

# THE LIBRARIAN'S IMAGE AND THE PERCEPTION OF LIBRARIES; A BARRIER TO LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT IN GHANA?\*

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## INTRODUCTION

The issue of the low public image of librarians and how the profession is perceived is constituting a hindrance to library development. This issue has been a long running one the world over, probably beginning soon after the profession came into being. In Ghana, the situation is not different because Alemna (1994) confirms this as a problem hindering the progress of the library profession in the country. Is this situation of the low public image of the librarian really true or are people just building on hearsays to arrive at that conclusion?. If it is not true, why then is it so persistent and seemingly intractable?.

## PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND PROFESSIONAL EXPECTATIONS

As far back as the 1950's there was a study by Bryan(1952) about the personality of the librarian. Since then several studies have followed. Slater (1980), Abram & Weaver (1990), Rothwell (1990), Schuman(1990), Koren(1991), Allwood(1992), Intner(1993) and Alemna(1994) to mention a few, have supported or contradicted the assertion that the

librarian has a poor public image. Before these studies however, Prins *et al.* (1992) enlightens us that in 1988 the Round Table for the Management of Library Associations (RTMLA) of the International Association of Library Associations (IFLA) began a research into the status, image and reputation of librarianship. A Working Group was set up at the 1989 IFLA Conference in Paris to follow up the research. The group concluded that there was need for empirical research in order to find evidence for the poor status of the profession. A worldwide survey was chosen as a means of acquiring information in addition to interviews, existing data etc. The Research Department of the Dutch Centre for Public Libraries and Literature was asked to develop and implement a research plan containing an ongoing study of available literature analysis of existing data and the worldwide survey among IFLA member Library Associations. The issues at stake were (and still are) these:

- That librarians pay a lot of attention to their status and image evidenced by the availability of a lot of articles on the subject

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with almost all the authors agreeing that the status is low.

- That the problem of the low image and status has existed for a very long time. Why then has the problem persisted, with all the attention being paid to it? Is it an impossible task or is it inappropriate action, no action at all, lack of funds or what?
- That there is no actual decision on how much status the librarian would like to have. What, which or who do librarians want to be?
- That librarians need to sell their wares in the open market. They need to come out of the old demands of the profession and embrace new ones.
- That librarians are taken for granted by people because they seldom get involved in controversial or dynamic issues. They rather stay within their profession, wanting to be experts in their field.

The RTMLA in view of the above stated the problem as "The general image of the public about the profession and the practice of librarianship is poor. The reputation of the profession is low and consequently the status of employees in this field is also low, made manifest by poor salaries and inadequate conditions of service. The picture is not standard worldwide but it is to varying degrees and it is fairly accurate for most countries." This holds true for librarians and the profession in Ghana.

Some results of the study so far indicate that:

- Librarians think the problem of status and image is that the public and authorities are not sensitive to what happens in the provision of information. This brings about the lack of recognition from the public,

users, employers and even colleagues in the office or university. This results in low budgets and salaries.

- Librarians do not sell themselves. They are not dynamic and need to determine their roles in the changing society. Librarians should offer high quality service and be user oriented. Public relations campaigns should be resorted to and they should invest in professional looking public relations materials, like brochures. They should go to the extent of contracting the job if the skills are lacking in the library.
- There is little motivation to train as a librarian. Most people get into the profession as a last resort. Also curricula in some library schools do not reflect the modern trends in information provision. Training should be geared towards the current demands of the society.
- Librarians need to act like entrepreneurs with interest in the specific needs of clients and give vital, 'value for money' service.

All these studies have agreed that there is a problem about the librarian's image though no concrete evidence has been adduced. Some further studies have also been done on the personality of the librarian. Fisher (1988) found out in his study of librarians for over 30 years that there is no distinct personality type and Samyuktha *et al.* (1990) also found out that there is no strong relationship between self image and the type of work one does.

However, the fact that the issue of public image is still, a source of concern to librarians evidenced by the several articles on the topic shows that all is not well with the public

image of the librarian and the perception of the profession.

The librarian has been seen by people from various angles. Cowell (1980) sees him/her as "a fussy old woman of either sex, myopic and repressed, brandishing or perhaps cowering behind a date stamp and surrounded by an array of notices which forbid virtually every human activity". Generally, people see librarians as arrangers and storers of books; custodians of old dusty books; stern looking persons; people who know nothing more than arranging books; non-graduates; poorly dressed and generally poor, to mention a few of the stereotypes. These statements have not been imagined. They have been reached through observations made by the public about *some* librarians which have now been generalised to typify who the librarian is.

Schuman (1990) also observed that "the impact of librarians has been hampered for too long by a self image which defines the information professional's role as the organiser and keeper of the world's knowledge. This is a self imposed, self-limiting mentality. Our information society requires an active stance on the part of librarians as *disseminators of information* (emphasis mine), not guardians of knowledge". Today's expectation of the librarian is as an information provider, assisting in literature searching, using modern information technologies for fast information delivery, making the library a resource centre with all the audio-visual equipment necessary to make information retrieval quick and fast.

Over a hundred years ago, Melvil Dewey (1876) stated that "It is not enough that the

books are cared for properly, are well arranged, are never lost. It is not enough if the librarian can readily produce any book asked for. It is not enough that he can when asked to give advice as to the best books in his collection on any given subject... He must put every facility in the way of the readers, so that they shall be led on from good to better. He must teach them how, after studying their own wants, they may themselves select their reading wisely"

This statement holds very true today where the librarian has to play a more active role in service to the library user.

Are we doing this to improve our public image?

Fisher (1988) comments that several studies have seen librarians as scoring below average in terms of leadership and self confidence; irritable; insecure; suffering from inferiority complexes; more sure of themselves than "normal" people; the male librarian being more feminine in his interests than men in general; less assertive than normal; more orderly and conscientious; authoritarian; above average intelligence; little tendency towards innovation; submissive; self conscious and feminine interest patterns; poor leaders; resistant to change; lack of good supervisory attributes. These are full of contradictions which make one to support Agada (1984) that "Little evidence was found to correlate... personality variable". Irrespective of these, it will be a worthwhile exercise for each of us to pick the traits mentioned above and check one's self against them to find out if they are true or false. The measurement of librarians with the trait approach is as un-

fair as stereotyping is.

Atkinson (1994) outlines four areas necessary for the improvement of the image of librarians

- They should not be modest or have a self-limiting mentality...stress the human element of library/ information expertise.
- They should emphasise staff training and development especially assertiveness, decisiveness, management of change and information technology.
- They should ensure regular liaison with users... build alliances and coalitions.
- They should improve curricula in training and professional development.

Koren (1991) sums up the discussion by saying that professional image is composed of professional title, professional role, capability, behaviour and 'social status'. The first three have been considered above. Behaviour and social status are worth examining.

## HUMAN RELATIONS AND SOCIAL STATUS

The success of every service institution or organisation depends a lot on good human relations. There is a lot of interaction with people in all age groups and a variety of backgrounds in such an institution, which means one must get on well with people.

Professional skill must therefore be backed by interpersonal skills to make one a successful career person. A positive attitude, flexibility, self confidence, hardworking and energetic stance and preparedness to learn are very necessary.

One needs to learn how to *think*, how to *learn* and how to *create*. These are very necessary for one to fit into the new infor-

mation society which may call for re-learning/re-training, with the introduction of new technologies which will require training in the use of new equipment and procedures. Librarians need to be ready, for the world of work is changing!.

## Self assessment

You will be successful in your career if you combine your professional and personal goals well. This calls for self assessment, where you will know who you are to enable you to know what you want to and can do. You will need to examine your values, interests, personality and skills.

The traits useful to our profession are *Drive, Enthusiasm, Positive Attitude, Flexibility, Energetic and Good Communication skills*. It is necessary that you identify your major strengths and weaknesses. This will enable you to make plans to rectify your weaknesses, thereby gaining control over them, while building upon your strengths. This will bring you success.

## Setting goals

You can only achieve success if you set goals and achieve them. Your goal should be what you can picture in your own mind, what you really believe can be achieved, what you really want and is realistic and what you can set time frame for. You can set goals for your skills, responsibilities, quality of work performance, further training and leadership. These goals will motivate, direct and make you take better decisions for optimum job performance.

## Communication skills

You need to communicate and get along well with others, be enthusiastic about your job,

be flexible to accommodate modern means of information delivery and other peoples views, develop and retain leadership qualities, have the ability to solve problems even in emergencies, exercise maturity and be professionally sound. These will also lead you to greater success in your career.

In communication, cues like how you look like (appearances, facial expression, eye contact, movement, gender, age) how you sound (tone, pitch, rate of speech and how articulate you are) what you say (balance between language and delivery is important for first impressions, consistency, truthfulness) how well you listen (listening to others more as you climb the leadership ladder, attentiveness, maintenance of eye contact, non-interruption of other peoples speeches) are what people look for to determine your personality and react accordingly.

### **Time and stress management**

It is necessary that you manage your time well. do important things more efficiently, where efficiency is quality and productivity. Be in control and learn to say no politely. Delegate, but keep very important work for yourself. Prioritize, get a timetable for yourself and do not get consumed with getting things done, rather enjoy each achievement you make and build some free time into your schedule. Do not burn yourself out.

Get stress out of your system by having regular sleep, good exercise plan, eating well and discussing problems with others. If you perform better on the job in the mornings tackle most stressful jobs in the morning. Most importantly, attack problems not people or yourself.

### **Grooming and dress**

Professional appearance is a statement of confidence. This is a combination of good grooming and proper dress. Professional look will make you feel better about yourself and will affect your behaviour on the job positively. It should be attractive and easy to maintain and a style which fits your personality. Looking good does not mean expensive!

### **Good dressing**

It is necessary that you are always conscious about the image you portray by the way you dress. It is not where you buy your clothing or sew them, or where you buy your shoes but how well you select and match them and how easy they are to be cared for. You need to be yourself in dressing and avoid extremities. Differentiation must be made between what you wear for office, outings and the home. Each venue has its specific function and so need a suitable attire. There is a difference between *dressing up* and *dressing professionally*!

### **Good grooming**

This includes looking good, feeling good, basic hygiene, proper exercise and diet, regular sleep and relaxation. Much attention has to be paid to the head (hair and face), feet (shoes) and most especially our body. We work with people so we must ensure that our body smell is more on the sweet side. Body odour, sweat-smelling shirts, badly ironed or un-ironed clothing, threadbare clothing, torn or unpolished shoes, unkempt hair and beard all cast negative images for the librarian.

### **Personal style**

This includes your personality. How you talk,

walk, personal touch to things you do and how organised you are. For example, to carve a top professional image, it will be necessary to use a briefcase or bag to transport your paper work to and from the office rather than files; use a notepad to take down notes at meetings or conferences rather than loose sheets; have a calendar handy( at office, at home and in your bag) to enable you check your schedule promptly in order to take on or refuse appointments. Always record your activity schedule and wear a watch.

Good grooming plus good dressing and personal style will give you your professional image.

### **Business/Office etiquette**

It is very necessary to have this in order to be successful in today's service industry. It is pertinent to know how to move through awkward situations easily and graciously. You have to handle yourself professionally in different situations in order to have successful interactions. You have to learn to say the right thing at the right time and do the right thing at the right time. The image of an institution is the people who work in it. You will derive positive or negative responses from people you come into contact with in your work. How they see you is very important to your success in your career. When you use basic business etiquette therefore, like good manners, being a good conversationalist; good listener, good comportment and avoidance of controversial discussions, gossips and topics with questionable taste in discussions, you will be successful.

### **Social activities**

The librarian should not be an island. It is

necessary to get interested and involved in activities going on around you other than in your profession. You need to contribute to the success of your parent organisation in areas other than library work, and also serve the community in other areas. This will enhance your image and debunk one of the assertions that librarians are not versatile and know nothing other than to arrange books. A hardworking person with a "go-getter" attitude, chalking successes in fields outside librarianship is a sure image booster for the profession.

### **CONCLUSION**

Having heard the studies cited as well as the beliefs of members of the public on what is librarianship and who the librarian is, and going through several other factors in this paper which have to be examined critically by each of us, especially by checking ourselves and our situations against them, one will be right in saying that the image problem is more of a lack of self-image, or self-esteem or self-confidence one, on the individual level. It is worth advising librarians to believe in their own worth and work seriously to sustain it. It is what you make out of yourself that others will perceive and amplify, to your success or failure.

I therefore agree fully with Fleck (1995) that the "unconstructive negative attitudes within the profession as a whole and among its individual members are arguably doing more damage than all the stereotypes of outsiders ever could. Working to rectify this situation is a more worthwhile task than unending concern about perceptions and images" and also with Ranganathan, as quoted by Rao (1981) that "the status of anybody is taken and not

given by somebody else. So it is with library personnel”

These sum up the whole issue which now calls for an inward rather than the outward look for solving the problem of the low public image and status of the librarian and the unfavourable perception of the library which is constituting a barrier to library development in Ghana.

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