Overcoming the last acceptable prejudice: Community building between public libraries and the LGBTQ community

Introduction

Queer individuals typically have neutral-to-negative attitudes towards public libraries. Further, the queer community is often invisible as there are no discerning visible characteristics marking an individual as being a member of this group. No exact count of the LGBTQ persons in the USA currently exists (nor would such a count be feasible), but estimates typically place the number of queer individuals in the USA at 8 million, or about four percent of the population (Advocate.com Editors, 2011), though the range is more broadly understood to be between one and eight percent based on the exact members of the LGBTQ spectrum included in any individual count (Carmichael and Shontz, 1996). Because queer individuals are found in nearly every community in America, it is conceivable to say that every public library serves this patron group.

However, just because this patron group is nearly universal, this does not mean that every public library will have the same outreach and community building goals and challenges as every other public library; indeed, much of this process will be shaped by local forces and the pre-existing quality of available resources. However, it is the view of this paper that community building in public libraries does not exist in a vacuum of outreach; instead, public libraries must not only turn their eyes outwards towards outreach with existing LGBTQ patrons and the current queer community infrastructure, it must also turn its eye inwards to examine what policies and practices the public library has undertaken or overlooked in making its space and services welcoming to LGBTQ patrons. If LGBTQ community members do not feel comfortable with the library as an organization, with its staff people, and with the library as a space of value to them and their causes, then any community building efforts will ultimately be unsuccessful and short-lived. As such, the marriage of revising existing services with outreach to an often marginalized community must be the touchstone for LGBTQ community building (and, perhaps, for community building between public libraries and any other non-mainstream group).

A point on nomenclature should be cleared up before this paper begins. Because of the varied nature of the gay community, a variety of terms have arisen to describe the different subsets of the population and the entire alternative sexuality community as a whole. For instance, this paper uses the term queer to refer to all members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning communities. Further, other implied groups (such as two-spirits and pansexuals) are typically included when talking about these groups. For the purposes of this paper, the terms queer, LGBTQ, and gay are used interchangeably to refer to the entire alternative sexuality community unless the context that the term is used in implies otherwise.

History

One of the most evocative anecdotes about the evolution of the perception of the public library's opinion towards the homosexual community is when mid-twentieth century Librarian of Congress Luther Evan's stated that the Library of Congress would not hire "communists or cocksuckers" (Carmichael, 1995). In the sixty years that have passed since this was a semi-official government policy, the idea of talking about queer issues or queer people in this way has moved from acceptable to socially reprehensible. However, this evolution of mindset from distaste for homosexuality to future partnerships in community building is one of the principal road blocks in the way to real community change. This history has left many on the public library side fearful of over-supporting an unpopular minority and those on the LGBTQ angered towards a public library that is seen as just one more discriminatory institution in a society that has long been unsupportive and hostile. Understanding these historical issues is an important first step in creating a community building plan that will engage the needs of the often invisible LGBTQ community.

Lack of Representation

A principle part of the struggle for queer representation in public library services has been the lack of available resources at the public library's disposal. Burke (2008) noted that prior to 1969 fewer than thirty gay-themed books had been published by any of the major publishing houses. Further, in cases when public libraries did have access to LGBTQ materials, these materials were often out-of-date, non-comprehensive, or located in inconvenient locations that could only be accessed through consortium or interlibrary loans (Linville, 2004). In recent years, this lack of available materials has been alleviated by an increase in the number of books related to queer themes that are published every year, but it was not until 2001 that many considered this integration of queer literature into the popular culture to be nearing completion (Burke, 2008). However, this low representation during the mid-part of the twentieth century can still be felt as having a subtle influence on the perceptions of the appropriateness of queer literature in public libraries (Carmichael and Shontz, 1996). Through this process, many LGBTQ individuals became naturalized to finding information elsewhere due to the lack of success they had at the public library.

In addition to censorship and collection development struggles, the LGBTQ community has also had to struggle with inaccurate, incomplete, and inept efforts to maintain easy-to-use archival and bibliographic control over gay records (Carmichael, 2000). LGBTQ persons have had to endure pejorative subject headings that mixed all queer issues under the main heading of "sexual perversion", subject headings that were difficult to understand due to obfuscating language, item summaries that avoided any mention of homosexual content, and in some cases, the direct destruction of gay-themed records (Thistlewaite, 1995). Additionally, even when library catalogs began to evolve in the late 1980's and early 1990's in the use of less judgmental subject headings, this nomenclature still failed to keep up-

to-date with the language that the queer community used to describe itself, in particular when transgendered issues were being discussed (Mehra and Braquet, 2006; Adler, 2009). One major result of these library shortcomings from the past decades has been a legacy of failed searches that have proven to LGBTQ individuals, justly or not, that the public library is not a place that can meet their information needs and, as such, is not a place for people like themselves (Linville, 2006; Burke, 2008).

A History of Political Struggle

The fight for gay rights has been a physical and vocal struggle that has defined a large part of the queer community's identity since 1969 when a group of queer individuals rioted in the streets outside the Stonewall Inn in New York City to demand equal treatment by the law and the New York City Police Department. Initially, in the 1970's, the gay rights movement achieved some successes such as the election of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay politician in America, to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors (Jones, 2000). The queer movement, however, soon became the most visible scapegoat of the 1980's rise to power of the religious right and Ronald Reagan (Loftus, 2001). As Loftus noted, this rise of conservative power became especially damaging as it occurred concurrently with the widespread outbreak of the AIDS epidemic in the American gay male population. As Randy Shilts noted in his chilling memoir of the response to AIDS in the 1980s *And the Band Played On,* the onset of AIDS stalled much of the momentum that the gay rights movement had achieved due to the heavy attrition of queer leaders that succumbed to the disease and a public that was newly fearful due to a widely misunderstood medical condition. The LGBTQ community had to turn its eyes temporarily away from the struggle for equal rights and protections towards a more internal focus on survival from an external plague.

Public libraries, for better or worse, remained largely absent from the struggle for gay rights throughout the last fifty years. It may not be immediately apparent, although, as to why this absence matters with current community building efforts. One area of concern is that many current library patrons and library employees grew up during a period when gay popularly meant "bad," when there was no representation of queer identities on library shelves, and when the only time anyone talked about the queer community on the news was in reference to the AIDS tragedy that was ravaging the gay male populace. All of these notions came together to form a mindset that held that the queer community was not a subset of the population that was worthy of equitable service in any area of American life, including public libraries (Schraeder, 2008). These negative sentiments, though by no means universal in the American populace or in the library worker population, would have to be overcome before any strong inroads towards community building with the LBTQ population could be undertaken.

Further, public libraries are vulnerable to censorship requests from external groups that oppose any attempt to provide LGBTQ positive books to children and young adults. These groups, including the American Family Association and Family Friendly Libraries, often use the term "community values" as a

way to justify their attempts at LGBTQ censorship (Burke, 2008). These challenges strained the already limited information resources available to queer individuals in public libraries. These sorts of challenges, mixed with abjectly homophobic political speech as signified by state constitutional amendments banning gay marriage, repeated opposition to equal rights in employment legislation, and continued rhetoric that still equates homosexuals with pedophiles and rapists, clearly delineated to all queer individuals that the "community" had separate value from queer people like themselves. As such, it can be assumed that many LGBTQ persons felt isolated from their communities, local governments, and the institutions that symbolized this "community" persona that had rejected them. Therefore, although many queer individuals maintained positive relationships with their public libraries, others avoided public libraries in part due to the public library's silence on defending them from this gross and hateful speech. Albright (2006) pointed out that what is on the shelves of a public library reflects the cultural attitudes, norms, and beliefs of the society it represents. When queer individuals go to their public libraries and do not see themselves reflected in the shelves, their response is to discount the value that the public library can have in their own lives. As such, the history of queer people's forming their own insular communities inside larger urban areas can be understood as a defensive response against overt homophobia and an attempt by those queer people affected by it to reduce their exposure to these negative attitudes and actions while looking inward for more positive representations of the queer community.

Professional Struggles

Although the stereotype that all male librarians are gay is ridiculous on its face, this belief ironically is held by many male librarians in the LIS field to be the most common stereotype associated with people of their gender in the library profession (Burke, 2008). This stereotype has little basis in reality. Yet, the library community does have some claim to its status as an inclusive community. The American Library Association Code of Ethics calls for equitable treatment of all people (Carmichael, 1995). Further, the ALA possesses the first gay professional group in America through the organization now known as the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Roundtable (Carmichael, 2000). The ALA has further made strides to avoid hosting conferences in cities and states with harshly anti-gay laws, and it has increased its efforts to combat gay prejudice from the 1990's to the present day. Further, there is a plethora of anecdotal evidence that noted that even in the darkest days of gay rights, homophobia, and ignorance on queer issues, some public librarians bravely filled in the information gaps while the rest of their profession lagged behind on these issues.

However, not all public librarians are in lock-step with the positions adopted by the ALA or the more progressive members of the profession. When the magazine *American Libraries* chose to feature a picture of the ALA's gay librarian group on the cover of a 1992 issue, the response from the library community was loud and overwhelmingly negative in the editorial pages of that magazine. In fact, 15.9

percent of recent MLIS graduates in a study conducted around the time of the publication of that magazine issue said that they would be offended if the magazine featured "openly lesbigay librarians" on its cover (Carmichael and Shontz, 1996). Further, there may be some librarians who resist this equal access to all mentality because of regional trends or religious or political beliefs (Burke, 2008). Also, there are few examples of librarians coming to the assistance of the gay liberation cause, and only one ALA president between 1975 and 2000 voiced support for gay rights during the time of their official presidency (Carmichael, 2000). In brief, although the broader characteristics and professional goals of librarians suggest that they advocate for the equality of all people, this has not been borne out in practice when support of the queer community would have proven to be unpopular and professionally risky.

Current Perceptions of LGBTQ Persons

There is a classic perception that public librarians, regardless of their individual political or ideological leanings, support the mainstream and majority opinions of their service areas when it comes to legislation (Carmichael and Shontz, 1996). There is also some evidence, both anecdotal and research-driven, that librarians as a whole tend to be more moderate or liberal than the public at large (Carmichael and Shontz, 1996). If these two patterns hold true, then the public library community will only see increased support for LGBTQ persons with each passing year.

As of 2011, the average American projected that over 25 percent of the American population identified as either gay or lesbian (Morales, 2011). The poll predicted that this was due to a correlating factor that showed that a majority of individuals identified that they knew a self-identified gay or lesbian. Further, support for gay rights has also become part of the new normal majority standard in American politics. In 2012, 54 percent of American s found gay relationships to be "morally acceptable," 50 percent supported gay marriage, and 63 percent supported same-sex partnerships in general (Saad, 2012). In fact, support for the majority of the items has risen by at least one-to-two percent every calendar year for the last decade (Saad, 2012). As such, the perception of gay men as pedophiles and the queer community at-large as not being worth support is dimming with each passing year (Burke, 2008). Instead, a majority of Americans have come to support the idea that the rights of queer people to belong in their communities as another recognized minority group has been codified. Further, with the first electoral victories for gay marriage in the history of the United States occurring in 2012 in Minnesota, Maine, Maryland, and Washington (Shapiro, 2012), queer individuals will emerge more and more in their communities as part of the essential paradox of minorities in American society. On the one hand, minority communities will have increased acceptance of mainstream roles and as such, their information and public library needs (and the outreach required to reach them) will become more typical. On the other hand, however, the community will maintain its own unique information, societal, social, and practical needs. Public librarians are now faced with a unique point in history in which community

building with queer individuals can be undertaken without fear of massive political upheaval or social backlash in many parts of the country due to the changing demographics of American society. Though some queer individuals and organizations may find these new community efforts to be opportunistic, public libraries with an interest in increasing their engagement and enmeshment with queer communities cannot afford to be bogged down by the past; instead, they must acknowledge past failings and look towards the future for ways to use current best practice and future goals to match the needs of all. The public library's mission is to serve the information needs of all the people in their service area, and many public libraries have additionally adopted a role as a provider of social outreach and engagement to the people in their communities. As such, LGBTQ individuals are a necessary part of every public library's public outreach plan because every public library, whether they know it or not, serves LGBTQ patrons.

Current Practice

Many in the library community have already engaged with the idea that service to queer communities is important. From historical retrospective programming in New York City (Thistlewaite, 1995) to gay history archives in San Francisco (Linville, 2004), many public libraries, particularly in urban areas and areas with a strong academic influence, have undertaken efforts to increase their visibility and openness to LGBTQ persons. Although queer books continue to be a target for censorship in public libraries (Doyle, 2011), the overall quality of the relationship between the queer community and public libraries is improving due to a shift in demographic trends. However, the heritage of decades of inadequately meeting queer information needs can be felt in contemporary library service.

One of the primary avenues of community outreach currently being utilized in outreach towards students and other young queer community members. Although evidence is primarily anecdotal due to the difficulty in studying emerging sexualities (due to privacy concerns and the still solidifying nature of the attitudes being studied), most of the contemporary library literature points to the fact that many LGBTQ youth use the library for their information needs (Helton, 2010; Linville, 2004). Linville (2004) pointed out that over half of queer youth have visited the library to seek out stories of real people who have self-identified as part of the queer community. Further, of the youth surveyed, Linville found that 82 percent were public library users. However, only 45 percent felt comfortable enough to ask the librarians questions related to their information needs. Also, youth expressed frustration at an inability to access LGBTQ materials that they had found in the library catalog but then could not find on the shelf. They expressed the belief (however rightly or wrongly) that queer materials were less likely to be replaced when they went missing than other materials in the branch library's base collection. This may be somewhat corroborated by the finding that some children's librarians believe that there is no interest in children or young adults in materials the LGBTQ themes (Downey, 2005). Further, though there has

been explosion in gay publishing in the 1990's and 2000's compared to earlier decades (Carmichael, 2000), library collections often lag behind.

Issues with a public library's collection were not the only areas of concern. In Curry's 2005 study on reference librarians' responses to queer concerns, approximately half of the librarians approached for assistance were either unwilling or unable to help with basic queer identity research concerns. Further, many patrons experienced failed searches for queer information due to the fact while queer subject headings have become less offensive, they are still more formal than the words used by many younger members of the queer community. For instance, queer youth are much more likely to search for "gay," "lesbian," or "queer" than they are to search for the subject heading "homosexuality" (Rothbauer, 2004). Additionally, many librarians may not understand that LGBTQ patrons will have separate information needs from those of the general population (Hart and Mfazo, 2010). All of this comes together to indicate a public library information landscape that is difficult to use and isolating towards queer individuals who may not be comfortable in seeking in-person help from librarians to meet their sensitive information needs.

However, this is not to say that there has been no positive evolution towards the public library's outreach to the queer community. In fact, 79 percent of librarians in a 2010 survey agree that gay and lesbian issues are human rights issues and that 91.5 percent agree that public libraries should carry queer materials (Hart and Mfazo, 2010). This is much better than the statistics for the 1970's through 1990's reported by Burke (2008), and it shows that librarians and the public libraries they serve are following along with society's gradual evolution to become more accepting and progressive when it comes to the information and societal needs of gays and lesbians. Additionally, many libraries are seeking out gay archives and historical materials so that they can better serve as research centers for people interested in these fields (Carmichael, 2000). Additionally, the American Librarian Association has endorsed service to the queer community as a necessary part of "the broad social responsibilities" that characterize the philosophical underpinnings of librarianship as a profession (Albright, 2005).

The activity of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Roundtable (GLBTRT) of the American Library Association should be specially noted and applauded for its positive steps in aiding the development of library practice. The GLBTRT has sponsored one of the most highly regarded awards for gay literature over the past forty years through the Stonewall Book Awards (American Library Association, 2012). With the expansion of the award in 2010 to cover young adult and children's literature, there are now three awards and up to 12 honor books a year that are noted for exceptional merit in portraying LGBTQ issues, people, and characters. Further, the organization curates a Rainbow List, a bibliography of the best LGBTQ media for children through the age of 18 to aid in the collection development efforts of public libraries. Further, the group puts out a publicly available newsletter and

maintains an e-mail listerv with the goal of maintaining a place for discussion of issues that are important to LGBTQ persons and people in the context of libraries. Though some scholars find fault with the "incrementalist" approach to change that has long been one of the hallmark traits of most professional queer groups (Carmichael, 1996), the GLBTRT stands as the main resource available to public librarians of all stripes to go to with questions on how best to serve the queer population over time.

Potential Conflicts

Just because a public library expresses a desire to move from its current position to a more community building role with regards to the LGBTQ community. Forces both inside and outside the queer community may have strong feelings that a public library will need to be aware of when it attempts to make its support for this often marginalized community more apparent. A public library may have a few politically charged missteps as it tries to make its way as an independent body. There are many examples of libraries coming under fire for supporting gay rights (Oder, 2005) or refusing to support gay rights on the queer community's terms (Pruitt, 2010; Helms, 2004). Anticipation of these possible friction spots can help ease hostilities and can allow public library personnel the chance to know ahead of time what sort of problems or resistance they may face. With this foreknowledge, they can come up with the answers that their larger service areas will need to reinforce and defend the community building value of this work.

Resistance from the non-LGBTQ community

When any public library determines that they need to increase the scope of their public service and community building offerings, a realignment of financial and personnel resources must be undertaken unless additional resources have been acquired at the same time. Although this determination of who should be the target of a public library's outreach efforts or what method should be used to triage these concerns falls outside of the scope of this paper, it should be noted that this is a primary concern of community building with any minority group. Public libraries, by engaging the almost universally minority LGBTQ group, leave themselves open to charges that they are favoring a small minority at the expense of resources that could be otherwise spent on the (implied more deserving) majority. This argument has been phrased around services to more visible minority groups (i.e. racial minorities), less controversial groups (i.e. disabled persons), or services to children, a group that many conservative activist groups see as standing in direct opposition to outreach to the LGBTQ community (Carmichael, 2000). However, as has been previously noted, demographic shifts have increasingly put this homophobic and anti-queer viewpoint in the minority (Saad, 2012). Thus, it's an important part of community building with any minority group to make sure that the public library can adequately engage in its outreach with minority groups without alienating the larger population. Also, if a public library, its board, and the majority of its community support actions taken to make the library more welcoming to

LGBTQ persons, then libraries should be prepared for the realization that it is, at times, impossible to please everyone due to the finite nature of public resources.

Resistance from LGBTQ Community

There are two principal areas that may cause resistance to community building efforts between the public and the queer community from LGBTQ individuals: issues around privacy and issues around representation. Though this paper will deal with these two concerns separately, they ultimately condense into a concern that public libraries may not prove to be organizations worthy of the queer communities trust. By being aware of these barriers to entry, public libraries can better position themselves to answer these questions when they undertake their first steps in queer outreach.

Although of lesser concern in 2012 than probably at any point in contemporary American history, there is a major concern in the queer community regarding an individual's "out" status ["out" being a colloquial term used in the LGBTQ community to denote how widespread knowledge of an individual's homosexual status is] (Curry, 2005). Although many younger people use the library's resources for information about LGBTQ issues and the issues around coming out, these same individuals are reluctant to ask for help from librarians due to fear that they will be judged (Linville, 2004). Many have pointed out that homophobic attitudes of library staff are barriers to entry (Stenback and Scharder, 2004; Hart and Mfazo, 2010; Mehra and Banquet, 2006). Further, Downey (2005) pointed out that checking out a book about the LGBTQ community or an item that is known to have queer or themes characters in-person with a library staff member may be seen in the eyes of many queer youth as a coming out activity. Due to the sensitive nature of this information and the difficulty of the coming out process, this in-person contact not only serves as a barrier towards the circulation of queer materials, it additionally blocks access to materials placed in a restricted area or those acquired through ILL (Downey, 2005). Stigma and discrimination are among the harshest consequences faced by a queer youth once they come out, and the potential for this may freeze interactions between young LGBTQ persons and public librarians (Mehra and Banquet, 2006). Further, younger queer individuals do not believe that they need a public library's support (Mehra and Braquet, 2006). Though queer youth may use libraries as a portal to the Internet, I doubt very many of these individuals connect this usage to the library assisting them; instead, the library becomes a gateway to what is useful. It is the responsibility of every public library that seeks a relationship with the queer community to not make this process more difficult than it already is in an overwhelmingly heteronormative society.

Once LGBTQ community members have come out, there concerns shift away from privacy concerns (as their queer status is no longer a general secret), and instead, one of their primary concerns becomes the lack of consideration given to the LGBTQ community. Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California representative Bill Walker noted that many queer archives (and perhaps by

extension, queer organizations) are hesitant to "rely on the kindness of strangers" due to America's long-standing history of being hostile towards queer individuals and LGBTQ society (Thistlewaite, 1995). Additionally, there is frustration that many public library organizations provide little more than lip service to the idea that queer concerns are on equal footing as that of other minorities. For example, Thistlewaite (1995) discussed a mid-1990's exhibit by the New York Public Library that was considered a groundbreaking display of the visibility of gay and lesbian history. However, the marketing for the exhibit did not contain the words "gay" or "lesbian." Instead, more coded signals, like the word "Stonewall" and a pink triangle in the logo of the exhibit were meant to signify to those in the know that something of interest to them was in the exhibit. Thistlewaite further posited that this latter day "hanky code" was undertaken in an effort to avoid any of the controversy that a more explicit branding might have aroused. Whether or not these concerns are overblown or not, it should be noted that there is concern in many parts of the queer community (especially among older members), that community organizations like public libraries may prove to be little more than fair weather friends who will not be there to support gay organizations, gay causes, and gay people the next time a homophobic piece of legislation makes a state ballot or the community experiences a unique health crisis. In the view of many queer individuals, if public libraries want to build partnerships with the queer community, then the public libraries need to be as proud of those partnerships and community building efforts with LGBTQ groups as they are of all other efforts put forth in this area.

Next Steps

It can be easy to write off outreach and community building to a minority group that seems to be small, under-represented, or of a less pressing concern than larger groups in a public library's service area. However, Carmichael and Shontz (2006) pointed out that even small minorities deserve the full protection of their rights in the context of library services due mainly to the fact that every population group has at least some general relevance to society as a whole. As such, it is well within the scope of public libraries as a whole (and the missions of many individual public libraries) to actively pursue community building relationships with the LGBTQ community.

It does not appear that the queer community expects or needs libraries to change. Queer individuals have coped with this information and community vacuum in the past, and they believe they can do so in the future. If libraries want to increase queer patronage and modify the attitude of queer individuals towards public libraries, then the onus of outreach is on the libraries to change the queer community's mind, not the other way around. The LGBTQ community at present is not hostile to public libraries; instead, they are wary to committing to any organization that has not supported them in the past. As such, every library should engage in community building efforts with these communities so that they can ensure that these tensions do not last another generation.

Staff Training

One primary step in assisting community building efforts with queer community members is ensuring that library staff personnel are knowledgeable about the unique information needs related to LGBT topics (Helton, 2010). Public libraries can never be certain who will be approached with the needs of any particular group, so it is in the best interest of positive interactions to have all front-line staff as aware as possible. Schraeder (2008) pointed out that there are a plethora of excuses that crop up from staff members when the subject of services to LGBTQ persons is raised. Among these are personal discomfort with the material, the lack of available resources to expend on queer materials, the apparent lack of queer individuals in the library's service area, and a belief that the library is already doing enough for queer people just by existing. This conversation needs to be rephrased around what the library could be doing to better support all of the people in the service area, and a discussion of where queer people belong in library services is a necessary part of this kind of conversation. By approaching services marketed towards the LGBTQ community as a subject of legitimate concern and a necessary part of embracing the public library ideal of service for all, there is hope that recalcitrant attitudes from some reluctant public library staff members will change.

Another area of education that could be improved to ensure a better connection between public libraries and the queer community is an improvement in the training that library school students receive in services to underserved and marginalized communities. Although the 1996 Carmichael and Shontz study that showed that fewer than half of library school classes offered training on social issues and fewer than one-fifth discussed LGBTQ specific issues is certainly out of date and cannot characterize contemporary library school training, many of the individuals trained in schools during this period are still in the library workforce and may not have been exposed to LGBTQ issues in a comprehensive way in the intervening time period. Additionally, although (as this paper obviously demonstrates) queer studies have become a perfectly acceptable avenue for library research for MLIS students, there is no mechanism in place in many library school settings to ensure that library school students have been effectively taught about the special information needs and social concerns of minority groups and how this would relate to library services in a range of library types and work roles. While this is certainly not to imply that there is no such training in these areas, individuals uncomfortable or uninterested in such topics typically have the chance to easily avoid them (Carmichael and Shontz, 1996). If community building is truly a major concern of the larger public librarian community, then it must start with the education of the newest professionals so that these future leaders have these ideals ingrained in them.

Lastly, library staff members should be prepared for some members of the larger community to be displeased or to have questions about the appropriateness of the public library engaging publicly in queer community building efforts. Librarians should "know their facts and be ready" so that they can

defuse superstitions fueled by superstition and fear with facts and understanding (Silverrod, 2007). Every library that serves that has more than 5,700 people in its service area has same sex couples among its patron base according to Gaydemographics.com (Silverrod, 2007), and the smaller the library, the more likely charges that gay people are displacing more worthy concerns may be. By ensuring that each staff member is knowledgeable about the goals of the community building projects a public library has undertaken (which will be different for each public library), the public library can put forth a united front. Sadly, as queer services are still the target of many library complaints (Burke, 2008; Downey, 2005), library staff members should also be prepared to tell disgruntled patrons the appropriate forums to which they can take their issues.

Collection Development

An up-to-date and thoughtful collection of LGBTQ materials can serve as the basis for extended involvement between these two groups (Albright, 2007). Many public libraries have strong ILL services that allow them to order a plethora of materials that they do not currently have in their primary collections. However, this may not be enough to meet the initial information needs of patrons who may feel uncomfortable making in-person requests for sensitive information. Patrons tend to be somewhat understanding in this regard. Although teens surveyed for Linville's 2004 article did not expect their library's collection of young adult LGBTQ literature and nonfiction to be comprehensive, they did expect their local branch library to possess some of the most popularly requested books in the branch's base collection. Libraries can further provide added value services by providing pathfinders and bibliographies of the available titles in different queer interest subject areas (Albright, 2006; Downey, 2005; Silverrod, 2007). There is disagreement, however, over whether these materials should be in separate sections to aid access. Some hold that separate sections benefit visibility of the collection and will serve as a focal point to the invisible queer community that the public library supports their needs (Hart and Mfazo, 2010). However, Hart and Mfazo (2010) also noted the other side of this argument: a delineated space would have the effect of making many not-out queer individuals avoid these resources because browsing in that section would mark them as someone with queer interests. There is no perfect solution that is right for every public library; instead, libraries should incorporate queer items into their collections the same way that they incorporate other collections with a specific audience in mind. If other collections are integrated into the larger collections with special notations, pathfinders, or stickers to mark them, then that is what should be done; conversely, if the library maintains separate sections for different types of specialized materials, then the same should be done for the queer materials as well. It should be noted in all community efforts to all minority communities that community building does not mean giving any one group special treatment over another; instead, community building ensures that all feel comfortable and equitably treated no matter who they are or what communities they already identify with.

Displays commemorating Pride Month in July or LGBT History Month in October could become part of the public libraries regularly rotating programming that is engaged with highlighting the achievements and contributions of minority groups in the same way it would for Women's History Month (March), African American History Month (February), Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15 – October 15), Breast Cancer Awareness Month (October), or various other holiday displays that target specific portions of the community (Christmas, Hanukah, etc.) (Helton, 2010). To make these displays, public libraries will have to ensure that they have enough contemporary materials of queer interest to make them worthwhile. Several bibliographies have been created by public libraries that have already embraced queer community building, such as the New York Public Library and San Francisco Public Library (Silverrod, 2007), that libraries can access online to inform their own efforts. Further, the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Roundtable maintains yearly lists of the items of merit and quality in queer literature for all ages (American Library Association, 2012). Although it may be harder to acquire these items because they often come from smaller presses that may not be represented by a public library's usual acquisitions companies, the extra effort will result in a more well-rounded and representative collection (Hart and Mfazo, 2012).

Information Needs

As any library engaged in community building knows, a public library is about so much more than the collection of materials it holds. It is a modern gateway towards knowledge creation. As has been previously noted, the queer community will have a variety of information needs because the community non-homogenous. As such, public librarians should be well-informed of the information resources available that target the specific health, legal, parenting, identity, and social needs of LGBTQ individuals. In addition, youth librarians should be aware of the special needs surrounding the LGBTQ coming out process, homelessness, bullying, and Internet safety (Fredericks, 2005). It is not necessary for a public librarian to know the answers to all of these concerns of the top of his or her head; rather, public librarians should strive to know what resources are available and where the holes in the current public library's collections lie (Curry, 2005). Queer reference interviews, no matter where they take place in a public library setting, should also remain confidential and positive so as to indicate that the patron was right to place their trust in meeting his or her information needs in the public librarian that he or she has approached.

Additionally, many times queer individuals have difficulty locating information resources using a library's computer resources due to Internet filtering software that is installed on them that block up to 60 percent of non-pornographic queer content due to inaccurate keyword filtering (Schraeder, 2008). Further, Simpson (2006) pointed out that certain subsections of the LGBTQ community such as pansexuals have nearly all relevant results to their searches filtered out by obscenity blocking software.

The way forward on this will require planning and care. Many public libraries rely on the special e-rate funding they receive through the Children's Internet Protection Act to provide Internet and technology access to their entire patron base, and a requirement of this law is that all publicly available computers have filtering software installed on them. To combat the inaccurate nature that is all too common with these products, public libraries should advocate to their vendors for more accurate blocking and to their legislative representatives for a more precise way of protecting children without excluding at-risk communities. On a more local level, though, public librarians can engage this problem as a community building exercise by making it apparent in the library (or when a page is blocked) that the library has a review mechanism in place. If the patron believes that the material is blocked inaccurately (as is often the case with LGBTQ material), then they should be able to easily and anonymously notify the public library so that the site can be reviewed. Public libraries should stay proactive in providing filtering exclusions to useful and non-pornographic LGBTQ resources as yet another avenue in which libraries can begin to reduce the invisibility of information available to queer patrons while simultaneously promoting a more active and engaged relationship between LGBTQ patrons and the library that serves them.

Outreach

When considering where to go next in the community outreach efforts between public libraries and the LGBTQ communities, public libraries simply have to realize that LGBTQ people, like all other minorities, are not one-issue individuals. They will have a variety of interests, beliefs, family structures, and personal preferences that will inform their library usage (Hart and Mfazo, 2010). However, one of the primary ways that a public library can influence and encourage this involvement is by making the public library setting as inviting and open as possible. If a public library would not support racist speech in its public areas, then it should also not support homophobic speech. If a public library provides programming that involves both parents and children, then the library should be aware that these programs may be attended by families with homosexual parents. To understand the special dynamics of the queer community in a public library's area, it should seek out partner organizations in the community to find out what services are needed or what is currently lacking (Albright, 2006). However, in many cases, especially in rural or more conservative areas, there may not be a strong organized queer presence. It is the suggestion of this author for public libraries to put their best foot forward and to have librarians engage with individuals who react positively to the library's initial queer community building to plan future activities. Further, contacting the administration of nearby (but not necessarily local) pride festivals or queer organizations may yield contacts that a public library can use to begin the infrastructure of community building on the local level.

Another concern related towards outreach is not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Public libraries should undertake their community building efforts by actively pursuing partnerships with

existing gay community's health, political, and social organizations. These efforts should not be coded but should instead make it clear to all that the local public library is not only a safe and nonjudgmental space but that it also looks after the civic needs of all of the peoples in its service area (Thistlewaite, 1995). Because there is still a stigma attached to a queer identity in many parts of the country, not all outreach can be person-to-person. Instead, public libraries will have to show creativity in how they approach queer individuals. There are numerous ways this can be done including the use of the rainbow flag or rainbow colors, signs that explicitly advertise queer themed events, workshops and author readings with a queer focus, honor or self-checkout system so that patrons can privately check out materials without having to worry about what a librarian thinks, and public and visible relationships with area queer organizations (Schraeder, 2008).

Lastly, public libraries interested in community building with the LGBTQ community should recognize that community is not just built in-house. These efforts benefit from having library staff members volunteer with local queer non-profits or by having them attend local pride festivals. The public library should seek opportunities to partner with queer organizations to host larger programs or to increase the visibility of existing services from both organizations. The library should maintain institutional presence at LGBTQ community centers. Library staff should volunteer to serve on governing boards for LGBTQ charities. The more that LGBTQ individuals begin to identify the library as a whole as a supportive group of people who is willing to help them not matter what their needs are, the stronger the bond between LGBTQ people and the public library will be. It is not just the queer identity that needs to be better represented in public libraries, it is also the public librarian identity of individuals who are passionately devoted to knowledge creation with no moral judgments on the individuals seeking knowledge. The public library primarily provides services that are passive in nature: individuals use them when they need or want them. However, interactions with librarians are by the very nature active. When librarians get involved with their communities (in this case, the LGBTQ community), it turns a passive resource into an advocate for positive change.

It may seem that this paper is advocating for public libraries to turn into stationary pride parades or gay heritage centers. However, this is not the case. Each public library will necessarily need to incrementally decide what steps it should take in its goal for social inclusion. What is being advocated here, however, is the idea that public libraries should consider queer activities, programs, and collection development to be of equal worth as that of any other subset of the population; as such, an involved, engaged, and proactive public library will by necessity and the sheer weight of probability incorporate some queer services into their existing service paradigm. When this internal censorship is removed, then the library can begin to create an atmosphere that feels free, open, and welcoming to all queer people. As Kathleen De La Pena noted in the closing chapter of *A Place at the Table,* power evaporates when action

ceases. Public librarians cannot approach community building with any group as a one-time endeavor; instead, community building activities must grow and build on themselves for years and decades to come because there will always be another area that could be improved and a new batch of young LGBTQ persons who are looking to the public library for the first time. It is because of this that it is not important for public libraries to attack all of their LGBTQ-related issues at the same time; because community building once started effectively will never cease, these issues will all be taken care of with time as long as the motivation to fix them and build these bridges is sustained in the mindset and mission of the public library and the dedicated librarians that staff them. Therefore, public libraries serving communities with a more anti-LGBTQ mindset than others can, for example, focus on removing barriers to existing Internet resources with a goal towards active participation in future pride events. There is a role to be played in this process by every public library, and there is a place at this table every member of the queer community and every public librarian that would like to be a part of it.

Conclusion

Community building is a political act. Whenever any organization attempts to rally people around a common cause for the attempted betterment of those involved, then the goals for which they strive become inherently political because it seeks to change the status quo of the community. The queer community has a long history of being unpopular with the larger American populace. As such, this unpopularity was mirrored for a long time in the apparent services offered to LGBTQ patrons at many public libraries. However, the tide of history is currently changing. More and more, Americans are finding that they know queer individuals and that LGBTQ persons can be found in almost every city and township. Further, support for gay rights incrementally increases year after year as a new generation of children reaches adulthood without the homophobic prejudices that characterized the past. Additionally, many libraries have made great strides forward, celebrating pride months, partnering with queer organizations, maintain current LGBTQ collections, and maintaining information resources directly related to the needs of the queer community. The community building process between public libraries and LGBTQ individuals has begun.

However, this work is by no means near completion. Primarily, the bulk of this community building work has been done in major urban areas or in hubs that have been traditionally friendly to homosexuals. This work needs to expand into the efforts of all public libraries, especially in areas such as the South and Plains states that have traditionally had a homophobic bias. This expansion will not be easy as much of the liberalization on queer issues has occurred in other geographic areas, but public libraries have a duty to serve all the people in their service areas. Indeed, it can be argued that public libraries and librarians have an increased responsibility to serve the information needs of minority groups due to the unlikelihood that these groups will be able to have their information and identity needs met

elsewhere in their communities. By arming themselves with data of the coming sea change and taking an incrementalist approach towards increasing GLBTQ representation in their libraries, public librarians across the country can begin the long and never-ending task of building communities in which not only do queer individuals find themselves represented and their information needs met, but these same LGBTQ persons find that libraries are safe spaces that accept them on their own terms, and as such, are places where the word "community" has been rewritten to include people like themselves.

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