
“Boundless opportunities?”: towards an assessment of the usefulness of the concept of social exclusion for the South African public library situation

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Abstract

Social exclusion is an important concept in the public sphere in many parts of the world and in some sectors in South Africa. This review defines the concept and identifies factors that contribute to social exclusion; the background to the social exclusion initiatives of the 1980s is described and reasons why public libraries are seen as agents for addressing exclusion are given. Evidence of impact from evaluative research is outlined. In counterpoint the incidence of the concept of social exclusion in the literature of library and information studies in South Africa is reviewed. The article found that social exclusion is not considered to any great extent in this literature and starts to explore its usefulness in local contexts.

Introduction

Public libraries have been extensively investigated (Black and Crann 2002:146) regarding their use and attitudes to them. In Britain Broady-Preston and Cox (2000:149) suggest that they “have returned to public and political agendas”. Referring to the absence of libraries from such agendas in the 1980s, they cite Usherwood’s observation that the dogma of that time “took away hope and idealism from a generation, perhaps two”. The return of the public library to these agendas is evident in the literature of social exclusion and in the central role it attributes to public libraries.

For Broady-Preston and Cox (2000:149) public libraries promote education and tackle social exclusion by providing access, using new technologies, to information for the disadvantaged. They draw on a Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS 1999) statement that the public library is well-equipped to take on this role as “one of the most important and respected public services, offering levels of customer usage, satisfaction and brand loyalty that most private sector organisations can only dream of”. Ironically public libraries are a favoured target for overstretched councils (Morrison in Broady-Preston and Cox 2000:151), a scenario common in South Africa where Massawe and Ncongwane (1999) and Lor, van Helden and Bothma (2005) comment on problems arising from legislation relating to the respective responsibilities of provincial and municipal government and the financial relations between them.

Social exclusion emerged as an important concept in Europe in the 1980s. Muddiman notes that there is agreement that the transition from industrial to “information” society has brought new forms of social exclusion. This follows the restructuring of industrial capitalism to an informational system of production which Castells (in Muddiman 1999:5) suggests is global in reach but “profoundly uneven in its effects”. The economic arguments underlying these debates are not addressed in this article for space reasons.

As a major concern for all spheres of public service, social exclusion has a considerable literature. There is also a substantial body of literature on the occurrence of social exclusion in the library context. Lockyer-Benzie (2004) suggests from Australia that a paradigm shift in thinking about social exclusion is critical to its incorporation in the planning processes of governments and service providers. Paradoxically, while the concept is embedded in the planning and evaluation initiatives of public bodies including libraries in many parts of the world, and while the term is found in the discourses of education and other public services in South Africa, scant reference is made to it in the literature of the local library and information (LIS) sector. Where such reference is made it tends to be to marginalisation, or information poverty rather than to social exclusion per se.

This article explores social exclusion as a concept seemingly of usefulness to our LIS sector and asks why a concept of such apparent relevance for a society of considerable inequities such as South Africa should appear to have been either neglected, or to have been rejected as not useful. The main task of this article is to examine the concept and chart its vestigial emergence in South African LIS discourse and then to commence exploring why it could be helpful in making the case for public library services here.

Answers to these questions may lie in defining social exclusion. The article notes factors that appear to influence or contribute to social exclusion and examines how and why the public library is suited to playing a key role in addressing exclusion. These tasks are based on a review of international and local literature identified through various databases. Evidence of the efforts of public libraries to address exclusion with regard to impact from evaluative research is described. Against this review is juxtaposed the small body of evidence that the author was able to trace in the literature on South African LIS regarding the concept. This exploration is undertaken amid dire warnings about "missing the boat" and the cost of not acting from Lor et al (2005) and Muddiman (1999). The article toggles between global and local contexts in exploring the examples.

Among those seeking to address social exclusion in Britain one finds Train, Dalton and Elkin (2000:484) who observe that the public library has reflected the notion that its services should be equally available to all over many years. It has striven to "confront the challenges of social deprivation and disadvantage, in particular via the outreach work it has undertaken with excluded communities". In 1995, the first year of the new South African democratic state, various authors identified positive change in the local LIS sector. Stilwell (1996) commented that the provincial library services, which provide the infrastructure for most South African public libraries, had started seeking to address equality in service provision. To what extent one asks does the South African government today recognize the role of the library in building the inclusive society that the Bill of Rights in the 1994 Constitution is intended to bring about? A positive indication is Arts and Culture Minister Pallo Jordan's announcement in February this year of an injection of one billion Rands as a "massive, massive intervention" to revitalize the country's deteriorating public libraries, with another 700 million allocated to the national archives (R1bn boost for libraries.2006).

Various authorities, as above, have suggested, however, that we still have some work to do in terms of convincing government at the different levels, that public libraries, in particular, have crucial roles to play. If this is the case does the concept of social exclusion help us in this regard?"

In seeking to explore whether or not social exclusion is a useful concept for LIS in South Africa the article draws on both the narrow and broader senses of social exclusion identified by Muddiman (1999).

Is identifying specific factors that affect exclusion not useful in evaluating our society's achievements which seem to require a more complex set of lenses than

those currently used? One factor that should be considered is the newly found class mobility of many citizens.

Bringing the concept of social exclusion to bear on our profession's concerns might well contribute to newly insightful ways of determining what needs to be done. There might, of course, be inherent problems with the concept for a society such as this where the formerly excluded constituted the vast majority of local people, rather than a socio-economic stratum, or pockets of immigrant "settlers" or asylum seekers. Dutch (1999:199), in addressing the origin of the thinking behind the exclusion issues - that it is morally wrong to allow a whole generation to be written off - identifies problems with the term inclusion suggesting that it implies that total equity is not possible. He identifies "fundamental differences between those who believe in the need for an equal society and those who believe in equality of opportunity within a capitalist society". He draws on Levitas:

While we should use the concept of social exclusion to pursue equality as much as is possible, we should remember that the political framework within which it operates is one which itself excludes the possibility of an equal society.

What are the implications of this observation for our new democracy and its libraries? The difficulties of addressing social exclusion in Britain where the initiatives have been strongly government backed suggest how daunting a task this could prove for our own state where equity in terms of access to basic utilities, for example, still has some way to go. This article can only begin to ask questions about such a large issue. It draws on the example of the United Kingdom (UK) where attempts to address social exclusion are well advanced.

It is to the first task, that of defining social exclusion, that we now turn.

What is social exclusion?

Lockyer-Benzie (2004) sees a lack of clarity about the concept as a major barrier to developing constructive ways of tackling social exclusion. Muddiman (1999) offers insight when he asks "What, then, is social exclusion and how does it differ from concepts such as poverty and disadvantage which it has replaced?" He points out that social exclusion theorists stress its *multidimensional* nature: "Social exclusion relates not only to a lack of material resources, but also to ... inadequate social participation, lack of cultural and educational capital, inadequate access to services and lack of power". Muddiman (1999) suggests that the concept

- attempts to capture the complexity of *powerlessness* in society rather than simply focusing on one of its outcomes.
- The British government's Social Exclusion Unit, for example, defines exclusion in practical terms as a mix of '*linked problems* such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown'.
- The Council of Europe, on the other hand, offers a more theoretical definition: '*social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty, encompassing not only low material means but the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life and in some characterisations alienation and distance from mainstream society*' (Duffy in Muddiman 1999:2).

The term social exclusion has been mostly used to refer to:

- *persistent and systematic* multiple deprivation, as opposed to disadvantage experienced for short periods of time (Walker in Muddiman 1999:2).
- Social exclusion often incorporates a stronger *spatial* focus, although this approach requires qualifying in that all localities, such as inner city areas, peripheral housing estates and deindustrialised semi rural areas tend to have concentrations of poverty. Muddiman (1999:8-9) concludes that no library authority in Britain is an exclusion-free zone.

This is likely to be the case in South Africa where new local authority structures are an amalgam of the old white boroughs and the former townships.

- Durrani (1999:8) argues that the definition cannot be static as "the process of social exclusion is dynamic, changing over time and space and affecting different groups in different ways". He adds from Castells: "social exclusion is a process, not a condition. *Thus its boundaries shift, and who is excluded and included may vary over time, depending on education, demographic characteristics, social prejudices, business practices, and public policies*".
- Muddiman (1999:2) agrees that the concept captures the *processes* of disempowerment and alienation, whereas other descriptions focus largely on the outcomes of such processes. A study of processes is important because it can identify the factors which lead to situations of exclusion, and, to ways to 'chart mobility out of poverty'.

He explains that a narrower view of social exclusion suggests "focused and targeted action aimed at particular problems, social groups and communities" while the broader view implies a "much wider project to build social capital and equal opportunity in society" (Muddiman 1999:5). Implicit in the term social exclusion is the idea that every citizen has the right to be fully included in society. As Train et al (2000:484) comment, this notion, that the public library should be equally available to all, is paralleled in the ethos of the public library.

What factors are seen to contribute to exclusion or marginalization?

Factors that contribute to social exclusion

Factors viewed as having an influence on social exclusion are: ethnic origin, gender, sexuality, physical or mental disability, educational attainment, employment status and economic status (Train et al 2000:483). In 2001 in Britain only 17% of libraries were found to be accessible to disabled people (Disability action starts. 2002:19). Other factors regarded as contributing to social exclusion are: unemployment, low literacy levels, low income, substandard housing, poor public transport, living in environments with a high crime rate, ill-health and family breakdown (Train et al 2000:484). In South Africa the incidence of all of these factors is generally high.

Dutch (1999:190) cites Alcock's phrase "the rediscovery of poverty" when he refers to the Welfare State's attempts to address poverty:

on the right, people were inclined to blame the poor themselves with a notion of personal responsibility for poverty and noted a culture of poverty and the encouraging of dependency. On the left the US [United States] War on Want programmes were influential and marked the beginning of selective targeted programmes in which professionals worked with the poor seeking to help them help themselves.

Pateman (1999/2000:[2]) cites Miller to argue that there is overlap between poverty and social exclusion "but not all socially excluded people are poor and not all the poor are socially excluded but most poor people are socially excluded and vice versa".

In the quest to understand poverty and exclusion Woolcock's (2001:3) views on social capital are useful. In his exploration of the social dimensions of development, Woolcock, drawing on Ostrom, points out that one of the main benefits of the idea of social capital is its approach to understanding poverty (Woolcock 2001:19). He cites Wilson to observe that a defining feature of being poor is that one is not a member of, and can be actively excluded from, certain social networks and institutions. Such networks are seen as potentially useful, for example, in securing good jobs and better housing. He agrees that social capital has costs as well as benefits, but asserts that the well connected are "more likely to be hired, housed, healthy and happy". They are also more likely "to be promoted faster, receive higher salaries, be favorably evaluated by peers, miss fewer days of work, live longer and be more efficient in completing assigned tasks" (Woolcock 2001:3,4-5).

Woolcock (2001:10) explains that whereas human capital resides in individuals, social capital resides in relationships. He sees poverty as “largely a function of powerless and exclusion”. One way forward out of this predicament is to forge alliances with sympathetic individuals in positions of power (Brown and Fox in Woolcock 2001:10) which Hirschman (in Woolcock 2001:10) calls “reform by stealth”, a kind of “linkaging with a vertical dimension”. This linking and leveraging – of “resources, ideas and information can be done with formal institutions beyond the community”, and would include institutions which specialize in information such as libraries. Woolcock (2001:12) draws on the work of Collier, Posner and Easterly respectively to observe that high levels of ethnic fractionalization per se are not a cause for concern - that diversity can be an asset - but that two or three competing ethnic groups in a situation of weak public institutions can be dangerous. Recent examples are the severe racial fractionalization seemingly behind the London terror attacks and the competition for jobs and benefits between newly enfranchised South Africans and immigrants and asylum seekers from elsewhere in Africa who are subjected to alarming levels of xenophobia.

Durrani (1999:7) cites Castells to describe social exclusion as

the process by which certain individuals and groups are systematically barred from access to positions that would enable them to have an autonomous livelihood within the social standards framed by institutions and values in a given context. Social exclusion is, in fact, the process that disenfranchises a person as labour in the context of capitalism.

An example is found in the Romany people in Croatia where many of the people whom Petr (2004) interviewed lacked basic information about how to obtain citizenship, for instance, hence their spiral of exclusion continued. Among the reasons for this exclusion was the fact that ICT was used widely but posed seemingly insurmountable difficulties in terms of access to information for people who “do not know how to send an e-mail, use mobile phones, send text messages or even use an ATM, to apply for or find a job”.

Some authors identify a *managerial and institutional* culture in public library services over the last twenty years which has moved away from a concern with disadvantage to a *consumerist* ethos which focuses on providing quality services to *existing* customers, “the most vocal of whom inevitably comprise an articulate and demanding middle class” (Muddiman 1999:11). Pateman (1999/2000) cites van Riet’s concept of the “dominant borrower” to pinpoint “the middle class libraries with middle class users” phenomenon. What is clear is that we have to recognise the problem that “‘social exclusion’ as a concept can be applied, at

least from time to time, to many more people and places than on the surface seems to be the case” (Byrne in Muddiman 1999:5).

Lockyer-Benzie (2004:43) identifies social conditions that can impact on exclusion and subsequent non-usage of the library service. Many of these are germane to the South African library and information context: information literacy; access to the new technologies; adult literacy; multi-culturalism; indigenous communities; ageing; poverty; unemployment; transport; geographical location; homelessness; isolation; disabilities; community ownership and participation; safety and security, and other potential barriers such as policies, operational issues and physical access. Having explored the term and factors that contribute to social exclusion the article seeks to address the usefulness of specific aspects of the social exclusion and libraries literature.

Background to social exclusion initiatives

Hill observed that in all areas of life in the 1970s there was “talk of breaking down barriers and of community involvement” (in Train et al 2000: 484) while in the 1980s Coleman identified ways of addressing the problem of disadvantage in relation to the library service (in Train et al 2000: 484). She noted, firstly, the need to determine the most effective way of enabling people to make use of the resources of the public library and secondly, to enable people to overcome the barriers preventing them from being included fully in society. In the 1990s Muddiman (1999) stated that “a relatively new concept - social exclusion, (together with its relatives social *inclusion* and social *cohesion*) has taken over as the most fashionable term for describing social division”. The European Commission used the idea as a centrepiece for its social policy (Room in Muddiman 1999) and it has formed the basis of much of the Labour Party's thinking on social justice. Labour established a Social Exclusion Unit reporting directly to the Cabinet Office and Prime Minister (Social Exclusion Unit 1998; Muddiman 1999) and in May 2006 the UK government appointed a Minister for Social Exclusion (Anon 2006).

Martin (2005:5) identifies two waves of policy in Europe related to the flowering of the information society concept in the 1990s. The first focused on the liberalisation of telecommunications and the development of ICT; the second on the wider social aspects of information society development including social cohesion and the “digital divide”. Those who lacked access constituted a major social problem: “people with lower incomes, lower levels of education, living in depressed areas or rural areas” - a new class of disadvantaged. Despite recognition of this problem the means used by government to address it were, in his view, “techno-economic rather than social drivers”. Martin identifies with an

approach that places technology, information and knowledge processes at the heart of economic growth but cautions, however, that “for all its wonders information and communication technology is simply an enabler of social and economic change”. In attaining an information society much more attention will need to be paid in policy agendas to social factors (Martin 2005:6, 8).

Wallis (2003:369) echoes this view arguing that “the role of information as knowledge capital means that there is danger of inappropriate commercialization of information” which can act as a barrier to its optimal use. In his view, if the information professional does not rise to the challenge of leadership within this age of “digital capitalism” (Muddiman in Martin 2005:8) society will become “information-saturated and simultaneously ignorant”. He notes Town’s identification of an information literacy problem which is manifest in students’ false confidence in the Internet as a complete information resource.

What role are librarians to play in these circumstances? Wallis (2003:370) contends that the most significant challenge for the information profession in the information society may be to map and signpost the information landscape; “this has been the traditional role of the librarian and whilst the information domain is changing the core principles of the information society remain as important to society as ever”.

Martin (2005) reports on a European Commission study of information society strategies of 15 European Union (EU) member states. The most common indicators of social concern related to particular groups within the community: women, the elderly, youth and in some countries, the unemployed. He identifies countries that, based on their published strategies, are making most progress towards being “socially driven information societies”: Denmark, Finland, Ireland, France, Sweden and Britain. He sees the impact of digital technologies on society as a complex and subtle problem in which there are limits to the role of public intervention but lauds the EU’s acknowledgement of the need “to confront the Digital Divide and the growing dangers of social exclusion” (Martin 2005:8). Table 1 shows the results of an EU scoping exercise of social equity challenges:

Table 1 Social indicators emerging in information society strategies (Martin 2005:10)

Access for all	North-South divide
Citizens’ rights	Poverty
Democratic participation	Social cohesion
Digital divide	Social inclusion
Disadvantaged groups: women	Sustainability
Disadvantaged groups: the elderly	Unemployment
Disadvantaged groups: youth	Welfare
Lifelong learning	

Lor and Britz (2005:63-64) point out like Martin that “there is widespread acceptance that information (or rather knowledge) is the dominant strategic resource of this new era, comparable to land in the agricultural era and to capital in the industrial era”. In making a claim for a moral framework for dealing with questions of information flows, they identify a “common good that consists of those things that society shares to everyone’s benefit”. They put forward the notion of the “information commons” and cite Rawls and his concept of social justice to assert that “Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty with a compatible liberty to others” (Lor and Britz 2005:65). Among these is the right to communicate, for “communities and nations to share their view and to learn from others”. They quote Hamelink: “globalization without dialogue becomes homogenization and hegemony. Localization without dialogue becomes fragmentation and isolation” (Lor and Britz 2005:66). Transposed to the local government level this recognition poses great challenges for highly heterogeneous societies like South Africa.

Dutch (1999) traces the impact since 1997, of the social exclusion concept on policies and directions at national and local levels in Britain. Following key documents published by the Social Exclusion Unit, in 1999 the DCMS brought out *Libraries for all: public libraries and social inclusion* which demonstrated Government’s recognition of the public library as an important player in addressing social exclusion. Contrary to Dutch’s view (1999:199), above, Train et al (2000:484) argue that the use of the term inclusion in the title of the document is positive, heralding attempts to find solutions and to showcase good practice.

Another significant initiative was that of the Library and Information Commission (LIC) which investigated the library’s potential for overcoming social exclusion, the scale and extent of which Muddiman (1999:10) saw as presenting public services like libraries with “enormous challenges”. In 2000 the former LIC published the report, *Libraries, the essence of inclusion*, supporting this view by noting that the revised Government social inclusion agenda had not fully articulated the role of libraries in combating exclusion. In 2000 the LIC merged with the Museums and Galleries Commission to form Resource which continued to work on the library’s role in inclusion (Train et al 2000: 484).

Eighteen years after Hill’s statement (above), however, Muddiman (1999) criticised the extent to which libraries had achieved inclusion. Pateman (1999/2000), in a similar vein, drew on Bramley to show that the biggest users of public libraries were middle class; one third of the population was middle class but this class comprised two thirds of the library users. Two thirds of the population was working class but this class formed only one third of library

users. Durrani (in Pateman 1999/2000) points out that while some are “over-included” in this way, many black and working class people are marginalised by white, middle class power relations in libraries. Pateman (1999/2000) cites Muddiman’s comments that for these non-users the gap between their culture and that of the library is unbridgeable. But how unbridgeable is it? Pateman argues that a useful starting point in seeking to counter the dominance in surveys of middle class user responses is to ask working class people, for example, and women especially (Vincent and Linley 2000:233) what they want from library services.

Hendry points out that in 1999 in a survey about responses to ICT accessibility that 35% of the respondents, more than a third of adult society in Britain, were either concerned about being left behind or alienated from the ICT context by their lack of interest or motivation. They were mainly drawn from the ranks of poorer, older, working class women. Other groups who were vulnerable in terms of skills exclusion were the self-employed, non-university graduates and low income workers. He argues for a policy specifically focused on information inclusion and knowledge inclusion: “I believe that the profession of information management and librarianship is uniquely placed to play a role in this process” (Hendry 2000:332-333).

Why public libraries are regarded as sites for addressing exclusion

Addressing informationally based social exclusion, Kerslake and Kinnell (1998:1,3) offer international evidence “demonstrating that public libraries have a vigorous impact on many aspects of society”. Hendry (2000:334) reminds us that in the nineteenth century public libraries “helped to revolutionise educational opportunities in the towns and cities of the first Industrial Revolution. They were described as the ‘poor man’s university’”. Despite being starved of resources for much of the last two decades they are still “enormously popular” and

- 58% of the population are library users
- 400 million visits are made to libraries in Britain each year
- 10 million visit at least once a fortnight.

“They offer levels of customer usage, satisfaction and brand loyalty which would inspire envy by any private organisation. The footfall through Carlisle Central Library per month is higher than any of the retail outlets in that city, including Marks and Spencer”. Libraries “promote social inclusion by helping to bridge the gap between those who can afford access to information and those who cannot”. They are “mentors and gatekeepers for those excluded from ICT”

(Hendry 2000:334-5). For him the opportunities libraries face are “boundless” and the problems of social exclusion are “more than solvable”.

The LIC working group (in Train et al 2000: 484) saw libraries

as places of sanctuary, secure, risk-free, social places that are welcoming to all; caring, helpful, supportive places where people meet on equal terms; non-judgemental, non-competitive, non-accrediting places and meeting places for individuals and ideas, shaped by and shaping the community.

Previous government initiatives in this area had concentrated on infrastructural aspects of exclusion such as inaccessible public services and information resources and had not recognized that “exclusion is experienced subjectively, that it is specific and relative to each member of society”. Therefore it should be examined in both psychological and sociological terms (Train et al 2000: 485).

The LIC suggested that in the wholly inclusive society:

- Individuals are *confident, resourceful* and *hopeful*, and have opportunities to be *enterprising* and *responsible*.
- Groups *celebrate diversity* through ‘delighting in difference’. They develop respect and appreciation for others’ differences; have access to *equality of opportunity and enhanced opportunity*; and display and enjoy *trust and sharing* within and between communities.
- Infrastructures reflect
 - Accessibility* – access to information, resources and services, irrespective of location allowing calibre and diversity of choice;
 - quality* – of services, resources and environment, including the nurturing of creative, pleasant environments;
 - sustainability* – ongoing investment ensures trust in, and constancy of, public service;
 - civility* – to allow individuals, communities and organizations to become actively involved in citizenship – and the development of institutions as *learning organizations*, responsive and accountable to their communities (Train et al 2000:485).

Train et al (2000:485) note the publication of two research project reports that identify a central role for the public library in a holistic sense. These are Elkin and Kinnell’s *A place for children: public libraries as a major force in children’s reading* and Train, Nankivell, Shoolbred and Denham’s *The value and impact of homework clubs in public libraries*.

While libraries have played a vital and unique role in supporting the reading needs of all children and young people Train et al argue that the role of such

services requires redefining because of various societal changes brought by recent decades. Some of these are:

- A higher proportion of black and ethnic minority groups in the younger population than in the population as a whole
- A rapidly growing number of single-parent families
- Widespread long-term unemployment and poverty.

As a result society now includes “many children and young people who were not fully integrated into their local community” (Train et al 2000:485).

Vincent (2002:[2]) citing the DCMS and Scottish Museums Council identifies specific categories of barriers to library use, and gives some examples:

- *Institutional*: charges; rules
- *Personal and social*: lack of confidence to ask for what you need; lack of basic skills
- *Perceptions and awareness*: “the library’s not for us”; “you have to pay to join”
- *Environmental*: location, physical access to and within the building.

While many libraries are dismantling these barriers Vincent (2002) suggests that new barriers are being created, for example, by library workers who argue that “It’s not our proper job” or “they’re not our proper users” in cases where the library is being used by people such as refugees e-mailing home. He cites the impressive example of Merton which has re-focused the service around lifelong learning, economic regeneration and community development.

The following two sections address two linked key areas of exclusion: rural areas and the ICT initiatives which are used in many cases to address problems of limited resources in rural areas. Both examples were highlighted in the coverage of the available literature on social exclusion and both are important in the South African context as the section on the local literature shows. These sections demonstrate how public libraries in the literature have responded to the problems regarding these two examples and are included here for these reasons.

Rural exclusion and library-based attempts to overcome it

Haggis and Goulding (2003) suggest that resources have been directed mainly at urban areas while Benstead, Spacey and Goulding (2004:402) provide insight into hardships experienced by rural people; often caused by social isolation and failed attempts to access services. Moor and Whitworth (in Benstead et al 2004:402) highlight a lack of access, giving examples, to

- *Opportunities*: jobs, learning and training

- *Services*: health care, education, shops, leisure and cultural services
- *Information*: welfare advice and information
- *Transport poverty*: greater reliance on public transport but also a comparative lack and infrequency of transport
- *Under-employment, seasonal, casual and temporary employment and low wages and the high cost relative to local wage levels.*

The Library Association has recognized the public library's potential as one of the few agencies which serve all parts of rural England. Interesting results in term of the flexible co-location of rural library services in a café, post office or pub are reported in Benstead et al (2004:402,405).

In the US it was found that access to ICT and the Internet provided rural residents with expanded resources and up-to-date information, especially medical information (Vincent 2002:4). The role of ICTs is addressed next.

Important ICT based initiatives and the role of ICTs in alleviating exclusion

The number of authorities using ICT was small in Benstead et al's (2004:407) study but most library authorities thought that ICT had had a significant impact on the delivery of services to rural communities. Derbyshire installed ISDNs in community buildings so that the mobile library service could deliver ICT to those who would not have easy access to it otherwise. Gloucestershire built a website in partnership with other local organisations to provide information for refugees and asylum-seekers¹ (Vincent 2002:4).

The British People's Network reaches parts of the society that were previously under-represented with regard to Internet access and computer use. No less than 40% of the non-members of libraries who use People's Network facilities also join the library. Reasons cited for using the Network were "learning, finding work, personal identity, community enrichment, social inclusion; and culture and creativity". There was also a considerable increase in young users entering libraries. Popular software in addition to email was office software, learning packages especially IT skills, online community information and reader development, local or national e-government services, digitized material such as local history images and electronic reference enquiries (People's network: a quiet revolution. 2003:3).

In counterpoint there is widespread recognition of the aggravating effects of the digital divide on the information rich-information poor dichotomy. Lor and Britz (2005:6) quote Arunachalam:

It is the nature of any new technology to exacerbate the existing divide between the rich and the poor. The newer and more potent the technology, the greater its ability to increase inequalities.

Jimba (in Ashcroft 2002:5) raises the issue of transferring information technology to developing situations expecting that it will function in a culturally appropriate way. The digital divide itself, Ashcroft notes, is a form of social exclusion on an international scale. Securing access is not the end of the story. Power (in Ashcroft 2002:5) is positive about the role information technology can play in alleviating social exclusion, in that it has a unique ability to share and preserve experiential knowledge and oral culture through digitisation.

Elkin and Kinnell's 2000 study of the public library's role in combating social exclusion

Elkin and Kinnell (in Train et al 2000:486-487), found that the public library was an agent in combating social exclusion. They identified five situations relating to what the library provided (a sixth has been added in this article). These situations are likely to have relevance as examples for the South African and other situations.

A non-judgemental, non-competitive, non-accrediting environment.

While the responsibility for reading skills acquisition was seen by most library authorities to lie with the school, librarians had responded to this challenge in acknowledging the importance of reading in the socio-cultural development of the child. They sought to facilitate the latter by:

- Providing all children with the opportunity to develop at their own pace, through equal access to collections representing the whole range of children's literature
- Ensuring that all children felt that the library was a place for them, not only for adults.

A caring, helpful and supportive place for the entire family

Librarians recognized the value of providing help for the reading child and his/her parents:

Encouraging parents to use the library is vital ... Parents need to be educated too, about what children read, and how to use the library ... We can help parents who would be intimidated going into a school to ask what to get for their children.

Some libraries had developed literacy schemes targeted at parents and child carers with low literacy skills. Such initiatives recognized that all parents could support the educational and social development of their children.

A place to discover and delight in diversity.

Very few authorities had managed to develop strategies to meet the needs of various ethnic groups within the community where group tensions were common. Children from such groups who were failing in school were a priority. In cases where adults from various groups did not use the library the children did in many cases. The library has demonstrated its ability to “encourage the development of socialization skills in all young people... by introducing them to communities other than their own in a neutral environment”.

A safe haven, a place of sanctuary

Recognising that life can be difficult for many young people who have to cope with the pressures of incipient adulthood in insecure environments, Elkin and Kinnell report that the public library did provide many children in desolate and neglected areas with “a means of temporary escape in a non-threatening, risk free social centre” where they could meet friends in a neutral and well-regulated environment”.

A force for public good

As the heart of the local community the public library makes a contribution as well as having a wider-reaching social role.

A base for homework clubs - safe, welcoming environments for social learning

Homework clubs in public libraries have benefits for children and young people that go far beyond educational benefits. Clubs were a place that helped with the difficult period of change for the children starting secondary school; offering those who were less academic, not very popular in school, or disaffected from school a neutral ground, as well as positive anonymity, safety, and privacy. A major service was equal access to printed and online resources and equal opportunities for all which at this age, Train et al (2000:64,69) suggest can mean enhanced opportunities to succeed. Other important research is reported in the next section.

What impact evaluation research reveals about public library initiatives

Wavell et al’s (2002:1) study, the Available Evidence Project, responded to Resource’s need for impact measurement data for stakeholders. It identified evidence from the years 1995 to 2000 on impact evaluation for museums, archives and libraries, synthesised it, described critically the different evaluation methodologies used in the sector, identified gaps and provided recommendations. Table 3 reflects the themes in their review:

Table 3 Summary of themes in social impact/social exclusion literature reviews (Wavell et al. 2002:11)

Kerslake and Kinnell (1997)	Matarasso (1998)	Coalter (2001)	Jermyn (2001)	Scott (2002)
1)The impact on the community in which library operates. 2)Impact on skills i.Literacy and numeracy. ii.Computer literacy iii.Lifelong and open learning. 3)Economic impact i.Information provision to business community. ii.Alleviating poverty. iii.Stimulating town centre activity. iv.Library expenditure.	Personal development Education and learning. Employment. Families and young people. Poverty. Health Community development Community. Social exclusion. Democracy. Local culture.	Personal capital Social contact. Development of confidence and self-esteem. Education and life long learning. Health and well-being. Social capital Economic and employment effects. Social cohesion and community empowerment. Community safety. Environmental improvements.	Impacts on the individual. The arts in education. Arts and offenders. Health and well-being. Creating social capital. Community development and urban regeneration.	Collective and personal development. Discussion and debate. Personal identity. Tolerance and understanding. Reverential commemorative experiences. Collective identity. Economic value. Education value.

The study reported on four areas that form the priority areas of government policy in Britain but which are relevant in any society. These are social, learning and economic impact and access. Social impact and access are described here.

Social impact

Social impact links to the discussion of social capital (above) and relates to “the overcoming of exclusion of individuals or groups in terms of poverty, education, race, or disability and may also include issues of health, community safety, employment and education” (Wavell et al 2002:6). Evidence from seven studies was reported and these found libraries played a role in

- *Social cohesion* – by providing a meeting place and centre of community development: raising the profile and confidence of marginalised groups
- *Community empowerment* – by supporting community groups and developing a sense of equity and access
- *Local culture and identity* – by providing community identity and information
- *Health and well-being* – by contributing to the quality of life and how well people feel, as well as providing health information services
- *Personal development* – including formal education, lifelong learning and training; after school activities; literacy, leisure, social and cultural objectives, through book borrowing; skills development and availability of public information
- *Local economy* – by providing business information and supporting skills development (Wavell et al 2002:v).

The most compelling evidence was found in the area of personal development. In spite of these positive findings Wavell et al (2002:vi) suggest that mechanisms for monitoring social impact in public libraries have yet to be established.

Access

Wavell et al (2002:6) define access as “the *provision of opportunity* whether physical, emotional or intellectual, to accommodate learning, social or economic wellbeing”. The literature revealed various barriers to access:

- *Institutional* – restrictive opening hours, inappropriate staff attitudes, charging policies
- *Personal and social* – lack of basic skills, low self-esteem
- *Perceptions and awareness* – “the organization has nothing to offer”
- *Environmental* – physical access, poor transport links.

Other studies exposed further factors: fear of the unknown, lack of appropriate mediation, location and aesthetics, and organizational learning. There was still a lot to be learned and acted upon to improve emotional, physical and intellectual access (Wavell et al 2002:85).

The British Audit Commission’s report (in Wavell et al 2002:24) suggested that the core role of public libraries is flexible, difficult to define and to measure in terms of outcomes. Consequently there is a danger of its being neglected by the cutting of book funds or library opening hours in favour of high profile national objectives. Wavell et al report that the evidence from public library studies was found to be potentially more useful in convincing influential policy makers and funders about the importance of the role of the library. They preferred quantitative measures and the validity of scale, preferably based on relatively large scale investigations conducted rigorously to other measures. These studies also produced some less positive results, for instance, negative points concerning the inclusiveness of public libraries (Black and Crann 2002;Wavell et al 2002: 31-32).

Wavell et al (2002:6) conclude that physical, emotional and intellectual access to resources and collections is a prerequisite for positive impact. In particular they see lifelong learning and social inclusion as priorities that the library has tried to address via the development of new partnerships and programme initiatives, including ICT projects. Muddiman et al (2001) like Britz (2004) in South Africa, base their case on social justice and argue that if “public libraries are seriously to address social exclusion, they need to become much more proactive, interventionist and educative institutions, with a concern for social justice at their core”.

All libraries and information workers and not only public libraries are urged by Ashcroft (2002: 3) to tackle social exclusion by actively adopting policies “that place an ongoing commitment to social inclusivity within their working culture”. In making the case for libraries as one of the best placed organisations with the cultural sector to bring about the necessary change to address social exclusion at community level the DCMS (in Ashcroft 2002:3) stated that what is needed is “mainstreaming social inclusion as a policy priority within all library and information services”. The scale and complexity of the social exclusion issues requires that public libraries examine the extent to which their services include all parts of society. Libraries need to address that proportion of the population who are not library members. Vincent (in Ashcroft 2002:4) argues that “this work cannot just be bolted on, but has to be mainstreamed” and this has implications for resource allocation. The complexity of the issue should not be underestimated and the limits of social inclusion initiatives are recognized by Dutch (1999:194) for instance.

For South African librarians similar constraints and challenges will operate. This will not mean as Dutch (1999:200) suggests a return to the community librarianship of the 1970s but may require “‘whole’ library structures that are

more radical in challenging present service provision and more systematically responsive to communities and community empowerment". For now, and in agreement with Dutch's observation (1999:200), at least the use of the term exclusion focuses the agenda on the needs of the excluded.

The way forward might lie in Woolcock's recognition (in Clutterbuck 2001) of the usefulness of the concept of social capital (above). While it is a good concept for understanding the role of networks in social and economic development Woolcock warns against over estimating the self-reliance of communities. However he also argues for an agency perspective:

At its best, a social capital perspective recognizes that exclusion from economic and political institutions is created and maintained by powerful vested interests, but that marginalized groups themselves possess unique social resources that can be used as a basis for overcoming that exclusion, and as a mechanism for helping to forge access to these institutions (Woolcock 2001:16).

For Clutterbuck (2001:1) "It takes an articulated effort of both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' to overcome this exclusion, but it can and is being done, with positive and lasting results. The next section describes the available evidence on the concept of social exclusion in the local LIS literature.

South African LIS literature and the concept of social exclusion

Key foci from the literature of social exclusion are found in the South African LIS literature. Without attempting comprehensive coverage, some examples are given here. Lor et al (2005:268) point out that while South Africa is "probably better endowed with public libraries than any other sub-Saharan country... the distribution and impact of these libraries have been skewed by the inequalities of the apartheid system". South Africa's public libraries face great challenges, for example, realigning themselves in the new democracy. Some managers renamed their services community libraries (Lor et al 2005:268), a step which Stilwell (1997) saw as somewhat superficial in many cases, rather than a system wide approach. It is in this mode that public librarianship has largely continued, albeit with a considerable expansion of service points into formerly unserved areas (Lor et al 2005: 269). There have been many positive developments, for example, in KwaZulu-Natal. Slater (2005) reports extensive library projects in rural areas as well as high levels of use by youth. Msunduzi boasts a remarkable new Bessie Head youth library.

Lor et al (2005:269) report on the spatial approach adopted for the Public and Community Libraries Inventory of South Africa (PaCLISA) project which used a geographic information system to plot the distribution of public and community libraries. They conclude that there are “areas of neglect and pockets of excellence” and warn that “if opportunities are not seized, public and community libraries could be bypassed by the political decision-makers”. Ashcroft (2002:4-5) refers in the context of social exclusion to Massawe and Ncongwane’s paper presented in 2000 at the SCECSAL conference in Namibia. It was presented at a local conference in 1999. The authors did not use the term social exclusion but they did trace attempts to address information problems in post-apartheid South Africa. Among these are the 1994 Constitution’s relegating libraries to provincial competence which in their view perpetuates inequalities. Mokgaboki (2002:78), in a similar vein, draws attention to the rural areas and their exclusion.

Ramogale and Fortuin (2004) address excluded or partially admitted groups, such as people with disabilities and use of, and access to, libraries and the Internet by race, with reasons for non-use by race. On a similar theme Valentine (2004) reports on the Smart Cape Access Project which targeted groups excluded from access to ICTs in the Western Cape via public libraries. This project sought to involve women, noting that girls traditionally have less exposure to technology. Of the Cape Smart users, 79% were men, hence access for women remains an issue to be addressed.

Witbooi (2005) reflects on the Western Cape’s Wesbank Library project, the result of a need for library and study facilities expressed at a community meeting by youth in the area. She offers sobering comment on her experiences of the complexity of post-apartheid South African communities, expressing the view that obtaining the full cooperation of the community for the library project is “very idealistic and optimistic – a reality that only exists in theory”. While communities are aware of their constitutional rights it is difficult to reach consensus in working groups. She comments further: “The community is quick to demand (express a need) services, yet when called upon to participate, their own poor socio-economic positions render them unavailable for service ...enthusiasm abounds for the project, but voluntary participation is a scarce commodity” (Witbooi 2005).

The concept of the archive in relation to the National Library of South Africa and the power relations that have framed inclusions in and exclusions from the collection are examined by Ritchie and Hermanus (2004). They draw on Mbembe to argue that certain documents are privileged over others and that in

this way the collection reflects exclusion from the archive of the “marginalized and silenced”.

Comments by De Jager and Nassimbeni on the PaCLISA research, suggesting that it represented “only the beginning of a ‘culture of assessment’” are referred to by Lor et al (2005:272). In a sense, this too is what Ramagale and Fortuin seek to embark on, and what Witbooi’s comments point to. In developing a culture of assessment in South African public libraries the case studies and comments on methodologies from the Available Evidence Project could provide useful examples.

Britz’s (2004:192) work does address social exclusion directly, pointing out how complex an issue the information divide is, embracing as it does such issues as “cultural and language diversity, levels of education and the ability/inability to access and benefit from information”. A primary cause of exclusion is the inability “to understand the language of ICT in order to obtain contextual functionality” which is more than “pressing the right buttons”. In addition to access people must have appropriate education to enhance their ability to derive benefit from information (Britz 2004:192,197). Like Woolcock and Clutterbuck above he provides a social capital perspective with reference to Chatman, noting “insiders share a communal culture, knowledge base, and set of symbols”. They understand and apply the contextually-bound information of “the space they inhabit as they share social networks and social capital which confer upon them powerful information resources within a given society”. The outsiders, excluded from the network, are considered information-poor in this context (Britz 2004:196).

Certain resources are owed to the information poor because they are human, Britz (2004:195) argues. Information that is essential to survival services in health, education, welfare, agriculture and labour, for example, must be regarded as a public good. There is a societal benefit to using such information. He cites Heeks to observe, however, that poor communities might not need new information; rather they may lack the expertise needed to access existing information. At the same time access to information and the ability to assign meaning to it may not solve the problems of these communities, and in his view may rather create unmet expectations.

Drawing on Sen, he argues that the fair distribution of opportunities is “to a certain extent more important than only the fair distribution of goods” (Britz 2004:198-9). Information affluence requires an infrastructure that enables the communication of information and ranges from the provision of libraries, publishers and booksellers to mass media distribution and electronic networks,

as well as the formulation and application of information policies (Britz 2004:196). He notes that the right to information is entrenched in the South African constitution: the Promotion of Access to Information Act, no 2 of 2000, in particular, protects citizens' rights to essential information.

Agha's claim that "Information is similar to the air we breathe. It should be free" is cited by Lor and Britz (2005:11) who point out the cost to our society if we do not nurture this right to information. The current article draws on these authors to argue that onerous as it might be to ensure an inclusive library and information service we need to consider the cost to society of not doing this, or of not doing it sufficiently energetically; rather than assessing the cost of doing it and finding an excuse in cost for not acting. The benefits are complex and difficult to define, particularly in financial terms; but the costs of the forgone alternative are less complex and easier to use in making a case for public libraries².

Where to and conclusions?

The article has defined social exclusion, identified factors that influence it, described the background to the initiatives and the reasons why public libraries are regarded as sites for addressing exclusion. Evidence from impact evaluation studies has been reviewed. In counterpoint evidence from literature searches on the concept of social exclusion with reference to South African LIS has been identified. It remains now to sum up and conclude this exploration.

The terms formerly disadvantaged and advantaged tend to persist in the local context. While the social exclusion issues have challenged our colleagues elsewhere, bringing for instance, a more nuanced view of community library issues and powerful new library-based inclusion initiatives, here they have tended to remain largely peripheral, but with some notable exceptions. This in itself is a matter of interest.

The reasons for the lack of engagement with the concept could lie in a view such as that of Levitas (in Dutch 1999) that the term social inclusion suggests an ultimate lack of universality, which might not sit well with our new democracy. On the other hand many of the formerly disadvantaged now constitute a newly advantaged class while the more vulnerable of both those formerly advantaged by race as well as the previously disadvantaged, have fallen on hard times in the job market. Access to opportunity has shifted radically in some instances and very little in others. South Africa represents a challenging context with the high incidence of HIV/AIDS infection in the younger population groups juxtaposed against the realities of meeting the expectations of the bright future many South

Africans expect. The exclusion literature is at pains to point out the complexity of the term, and that a single variable is seldom responsible for exclusion. Do we therefore not need more complex lenses to assist us in assessing the extent of access and exclusion in South Africa so as to build a compelling case for public libraries?

In examining the concept of social exclusion and attempts to address it we are offered:

- A complex understanding of the concept of exclusion
- Knowledge that the concept can be applied more widely than is commonly expected and that its boundaries shift
- A crisper focus on the issues of who is in and who is out
- An opportunity to advance our vestigial culture of assessment informed by research on the impact of factors linked to social exclusion
- An opportunity to formulate more cogent plans of action, informed by impact studies
- A chance to take forward the somewhat limited local concept and practice of community librarianship.

Wallis (2003:371), like others above, warns that social good will not automatically follow the diffusion of technology through society and as government and other organisations compete to deliver services online “there is a danger of increased social exclusion unless there are agents operating within communities who can offer not only access to the digital environment but also the skills in information literacy required to benefit from it”. He sees public libraries as well placed to take on this role, quoting Muddiman:

The information and library community can change the inequalities, injustices and chaos of postmodern capitalism by building new pathways to knowledge based on values of social justice; universal literacy and the right to know.

Should the South African public library rise to this challenge it might continue to “reinvigorate and reinvent itself” but “if it fails, then the public library too, like the poor and excluded communities it exists to serve, might find itself consigned to the margins of the “information” society in the twenty first century” (Muddiman 1999:12). This article asks whether this challenge is the beginning of “boundless opportunities” and one that local public and other librarians should heed. If this is so, what should the nature of our response be?

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Endnotes

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