Community Engagement in Public Libraries: Practical Implications

Hui-Yun Sung and Mark Hepworth

Abstract

The implications of a qualitative research study into community engagement (CE) and public libraries are presented in this chapter. It involved three case studies in England. The research methods employed included 34 semi-structured interviews, 12 direct observations, and document analysis. The viewpoints of both service providers and service users were captured. All data were analyzed using thematic analysis, in an inductive fashion. After summarizing the literature, six practical aspects of CE in relation to library practice were identified which were: public libraries as a community space; partnerships; community involvement in the library service; involvement of volunteers; working around books or information; and engaging in public dialogue and deliberation. The study, based on empirical data, concludes that while the public library as a community space was recognized as a key aspect to foster CE, it is a passive form of CE. A stronger level of partnership and community involvement is required for the promotion of genuine CE, wherein the community-driven approach and the organic nature of the CE process are paramount to engagement. It was observed that little systematic research has been done to examine the CE process in practice in public libraries. Nor have the practical implications of CE for public libraries been addressed. This study provides practical implications of CE for public libraries, as a first step toward systematic research in this area.

Keywords: Community engagement; involvement; participation; partnerships; empowerment; public libraries

I. Introduction

The decline of public library service usage in England, for example, reduced access to public library service points, decline in library visits, and decrease in adult book issues (Audit Commission, 1997, 2002; Coates, 2004; The
Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, 2008); and a reassessing of library policies and practice in accordance with the UK Government’s agenda (Goulding, 2009; Pateman & Vincent, 2010), have resulted in a growing literature on community engagement (CE) in the context of public libraries both in theory and in practice. To this end, the trends and trajectories of CE in public libraries were observed.

Changes were noticed when CE was conceptualized into models. More recently, library-related models have tended to incorporate CE culture in library services as a whole, instead of regarding CE as a separate or one-off activity (Mehra & Srinivasan, 2007; Pateman & Vincent, 2010). Furthermore, greater emphasis is placed on a community-led service, rather than a library-based one, which has been implemented for some time (see Working Together Project, 2008). Also, community needs have traditionally been assessed through quantitative performance indicators, such as library use statistics, community survey results, but more interest has recently been concentrated on working with communities throughout the service planning process (Working Together Project, 2008).

Following an increasing interest in CE in rhetoric, a number of community-based programs occurred in public libraries worldwide. A wide diversity of forms of CE emerged in tandem and changes were also observed. For example, one of the obvious changes was a shift in the relationship between library services and local communities, where the community went from being considered as passive beneficiaries or customers with choices, to actually becoming active stakeholders (Pateman & Vincent, 2010). Additionally, as engagement went wider and deeper, some emotional aspects of the process were observed, such as friendship, trust, respect, ownership, and commitment (Working Together Project, 2008).

While the past decades have evidenced a growing effort in implementing CE both in theory and practice, little systematic research has been done to examine the CE process in practice in public libraries. Nor have the practical implications of CE for public libraries been addressed. To this end, this chapter discusses the practical implications of CE and public libraries.

This chapter discusses practical aspects of CE, presents the research design for a qualitative research study, and discusses the findings of the research.

A. Practical Aspects of Community Engagement

Similar to other cultural institutions, such as the heritage sector (Perkin, 2010) and the archive sector (Stevens, Flinn, & Shepherd, 2010), a review of both practitioners’ and academic literature identified a wide range of approaches toward CE that were adopted in the public library service.
For example, Libraries for the Future’s Civic Library Model consists of six areas of activity to promote democratic values and to foster civic participation (Schull, 2004). Kranich (2005) suggested examples of civic partnerships to promote civic engagement. Hillenbrand’s (2005) research investigated the role of public libraries in contributing to social capital. In addition, the Community Service Volunteers and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council in England proposed Aspects of Community Engagement as a library service template, which identified what libraries are currently doing and plan future activities in relation to CE (CSV Consulting, 2006).

Summarizing Schull (2004), Kranich (2005), Hillenbrand (2005), and CSV Consulting (2006), the authors identified six practical aspects of CE that are common to library practice. The six aspects are:

1. public libraries as a community space;
2. partnerships;
3. community involvement in the library service;
4. involvement of volunteers;
5. working around books or information; and
6. engaging in public dialogue and deliberation.

There is a consensus across the literature that recognizes public libraries as a shared public space to foster CE (Bryson, Usherwood, & Proctor, 2003; CSV Consulting, 2006; Goulding, 2004; Hillenbrand, 2005; Kranich, 2005; Schull, 2004). However, the public library as a community space itself is in essence a passive form of CE (Goulding, 2009; Harris, 1998; Pateman & Vincent, 2010). To this end, reflected in the six practical aspects of CE is that libraries revitalize their civic spirit not only by providing space and information but also by expanding opportunities for dialogue and public deliberation.

In line with the promotion of CE in libraries, partnerships were also accentuated in the government’s agenda, academic literature, and empirical evidence. As Kranich (2005) stated, “Working closely with a rich and diverse array of partners, libraries of all types must help rekindle civic engagement, promote greater citizen participation, and increase community problem solving and decision making” (p. 99).

In addition, increasing emphasis was placed on involving the community in the library service planning in order to provide relevant and sustainable services (Williment, 2009). However, depth and breadth of CE vary in practice. Related to community involvement was the issue around volunteering. While there were controversies with regard to using volunteers in public libraries (e.g., professional concerns), research has showed benefits of using volunteers in public libraries, for example, developing their skills.
and enhancing their feelings of ownership toward the service (Cookman, 2001).

Whether the library should work around books or information is open for debate. While Goulding (2009, p. 48) saw “work around books and reading” as an encouraging areas of potential for CE, Pateman and Vincent (2010) emphasized the importance of meeting community needs through engaging with the community in the service planning, design, and delivery. Similarly, a conference in the United Kingdom, entitled Community Engagement through Reading, concluded that libraries could work with readers as a springboard to involving people in decision-making about future local public services (Local Government Association, 2007).

II. The Research Project on Community Engagement

A. Methodology

This research took a pragmatic philosophical perspective based on Blumer’s (1969) symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes the researcher’s interpretation of the meanings of the interactions between individuals in relation to the environment. While pragmatist researchers tend to use mixed methods (Creswell, 2009), the majority of symbolic interactionist researchers adopt qualitative methods (Denzin, 1992).

As identified in the introduction, there is a body of literature from which practical aspects of CE for public libraries have been identified (CSV Consulting, 2006; Hillenbrand, 2005; Kranich, 2005; Schull, 2004). Yet, there is little systematic research examining the CE process in practice in public libraries. Due to the focus on the issue of CE and the exploratory nature of this research, a multiple-case studies approach was adopted.

Initially, six potential projects with CE content were explored. See Table 1 for characteristics of potential organizations/projects for investigation. Part of the reasons for conducting case study research was to provide the researcher with an opportunity to explore a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2009). Furthermore, as suggested by Eisenhardt (1989), the researcher followed a deliberate theoretical sampling plan and selected three cases for investigation, in order to provide examples of polar types. The three selected cases were: Citizens’ Eye (Leicester Central Library); Project LiRA (Derby City Libraries); and Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries (Leicestershire County Council: Library Services).

The rationale behind the choice of the three cases was that they all claimed that they conducted CE activities. As indicated in the preliminary
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project names</th>
<th>Organizations</th>
<th>Sites</th>
<th>Year project began</th>
<th>Year project finished</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Approaches</th>
<th>Project content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizens’ Eye</td>
<td>Leicester Central Library</td>
<td>• Leicester Central Library</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Bottom-up</td>
<td>Community journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to Your Library</td>
<td>Leicester Central Library</td>
<td>• Leicester Central Library</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Fixed-term</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Connecting libraries with refugees and asylum seekers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project LiRA</td>
<td>Derby City Libraries</td>
<td>• Allenton Library</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Fixed-term</td>
<td>Top-down</td>
<td>Library building refurbishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries</td>
<td>Leicestershire County Council: Library Services</td>
<td>• Coalville Library</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Fixed-term</td>
<td>Top-down</td>
<td>Promoting health and well-being in libraries</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project 5</td>
<td>Leicestershire County Council: Library Services</td>
<td>• Melton Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project 6</td>
<td>Organization 6</td>
<td>• Site 6</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Fixed-term</td>
<td>Top-down</td>
<td>Library building refurbishment</td>
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*aProject 5 (Site 5) and Project 6 (Organization 6 and Site 6) were not able to participate in the study due to time and financial constraints, and were not named to protect their identity.*
meetings with key contacts from the three selected cases, they covered all or some of the practical aspects of CE as in Table 2.

The three case studies were fundamentally different with regard to whether the project was operated bottom-up or top-down and whether the project was fixed-term or ongoing. Accordingly, the three selected public libraries had different perspectives on how to engage the community and used different strategies and methods to do so in project planning, management, and delivery.

1. Overview of the Three Selected Case Studies

Citizens’ Eye, a community news agency, is a social enterprise and a legal entity in its own right. Citizens’ Eye was established in January 2008 and has worked in partnership with Leicester Central Library since November 2008. Under Citizens’ Eye were 12 different news agencies, each involving different groups of people in the community (e.g., young people, the elderly, ex-offenders, and the homeless) to contribute to their publications (e.g., newsletters, magazines, newspapers, and web sites) that were sourced, edited, and written by and for people. The fact that Citizens’ Eye was hosted by Leicester Central Library and that there was overlap of staffing between Citizens’ Eye and Leicester Central Library enhanced the recognition of the library as the sum total of all those activities and services provided under its roof and promoted by its staff.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of CE</th>
<th>Selected cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Citizens’ Eye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public libraries as a space</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnership working</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community involvement in the library service</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involvement of volunteers</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Working around books or information</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engaging in public dialogue and deliberation</td>
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Project LiRA, standing for Libraries in Renewal Areas, was conducted by Derby City Libraries and funded (£2 million) by the Big Lottery Fund’s Community Libraries Program in 2007–2010. Project LiRA set out to refurbish or build new public libraries in three of Derby’s Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, including Allenton, Chellaston, and Mackworth. As required by the program, Derby City Libraries carried out a range of CE activities in the service planning and delivery.

Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries was a one-year long project, from September 2009 to September 2010, working with National Health Service: Community Health Services across three libraries in Leicestershire County Council: Library Services (i.e., Coalville, Melton, and Oadby), with supporting funding (£20K) from the Primary Care Trust to cover stock and staff training. Services provided by the libraries and the National Health Service included: exercise referral (through holding one-off exercise taster sessions at the Health events); self-help (through providing health-related books and DVDs); cognitive behavioral therapy; information prescriptions; and bibliotherapy (therapeutic use of literature).

2. Data Collection and Analysis

Research methods included 34 semi-structured interviews, 12 direct observations, and document analysis from January to May 2010. Interviews were conducted by the authors with three key stakeholder groups, including:

1. library staff, both at the managerial and operational levels;
2. local community members, who participated in the selected projects; and
3. partnership organization staff.

See Table 3 for a breakdown of interview respondent numbers.

An inductive thematic analysis procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze and code the data gathered. Six phases of data analysis included:

1. familiarization with the data through transcription, field notes, and annotation;
2. line by line coding (Charmaz, 2006) to extract data nuances;
3. organization of initial codes through data mapping, employing mind mapping techniques;
4. synthesizing potential themes and assigning the themes back to the data, using ATLAS.ti 6.1;
5. defining and redefining each theme; and
6. writing up research findings.

The challenge of this approach concerned bias that the researcher might misinterpret research participants’ responses. To improve reliability and validity new data were compared to old data against what had been learnt.
B. Findings

In order to adopt a pragmatic approach to apply prior research and theories in the interpretation of the inductive findings in the three case studies, and to make a contribution to the relevant literature, the six practical aspects of CE are used as a framework to compare and contrast the findings of the three selected case studies. It is anticipated that a comparative analysis across the three case studies will yield more lessons to be learnt from the cases.

1. Public Libraries as a Community Space

There was a general agreement across the three case studies that the public library is regarded as a community space to promote CE, partly because the public library is perceived to be “safe,” “informal,” “neutral,” “unthreatening,” “welcoming,” and “open for all.” This was particularly emphasized by interviewees in Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries. However, in Citizens’ Eye, there was more emphasis on the relationship building between the service and the community in the process of CE.

As a result, while all three case studies took place in libraries that are based in a community, the extent to which the three were community-based

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Selected cases</th>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>Library staff</th>
<th>Local community members</th>
<th>Partnership organization staff</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citizens’ Eye</td>
<td></td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project LiRA</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
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<sup>a</sup>There were only two library staff members at the managerial level from Leicester Central Library actively involved in Citizens’ Eye. This echoed the finding that Citizens’ Eye was community-initiated, community-led, and self-sustained, with only facilitation from the library.

<sup>b</sup>The authors attended the Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries events in Melton, Oadby, and Coalville to recruit potential respondents for interviews without success. This supported the finding that there was no direct involvement of the community in project planning and management.
was different. For example, a sense of belonging between the service and the community was found in Citizens’ Eye, where it was not only about library services being part of the community but also local communities feeling involvement with the library service. However, the results from Project LiRA and Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries expressed the relationship as hierarchical.

In this regard, the researcher concluded that the way in which services are planned and delivered has an impact on the relationship between the service and the community. While Citizens’ Eye embraced a community-driven approach, from community-initiated, community-led to self-sustained, Project LiRA and Community Health Wellbeing in Libraries adopted a library-led approach, from library-initiated, library-run to library-sustained.

This issue concerning the difference between “libraries that are based in the community” and “community-based libraries” was also raised in the literature. For example, Goulding (2009), citing Harris (1998) noted “Although public libraries are based in communities, the extent to which they are community-based has been questioned” (p. 42). Furthermore, Pateman and Vincent (2010) suggested that “a shift from libraries that are based in communities to community-based libraries” is required to develop a needs-based library service; the latter (i.e., community-based libraries) implies “a positive and dynamic relationship between the library and the people who live in the neighborhood” and “a clear organic connection between the work of the library and the needs of the local communities” (p. 121).

2. Partnerships

Partnerships are high on the UK Government’s modernizing agenda (Great Britain, Prime Minister, Cabinet Office, 1999) for local authorities. It was not a coincidence to find that all three case studies embraced a culture of partnerships in their service planning, management, and delivery. Three main types of organizations with which public libraries tend to work in partnership, identified from the literature, are voluntary and community sectors, other public services, and corporate partners.

One of the common and main methods in all three case studies was co-location. Common outcomes of co-location across the three case studies included sharing resources and facilities, strengthening partnerships, attracting potential library users, and increasing the capacities of the library. Nevertheless, Goulding (2009) described “the one-stop shop approach” through the co-location of a range of local council services as “a passive type of community engagement” (p. 44).
In addition to the passive form of partnerships (i.e., co-location), Citizens’ Eye emphasized a two-way, real partnership working with living links, which not only built up person-focused relationship with different organizations but also increased organizational capacities. As a result, when it came to the relevance of the service, Project LiRA and Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries tended to focus on the effectiveness of services, such as fulfilling the library’s accountability and increasing library visitors. Besides increasing the effectiveness of the service, Citizens’ Eye evidenced mutually beneficial relationships and capacity building for a long-term impact. This finding echoed Kranich’s (2005) call for close and collaborative partnerships in order to help rekindle CE in the library service.

Invited partnerships tended to be “temporary” and “short term,” as described by research participants in the Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries project. As a result there was no emphasis on the sustainability of partnerships in the CE process. In contrast, realistically working in partnership was featured by its two-way, constant process, where participating organizations understood each other’s organizational cultures, overcame challenges, and identify mutual benefits from working together, as illustrated by Citizens’ Eye.

Both Derby City Libraries and Leicestershire County Council: Library Services recognized that different partnership organizations had different priorities. This in turn had a negative impact on how many of the potential benefits of partnerships could actually be achieved. In this sense, results from both of these cases suggested that libraries communicate the value and benefits of library services to partnership organizations. Interestingly, Citizens’ Eye did not reveal conflict from different organizations having different priorities. Instead, partnership commitment in Citizens’ Eye was shown through not only working together, but also honesty, trust, loyalty, and support. In addition, commitment in Citizens’ Eye was built upon working toward the same goal, having commonalities and obtaining mutual benefits.

It is clear that different motivations for partnerships brought about different outcomes in different projects. The researcher found that the degree of relevance of the projects to partnership organizations was different across the three case studies. Real commitment from partnership organizations to Citizens’ Eye and its relevance to the partners, became a strength in terms of the likelihood of its long-term sustainability.

3. Community Involvement in the Library Service

Probably in response to government demands for wider and deeper engagement, all three selected public libraries claimed that they have
engaged with local communities. All three involved key stakeholder groups—library services, local communities, and partnership organizations. On closer inspection however, the roles that libraries and local communities played in the process were different.

Derby City Libraries and Leicestershire County Council: Library Services took leadership roles in Project LiRA and Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries. The two projects were initiated, run, and sustained by the library service with different degrees of involvement from local communities. Citizens’ Eye however, was initiated, run, and sustained by local communities, with facilitation from the library service. Citizens’ Eye was an initiative, where both the community and Leicester Central Library moved forward together. In contrast to Citizens’ Eye, the rationale behind the implementation of the other two projects was to fulfill the library’s accountability for its funding bodies, which reflected a top-down approach.

As a result of the difference in the roles that libraries played, it was found that the roles of local communities were also different across the three case studies. For example, local communities acted as active stakeholders in Citizens’ Eye. In Project LiRA, local communities were regarded as customers with choices, which indicated that Derby City Libraries, before engaging with the community, had set the scope of local community participation. Similarly, Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries found no direct and active involvement from local communities in the planning and decision-making in the project, and local communities were regarded as passive beneficiaries and recipients.

The sliding scale from stakeholders, customers to beneficiaries saw gradually lesser degrees of attention paid to local communities in terms of their voice and choice in the CE process. In addition, different roles that key stakeholders played also reflected different relationships between service providers and service users, which in turn had a direct influence on the sustainability of the three cases. For example, when local communities acted as stakeholders, Citizens’ Eye evidenced a learning process for both organizations and individuals, which was considered to be a positive contribution to its development. When local communities were regarded as customers, the outcome was limited. As evidenced in Project LiRA, one of the consequences was reluctance from local communities to form constituted groups after the project was completed. When local communities were considered to be passive beneficiaries, funding determined the sustainability of the project, as seen in Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries. The researcher concluded that evidence of institutional bureaucracy, time pressure, or funding constraints influenced the different approaches used in different studies, which had been found by Brodie, Cowling, and Nissen (2009).
4. Involvement of Volunteers

Before discussing the use of volunteers, it should be noted that Citizens’ Eye is an entirely volunteer-run organization whereas Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries provided no voluntary opportunities in the process of project planning. In between those two was Project LiRA which involved volunteers to get the project off ground within the community.

Due to its voluntary nature, commitment from volunteers was essential to the sustainability of Citizens’ Eye. As one member noted, “Citizens’ Eye is only going to be as successful as the amount of time and energy that the community devote to it.” Because of the way in which Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries was developed, there was no emphasis on commitment from local communities at all, which logically led to a lack of discussion around the continuity of involvement from communities. The fact that Project LiRA was required by its funding source to involve local communities in planning and delivery of services, indicated that commitment from local communities was desired but not essential.

Fundamental difference in commitment from voluntary local communities lay in the rationale for the implementation of services and community motivations for participation. For example, Citizens’ Eye represented a space that was of the community’s own making, whereas Project LiRA was a space that was made for local communities. As Cornwall (2008) pointed out the fundamental drive behind these two types of spaces reflected the “power” of the relevant stakeholders.

Furthermore, people’s motivations for participation also accounted for different outcomes and sustainability. For instance, one of the main motivations for local communities to engage with Project LiRA came from their desire for a static library in their local area. Hence, once the library was built, some community members could not see what their future roles would be and were therefore reluctant to become constituted groups. In Citizens’ Eye, in addition to all personal reasons for participation (e.g., fulfilling their interest in writing and also gaining working experience), “community-minded people” played an important role in terms of enhancing its sustainability.

People’s personal characteristics and personalities also accounted for the success of the CE activities. For example, the founder of Citizens’ Eye was said to “[be] not money-oriented,” “community-minded,” and “very true to the local population.” Volunteers in Citizens’ Eye also showed their passion, enthusiasm, confidence, energy, and determination. Similarly, Willingham (2008) suggested that in order to act as civic agents and to advocate for the community, entrepreneurial librarians who are ambitious, resourceful,
innovative, creative, relationship-orientated, results-oriented, and willing to take risks are required.

Both Citizens’ Eye and Project LiRA found rewards were reaped from using volunteers, such as advocacy for services and enhancing volunteer ownership of services. This was also found by Cookman (2001) who said that one of the merits of using volunteers is “to take advantage of the large pool of existing knowledge and skills” (p. 11). This was recognized in Citizens’ Eye, where volunteering helped enhance social relationships within the community. In the words of its founder “Through their volunteering, people get new friends and social networks [. . .] For me, it was a defining moment in setting up Citizens’ Eye.”

5. Working Around Books or Information

Books. The three cases studied demonstrated that the library offered more services and opportunities for local communities than just books. Provision of books still played an important part in services provided by both Project LiRA and Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries. As library staff members in Community Health and Wellbeing stated, “I think we [Leicestershire County Council: Library Services] still need to have books as our base. That is our core service” and “Since we had all these extra books bought for us and the extra stock, it’s pulled more and more people in. Increased book issues have been phenomenal.”

Information. The study found that the partnership with Citizens’ Eye helped Leicester Central Library fulfill its informational role, because it was regarded as a catalyst for information dissemination. Yet, despite all the benefits that Citizens’ Eye brought to Leicester Central Library, there was some conflict between library staff and Citizens’ Eye volunteers. A possible reason for conflicting views within Citizens’ Eye was that librarianship was quite conservative and introducing the idea of community journalism to a traditional library service could be regarded as revolutionary. This phenomenon was noted by Cornwall (2000) who noted “The use of folk media [. . .] challenged the authority of conventional forms of ‘expertise’ and the guise of professional neutrality that cloaked conventional development solutions” (p. 24).

Among all three case studies only Citizens’ Eye, which was described as “a fairly streamlined organization” by a local community member, used social media to inform, consult, and involve local communities regardless of time or location problems. Citizens’ Eye broke down people’s stereotypes about
equating libraries with books and reading, by bringing people into libraries for more creative activities, such as reporting news, publishing magazines, and blogging. In contrast Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries allocated the majority of its funding to purchasing health-related books.

6. Engaging in Public Dialogue and Deliberation

Public libraries are promoted as places to expand the opportunities for public dialogue and deliberation in the literature (Hillenbrand, 2005; Kranich, 2005; Schull, 2004). To this end, libraries have held nation-wide reading programs to encourage shared reading in relation to issues such as race, disability, and immigration. The closest example found in this study was Citizens’ Eye, where local communities reported news or issues that were relevant to their lives.

While Citizens’ Eye engaged with local communities in a local context, both Project LiRA and Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries engaged with local communities in a library context. Specifically, Citizens’ Eye provided a platform for different community groups, such as young people, the elderly, and the homeless to have a voice on issues that mattered to them. Both Project LiRA and Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries invited local communities to participate in what was offered by the library.

Although it could be argued that the original intention of the three participating libraries was to provide services that were relevant to local communities, there was a gap between rhetoric and practice. For example, Project LiRA and Community Health and Wellbeing in Libraries tended to focus on improving the effectiveness of the service in order to meet the library’s accountability needs.

III. Conclusion

The intent of this chapter was to make a contribution to the policy and practice literature in the area of CE and public libraries. The researcher adopted a pragmatic approach in discussing the research findings within the current literature and was to apply prior research findings and theories to the interpretation of the inductive findings in three case studies.

Limitations and gaps in the knowledge of CE within the context of public libraries still need to be filled. For example, the research reported here focused on active participants from the community and did not (deliberately) involve nonusers. In short, there was no investigation into reasons for community self-exclusion from, or rejection of, participation. In future
studies sample size could be increased to add different perspectives from a wider range of stakeholders in the CE process.

The discussion in this chapter indicated that all three case studies contributed further understanding toward six practical aspects of CE for public libraries that were drawn upon from the literature. However, the extent and nature of their contribution varied across the three case studies, which ultimately brought about different outcomes. The different outcomes resulted from different beliefs, values, and ways of working in different case studies, which resulted from different rationales for the implementation of the three (ongoing) projects.

The findings here present a strong argument for genuine CE within and by public libraries. Based on the empirical investigative results, practical recommendations for genuine CE in the public library sector are as follows:

1. Findings showed that CE was interpreted differently by different people, particularly library practitioners, which in turn brought about different outcomes. Therefore training in differentiating and understanding different forms/levels of CE and their implications are considered to be important.

2. CE was implemented differently in different projects, bringing about different outcomes. This points to the need for radical shifts, from service-led to community-driven outlooks and from hierarchical structures to flat structure. Again staff training in relevant CE skills, such as interpersonal skills and entrepreneurial skills will be important going forward.

3. The organic nature of the CE process was paramount to engagement and the results being more likely to remain relevant. This is a huge shift in perspective. The challenge is for services to learn how to genuinely facilitate community-based projects—allowing CE to become a truly transformational development tool.

In summary, this study concludes that while public library as a community space was recognized as a key aspect to foster CE, it is a passive form of CE in itself. A stronger level of partnerships and community involvement is required, wherein the community-driven approach and the organic nature of the CE process are paramount. Hence, there is a need for staff to have an entrepreneurial “can do” culture and develop the belief that members of their community have the capacity to understand their own needs, although they may need help expressing them. Library staff also need to recognize that engagement stemming from the community has the capacity to run autonomously and sustain engagement processes.

References


