

Public Librarians Hold Critical and Evolving Role as Community Facilitators of Government Information

Zhu, X., Winberry, J., McBee, K., Cowell, E., & Headrick, J. S. (2022). Serving the community with trustworthy government information and data: What can we learn from the public librarians? *Public Library Quarterly*, 41(6), 574–595. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2021.1994312>

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Article abstract

Objective – To understand public librarians’ experiences in addressing their communities’ government information and data needs.

Design – Semi-structured interviews.

Setting – 4 public county library systems in 2 southern states in the United States in early 2019, prior to onset of the COVID-19 pandemic

Subjects – 31 public service librarians, recruited through a combination of theoretical and convenience sampling strategies.

Methods – The researchers conducted individual interviews, ranging between 30 and 60 minutes, with each participant. Interview recordings were transcribed and processed through the qualitative data software NVivo, using a grounded theory approach with open inductive coding followed by thematic analysis.

Main Results – Six major findings were identified through thematic coding, including variability and complexity of reference questions, diversity in patron demographics, need for advanced knowledge of the local community context, preparedness of librarians to provide reference consultation for government information, balance between information and interpretation, and trust issues related to government sources. Challenges related to digital literacy level was a shared factor across multiple themes, as patrons’ government information needs are increasingly impacted by their ability to access web, mobile, and computer technologies, navigate online resources, and interpret bureaucratic vocabulary. Some librarians also expressed their own eroding trust towards the validity of government sources, such as climate change information from the Environmental Protection Agency under the Trump administration.

Conclusion – A majority of the findings were consistent with past literature, including the breadth and depth of varying government informational needs of public library patrons and the trust patrons have for their public libraries and librarians. Researchers also noted limited initiatives by public libraries to proactively educate patrons about open data or misinformation and recommended that libraries and library science educators better prepare current and future librarians for their role as government information mediators.

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

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Commentary

This study provides timely advocacy for the value of public libraries in assisting their communities with identifying, accessing, and interpreting government information and data in an increasingly complex information and technology landscape. Even though data was collected prior to COVID-19, the findings remain relevant and applicable for the current socio-political context. Moreover, the authors skillfully provided a concise literature review of pertinent research, which would be valuable to those interested in public libraries’ roles in promoting equity and inclusion through government information reference.

Two appraisal tools were consulted to assess this study: Glynn’s *EBL Critical Appraisal Checklist* (2006), which provided a framework for the review, and Letts et al.’s *Critical Review Form* (2007), which supplemented qualitative elements not fully addressed by Glynn’s more quantitatively oriented checklist. Overall, the study’s purpose was clearly stated, and the selections of theoretical framework and methodology were appropriate for the research questions. The researchers also provided sound rationale for population selection and recruitment decisions, and they addressed limitations for the generalization of the findings. Informed consent was obtained, and data analysis tools and approaches were clearly identified.

Yet, despite many elements that strengthen validity of the research, several omissions weakened the transferability of the study (Letts et al., 2007). Firstly, the authors did not provide interview questions and a protocol. It is also unclear which of the five coauthors served as interviewers of the 31 subjects and which participated in coding and analysis. Details on how the researchers approached norming during their coding process were vague; for example, researchers noted that seven general areas for analysis had initially emerged, but they did not elaborate on how they selected the final themes from those topics.

Finally, the researchers may not have fully considered how their own positionalities could have influenced their analysis and interpretation of the results. For instance, the authors had expected to find public librarians proactively “fighting misinformation” and “promoting open data” and were surprised that interviewees showed “a lack of concern” in those topics (Zhu et al., 2022, p. 589). However, given the digital divide and digital literacy challenges experienced by many public library

patrons and the increasingly polarizing political climate in many communities, it may not be reasonable to assume that public librarians would be as actively engaged in emerging LIS topics as a research group consisting of university faculty, doctoral students, and recent graduates of MLIS programs.

Because of these validity limitations, readers are advised to consider the representativeness of the discussion with some reservation. Nonetheless, this article highlights a critical and unique role of public librarians as trusted facilitators and mediators of government information and data. The researchers also convincingly identified gaps in current LIS curriculum and the need for educators and administrators to provide specialized government information reference, information literacy, and digital literacy curriculum or professional development opportunities for aspiring and practicing librarians.

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