

## **From the Outside Looking In: Librarians and Social Change**

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**Abstract.** While social change is usually brought by enormous events or occurrences, individuals, in their own ways and through their profession, can contribute to society to make a difference. While society shapes individuals, the individuals also shape the society, thereby being able to bring about social change. With librarians' relevance continuously questioned and doubted in this age of information and the internet, making a difference in society, be it big or small, will demonstrate as to why libraries and librarians primarily and should unceasingly exist. This study aims to answer the question, *how do librarians affect social change*, from the perspectives of the student applicants of the Bachelor of Library and Information Science (BLIS) program of the University of the Philippines School of Library and Information Studies (UP SLIS). Through a survey administered to the students, results showed that students perceived librarians to be agents of social change, through their provision of information and library services. Librarians are believed to bridge information and society and have a significant role in educating the people and building nations.

**Keywords:** librarians, social change, Bachelor of Library and Information Science students

## **1. Introduction**

Social Change is the transformation of a culture over time or a significant modification in the lifestyle of a society (Duka, Cecilio D.; Buraga, Jeremias F.; Pila, 2014; Ferris & Stein, 2008). This change is frequently brought about by natural calamities, physical events, demographic factors, technologies, innovations, and human collective action, among others. The change, which varies in pace, sets the society in motion, and affects various facets of life of an individual or a culture.

While social change is usually brought by enormous events or occurrences, individuals, in their own ways and through their profession, can contribute to society to make a difference (Ferris & Stein, 2008). Such individuals are those in the helping professions, such as those in medicine, education, social work, counselling, ministry, and others. The intersection of biography and history of C. Wright Mills explicates that while society shapes individuals, the individuals also shape the society, thereby being able to bring about social change.

Such individuals may also be librarians and information professionals. Librarians are often called to be change agents in societies (Mathews & Lacy, 1970; Wasserman, 1972; Noyce, 1972; Nkiko & Iroaganachi, 2015; Garcia-Febo, 2016, and; Esptein, Smallwood, & Gubnitskaia, 2019).

Living in an information-based world, communities are now challenged, among others, by the proliferation of fake news, misinformation, disinformation, information illiteracy, and historical revisionism. Zalusky (2017) believed that “national issues and trends impacted our nation’s libraries, and librarians rose to the challenge, promoting media literacy, protecting the freedom to read, advocating for equity, diversity and inclusion and responding to the needs of their patrons” (p.1). With all these occurrences in a postmodernist world affecting communities, libraries, and information centers, how do librarians respond to these changes?

An interesting perspective of looking into the ways on how librarians affect social change would be from a category of the recipients themselves of the services of the libraries – the students, specifically, higher education students applying to be in the BLIS program.

The University of the Philippines in Diliman (UPD) is the biggest constituent university of the University of the Philippines (UP) in terms of student population, number of faculty members, and degree-granting units. As of November 2021, UPD has 26 degree granting units, 261 academic programs, 2,773 faculty members, and 22,796 student population (UP Diliman, 2022).

One of the degree-granting units of UPD is the School of Library and Information Studies (UP SLIS). It is the premier library and information science school in the Philippines having produced quality graduates since it first offered library science degree in 1961. The School, through the years, contributed significantly to the development of Library and Information Science education in the country. In 2016, UP SLIS has been awarded as a Center of Excellence in Library and Information Science by the Philippine Commission on Higher Education, the first school to be awarded with such distinction. It has also joined the iSchools Consortium to further advance the information field in the country (UP SLIS, 2021).

Currently, the School offers four degrees, namely: Bachelor of Library and Information Science (BLIS), Master in Archives and Records Management (MARM), Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS), and Master of Science in Library and Information Science (MSLIS).

The BLIS program admits students every year through three ways: from the passers of the University of the Philippines College Admission Test (UP CAT) who chose BLIS as their course; students from other degree granting units within UP Diliman (i.e., shiftees), and students from other UP Constituent Universities (i.e., Transferees-1) and non-UP Universities (i.e., Transferees-2). For the shiftees and transferees, one of the requirements in their application to the program is taking of introductory courses (around 2-3 subjects) in the School before they can be considered for admission. This is done to ensure that the students will have basic knowledge of what Bachelor of Library and Information Science program is about and assess themselves if the program is appropriate for them. Once they have finished and passed the courses, they can finally apply to the School, submit the requirements, and subject themselves to the panel interview and essay. If they successfully passed all these, they

will be formally admitted to the School in the coming semester.

Accepting these student applicants to the program means that they have an understanding of the library and information science profession, have the potential to contribute to the profession, and are capable of finishing the program, among others. As such, they were asked various questions in the essay and interview about certain topics and issues surrounding LIS. In this way, the School has a gauge on how well they understood LIS and/or librarianship.

This research looks into the perspectives of the student applicants to the question, *how do librarians affect social change?*

Social change and librarianship are no strangers to each other. The very nature of how librarians work and what they do to provide access to information to their patrons may contribute to the changes in the lives of these individuals or their communities. Thus, the challenge to librarians to become instruments of change or to respond to social changes happening around them have been examined in various studies.

It is noteworthy to know the insights of these applicant students to the research question as they will be future librarians and information professionals themselves. Their perceptions and ideas on this topic will help improve the LIS education and practice in the Philippines.

## **2. Literature Review**

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 (Lumen, n.d.). It can also be caused by individuals or through their professions who want to make a difference in society (Ferris & Stein, 2008).

A review of the literature shows that there is a challenge for librarians to respond to social change (Asheim, 1978; Epstein et al., 2019; Garcia Febo, 2016; Nkiko & Iroaganachi, 2015; Noyce, 1972; Wasserman, 1972). Librarians are called to do more for their communities, serve the hard to reach, advocate

for social causes, fight for access to information, information equity, and the list goes on. On the other hand, there were also studies citing how librarians are being agents of social change in their own libraries and communities.

### ***2.1 Libraries/Librarians Challenged to be Social Changers***

Making a difference in society is what librarians are called for in some literature.

Wasserman (1972) believed that since change is constant, the librarianship profession should change as well from being conservative to one that is pro-active and responsive to social changes. In the article of Asheim (1974), he discussed librarians as professionals and elucidated how it all meant at that time, especially with what transpired in the 1960's during the Establishment period where social change was the maxim. He further said that librarianship "should abandon its traditional stance of objectivity and neutrality and move to become an instrument of positive social change" (p. 244).

A few years before that, Noyce (1972) argued that librarians should work for change in society and not just follow the existing state of affairs. With the challenges confronting libraries at that time, such as, public lending rights, he believed that there should be a publication and new organization that discuss radical librarianship. As such, he produced a publication that showed experiences of some libraries in dealing with social issues.

The same sentiment is also echoed by Nkiko & Iroaganachi (2015) as they believe that librarians should go beyond their traditional roles and welcome the challenges by their communities and aptly respond to them if they want to be continuously relevant. Garcia Febo (2016) believed that librarians are global professionals who are game-changers and innovators, who can advocate both at the local and international levels for provision of access to information, social inclusion, and promotion of reading and literacy.

Epstein, Smallwood, & Gubnitskaia's (2019) book is a compilation of experiences and stories of various librarians and LIS educators on their roles in promoting social justice, social change, and tolerance. The compiled stories are about representing the under-represented, establishing partnerships, building communities, administering with diversity,

supporting activities, generating programs, and expanding pedagogy in teaching.

It is clear though that librarians are challenged to be agents in their institutions and communities. But how do they demonstrate being agents of social change?

## ***2.2 Libraries and Librarians as Agents of Social Change***

Tremblay-McGaw (1999) argued that librarians working in advocacy organizations can be policy advocates and not only information providers as they are in excellent positions to know the issues in specific areas. They can help in policy formulation since they already have the knowledge in various advocacies as they are exposed to the myriad of information about these causes. The author then cited institutions where they have librarians and information professionals working there, namely, the Data Center, Rainforest Action Network, Sierra Club, and Trauma Foundation, where they help solve problems in societies by providing information on these issues.

The concept of anarchist librarians, “those who live their beliefs and are engaged in long-term struggles for social change” (p. 381), was discussed in Morrone & Friedman (2009) while looking into the history of Radical Reference, a group of progressive library workers and students. In the literature, the documented story of a social conscience in the library profession began within the American Library Association (ALA) as recorded by Samek (2001) and Raber (2007).

Shrestha (2013) believed that libraries can be sustainable vehicles for social change as evident in the stories of the READ (Rural Education and Development) program which is responsible for the building and development of community libraries in Nepal. These libraries are changing to meet the changing needs of the community and are becoming sustainable vehicles of social change as they address societal issues like economic empowerment and livelihood training.

Alvim & Calixto (2013) hold that public librarians may be a driver of social change as they discussed the impact of Web 2.0 in the social role of Portuguese public libraries and looked into how libraries still carry out its social mission despite the economic and political crisis happening in Portugal (such as,

reduced investment in public services including libraries). The authors further 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 common good, and the increase of social capital in order to improve the communities’ quality of life” (p. 13).

Rhodes (2014) showcased the example of a “living archives” to show the life in their communities through their involvement in social movements and engaging others. This exhibited libraries as forces of social change. The librarians in a community project in Uruguay helped young women in the disadvantaged group through access to information and provision of information service (Sabelli & Maiche, 2014). The authors used qualitative method, through interviews and focus group discussion, to gather data for the study. Results showed that knowing the information needs of the disadvantaged group (i.e., young women in Uruguay) help these women in the communities. The libraries served as their sacred spaces too.

The project AgroLib-Ja (Agricultural Library in Jagodina in Serbia) showed that libraries respond to the needs of the users (Tanasićević, 2014). The study demonstrated that a public library may be the initiator of social change locally and in a wider context as well. They believed that libraries are relevant entities and creators of change in a society that helped the lives of the people and the local community. Moxley & Abbas (2016) believed that public libraries play a role in societies undergoing considerable social change (i.e., Carnegie libraries). They discussed public libraries as community anchors for people who are vulnerable and explained that libraries in Britain and USA expanded to accommodate the growing literacy among people and the rise of public education. As such, they proposed blended strategies like the social service information clinic and community forum that the public library can adhere to.

On the other hand, the outreach activities of the Makerere University Library demonstrate librarians’ response to societal needs (i.e., digitized music collection –ethnomusicology, which continue to shape and change Uganda’s society through music) (Musoke & Namugera, 2014). The activity showed that librarians have contributed to information literacy and societal development and further demonstrated “that

information, once accessed and applied, leads to societal development” (p. 11). Dokk 1, the new library in Aarhus, a community center co-created with the community is envisioned to be as engine for development and social change (Garcia Febo, 2016).

The collection of essays of Pizmony-Levy (2016) provides understanding on how libraries and archives can be places for social change for the LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Questioning) community. The materials, resources, and related research services about them available in the library show that the library is a friendly and inclusive place for them. A similar study on the LGBTQ / gender nonconforming youth/ youth of color/ community was conducted by Austin (2017) which “traced how past policies and processes that established white, middle-class, and heteronormative conduct and knowledge as central to library services worked - and continue to work” against these people (p.1). Case studies were utilized along with queer, post-structural, and critical theory as theoretical foundations. Edith Guerrier’ life, a librarian during the Progressive Era (1900-1920), illustrated the interconnected evolution of librarianship and social welfare through progressive library programs and promotion of reading materials (Bausman, 2016).

The study of Ghosh (2019) examined how entrepreneurial librarians are “advocating social change by designing client-driven services, organizing fundraising programs, applying business models to traditional library services, and stressing on developing a network of relationships, and ecosystem of entrepreneurship” (p. 2). The article cited examples, such as, entrepreneurship outreach/ creative partnerships, Entrepreneurial Library Program of the JHU Sheridan Libraries, the human library which began in Denmark, the feminist library in India, the National Entrepreneurship Librarians group in Canada, the Polan Sakarmovement in Bangladesh, Makerspaces, the Oodi Central Library in Finland, the Qatar Public Library, and libraries helping start-up companies. The article also discussed the roles of entrepreneurial librarians, and the new roles of librarians in general for championing/ advocating social change, responding to client demands, designing new services, and developing exciting fundraising programs. The article discussed the SCLSNJ’s Warrant Township Library wherein they have a business space to support small business owners and business professionals by providing online business



resources, fax services, librarian-curated business materials, and a working space or conference room.

A descriptive research utilizing survey was conducted by Madu, Onyeneke, & Azubogu (2018) in getting perceptions of the community whether public libraries are instruments of social change. The community believed so and they said that it is one of the functions of a modern public library.

From the literature studied, it can be surmised that librarians are being change agents through the activities/ programs/ advocacies they do inside their institutions and in their communities to help people in improving their way of life. Are these also the perception of students who intend to take Bachelor of Library and Information Science at the University of the Philippines Diliman? These students are one of the categories of clients of libraries and information centers in higher education institutions. They themselves are also recipients of library services and programs.

### **3. Objective of the Study**

Hence, this study aims to examine the perspectives of the student applicants of the Bachelor of Library and Information Science (BLIS) program of the University of the Philippines School of Library and Information Studies (UP SLIS) on how librarians affect social change.

It is essential to know the insights of these applicant students as they will be future librarians and information professionals themselves. Their perceptions and ideas on the topic will help improve the LIS education and practice in the Philippines.

### **4. Methodology**

The study is a descriptive research that utilized survey to gather data from the student applicants of the Bachelor of Library and Information Science (BLIS) program of the University of the Philippines School of Library and Information Studies (UP SLIS) for the Second Semester AY 2019-2020 about their perception on the ways librarians affect social change.

There was a total of 17 student applicants, hence respondents, comprising of both male and female. These applicants are higher education students (i.e., shiftees) from other colleges within UP Diliman who intend to “shift” to another course in the same university. Shifting is a “change of a student’s major or degree program within UP Diliman,” (UP Diliman, 2014). It is only allowed in the university if the student is able to finish at least 30 units in their first or previous program. These students are also subject to the admission requirements of the college where their intended new course is being offered.

One of the admission requirements of UP SLIS to the shiftees is the taking of 2-4 subjects of introductory courses stated in the BLIS curriculum taken in 1-2 semesters. After successfully taking and passing the introductory courses, they can then apply to the program and submit other requirements. All the requirements will be screened and initially evaluated. If they passed this stage, the student applicants will be invited to a panel interview, which is usually scheduled in the afternoon. In the morning of the day of the interview, student applicants are gathered in one room to listen to a brief orientation about UP SLIS and the BLIS program. It is also an opportunity for the students to ask questions about BLIS, the college, and others. After which, they will be given a sheet of paper where they need to answer a question about library and information science. They should write their answer through an essay in the given sheet of paper. Student applicants are not allowed to look at their notes or mobile phones to do some basic searches. The question asked was *how do librarians affect social change?* The student applicants were given a maximum of two (2) hours to answer this question.

Their answers were then tabulated and analyzed to answer the research question.

## **5. Results and Discussion**

Natural calamities, physical events, demographic factors, technologies, discoveries and innovations, diffusion, and human collective action, bring about social changes in our society. Social change is the transformation of a culture over time or a significant modification in the lifestyle of a society (Duka, Cecilio D.; Buraga, Jeremias F.;Pila, 2014; Ferris &

Stein, 2008). While social change is usually brought about by huge occurrences, such as, physical environment, and population shifts among others, individuals, in their own ways and through their profession, can contribute to society to make a difference. Ferris and Stein (2008) termed this as “helping professions,” which include careers in nursing, counseling, teaching, and those in social service, non-profit, and law enforcement sectors, where every encounter with a person or client is an opportunity heading for social change.

Literature review showed that librarians have always been challenged to respond to social changes and that libraries/librarians are considered agents of social change. For the latter, libraries and librarians are being agents of change through their services, activities, programs, and advocacies that they do.

Through a survey administered to 17 student applicants of the BLIS program of UP SLIS, their perspectives and insights on how librarians affect social change were gathered and analyzed as they are important contributions on how the librarianship profession and the LIS education in general can be improved. It is also noteworthy that these students will be future librarians and information professionals themselves and are also consumers of information and users of libraries and information centers. Their thoughts are valuable to libraries and LIS schools in the Philippines.

### ***5.1 Social Change and Librarians***

A number of student applicants started their answers with their understanding of social change. One mentioned that “social change should result to betterment of society, ”while others mentioned that social change “is a gradual change and cannot be achieved in a single lifetime.” One even wrote social change as being “small steps that lead to bigger things.”

In the field of librarianship, there were social changes that transpired in history which affected how library practice is done. Some documented literature on the topic is the article of Mathews & Lacy (1970), where they called on librarians to respond to the post-war social changes affecting libraries, such as, population growth, and rise in scientific research and development brought about by increased investment.

Libraries in Russia, on the other hand, faced immense challenges during the state reorganization of their country (Zaitsev, 1996). This political social change brought operational changes in the system of their national libraries – the formerly integrated ones now become libraries in each sovereign state which are now acting as national libraries to preserve the memory of their people.

While social changes change over time, depending on social, technological, and environmental occurrences, among others, prevailing in each epoch, libraries are affected in more ways than one. The twenty-first century may pose different social changes as technology brings in alterations in individuals, societies, institutions, organizations, and countries. With an information-based society, communities are now challenged by information inequity, misinformation/ disinformation, information access, and the likes. While Salvaggio (1983) believed that it is the task of policy makers to minimize these problems, he also argued that information societies differ from one country to another due to variables as national ideology, and policies on information, among others. With these changes, institutions are affected, and so as libraries.

Singh & Uttam (2012) believed that with all the changes happening in a post-modern society, librarians can fight social exclusion through literary and media education at the primary level and technological information at the higher education level. This kind of education will provide skills to individuals to navigate information in each stage of their lives. Zalusky (2017) also believed that libraries and librarians rose to the social challenges transpiring by promoting and advocating causes, such as, freedom to read, media literacy, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

More recently, the Covid19 pandemic brings about massive changes in how society works – in politics, in education, in religion, and in various institutions, libraries included. With this “new normal”, it definitely brought changes in how libraries operate and deliver their services.

In all of these happening, one answer by a respondent appeared to be true when s/he said that “librarians should adapt to social changes happening.”

## ***5.2 Ways on How Librarians Affect Social Change***

The responses of the respondents on this question can be categorized into themes. These are the following:

#### *5.2.1 Services*

These services refer to the activities and/or programs that librarians conduct in their libraries to help their users and communities improve their lives. Such services include, but are not limited to, seminars, lectures, language classes, computer classes, and information literacy programs. It was also mentioned that these services plant the seeds in the community to grow and nurture to help society progress.

#### *5.2.2 Information Provision/ Equitable Access to Information*

The information provided by librarians enable their users to participate in a democratic society and make informed decisions and solutions on several societal issues based on the information available to them. As one respondent said, “librarians are called towards the duty of fortifying the country’s agencies of information.”

Another important aspect in information provision is the equitable access to it – that libraries do not discriminate its clients for their nationality, gender, race, and class, among others and that the same right and privilege be accorded to all members of the community.

#### *5.2.3 Fight Against Information Disorder*

A recurring answer of most of the respondents is that of Information Disorder, which includes misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information. This disorder heavily afflicts our society today. With the proliferation of fake news and historical revisionism, librarians are called to educate the public and equip them with the necessary skills on evaluating authentic and credible information sources. Information literacy should be taught early on to children so they can grow up to be critical consumers of information.

#### *5.2.4 Preservation and Conservation of Materials*

Librarians are also called to preserve and conserve materials and historical records for future access and use of generations to important information.

#### *5.2.5 Library as a Place*

As a place, libraries are said to be spaces that bring people together without discrimination or fear of eviction. They are places that help nurture and develop your capacity to learn.

They help you be more aware of your culture and heritage. They are spaces that reflect the changing needs of the community and how the libraries respond to these changes. Libraries are positioned to be 3<sup>rd</sup> places – the preferred venues where people go next after their homes and schools or offices.

In all these ways on how librarians affect social change, other roles of librarians were brought to the fore. Respondents identified librarians as:

- Educators sharing their knowledge
- Entertainers who spread fun and laughter
- Public servants who extend their help to the less fortunate
- Advocates of the rights of the Filipino people fighting for access and freedom of information

As societies evolve, so thus the librarians. As society shapes individuals, the individuals themselves shape society. In the events mentioned above, librarians shape individuals through their work in libraries and information centers.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study showed that students perceived librarians to be agents of social change, through the services they offer, the information they provide, and the roles they take on. Librarians are believed to bridge information and society and have a significant role in educating the people and building nations. They are seen to be in continuous pursuit of upholding every Filipino's right and access to information. The insights of the student applicants demonstrate how Filipino librarians are helping individuals and communities in their information needs. With the knowledge of these needs, libraries and librarians are better equipped to explore ways and means to respond to these needs. Much like a ripple effect, the provision of these information needs may help individuals perform better as responsible members of the society and consequently, citizens of the country, which would support the country's development.

Recognizing these perspectives and insights of BLIS student applicants could help practicing librarians and information professionals assess themselves and improve the services they

provide to the community. It would also assist LIS schools in further educating future librarians in the country.

As librarians' existence these days are continuously being challenged and that there has always been a call to expand their roles beyond the traditional ones and for a progressive thinking in librarianship, these perspectives and insights can further demonstrate the Filipino librarians' relevance these days and how they respond to the changing times and needs of their communities.

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