

# **Governance of public library services: how philosophical approaches to a public service impact on practice <sup>1</sup>**

David McMenemy  
Computer and Information Sciences  
University of Strathclyde  
Glasgow, Scotland

## **Introduction**

Challenges for public libraries faced since the turn of the millennium has seen the period dubbed a volatile time for their history (Goulding, 2006, p.3). One of the key challenges faced by public services is how the governance regimes they must work under view those services from the point of view of prevailing political philosophy. While this might seem a rather esoteric issue to consider in the daily grind of service provision, the political philosophy of any prevailing government will have a significant bearing on how they approach the delivery of public services during their tenure, and what they see as the purpose of those public services. It follows that this will then have a significant knock-on effect for the professions charged with delivering those services, who might have to interpret potentially changing missions and ends for their services.

This chapter explores how public libraries have been viewed historically in view of the political philosophy of the day, how this has impacted on governance, and how an understanding of this can contribute to more effective advocacy on behalf of the profession. After defining the philosophical terms of reference, the discussion is brought up to date with an analysis of how current political thinking challenges the traditional public library ethos we may have grown to believe was eternal. The focus of the chapter is the United Kingdom, however readers across the world should be able to recognise the theoretical influences discussed and how they might apply within their own countries and how they deliver services there.

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## **Political philosophy – the theoretical dimension**

Political philosophy is largely informed by ethical frameworks. The three main ethical theories that have most informed political philosophy are:

- Consequentialist ethics
- Deontological, or duty-based ethics, and
- Virtue ethics

We will summarise each theoretical area in the sections below.

### *Consequentialist ethics*

Consequentialism relates to the potential outcomes of an action and the ethical ramifications of said action. What is important for the consequentialist is that the outcome is satisfactory, not necessarily how that outcome has been achieved. The main consequentialist ethical theory is utilitarianism. The father of utilitarianism was Jeremy Bentham whose theories were developed further by John Stuart Mill. The basic formula for utilitarianism is the *greatest happiness for the greatest number*; not individual happiness, but happiness for the largest number of people.

Utilitarianism had a significant effect on political philosophy through the Victorian era and well into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century before it was arguably supplanted by philosophies more focussed around individual freedoms. The emergence of major public services, welfare systems, and institutions like public libraries and museums can be attributed to the emerging utilitarian thinkers of the Victorian era. From a purely public libraries stance, then, utilitarianism has had a significant effect on the development of information services to the public, and to this date it remains a political philosophy that carries great favour with many public sector professionals who believe the services they provide maximum value for the public, and as such can be justified because of the positive results they provide for wider society. For instance, encouragement of reading, helping educational outcomes, providing a neutral space within a community, all of these are potential utilitarian justifications for library services, since they highlight the wider societal benefits that arise from providing them.

As we have stated, utilitarianism relates to the happiness and well-being of the majority – therefore in a utilitarian world it is acceptable for some in society to lose out if the happiness of the majority is the over-riding consequence. This is an important concept, since taken to its extreme it could advocate harm being allowed to a small number of people to benefit the

majority. Clearly this raises significant issues of natural justice that have to be addressed by any ethical thinker. An argument against libraries we will revisit later relates to the requirement of a citizen to pay taxes to provide libraries whether they want to or not. This critique, from a liberal standpoint, centres on the argument that the individual's rights should not be subsumed for a greater societal good. The *fairness* of welfare services (consideration of the balance between those who benefit and those who do not) has been a key feature of the critique of utilitarianism by rights-based philosophers, and we will see an example of this kind of critique from a public library perspective that occurred, in a blaze of publicity, later in the chapter.

### *Deontological ethics*

Deontological ethics relate to the concept that there are certain values or actions that are inherently good or bad. Deontological, or duty-based, ethics are primarily based around the theories of Immanuel Kant, a German 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher. Kant was not convinced by the concept of utilitarianism, believing that it ignored a fundamental point in ethics that some actions were by their very nature good or bad and that this, not the consequences of the actions, were what is important. As we have seen above, taken to its extreme, utilitarianism could arguably support murder or theft or torture, if as a result of these acts happiness of the majority was guaranteed. The deontologist would instead see the act itself as being right or wrong, regardless of the consequences.

In essence Kant provided four axioms related to his ethical world view that have been argued to provide basic guidance (Hauptman, 1988: 2). Firstly, Kant's concept of goodwill related to the desire on the part of the human being "to act correctly, fairly, or ethically" (Hauptman, 1988: 2). The second is duty, which as Hauptman observes could be regarded outside of a strict government role such as military, or security, to be rather an old-fashioned concept from Kant's time. It can, however, be considered to apply to professional ethics. (Hauptman, 1988: 2).

Kant's *categorical imperative* is arguably the most important of his theories related to ethics. In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, published in 1785, he stated two further important maxims that underpin his theories. The first of these maxims states that "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law".

Within this oft-quoted line lies the basis of an ethical theory that has been interpreted and re-interpreted to this day. The basis of the imperative is that any action should be morally justifiable by virtue of it being measured against it being a potential universal law of nature.

Kant's final maxim relates to the morality of how we use other human beings. He states "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end". Using a human being as a means relates to using them to further your own interests, and not thinking of their interests. Treating them as an end, on the other hand, means considering their interests in any dealings you may have with them. This essentially means respecting their freedoms to make decisions and to act in their own interests. This part of the categorical imperative is the basis of many of the rights-based philosophies that currently exist.

#### Rights-based concepts

The rights each citizen should expect to be afforded is what forms the main concern of rights-based philosophers. These are considered from myriad standpoints, such as the right of the individual not to have their interests interfered with by society or organisations, as well as the right to maximise one's own happiness first and foremost.

As may be obvious, rights-based approaches can clash somewhat with consequentialism in some of their manifestations. Indeed, the right of individuals versus the rights of the largest number could be seen to be one of the most persistent philosophical debates of the past 40 or so years, since political philosophy from the 1970s onwards has been heavily influenced by rights-based notions of individual freedom, especially related to free-markets.

#### Negative and positive rights

An important aspect of such rights-based theories relate to the concepts of *negative and positive rights*. Positive rights consider the notion that citizens have a set of expectations as to the services they should receive from the state. Often referred to as *welfare rights*, they incorporate issues such as education, health, unemployment benefits, and the like. In opposition to positive rights, negative rights are based around the notion that people should not be unjustly interfered

with, and that the over-riding maxim should be one of freedom to pursue one's own interest first and foremost.

A key theorist around the notion of positive and negative liberty was Isaiah Berlin, who believed that proponents of positive liberty could steer into coercion or authoritarianism in trying to achieve the goals they saw as just. Berlin argued that:

Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture in the name, and on behalf, of their 'real' selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man ... must be identical with his freedom.  
(Berlin 1969, pp. 132–33)

Negative rights inform the thinking of many who label their beliefs as libertarian in origin, and can often mean mistrust of state intervention, publically-funded services, and taxation. Indeed, one of the key thinkers in the area, Robert Nozick, has labelled taxation as tantamount to making the taxpayer a slave of the state (Nozick, 1974). His argument was that if an individual has worked to earn money, then the state taking part of that money without permission means that portion of the time spent working was actually working on behalf of the state.

For negative rights philosophers, the concept of self-ownership is of paramount importance, and the freedom to choose how their interests are advanced should be theirs and theirs alone.

Another philosopher beloved of negative rights proponents is Ayn Rand, who famously stated that, "Individual rights are not subject to a public vote; a majority has no right to vote away the rights of a minority; the political function of rights is precisely to protect minorities from oppression by majorities (and the smallest minority on earth is the individual)."

Clearly we can see a direct challenge to the kind of philosophical approach that justifies spending on a public library service in this kind of mind-set. Indeed, in the mid-1980s, a right-leaning think-tank, the Adam Smith Institute, argued against public library services on several points that were informed from a negative rights perspective (ASI, 1986). Firstly, the potential coercion of the taxpayer, the cost to authors and publishers, and lastly the funding of leisure (a private pursuit) by the public purse. The report advocated charging for library services rather than paying for them through general taxation.

### *Virtue ethics*

Virtue ethics has its origins in the classical philosophy of Aristotle. A major consideration in classical mythology was what the virtuous life would actually be, and this informed the concept of living the *good life*, and being a good person. At the heart of the concept was *eudaimonia* or happiness, the point of the virtuous life being to maximise happiness (Crisp, 1998, 2011). As Benn has observed, “In contrast to Kantian and utilitarian approaches, Aristotle is not concerned to discover a supreme practical principle telling us what to do, or to derive any secondary moral rules from such a principle” (Benn, 1998: 161). In Aristotle’s ethical approach virtue was about individuals developing specific dispositions to act in virtuous ways. This was not a simple binary issue, since Aristotle saw dispositions to be individually on a scale between excess and deficiency, with the ideal disposition being a mean for each category. For instance, when we consider the disposition of courage, Aristotle argued that it was the mean on a scale that had fear on one side, and boldness on the other. For the virtue of self-control, it lay between pleasure and pain. The virtuous disposition, then, lay between two other dispositions, both believed by Aristotle to be vices; one of excess, and one of deficiency. Importantly, Aristotle also saw that the mean might adapt to specific situations. For example, anger in some situations is warranted: when one witnesses injustice, perhaps. The virtuous person can respond to circumstances appropriately, demonstrating the appropriate disposition to meet the need of the situation.

Another key idea relates to the promotion of civic values, that is, the values related to “people's beliefs, commitments, capabilities, and actions as members or prospective members of communities” (Crittenden and Levine, 2016). The alignment of the cultivation of virtue with the concept of being a good citizen is an important one to consider not only from classical philosophy but also when we consider contemporary policy issues. For instance, in virtue ethics, dispositions such as being charitable are an important aspect of being a virtuous person, and we can identify this consideration applied with regards to libraries when it comes to the issue of volunteering, but also in terms of how many libraries are now being governed under new structures related to charitable bodies, and the broader movement towards seeking donations for public services from philanthropists. This is a significant departure for UK library governance, but is a direct influence of elements of virtue ethics returning to the political consciousness, and

its impact on public service provision. The impact on library governance of this is yet to be fully understood.

### Communitarianism

This leads us on to discuss the topic of community: the key debates in political philosophy from the 80s onwards have been related to community. Philosophers such as Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Walzer dubbed with the label of *communitarians*, argued that a societal focus on individual autonomy meant that citizens were viewed as atomised individuals, all involved in maximising their own position in opposition to others. The communitarians believed that this was a reductive way of looking at human beings and it ignored major influences such as family, community, and country that were a major part of their identity. Importantly for communitarian philosophers, the Aristotelian concept of virtue was inherent in a more community-focussed approach to social justice. The idea was that forming the good citizen to be a part of a strong and functioning community was a vital component of social justice.

MacIntyre's key "critique of liberalism derives from a judgment that the best type of human life, that in which the tradition of the virtues is most adequately embodied, is lived by those engaged in constructing and sustaining forms of community directed towards the shared achievement of those common goods without which the ultimate human good cannot be achieved" (MacIntyre, 1981, 2007: xiv-xv). This is a clear clash with a rights-based approach that advocates no one conception of the common good or morality that should predominate in society. Sandel similarly questioned whether a just society could emerge as a result of a focus on a neutral society that privileged the goals and aspirations of individuals over those of the community values that have emerged through a shared culture, narrative, and history:

At issue is not whether individual or communal claims should carry greater weight but whether the principles of justice that govern the basic structure of society can be neutral with respect to the competing moral and religious convictions its citizens espouse. The fundamental question, in other words, is whether the right is prior to the good" (Sandel, 198: p.x).

This communitarian approach began to have influence in the mid to late 90s in the UK, firstly with some elements of Blairism, but in the most recent past we have seen communitarian philosophy majorly influence both Conservative and Labour politics through the movements

around The Big Society and Blue Labour. For instance, in a speech delivered in 2009, a year before he took power, David Cameron stated that, “because of its effect on personal and social responsibility, the recent growth of the state has promoted not social solidarity but selfishness and individualism” (Norman, 2010, p.1). We will consider the influence of this on library governance shortly.

### **Applying to the real world delivery of public libraries**

How do we consider the theories discussed above in terms of how they have impacted on public library governance? The era of utilitarianism was a good one for public libraries. It saw a rapid expansion of their growth, and it also was an easier advocacy opportunity for the profession. The notion that public libraries are a *good thing* for society is a straightforward proposition in a political climate that advocated the targeted public expenditure to benefit the largest number.

However, the focus on individual rights as the prevailing organiser for society saw the expansion of the free market society into all aspects of our lives in the last 40 years or so. This in turn impacted on professions such as librarianship as they sought to be seen as a relevant in a market society. The space does not exist in this chapter to explore the wider impact of this on librarianship, though readers wishing to do so can find treatments of various aspects of it in the work of Buschman (2003), Budd (1997), D’Angelo (2006), Usherwood (1996, 2007) among others, and an excellent critique of the impact on society more generally can be found in Sandel (2012). Budd especially considers the issue of using the word “customer” to refer to library patrons, and this impact this might have on the relationship between the library and the patron. Notwithstanding individual viewpoints on the importance of this, there was a clear attempt from the 1980s onwards to appear more business-like in terms of library provision, even going as far as providing services that mirrored corporate environments such as shops (McMenemy, 2009, p.189). Concern with this has been evident, with issues raised related to how such a consumerist approach might impact on the mission of the library service, or even corrupt it. D’Angelo has stated that library users expect their public library spaces to represent, “[...] democracy, civil education and the public good” (D’Angelo, 2006, p. 4). It is difficult to reconcile a commercial imperative with this mission, and if the library is positioned to treat the user as a customer in a marketplace as opposed to a citizen receiving services, the change in emphasis and ethos is likely



to be a challenge to traditional professional values. Seeing the commercial imperative leading to public libraries becoming populist and “dumbing down” their collections, Usherwood addressed this issue directly when he asked the question:

“The profession must decide if it wants to maintain public libraries as social institutions serving the public good or as quasi retail outlets that simply seek to maximise their popularity by responding to populist demands” (Usherwood, 1989, p.71).

Applying the theoretical ideas, we have discussed above to libraries more fully, however, allows us to expand on our discussions further in terms of both past governance issues, but also future trends. The concept of the civically-funded, free public library is one that has been with us since the mid Victorian era in the UK, USA, and Europe and across the developed and increasingly the developing world. The campaigns that led to the first public libraries in the UK and USA were linked to the growing *utilitarian* policies that were prevalent among thinkers in the period. The expansion of public libraries and other initiatives such as the expansion of museums and public parks were designed to offer maximum utility for the majority of people, utilising public funds to create a positive shared experience. The simple idea was that society as a whole would benefit if more people were able to make more productive use of their leisure time. People would be able to educate themselves and contribute more positively to society, benefitting the utility of many others. As highlighted above, however, this mind-set is not one that informs many of the political class of the recent era who believed in a market-driven individualistic world-view akin to that of some of the rights-based philosophies; it is also one that was increasingly shared by many citizens.

For a rights-based philosopher public libraries can be criticised from a philosophical perspective on at least two fronts. Firstly, by providing free access to books and other materials they deprive the creators of those resources, and those who publish them and sell them, from income. Simply put, if people are borrowing materials then there is no need to purchase them. We will discuss this crucial issue below in terms of the ethical arguments for and against. A second rights-based critique of public libraries is often that public taxation is being used to provide services that should be provided by the market, rather than the taxpayer. The issue of public libraries depriving authors and publishers of income is one that has recently been prominently highlighted in the UK. The issue is not a new one, it has been used as a critique of public libraries for a long

time, and indeed legislation has been adopted in several countries, including the UK and Germany, to ensure authors are compensated for public libraries lending their material – a concept known as *public lending right*. As a consequence, the concept of public lending right sees authors given money from a state fund to compensate them for their books being lent in libraries. This was a key argument utilised against public libraries in *Ex Libris*, where it argued that libraries account for a fraction of books sold, and the free access provided to the public was a significant cost to authors and publishers who bear the financial burden. Even the introduction of PLR placed an increased burden on the taxpayer, since the PLR monies distributed to authors came from the public purse (Adam Smith Institute, 1986).

The key reason this debate became media-worthy in the UK in recent years was not necessarily the message, but the messenger. The best-selling author of the *Horrible Histories* series, Terry Deary, raised the issue by suggesting that public libraries do indeed deprive authors, publishers and booksellers of income and that the concept of the free public library was one that belonged in a bygone age:

Because it's been 150 years, we've got this idea that we've got an entitlement to read books for free, at the expense of authors, publishers and council tax payers. This is not the Victorian age, when we wanted to allow the impoverished access to literature. We pay for compulsory schooling to do that (Flood, 2013).

He went on to argue that:

Books aren't public property, and writers aren't Enid Blyton, middle-class women indulging in a pleasant little hobby. They've got to make a living. Authors, booksellers and publishers need to eat (Flood, 2013).

For many in the library and information world, and even in the wider publishing world, these views were disagreeable: but they represent a logical, viable viewpoint shared by many who have a rights-based approach to ethical thinking that informs their world-view. Terry's viewpoint is not necessarily *wrong*; it is merely another way of looking at an issue of rights that those who disagree need to find appropriate ways of debating without coming across as unreasonable. Responses to Deary's stance ranged from reasoned argument advocating the benefits of public libraries to society, to hate mail and an online petition to remove his books from public libraries, which was later removed.

The key issue at stake in the Deary debate was the *right* of the author and publisher of a work to maximise their income from their own outputs. Public libraries as sources of a free supply of books to all citizens potentially limit sales of books, and thus impact on the potential income of both author and publisher. Even in a country where a public lending right exists, like the UK, the income derived from the loan of a book in no way would equate to the income derived from the sale of a book. In addition, in the public lending right scheme used in the UK it is only the author of the book who receives a contribution when a book is lent by a library, therefore the publisher's income from a library is only from the copies sold to lend. The existence of public lending right as a concept at all is an acknowledgement that the author deserves recompense for books lent and not sold. Arguably, then, the premise from Deary is one that has already been accepted, or else public lending right would not exist.

On the other hand, the concept of a public library is one that attempts to maximise the benefits for the largest number of people. While it impacts on the income of authors, publishers and booksellers, it provides access to resources for millions of people who may not otherwise be able to afford them. One could also take a rights-based stance to advocate for public libraries as a *positive right*, from the point of view of empowering people through access to knowledge.

The essential issue of whose benefit takes priority is one that is very much coloured by the political winds of the time. As highlighted above, what is important from an ethical perspective is understanding the arguments of critics like Deary, reacting appropriately to them, and being aware of the equally valid counter-arguments that can be presented. The table below gives an indication of where the ethical debate highlighted above could be placed from the point of view of the ethical theories we have discussed:

**Table 1 - Potential ethical stances on free public libraries – utility and rights-based**

<b>Pro free libraries</b>	<b>Against free libraries</b>
<b>Utilitarian view (Consequentialism):</b>	<b>Rights-based theory (Deontological):</b>

Provision of free public libraries benefits the majority of the population	The author and publisher of a work have the <i>negative</i> right to not have their financial interests damaged through lending of their materials
<p><b>Rights-based theory (Deontological):</b></p> <p>Citizens have the <i>positive</i> right to access to education and knowledge. Public libraries help support this right.</p>	

As we can see, some arguments both for and against can come from the same ethical theory, just opposing subsets of same. For instance, it is quite logical to hold a deontological belief that a public library is a positive right (i.e. the right for a citizen to receive a state-funded service) or believe that you a negative right not to have to pay for a library service (i.e. funding libraries for everyone is an unwelcome and unnecessary interference in the private interests of people). Kant’s belief that it is wrong to use other human beings to advance one’s own interests allows for such a dichotomy in interpretation to exist. A basic understanding of such a dichotomy is vital for any professional who seeks to argue against either stance. As stated above, neither is necessarily incorrect, and any view needs to be argued and understood on its ethical merits cognisant of opposing views.

**The governance challenges of a communitarian focus – the Big Society and beyond**

The election of the David Cameron coalition government in 2010, followed by a majority Cameron government in 2015 placed his “Big Society” policy at the heart of public services. The concept behind big society was a renewal of community narrative, promoting an ideal of a community that had a collective set of value and goals, and was working towards them. The political interpretation of this led to an emphasis on localism and more resourceful communities being built up. Another key goal of the big society was to enhance and empower the third sector, relying on third sector organisations to be able to take on the running of state services. One of the key architects of the big society was Jesse Norman, who reacted to criticism of the expansion of the third sector in the following way:

it would be absurd to pretend that they are the whole of what is intended by it. The idea that public services could ever simply be transferred wholesale into the third sector is a hopeless canard, given the relatively small size of the latter. But it is equally clear that the third sector is the home of vast innovation and social energy, as is the private sector, and that these resources need to be more widely and intelligently deployed (Norman, 2010, p.201)

Localism was and remains a key theme, with the *Localism Act 2011* introducing significant new powers for local communities to manage services for themselves if faced with closure.

Previously when a library was closed by a local authority, there was no mechanism for the community to take on the running itself. The *Localism Act* allowed communities to take on this responsibility for themselves if their library was threatened with closure. This is framed by the proposers of the legislation as an issue of empowerment, while the library profession more generally might not see it in such a positive light. Nevertheless, the legislation has greatly empowered local communities to take on the governance of their own community assets, and fits in with the growing trend around community building through Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) which is trend that emerged in the USA in the early 1990s and is growing in the UK. Jesse Norman summarised the benefits of this approach from a big society standpoint:

Greater involvement of people in their local communities would reduce isolation, strengthen social ties and increase self - reliance. It would build the capabilities of both individuals and institutions, and bring forward a new generation of citizen leaders. The result would be both a stronger society and better government (Norman, 2010, p.197).

While the David Cameron era of government is now over, the shadow of localism and big society remains over public library governance. It is the claims of community that is looming large over public libraries and their governance in the current political climate.

Public library managers must seek to understand how this new era differs from the preceding one that focused on individual freedom if they are to be effective in managing its opportunities and dangers. Arguably the profession got much of that former period of history largely wrong, focussing too much on being more 'business' like and transforming citizen and societal *needs* into customer *wants*, and in doing so we weakened the profession by limiting the social mission.

The criticisms applied by authors such as Buschman, D'Angelo, and Usherwood highlight where they saw the damage done to public library services and ethos through a more commercial, individualistic focus: this was damage to purpose, ethos, and potential impact of services in society. In a study of public library policy documents produced under the last Labour government in the UK between 1997 and 2010, Greene and McMenemy identified “a move away from a welfarist approach to a consumerist approach which emphasises individual consumer choice, where choice has been used as a rhetorical tool to introduce public sector reforms” (p.34). More recently research applying Rhodes’ theory of hollowing out of public library services has identified private sector approaches to service delivery as being a key factor in the reduction of library services. Applied to public libraries, hollowing out was defined as, “a process of efficiencies and restructuring in which library buildings stay open but the actual services, and the value of those services, is eroded through government and local government policy, cuts, and ‘deprofessionalisation’” (Robertson and McMenemy, 2018)

In the realpolitik of the twenty-first century, communitarian-inspired politics has seen policies that seek to reduce state solutions and make communities the ultimate arbiters of what services they seek to provide locally. We must begin to see even the handing over of public libraries to be managed by communities in this context if we are to understand and manage the process. While some might argue it is simply a right-wing, market-oriented government shrinking the state, the communitarian angle to it means that there is a prima facie link to social justice that is also driving it. We need to address both elements of this if we are to successfully advocate for the importance of both libraries and librarians.

It is difficult for a profession that is aimed at building community resilience to be against a policy that is claiming to do just that. Nevertheless, the highlighting of the issues that community-run libraries presents for the longevity and integrity of the service is an important consideration for the profession. This is a governance challenge faced by the profession that is novel. On the face of it, the profession adopting a stance of being against the use of library volunteers looks like a concern with self-preservation and protecting the status quo. Equally an acceptance of volunteers in libraries can be argued to be against protecting the library workforce. This is arguably why we have seen policy developers take an open-minded, but cautious

approach, as represented by the Scottish Library and Information Council report, *Evidence on the use of volunteers in libraries and on volunteer-run libraries* (2015): “there can be challenges in using volunteers but also highlights the fact that there can be benefits for the volunteer, the library and the wider community in having volunteers undertake tasks that are additional to those of professional staff.” Being opposed to community empowerment looks regressive, but blanket acceptance of a volunteer model looks negligent. This dichotomy will remain a significant challenge for the foreseeable future across the UK.

### **Conclusion**

For librarians, words and the meanings of words, matter. This is more the case of the word community than for many others. As Shaw has observed, community “...continues to be appropriated to legitimate or justify a wide range of political positions, which might otherwise be regarded as incompatible” (Shaw, 2007, p.24). It is an important observation, then, that when politicians or other managers use the word ‘community’ it may not be how a public librarian has historically considered the term to mean. Public librarians usually take the term to mean provision of services to a community. This needs-based focus is evident in the volume devoted to community librarianship published recently by Pateman and Williment (2013). However, communitarian philosophy, at least in its *big society* guise practised in parts of the UK, has increasingly focussed on a perceived empowerment of the community through local decision-making. This hypothesis has not yet been fully tested to see if it is progressive or regressive from a governance point of view. Like the other ethical approaches discussed earlier, the philosophies of community and virtue when applied to social justice pose both potentially progressive and regressive dimensions. There is no doubt that the era that is now emerging related to public library services in the UK raises significant issues for the longevity of the service. The long-term viability of community-run libraries is a completely new development in public library governance in the UK. The inspiration may come from a communitarian philosophy, but this is a new philosophy with untested maxims, and while the experiment may prove to be a success, that many communities are taking on the governance of library services through the threat of closure, and not through any progressive choice, should be of concern to us all.

On a positive note, the era of community arguably calls even more for a profession that can navigate ideas and public discourse, and help citizens become informed. As Sandel has argued, “the hollowing out of the public realm makes it difficult to cultivate the solidarity and sense of community on which democratic citizenship depends” (Sandel, 2009, p.267). No profession is better placed to help this culture develop, and it is public libraries *and* community librarianship that can help it do so. The profession as a whole need to battle with all of its collective might to ensure that the governance models that emerge in the era of communitarianism allows the service to move forward into the future with confidence.

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