



## **Information for Social Change**

*"an activist organisation that examines issues of censorship, freedom and ethics amongst library and information workers..."*

### **The Culture of Comfort**

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Libraries are meant to provide equal access to information for all community members. How then does the library build its capacity to serve the increasing numbers of socially excluded people who do not use its resources but who would benefit significantly from them? We need to identify the barriers that keep people from walking through our doors. We need to identify ourselves as one of the barriers.

Librarians are a barrier because we are mired in a culture of comfort. Like most people we remain where we are comfortable: comfortable with the programs we offer, comfortable with the services we provide, and comfortable with the people we serve. Even our challenges are comfortable: to do more of what we always do for the people we always serve. As a result we often fail to serve communities that do not look, feel, or think like us. Even when we acknowledge our responsibilities to communities that are not reflections of ourselves, our institutional culture lets us impose our concepts of appropriate services on people who were never interested in them in the first place. Thus our culture of comfort becomes a culture of colonialism. And like colonialism it assumes that the colonizers understand the needs of the colonized better than they do themselves.

The library's culture of comfort lets us define our communities as the people who use our services, and who know and like us. Our responsibility to the community is discharged when we meet the needs of these patrons. We then evaluate and measure our success by surveying individuals who use the library. By definition these are people who find the library supportive of the issues that matter to them and who see the library reflecting the values and social structures that they are comfortable with. This self-reinforcing loop lets us mask exclusionary library practices by claiming that we respond to community feedback, and that we serve all the people who want to be served.

Our culture of comfort lets us believe that if people do not use the library it is because they do not know about the library. It lets us believe that a marketing campaign, or a warm and personal introduction, is all that is necessary to inaugurate people into the library. But socially excluded people know about the library. And what they know is that the library makes them feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. We are so caught up in doing what we always do, in justifying what we always do, and then assuring ourselves that we



