capital in order to improve the communities' quality of life" (p. 13). This role is further exhibited in the study of Moxley & Abbas (2016) that showed public libraries are essential in societies undergoing considerable social change, such cases include the Carnegie libraries. The authors argued that public libraries function as community anchors for vulnerable people. They also explained that libraries in Britain and the USA expanded to accommodate the growing literacy among people and the rise of public education. As such, blended strategies such as the social service information clinic and community forum were proposed for the public library to follow.

A study by Sabelli and Maiche's (2014) also demonstrated how librarians respond to social changes in their respective communities. In their paper, librarians in a community project in Uruguay helped young women in disadvantaged groups get access to information and provided them with information services that suit their needs. According to Tanasijević (2014), how libraries respond to the needs of the users can also be seen in the project AgroLib-Ja (Agricultural Library in Jagodina in Serbia). It was shown in the study that a public library may be the initiator of social change locally and in a wider context. This can be achieved by positively contributing to the overall welfare of the rural community as well as influencing farmers' perception of libraries, ultimately leading to an outcome that benefits both the library and the community. It was believed

that libraries are relevant entities and creators of change in a society that helped the livelihoods of the people in the local community.

The perceptions of the community about public libraries as instruments of social change were investigated in a survey by Madu, Onyeneke, & Azubogu (2018). The results showed that the community perceived public libraries as social change instruments, which can also be attributed to the functions of a modern public library. This may indicate that public libraries are seen as essential institutions that are capable of catalyzing societal transformation by performing their roles as information institutions while being active member of their respective communities.

The literature reviewed illustrated that public libraries and librarians can bring about social change. Public libraries and librarians are considered agents of change in their respective institutions and communities because of their advocacies and programs that help improve societies. While there are documented stories and experiences of librarians and libraries responding to social changes and being instruments of social change, there is no literature, thus far, in the Philippine context that the researcher was able to come across with. It is important to explore how social change happens in the context of Filipino public libraries. To facilitate social change, it is necessary to document the lived experiences of Filipino librarians working on the ground so that they can act as a motivating force for other librarians who wish to do the same. It is also important to explore the various activities and advocacies that Filipino librarians participate in that eventually lead to social change in their specific communities.

Methods

The study used a qualitative phenomenological method which utilized the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to determine how Filipino public librarians perceive social change. Since IPA was used in this study, a small sample that is purposively chosen and homogenous is recommended as the interpretation and analysis of the data consume a great deal of time. The Filipino public librarians were narrowed in scope to only consider those who are known to have community outreach activities and advocacy programs. At the time of the study, only two Filipino public librarians were available for the interview.

A semi-structured interview was used to gather data by interviewing the two Filipino librarians who work in public libraries about their perceptions of social change based on their lived experiences as professionals. Before starting the data collection process, a request letter, consent form, as well as interview guide was sent beforehand to the respondents. This ensures confidentiality such that the participants can be safeguarded during the data collection process. The interview schedules were then arranged after the participants gave their consent. The data collection process was conducted through a video conferencing platform called Zoom.

Rich and descriptive data were collected about the public librarians' nature of work, their perspectives and understanding of social change, as well as their programs and advocacies regarding social change. The data were then stored and organized properly for easy retrieval after the data collection process. Moreover, to facilitate a streamlined coding and analysis process, transcriptions of the interviews were created.

The software Atlas.ti was utilized, in addition to manual coding, in performing the data analysis for the study as well as organizing the data that were collected during the interview process. After the coding process, the software was also used for thematic analysis as well as for visualization of the recurring themes. The results from the analysis were used to develop insights on how Filipino public librarians perceive social change, how they respond and affect change in their respective communities, and what motivates them to do what they do in their profession.

Results and Discussions

Social change, as the name implies, is a change in society brought about by social movements, environmental shifts, technological innovations, and others, which can be human-caused or natural (Griffiths & Keirns, 2015). It can also be caused by individuals or through their professions who want to make a difference in society (Ferris & Stein, 2009). One of these professions includes librarianship since they are also considered to be agents of change.

Literature review showed librarians who are involved in social change have participated in doing outreach community activities or those working in public libraries (Shrestha, 2013; Alvim & Calixto, 2013; Sabelli & Maiche, 2014; Moxley & Abbas, 2016; Ghosh, 2019; Madu, Onyeneke, & Azubogu, 2018). Public libraries are mandated to provide for the information needs of the community and reach those who are unreached. As the IFLA/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1994, p.1) states, “public library, the local gateway to knowledge, provides a basic condition for lifelong learning, independent decision-making and cultural development of the individual and social groups.”

In this study, two public librarians were interviewed to determine their perceptions of social change and how they respond to it. The first respondent is Public Librarian A who works at the National Library of the Philippines and is also a known storyteller amongst Filipino librarians. She is also involved in various storytelling community activities in hopes of spreading awareness about information literacy. The second respondent is Public Librarian B who works at the Quezon City Public Library. He has spearheaded various community outreach activities and his advocacy revolves around reading for children. These two public librarians both shared their lived experiences regarding social change and how they perceive it.

Nature of Work

Public Librarian A works as a Reference Librarian assigned at the Children’s Library. As such, she has administrative and technical responsibilities, which include overseeing the Children’s Library Services. At times, she is assigned to the General Readers’ Services to respond to the reference inquiries of clients. For her, being at the NLP which is a government agency, is aligned with her desire to become a public servant.

The interview with Public Librarian A revealed that she uses her work to promote information literacy to the street children around Rizal Park. She wanted to create a lasting educational impact on these children through her storytelling sessions. Furthermore, she is striving to turn the library into a safe space for children where they can freely do their academic tasks as well as other recreational activities.

For Public Librarian A, the nature of her work allows her to reach out to the community and promote safe spaces and learning among children. This shows that Public Librarian A, while working at the National Library of the Philippines, is taking strides to extend the services of the library outside its physical premises to target the community, especially the street children.

Moreover, Public Librarian A’s passion for storytelling becomes her driving force to continue with her work as a public librarian and it also motivates her to create more programs and activities for children. This is because her storytelling sessions bring positive changes in the lives of the children since her session provides them with educational development and personal growth.

Meanwhile, Public Librarian B who works at Quezon City Public Library also has a passion for helping people. Before working as a public librarian at QCPL, Public Librarian B was exposed to grassroots communities that inspired him to serve the people. Due to this, he also became socially conscious about the issues happening in society. To respond to these changes, Public Librarian B participated in various activities such as putting up children’s libraries, conducting

educational training for high school students, and visiting different communities to conduct storytelling sessions.

Public Librarian B narrated that his advocacies align with the nature of his work at the Children's Section in the Library Extension Division at QCPL. He uses his work as an opportunity to conduct community outreach activities to further his cause.

Both of these public librarians utilize their platforms in order to bring about social changes in their respective communities. Moreover, their nature of work also allows them to realize their advocacies and conduct outreach activities to make society a better place.

Understanding of Social Change

This paper delves into understanding social change in the perspectives of Filipino public librarians. When asked about Public Librarian A's understanding of social change, she says that social change is:

“Change happening in the environment that the librarian is moving in. The activities that benefit the children that influence their personal, social, and community lives. It is how you are able to cope with changes happening in your environment, the technology, the people.”

For Public Librarian A, she believes that social change involves the changes happening in her institutions or community and how she responds to these changes. She further stated that technology, the pandemic, and the status of people's lives are also social changes that affect a public librarian's work. She believes that Filipino public librarians can become catalysts for social change when it comes to tackling these issues. In her words, a library is considered “a centre for learning.”

In addition, what is prominent to Public Librarian A's understanding of social change is that she believes that the activities that she conducts for children are changing their lives. These activities, which include storytelling sessions, arts and crafts, and puppet shows for children, collectively define social change in her context as a public librarian. She also believes that these activities not only bring changes to society but also transform her life for the better.

Public Librarian A also receives feedback which signifies that changes are actually happening to the people that she served and helped through her advocacies and activities. The feedback and comments allow her to see how the lives of people improved and may be considered proof that her storytelling sessions are working. Furthermore, these sessions also allow Public Librarian A to form a deep connection with the children, even to the point where they tell her that poverty hinders them from reaching their dreams and full potential. She believes that being a Filipino librarian can bring change by encouraging these children to chase their dreams despite all the setbacks and challenges in life, which are lessons that children can also learn from their storytelling sessions.

For Public Librarian B, his understanding of social change revolves around education, information literacy, sustainable development, and awareness of the challenges brought by poverty. He attributed social change to his profession as a librarian by stating:

“For our job, teaching the public about basic literacies is important. Nowadays, there is a lot of fake news and libraries can take part in the solution to bring change. We can hold discussions about media and information literacy.”

Public Librarian B believes that libraries can help in providing solutions to societal issues. Libraries can create programs with an emphasis on teaching and mentorship since education plays an important role when it comes to bringing about social change. By equipping the public with the necessary skills that they need to become information literate and make informed decisions for themselves, he believes that society can slowly start changing.

Moreover, he also believes that making concrete plans for the library based on the information needs of the clients also affects social change. Public Librarian B also emphasized that passing on one's advocacies to other people can help sustain social change in our community. This is relevant in the Philippine setting because of the lack of registered librarians and the demand for their services is just increasing. In line with this, he hopes that his advocacies can be maintained by the younger generation of librarians because his activities and programs have already changed people's lives. Apart from his advocacies and activities, Public Librarian B also believes that supporting the dreams of children through education can lead to social change.

Public Librarian B also related his understanding of social change as a librarian to his life experiences and his hopes for the future. He stated that libraries can help support children in achieving their dreams through educating them, which can then lead to social change:

"For me, a child living in poverty can achieve his/her dreams, finish school, and get high honors, cum laude... just because of the library's support from the start. We can see that we can affect social change in those kinds of instances."

He believes that libraries can bring social change and promote accessible education by providing people with the resources that they need to enhance their literacy and by conducting programs that meet the needs of their constituents. Libraries also offer free access to information which helps bridge the information gap in the Philippines. Furthermore, Public Librarian B also added that turning libraries into safe spaces can contribute to social change since this allows people to communicate freely by giving them the freedom of expression. He also stated that the library staff should unite towards the same advocacy and promote the library's mission and vision to bring about change.

Both of these public librarians believe that education is key to social change. The main focus of Public Librarian A is to teach the youth about the importance of reading books, while Public Librarian B is focused on teaching the public about basic literacies. Based on both of their experiences, promoting education has proven effective in changing people's lives. In order to push forward education in society as librarians, they both believe that libraries should establish and conduct programs and activities that are relevant to the community.

Affecting Social Change

The advocacies of Public Librarian A are centered around information literacy for children, which highlights her commitment to accessible education. Furthermore, through her outreach activities, she helps in fostering the love for reading and learning among children. One of her activities includes storytelling sessions which is anchored to her advocacy of teaching young people the value of reading books.

Based on her lived experiences, she has personally seen how the activities that she conducted transformed children. The storytelling sessions gave the children hope, especially in pursuing their dreams. This is how Public Librarian A's advocacies and programs affect social change in her community. Apart from visiting PGH's cancer ward for children, she also visits the elders at Home for the Aged (a retirement home that provides the needs and takes care of elders), and the poverty-stricken families at Smokey Mountain (a former landfill where the garbage of Metro Manila was dumped) to conduct storytelling sessions, as part of NLP's advocacies and outreach activities. She fully supports these activities and carries with her the same advocacies that NLP has. Public Librarian A further stated that "as a librarian and a storyteller, my advocacy is to teach young people about the value of reading books."

Public Librarian B's advocacies also include promoting reading amongst children, hence, he established an activity called the Book Mobile. For a certain period, the Book Mobile stayed in

schools wherein activities such as puppet shows, card games, video presentations, and reading sessions were conducted. This activity aims to promote education and learning through recreational activities. Public Librarian B also developed the program called Pinoy Reading Buddies to promote reading. In addition to this, other activities that Public Librarian B organized while in QCPL include Heneral Basa and Aklatang Pambata, which also align with his advocacies to help people and promote literacy and education through reading. Apart from developing programs, Public Librarian B also loves mentoring people and he hopes that his efforts in teaching people will eventually lead to change in the future.

His passion for conducting activities that bring social change and leave a positive impact on society pushes him to further continue doing his job at QCPL. He was thankful that he had the opportunity to follow the path that he wanted to do in his life while at the same time, teaching and inspiring other people through his work. Furthermore, he also still continues to follow through with his advocacy even beyond the confines of the library. Public Librarian B believes that his activities are making big differences in his clients, especially those that concern the Schools Division Office because they have already captured the impact of the audience. Further, he also thinks that activities like the online Book Mobiles that started in day-care centers also have the most impact since they have partnered up with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) as well as the Local Government Unit (LGU).

According to both of these public librarians, doing activities that align with their advocacy is their passion. They both believe that programs and activities conducted by public libraries for the community can greatly help in social change based on their lived experiences.

For Public Librarian A, her storytelling session is just one of her ways to encourage kids to visit the library and to promote reading among children. She believes that you can teach young people a lot of things by simply just telling them stories that have great life lessons. This goes the same for Public Librarian B wherein he also conducts activities that put the youth at the forefront. Both these Filipino public librarians believe that if children are equipped with enough knowledge, they will have the opportunity to follow their dreams and reach their goals. Furthermore, it takes a great deal of commitment and passion to establish programs and activities that put the needs of the people first. Their passion and love for their craft make it possible for both of these public librarians to serve people and bring about social change. Despite all the challenges that they faced, both of them still believed in their advocacies.

Conclusions

Filipino public librarians understand social change through education and community engagement. Both librarians believe that education plays an important role in driving social change. They also emphasized the importance of activities such as storytelling sessions as well as arts and crafts for children in bringing about social change. Libraries can conduct such programs to meet the needs of their communities. By aligning their efforts with the evolving demands of society and actively engaging in educational initiatives, public librarians can act as catalysts for meaningful social change. Public librarians also affect social change through their advocacy for accessible education and information literacy. By identifying the information needs of their respective communities, they create programs that support these advocacies. Their commitment to their advocacies shows how public librarians can drive meaningful social change through their proactive efforts.

The study showed that the perception of both of these Filipino public librarians on social change is centered around helping people through their advocacies, the information services that they offer, as well as the programs and activities conducted by the respective libraries where they

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work. Furthermore, these public librarians are also motivated by their love and passion for serving the community. They also both believe that education is important in creating social change. This can be achieved by teaching children basic literacy skills and providing them with the resources that they need to enhance their learning.

It can also be surmised that storytelling sessions are essential for the youth based on both of their lived experiences. They have shared how the lessons that they can derive from the books have helped so many children. Moreover, despite the challenges that they faced, both of these librarians still continue to push forward with their activities and advocacies. Further, their perspective on social change is also deeply rooted in altruism, which is a good trait for a public librarian to have.

Understanding the perspectives and insights of Filipino public librarians on social change could help information professionals and practicing librarians in improving their library and information services. It could also help them develop programs and conduct activities that promote social change. In order for public librarians to provide the appropriate services that their clients need, the urgency to provide funding support for public libraries as well as to enforce existing laws was also emphasized.

Due to the challenges and social changes that librarians face in society, they are urged to play a more proactive role in society and go beyond their traditional duties. The perspectives of these Filipino librarians further show how relevant librarians are in our current societal landscape and how they continuously adapt to be able to respond to the evolving needs of their respective communities.

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Поклик до служіння: публічні бібліотекарі та соціальні зміни

Мета. Соціальні зміни включають події, що впливають на соціальний, культурний, економічний, політичний та географічний контексти. Серед інших, публічні бібліотекарі відіграють вирішальну роль у посередництві цих змін, просуюючи грамотність, читання і боротьбу з дезінформацією. З огляду на це, розуміння життєвого досвіду та інсайтів публічних бібліотекарів може сприяти подальшим соціальним змінам та покращенню бібліотечної справи. Дослідження має на меті відповісти на питання, як публічні бібліотекарі розуміють соціальні зміни та впливають на них, спираючись на життєвий досвід філіппінських публічних бібліотекарів як інформаційних професіоналів. **Методика.** Було використано підхід інтерпретативного феноменологічного аналізу (ІФА) та проведено напівструктуроване інтерв'ю для визначення сприйняття соціальних змін двома філіппінськими публічними бібліотекарями. **Результати.** Дослідження показало, що публічні бібліотекарі мотивовані своєю пристрастю до роботи в громаді. Вони також вважають, що освіта відіграє важливу роль у соціальному розвитку, і наголошують на важливості навчання дітей грамотності та надання їм навчальних ресурсів. **Висновки.** У статті зроблено висновок, що ці бібліотекарі сприймають соціальні зміни як допомогу людям через їхню адвокацію, інформаційні послуги та бібліотечні програми.

Ключові слова: публічні бібліотекарі; соціальні зміни; освіта

Received: 22.08.2024

Accepted: 02.12.2024