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Programs and Strategies for Community Resilience in a Metropolitan Area Public Library: A Case Study

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Programs and Strategies for Community Resilience in a Metropolitan Area Public Library: A Case Study

Cover Page Footnote

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INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the community-related programming of a large public library system in a major Texan city in the digital age. The effects that digitalization of everyday life and the digitization of documents, aging, migration, climate change, and neoliberal policies have on a global scale, change communities, and increase their vulnerability. These are the big slow-moving change processes facing communities (Pierson, 2003; Vårheim, 2016, 2017; Wilson, 2014). How do public libraries relate to the vulnerabilities of their communities? What tools do they use for decreasing vulnerabilities and for increasing resilience?

Research on the role of public libraries from a community resilience perspective is limited, and research has focused mostly on the role of public libraries in disaster recovery (Jaeger, Langa, McClure & Bertot, 2006; Vårheim, 2015; Veil & Bishop, 2014). A few conceptual papers have been written on libraries and their general or long-term role in creating stronger and more resilient communities (see Vårheim, 2017). Also, concepts like information resilience and cultural resilience have been employed in relation to resilience research and are important in a community resilience perspective (Beel et al., 2017; Lloyd, 2015; Pratt, 2015; Vårheim, 2016).

Vårheim (2016) called for empirical research responding to the questions of how and to what extent public libraries, building on, but specifically outside the specific case of the disaster recovery preparations and efforts, contributed to community resilience. This paper explores the programming of one public library system as part of the larger effort needed for taking on these questions. Hopefully, from this study, new research is inspired.

Given the limited knowledge of the specific community resilience contributions of public libraries, this paper relates not just to the library program portfolio, but also the scope of library management strategies for resilience. Explorative case studies are one of the primary steps in a theory-building process and the further development of research strategies on the role of public libraries in developing community resilience. Hence, this paper sets out to provide a fairly thick description of the work—programming and planning—of a big public library towards its communities both in the main downtown library and in the many branches.

This description is based on an in-depth interview with the library director and two of her closest deputies (both women) in the fall of 2016. A big city in the United States close to Mexico was selected on the assumption that here we have the most advanced libraries and at the same time, the highest need for library community engagement.

First, programming activities are described; and second, the strategies employed in initiating, funding, planning, organizing, implementation, and follow-up of programs.

A COMMUNITY RESILIENCE PERSPECTIVE

In connection with the study of community resilience, one helpful definition of community is “the totality of social system interactions within a defined geographic space such as a neighborhood, census tract, city, or county” (Cutter et al., 2008, p. 599). Community resilience is “the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise” (Magis, 2010, p. 402). As institutions present in most communities, open to everyone, used by many, and trusted by most people (Vårheim, 2014a, 2014b, 2017; Vårheim, Steinmo & Ide, 2008), libraries are well placed for contributing to the resilience of communities—the ability to handle vulnerabilities. Resilience involves “a capacity for successful adaptation in the face of disturbance, stress, or diversity (Norris et al., 2008, p. 129). In addition to the adaptive role in disasters (Veil & Bishop, 2014), libraries can be construed as instruments for building general resilience, the capacity for dealing with community vulnerabilities in general (Vårheim, 2016, 2017; Vårheim, Skare, Lenstra, Latham & Grenersen, 2018). It is this general ability that constitutes the “core” of community resilience.

Within resilience theory, general resilience and specified resilience, are distinguished according to the degree of knowledge of the expected, in our context, community disturbances (Folke, Carpenter, Walker, Scheffer, Chapin & Rockström, 2010). Generalized resilience involves the capacity to handle unforeseen events and general uncertainties. It covers both unknown and unlikely threats to communities. On the other hand, specified resilience is focused on known specific threats (e.g., tornados or an aging population). General and specified resilience are complementary, and a balanced approach is needed for reaching optimal solutions. Specific threats are known, and therefore, concrete institutional capacities can be designed and set up. This means that for actionable knowledge, prospective general resilience measures are at a comparative disadvantage, and the capacity for handling presently unknown threats can be weak.

The scope of generalized resilience makes it problematic to construct precise general resilience applications. Still, Carpenter et al. (2012, p. 3252) mention nine factors that can impact the construction of general resilience resources: diversity, feedback, leadership, modularity, monitoring, nestedness, openness, reserves, and trust. For resilience to remain general, institutions need options for self-regulation and innovation (Carpenter et al., 2012, p. 3255). Public libraries can influence community resilience mediated through different mechanisms and programs, and related to several different roles of public libraries.

Norris et al. (2008) developed a much-used theoretical model to understand community resilience as a process connecting four types of adaptive capacities geared toward the goal of community adaptation—community competence,

economic development, information and communication, and social capital. This model provides a strategy for being prepared when disaster, in the form of abrupt events, strikes. The model shares the disaster focus with much of the relevant community resilience literature. At the same time, the authors stress that the idea is to provide a model for meeting unknown threats—i.e., the model contains a general resilience component.

Aldrich (2012) finds that social capital is the most important adaptive capacity in disasters and the main variable underlying community resilience; also, economic capital and environmental capital are important in this respect (Wilson, 2014). Social capital mainly consists of two components: social networks and trust in others. Putnam (1993) provides a much-used definition of social capital: “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action”. Ye and Aldrich explicitly mention public libraries as an important community infrastructure for creating social capital (Ye & Aldrich, 2019, p. 4). Three established concepts of resilience are directly applicable to library functions and have been used in research on public libraries and heritage institutions: community resilience, information resilience, and cultural resilience.

COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

The literature on public libraries and community resilience is limited. Two articles utilize the concept in empirical analysis. Veil and Bishop (2014) studied the contribution of libraries to community resilience during natural disasters in several states in the United States (mainly tornados). They employed the theoretical community resilience framework following Norris et al. (2008). The authors found that libraries contributed to community resilience and disaster recovery in several respects. Public libraries were the instruments for access to the outside world, provided working space and a meeting place for the general population and relief organizations, worked as a hub for local news, and a place for collecting disaster accounts from individuals. Grace and Sen (2013) conducted a case study examining how the daily public library practices influenced community resilience.

INFORMATION RESILIENCE

Lloyd defines information resilience as “the capacity to address the disruption and uncertainty, to employ information literacy practices to enable access to information relative to need, to construct new information landscapes, and to reestablish social networks” (Lloyd, 2015, p. 1033). Lloyd relates to different social practice arenas (Lloyd, 2013), for example, health literacy among refugees (Lloyd, 2014). Public libraries are found suitable venues for developing information literacy and information resilience among underprivileged social groups (Lloyd, 2015).

CULTURAL RESILIENCE

In accordance with the cultural resilience/community impact of cultural heritage institutions, public libraries are well-placed in local communities for building cultural resilience. Libraries provide literature, cultural events, and a meeting space for voluntary organizations for heritage and culture. Few, if any, studies of the contribution of public libraries to cultural resilience have been accomplished. Crane defines cultural resilience “as the ability to maintain livelihoods that satisfy both material and moral (normative) needs in the face of major stresses and shocks; environmental, political, economic, or otherwise” (2010, p. 2).

Having identified some of the empirical and theoretical perspectives of resilience research, and the role of public libraries in creating resilience in their communities, this paper calls for further ideas and critiques for the development of an agenda for conceptual and empirical exploration and research. The concepts of community resilience, information resilience, and cultural resilience are all within the traditional remit of public libraries. However, how and to what extent public libraries contribute to community resilience is an empirical question, and outside of disaster situations, largely remains to be seen; very few studies relating to this substantive role of public libraries have been conducted.

PROGRAMMING TOWARD COMMUNITIES

This section presents the programming activity towards the community carried out in the public library system of one big Texan city.

PROGRAMS

In the city, the library leadership group mentions nine different types of programs: programs for adult education, in this case GED (the general educational diploma qualifying for higher education and ESL (English as a second language) classes; job finding programs; early childhood education: pre-K education; programs for engaging the homeless; community conversation programs; programs focusing on ethnic groups; programs addressing poverty, free meals for children; programs for business startups.

In this pack of programs, four were singled out as the most important by the interviewees. It is job finding, adult education in general, ESL classes, and pre-k education. Job finding involves: how to get the job, help to apply for a job, and help to find a job. Below three types of programs are described in more detail based on and quoting extensively from the interview transcripts.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Early childhood education programs are mainly about getting parents connected to the programs. Pre-k education is the school system offering to three- and four-year-

olds before they start kindergarten. The problem is that many people do not know about this opportunity “number one, and in the cultural part from, especially, the Hispanics is for to keep the little ones close to home before they go to school (...) And is not always teaching them the ABCs and 123’s, and then they land at kindergarten, and they’re already behind.” The library is helping the community to bridge this gap by trying to teach the parents that it’s good for the children to send them to school for half a day from age 3 or 4 to get the basics so that they will be able to adapt to kindergarten more easily.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS’ PROGRAMS

The library has identified a need to reach across social and ethnic groups. Community conversations are one way of achieving intergroup contact: “we are a mixing place that you can walk into our libraries and find a great mixture of the community.” One example is a program about a neighborhood police shooting bringing people together to talk about the meaning of respect for each other. Police officers and community members attended and participated in the conversation, and not only the same people came every time: “I think we have to find those moments that people do cross and talk to people outside of their community” (...), and “sometimes it's just the opportunities or the ability to know that something else is possible” that is needed.

Also, election debates had been tried out for the first time, the librarians were skeptical about how this would turn out, but explains that it went very well.

HOMELESS ENGAGEMENT

“The community wasn't really coming to this library as much, because they viewed it as a place that had been taken over by the homeless.”

As in many libraries, across the United States and elsewhere, the downtown branch in the city library systems faces a substantial number of homeless daily users. Three years before there was more or less a battle regarding sleeping in the library—“it wasn't a fun place to be.” The library understood that catering to this particular group of library visitors could have had immediate benefits for the group, for other users, the library, and the community. A series of programs and initiatives were started for handling the situation.

First, “we started very basic with greeting them at the door, looking them in the eye, humanizing them, learning their names, inviting them to have coffee and sit down with the staff, so we got to know them as human beings.” Second, the bathrooms were cleaned properly. The staff discovered that when people were treated with respect and facilities upgraded, in return facilities were treated better, and librarians respected somewhat more.

Having achieved this basic understanding, “we instituted a lot of programs to engage them in this building, so they're not just sitting here falling asleep with

nothing to do.” In this process, homeless patrons were asked what they wanted to do in the library. As a result, new programs were started: computer classes and adult basic education programs—GED programs (general educational diploma)—the high school equivalency exams necessary for further education.

The provision of the necessary services for the homeless proved challenging. At first, the library hired a social worker for one year, and the library discovered that they could just as well carry out this themselves. The social worker helped some, but mostly referred people to the already long-established social service providers in the city, while the homeless, in particular, needed services beyond that. A new approach was tried out involving employing more extrovert librarians, “very connected and very outgoing and social who would organize all of the engagement for them: smoothing the path for some of our customers to get into housing or get into the social services that they need, whether it's mental health or—sometimes they just don't have their ID, and it costs \$15 to get your ID, and that's a huge barrier when you have nothing”. And at “the same time, reach out to all of the providers.” The contact with the city forum for service providers is quite extensive, and the forum has their meetings in the library, where they also meet a variety of the issues of the homeless first-hand.

Every two weeks, the library arranges a coffee and conversation informal event for the homeless, including librarians, and without any agenda: “where we all just come together and chat.” A variety of programs, for example, Game Day and Movie Day, keeps the homeless more engaged than earlier. Library sleeping and eating regulations have, over time, been relaxed.

PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION AND PROGRAM FOLLOW-UP

“The success rate of, for example, the GED programs is amazing: 100% of students have joined higher education institutions. Practices for encouragement have been put in place: calling students missing classes, arranging graduation ceremonies, and conducting ‘wraparound services’: That's not the end of your education, and you're going to hear from us again [laughter]. And now, let's help you get some financial aid. And what school are you going to go to next? And what kind of career are you interested in? And let's take that next step together.”

Also, students in digital programs (online-courses) avail of close follow-up. Digital GED courses are offered. Students, both when on-line and off-line, are called by staff to maintain and enhance commitment to studies: “We didn't see you log on this week. Is everything okay? Anything I can do to help you?” Online courses for continued education are on offer to graduates.

PROGRAMS AND FUNDING

Particular to this city library system, the library does not receive city funding for programming activity: “Well, one thing that I think is probably unique to the City

Public Library that other larger systems don't have, or do have that we don't, really, is we're not supported by city funding for any of our programs. Our budget is books, bodies, and buildings.”

This means that external grants and external sources fund any programming activity in the city public library. For this library system, the state of Texas, at the time of the interview (fall 2016), funded only a negligible amount of library activities: “we have two grants right now that are total \$150,000 and our annual budget is just under 30 million.” These funds are grants originating from the federal government [from the Institute of Museum and Library Services) (IMLS)], and described by the interviewees as “pass-through money.” Before 2009 and the financial crises and the big budget cuts in its wake, the state library distributed significant funds directly to public libraries (“direct aid”). However, some State libraries have more generous funding schemes for public libraries.

In the period after 2009, the City library has been through a series of budget cuts, and by 2016, the library is nearly back at pre-2009 levels. Cuts were severe: “50% cut to our budget and we lost 52% of our staff. So, we didn't close any locations, but we reduced our hours significantly.” The cuts meant big changes in general services to try to maintain programming activity but gave opportunity and made room for operational and organizational changes needed due to technological change and new patterns of usage. Still, cuts meant that “we weren't out in the community as much and we felt the impact of that, I would say for the last—we're finally unfeeling the impact of that, but it took a couple years of really getting re-engaged back into the community, to get over that. So, if we do it again, if we have to ever have cuts, we'll continue to be in the community because that was—”

As a side note, this comprehensive turn and change process that the library has been through could be seen as a good illustration of the Schumpeterian theory of innovation, and is eloquently expressed by the library leadership in this rich description how a “new library” is born:

So, the financial commitment for us is difficult. Many times it's using staff talent, and one thing we did, in the last three years, we've added a lot of staff. We've gotten our budget back a little bit from the budget crunch, and we hired staff differently than we had previously. So, we hired people with other talents. Maybe, piano teacher, you know. And now we can teach them how to work in a library, but we can also use those skills in-house to have a program. So, it doesn't cost me anything more; I'm already paying for your salary. So, we conscientiously, in our last hiring—and we've hired over 200 people in the last three years, which is significant—we hired for attitude and for other skills. So, we didn't necessarily seek out people that had ever worked in a library before, because we have lots of great librarians. We did, of course, hire degreed librarians. We always will have them [laughter]. But

for the support staff and the rest of the staff which we call library associates, we really looked for outside of what we normally had hired in the past. And we looked for people for other skills that had worked in law libraries, and music libraries, that wanted to come and serve the public, but have a different institutional background or educational background. And we're taking advantage of those skills and talents.

SPONSORSHIPS AND PARTNERSHIPS

State and especially city grants cover only a small proportion of the funding for library programs. The friends of the library contribute to the funding of most new programs. The other two main sources of funding are corporate sponsors and the pool of talent in the staff. Corporate sponsors are important. But one example is a natural gas company that supports several library programs through employee charitable giving and made it possible to start a new children's only library in a shopping center. This library alone runs 13 storytimes a week. Other important contributions from the company are subsidized bus fares for children to the branch, and technology that makes virtual travel possible. A considerable effort from the library leaders is invested in finding sponsors.

However, most of the cooperation with external actors comes through partnerships, partnering with other organizations working in the communities for common goals. In the examples of programs described, most involve partnerships. Partnerships are mostly targeted toward specific social groups and goals. The library is always looking for partners to realize programs; for example, it can be ESL classes and GED classes. Partnerships are deemed very important to library activity:

I think a lot of how we accomplish, I think, is by partnerships. While we do a lot of our own ESL and GED, we've been able to expand part of that through some really targeted partnerships, as well, and those kinds of things. And I think each community is also, kind of, looking for their own partners for programming.

The library has focused on the younger population for many years and now will prioritize the elderly:

So probably the thing we're going to be expanding on in the next year is our senior programming for older adults because we've been so focused on early childhood and adult education for a few years that we really haven't done much programming for our older adults. We've done it targeted in a few neighborhoods but not system-wide, so that's something that we're going to expand.

An example of a partnership targeting the most basic of needs is the free breakfast and lunch provided in the library for children during the summer holidays. In one of the big city school districts, all children attending public schools get free food every day because nearly 100% of the children's families qualify for this benefit. The library partnered with another organization sponsored by the agricultural authorities, and the library now offers free meals in the nearly 75 percent of branches: "that's what I call a true partnership because they're receiving federal funds to provide food in low-income areas, and what better way to do it than at the library? It's been a bit of a challenge for some of our library staff. There's additional waste to be dealt with, there's food, but we've conquered those."

NEW LIBRARIANSHIP

Examples of economically disadvantaged communities and people are numerous. On the other hand, it is a reason for hope, in observing the ingenious ways of librarianship and library leadership witnessed in this paper. The difficulty and hardship of practicing librarianship and executing library leadership in the library studied is handled not with despair, but with common sense, knowledge of communities, initiative, innovativeness, planning, organization, cooperation, doing, and humanity:

I think those are our goals. The programs [Mary] has listed I absolutely think are goals. And I think part of what I see is that communication also. Because I was just at a branch this morning where they've really engaged the kids to help choose the kinds of programs that they'd want to do. So, they plan; each month, they meet, and they pick the programs for the next month. So, we see to that microcosm where the kids are engaged and are given a theme and get to choose. And I don't think that happens everywhere, but it was a great model today. I was like "Wow [laughter], I love that."

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have seen how a public library, through a variety of programs, has sought to strengthen communities and the well-being of individual community members.

A main purpose of the paper has been to report the findings from an explorative case study on the relationship of a public library system with its communities as part of a research project aiming at creating empirically-based knowledge on the role of public libraries in creating community resilience. This study is a follow-up on conceptual papers on resilience perspectives, particularly community resilience, adapting and developing, and making community resilience theory more operational in library research. By, as a beginning, exploring aspects

of the library–community relationship, it makes it more fruitful to pursue further study both on the library as an institution for general resilience, and to delve more deeply into the aspects of the library’s community role described in this paper and into an array of different types of library programming. Also, a next-step approach is extensive reviews of the general library community-oriented research from a resilience perspective.

The library system is described as a tool for community resilience. In the paper, we have seen examples of mechanisms working for stronger communities and resilience.

The necessarily broad reach of general resilience compared to specified resilience focusing on a specific community vulnerability, for example, aging, makes it a difficult task to specify how general resilience is created. For success, in contributing to general resilience, every community and public library needs its own plan designed after careful analysis of the idiosyncrasies of the community and the state of the library. However, there is still a need for further developing and adapting the concept of generalized resilience.

A theoretical resilience perspective points toward both resilience outcomes and the mechanisms for creating resilience. This case study provides an example of how a library connects with its community. It does not provide a general recipe for library general resilience creation, and such a formula is not possible to construct—however, it is possible to research what mechanisms are relevant and how they work.

The study of programs and the mechanisms operative in creating program outcomes is valuable for further research and case studies of libraries in other communities. Such case studies are valuable whether they follow an explorative approach, or through the focused selection of cases, have the ambition of theoretical generalization. A plurality of studies is needed for building a minimal degree of empirically-based knowledge on public libraries and strategies for resilience. Additionally, studies of public libraries from a community resilience perspective contribute to community resilience research in general.

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