



Libraries and a "Better Life for All": The politics, processes, and promises of the South African *LIS Transformation Charter*

Genevieve Hart and Mary Nassimbeni

Abstract

The rhetoric of public librarianship includes many ringing claims for the role of libraries in democracy; and, on the twenty-first anniversary of democracy in South Africa, it is an opportune moment to examine the rather confusing fortunes of libraries since 1994. The library and information services (LIS) profession portrays libraries as agents of development and social transformation; yet, since 2009, more than twenty South African libraries have been destroyed in social protests. This paper reports on the work of the authors of the *LIS Transformation Charter*, which after a start-stop-start process of two phases over six years was delivered to the government in 2014. The paper analyzes the political and professional forces that influenced the charter-writing processes. The two fundamental arguments of the charter are that access to information, and thus to libraries, is a fundamental justiciable human right, both as a so-called freedom right and as an instrument of other economic, social, and cultural rights; and that transformation will depend on "ecosystems" thinking whereby the various subsectors collaborate to ensure seamless services and the equity of provision. The paper argues that the final *LIS Transformation Charter* maps a path for a transformed and integrated library system that has meaning for all sectors of South African society.

Introduction

There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration.¹ —Andrew Carnegie

It seems apt to begin this paper with these words from Andrew Carnegie, whose belief in the power of libraries has, over many years, hugely benefited South Africa. The rhetoric of public librarianship includes many similar ringing claims for the role of libraries in democracy; they have been described as "beacons of democracy" (Brown, 2004, p. 169), "active agents of democracy" (Kranich, 2013, p. 17), "democratic hothouses" (Madsen, 2009, p. 10), and "gateways to democracy" (Walker, 2011, n.p.). To the American Library Association (ALA), libraries are the "cornerstones" of democracy (ALA, 2001, n.p.), implying that without them democracies would

