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# Information Literacy, Participatory Projects and the Development of Political Roles for Librarians

Raphaëlle C. Bats

► **To cite this version:**

Raphaëlle C. Bats. Information Literacy, Participatory Projects and the Development of Political Roles for Librarians. Information Literacy: Key to an Inclusive Society. 4th European Conference, ECIL 2016, ECIL, Oct 2016, Prague, Czech Republic. hal-02476923

**HAL Id: hal-02476923**

**<https://hal.science/hal-02476923>**

Submitted on 13 Feb 2020

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Raphaëlle Bats, ECIL

Résumé en français :

En 2015, la Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon a commencé la préparation d'un programme d'événement appelé « Démocratie : rêver, penser et agir ensemble ». Ce programme offrira entre novembre 2016 et mars 2017 près de 80 événements de toute nature, dont plus de la moitié sont participatifs. Pendant l'année de préparation, le comité de pilotage de ce programme a mis en place une veille autour de la participation pour se former et pour informer et former les équipes de la bibliothèque. Cet article est l'analyse de cette veille aussi bien en termes de sources, de médias que de contenus et d'auteurs. En m'appuyant sur la définition de la culture informationnelle telle que donnée par Olivier Le Deuff, j'ai étudié cette veille en trois temps. D'abord, j'ai cherché à voir si cette veille laissait apparaître une certaine définition de la participation que les bibliothécaires auraient retenue comme pertinente. Cette veille étant collaborative, elle s'appuyait sur des veilles individuelles mises en commun. J'ai cherché ensuite à déterminer la part des valeurs bibliothéconomiques dans la sélection qui était menée par des individus bibliothécaires. Et enfin, j'ai cherché à voir dans quelle mesure cette veille et ses modalités de diffusion créait des injonctions à l'action participative pour ses récepteurs.

Au terme de cette recherche, il semble que dans un projet comme celui mené par la BML, la recherche d'information menée par l'équipe organisatrice est révélatrice d'une nouvelle approche du rôle politique des bibliothèques. Elle dresse le portrait d'une nouvelle génération de bibliothécaires qui assume son rôle politique avec un sens élevé de la responsabilité des employés du service public culturel. Néanmoins, cette volonté de prendre part à l'action politique semble entrer en conflit avec un autre aspect de l'institution culturelle, qui est celui des valeurs qu'elle entend défendre et en premier lieu la notion de neutralité. Cette ambivalence très perceptible dans la veille qui est menée, et par conséquent dans la représentation que les bibliothécaires se font de la participation aura un impact non négligeable sur les formes des pratiques participatives qui seront mises en place.

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<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-52161-9>

Information Literacy: Key to an Inclusive Society  
4th European Conference, ECIL 2016, Prague, Czech  
Republic, October 10-13, 2016, Revised Selected  
Papers

Kurbanoğlu, S.; Boustany, J.; Špiranec, S.; Grassian, E.;  
Mizrachi, D.; Roy, L.; Çakmak, T. (Eds.)  
2016, XXI, 742 p. 87 illus., Softcover  
ISBN: 978-3-319-52161-9

# Information Literacy, Participatory Projects and the Development of Political Roles for Librarians.

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**Abstract.** This paper reports on information retrieved by a team of librarians of the public library of Lyon as part of their preparation for their involvement in a participatory project. I based the quantitative and qualitative analyses on a theoretical framework built on philosophy and information science concepts. My results shows that taking part in political action seems to be in conflict with some traditional values of libraries like neutrality, democratization, and emancipation through culture rather than through action. Finally my study lets us draw the portrait of a new generation of librarians who accept their political role.

**Keywords:** participation, public libraries, political culture, expertise, librarianship

## 1 Introduction

For more than 20 years, in France, the public has regularly experimented in participating in urban renewal projects. For the past five years, cultural policies have expressed interest in similar efforts. Libraries in particular have begun to embrace this new dynamic on their own initiative, on the initiative of elected officials, or, in rarer cases, on the initiative of associations. Municipal and national libraires have been especially eager to launched participatory projects in many fields such as acquisitions, heritage, event organization, and records correction. While participation seems to be legitimate in libraries, both philosophically and politically [1], librarians still are learning to view their services as new approaches in political action and agency. They are still beginning to consider their role as an emancipatory service in a public space,. The first reason is that participatory projects<sup>1</sup> required equality between the public and the institution. Libraries are more used to an approach where they provide guidance in support of a top down education. The second reason is that participatory projects are an opportunity to practicedemocracy. This would require libraries to adopt a critical approach to the actual democracy, a critical position that is not in the habits of cultural institutions that claim neutrality.

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<sup>1</sup> I define a participatory project as a project where the patrons are actors and not only passive or consumers. We can measure participatory projects using Sherry Arnstein's [29] spectrum from non-participation, tokenism, and citizen control.

The Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon (BML) is the second largest public library in France after the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. It employs a staff of 500 and serves 14 branches and one central library. As early as 2014, the BML was envisioning a large cultural project on democracy. After the terrorist attacks in January 2015, the project took a more participatory dimension. In Spring 2015, the “Démocratie 2017” project was officially launched and I joined it in Fall 2015 as a PhD student invited to the steering committee of this cultural project, which will take place from November 2016 to March 2017. During this project we experienced that participatory projects are particularly demanding in terms of knowledge and skills. It required that we gain knowledge in participative animation’s tools and in the political stakes of participation. Librarians took part to acquire new skills and worked on information retrieval using the bookmark tools Diigo. Information retrieval led by librarians seemed to be perfect situation to observe how librarians trained themselves to acquire new knowledge., This project will serve as my thesis which will focus on the link between knowledge and political action.

I make the hypothesis that, when studying the information retrieval process of librarians engaged in such projects, it will be possible to observe their information literacy as well as its impact on the participatory project of a public cultural establishment. To validate these assumptions, I used a theoretical framework, built on philosophy and information sciences including the “archéologie des savoirs” de Foucault [2], the concept of information literacy of Pawley [3], and the concept of “information culture” of Le Deuff [4], to analyze the statistical treatment of information retrieval made by employees of the BML. Prior to detailing the methodology and the results of this study, it is essential to conduct a literature review, beginning with the matter of knowledge in participatory projects and then exploring the matter of librarians' informational skills. I will end the article with a discussion on the political role of libraries and the engagement of librarians in a public service for which neutrality is a central value [5].

## **2 Literature Review**

Participatory projects have a multifaceted relationship with knowledge. Participation is often approached as a citizens / elected officials / technicians triothat, although it shows some shortcomings [6]), in particular due to excessive categorization, still allows to distinguish between various forms of knowledge gathered by the participants. Because of the entanglement of the roles between citizens and technician [7] [8], participatory projects also result in the development of new knowledge related to the context, to the territory, or to participation itself, both in theoretical and practical terms. We can even expect to see a professionalization of this participation [9] that might drive it away from the field of engagement [10]. So, while citizens and technicians assemble knowledge, they also generate new ones. But there is no research done on the conditions of these learnings. In this article I will attempt to fill this void by studying the specific case of librarians.

There is an abundant literature analyzing the training dispensed by librarians to their publics to achieve information literacy and political literacy. Henri Maitles [11] noted that if political education has no conclusive effects, the political literacy provided by librarians should focus on skills to participation to politics and to political knowledge, more than on the working of political institution, to be more effective. For Elmborg [12], librarians had to focus not on transfer of information but on acquiring a critical conscience. For Smith [13], the critical literacy lead to a political agency in moving from individual point of view to a social one, and in requiring a assumed responsibility. Political action seems to required a political look on information. In this paper I will try to observe it.

On rarer occasions, that literature offered analyses on librarianship trainings aimed at teaching instructing skills [14]. Yet there is surprisingly sparse literature on how librarians wield their own information literacy while engaged in their professional activities. Education and information sciences focus on the training of students and children but rarely on the proficiency of the teachers and librarians themselves [15]. I would like to fill this silence in the literature is something with this study.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Theoretical framework**

Myresearch relied first on a philosophical approach to determine the type of political discourse of French libraries. The « archéologie des savoirs » of Michel Foucault [2], gave us a framework to study the sources that inform the political action of librarians, which include: key texts of French libraries including a Manifesto and classical texts; the orientation plan of the public library of Lyon; and, finally the information retrieval of librarians involved in the “Démocratie 2017” project. I will just focus on this last point ior this paper,. Second, my research stood on two political approaches of information literacy (IL): the critics of IL from Pawley [3], and the concept of culture of information of Le Deuff [4]. I used these approaches to build a theoretical framework for this specific case.

1. According to Le Deuff, culture of information is eminently political and civic

[16]. It “takes into account the necessity for the citizen to have pertinent resources available, so that they can form an opinion.” [4, p105]. For Pawley, information literacy requires the ability to put information on a political context. I wanted to measure inthis information retrieval study whether librarians had a political agenda and/or librarianship agenda.

2. According to Le Deuff, “[communicational culture] is closer to critical literacy and requires resistance capacities. There is a political and philosophical dimension centered more on the individual than on the citizen.” [4, p 106]. Each individual gathers

knowledge that allowed them to form an individual and critical analysis of the information they found. For Pawley, information literacy lead everyone to engage himself or herself [3]. Information looked for, selected, and absorbedreflected choices and values. Myinformation retrieval analysis will show if the tastes and interests of the individual take precedence over the collective values of the librarians as criteria for evaluation of information.

3. The phrase “culture of information” was inspired by the work of Major R. Owens and how he linkrf the matter of responsibility to information literacy. According to him, information retrieval committed us to act. Christine Pawley also used this notion of action around the concept of consumers-producers [3]. The trainer should not perceive the one intended to acquire information literacy as passive, but as able to create their own information. Both these theories of information literacy gave an important place to action made possible by information. I therefore, tried to find out to what extent the information retrieval done by the group revealed an active dimension.

### **3.2 Statistical study**

The steering committee of the “Démocratie 2017” project conducted information retrieval work on the topic of the event. My article looks precisely into this information retrieval process, which is stored and compiled in a Diigo project The Diigo project is freely accessible. It is also diffused weekly via a Scoop-it.

Mystudy relied on a statistical treatment of the Diigo project to identify:

- Quantitatively: items, sources, type of sources, and form of items
- Qualitatively: topics related to the project, intellectual ou academic field of authors, and topics of the items.

I knew that this research had a bias inducted by the thema of the project itself. The action of librarians working on participatory projects and new democratic forms as well as the information they seek related to these projects wasnecessarily very political and very closed to some alternatives movements.

## **4 Results and Discussion**

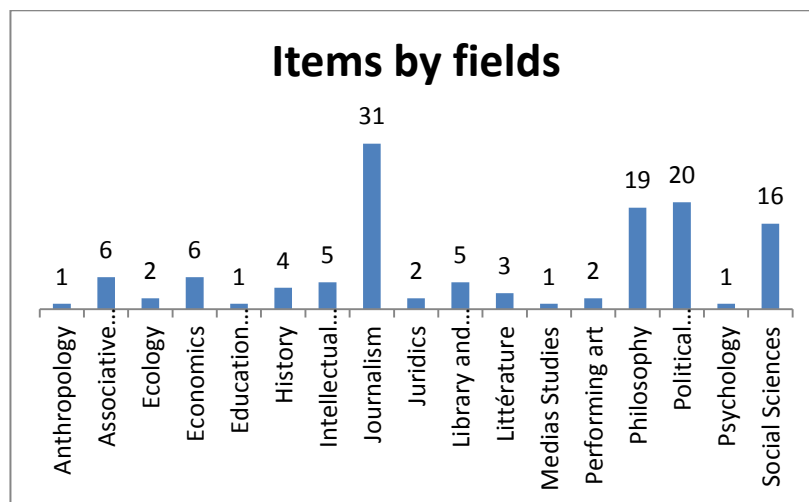
The Diigo of the Démocratie 2017 project added 125 items in eleven months. I studied the content of this information retrieval process from June 2015 to April 2016. Twelve participants contributed to the Diigo, including the eleven persons of the steering committee and myself. I published 4 out of the 125 items. Two members of the steering committee did not sign up. Three of the participants did not entereditems, six participantsentered fewer than the. The three agents who initiated the project entered 20 items, 30 items, and almost 60 items respectively. Those three agents began their data gathering work in in June 2015 while all the others began during fall. However, the time they started their participation was not the only explanation for their higher

participation. These three agents worked in the “Society and Civilizations” department of the central library and political matters were at the core of their daily activities, as opposed to other members of the group who might have been working on more distant topics.

#### 4.1 Objective based approach

Instead of showing a desire to prepare as a librarian, the Diigo data reveals that librarians involved in the project? desired to develop a unique view of the topic extending beyond the framework of the library.

Examining the 125 items by subject fields showed only 5 items from Library and Information Sciences (LIS). Three addressed new topics in librarianship: the common good of knowledge. Two others talked about political questions in libraries: burned libraries in the first example and participatory projects for the second. LIS seemed to be considered as another academic field, like the performing arts, medias studies, psychology, and anthropology. LIS is a potential source for this project, but not the main source.



• **Fig. 1.** Items by fields

The main field of the items was, in fact, journalism (31 items or 25 percent out of 125). By journalism, I mean that the author of the item was a journalist who wrote with a journalistic orientation. There were 88 (90 percent) items in all other academic fields. The final six items were about associative activism or texts written to serve or present the activist project of an association. In the 88 items written with academic orientations, 19 (15 percent) were in philosophy, 20 (16 percent) were in political sciences, and 16 (13 percent) were in social sciences. The two last fields were not surprising since the political and social sciences were related to the topic of the project and to the library acquisitions areas of the leaders of the project. At first, the presence

of items in philosophy could be seen as strange, but those items were essentially in political philosophy.

The 125 items come from 79 different sources. Sixty-three (80 percent) of these sources were mentioned only once but 15 (12 percent) were mentioned more than once, in particular *France Culture* (17 items) and *Médiapart* (8 items). The other sources were mentioned fewer than four times with the exception of the catalogue of BML, whose use is described in the paragraph below. *France Culture* is a very high-level national public radio station where a lot of academics speak. This radio station leans more towards intellectuals than culture even though the latter is still largely represented. *Médiapart* is an online independent journal that aims to revive the tradition of journalistic investigation, calls for participation among its readers, and frequently organizes debates.

These data show that LIS and/or technical questions were not central in this information retrieval. The main use of this information retrieval was to train collaborators on this topic so that they can grasp the concepts in a more general sense and not solely in the context of libraries. Six items used the catalogue of the BML as their source which pointed out that some of the useful documents were already in the collection. It also allowed the team to identify potential participants. The list of lecturers invited to talk during the future events (November 2016 to March 2017) was the same than the list of authors identified in the information retrieval. Some are mentioned numerous times such as Rancière and Fraser in philosophy, Wahnich and Rosenvallon in history, and Coriat in economy.

This led me to think that, for the librarians doing this information retrieval, the point was not to find data allowing them to simply do their job but to do their work differently. Likewise, they did not simply question today's democracy; they also questioned the potential for an emerging democracy. As such, the Diigo project showed a civic rather than a technical informational culture. In fact, if the project called into question what libraries usually stand for, then the information retrieval process largely went beyond a technical objective. It allowed librarians to question their role in society, facing social and civic practices they were not familiar with. It revealed the possible emergence of a new kind of librarian. French librarians have long been accused of being "Télérama", that is to say that, despite being left-leaning they had an elitist discourse on the democratization of culture. In other words, it was OK to watch TV but only if you watched good movies. Entertainment was only acceptable as long as you picked and chose. This type of discourse had long been relayed by librarians in the way they selected documents they deemed good and of appropriate cultural level for their public [17]. Yet there is a complete absence of any reference to Télérama on the Diigo platform. In fact, Télérama may have been replaced by *France Culture* as a new cultural reference served as an indicator to the importance of the academic fields we observed. While the objective for librarians here was not to develop their librarianship skills, they clearly tried to identify experts in democracy and participation that were almost exclusively academics. It showed a certain position of humility with librarians clearly stating that they were not experts as opposed to the Télérama librarians. In opposition, if they are not experts, they had the keys to contextualize, to point out the

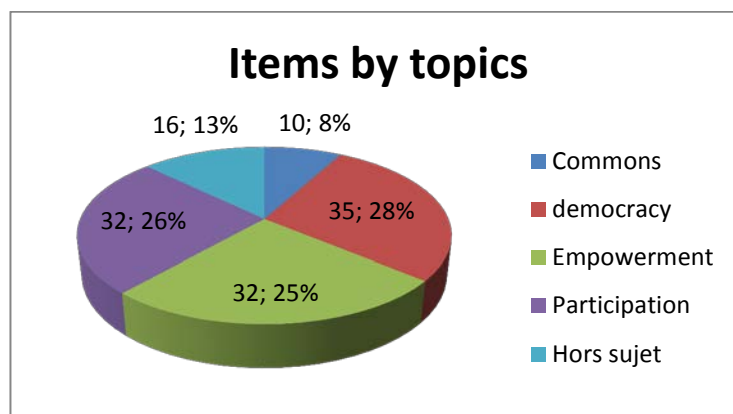


stakes, and to build and help to build a political discourse. This was a first step to moving a cultural action into a political action.

#### 4.2 Value-Based Approach

The items in the Diigo project leaned heavily on the left or sometimes far left side of the political spectrum. As it allowed, on one hand, the training of agents and, on the other end, the creation of a list of potential participants, the whole project was characterized by this left-leaning tendency. Most of the items were critical of democracy and representation and called for an increased participation in the political field and for more empowerment for each and every person from a collective point of view. These were signs of a drifting away from the usual political parties as well as an interest for radical democracy. Facing the difficulty of distinguishing between the nuances of the left, I focused on the identification of items from the right or neutral. I considered the institutions as neutral if they offered services by the state. If they did not, I assigned them to the political party in power at the time of creation of the content or to the stance of the participants taking part. So, a radio show on *France Culture* could not be considered as neutral when only left or far left academics took part. While I was able to find four neutral items, I could not find one expressing a right-wing stance. As I said earlier, this result was not very surprising due to the theme of the project. However, this result was not in complete opposition with the generally left-leaning tendencies of French librarians and with the values of librarians. In an article of the activism of librarians, Camille Hubert expressed a real difficulty in identifying right-leaning librarians and the only person who accepted her invitation to talk to her asked to do so anonymously [18].

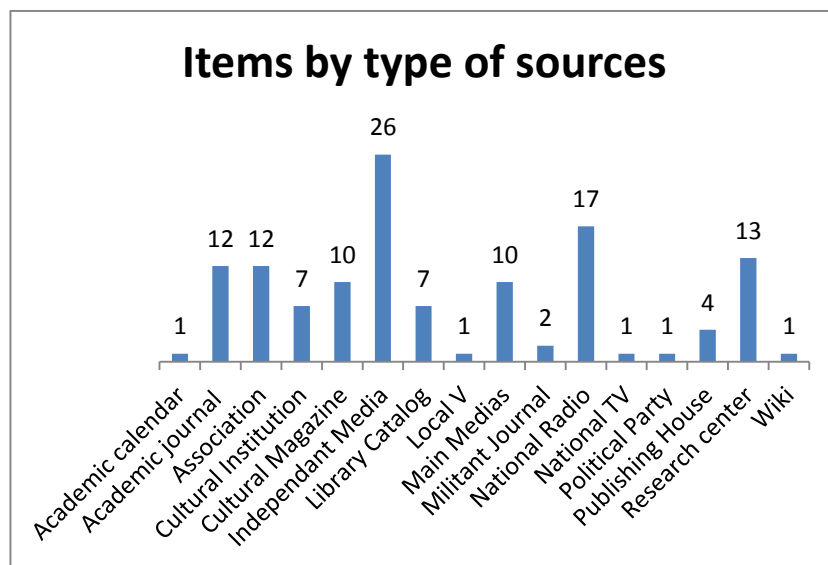
To go further in the analysis of the content of the items, I looked at how they fit or did not fit in the four major topics of the project as defined by the steering committee: democracy, participation, empowerment, and commons.



• **Fig. 2.** Items by topics.

There was an almost perfect equality between three topics: democracy, empowerment, and participation. The topic of Commons was weaker compared to the others but the specialization of this topic, its novelty, and the low number of people working on this explained it. What was really surprising was that 13 percent of items did not fit into one of the major topics. All these items were related to political questions and, specifically, to critics of today politics including critics of political parties, governmentality, and use of algorithms in politics. This 13 percent of items showed that this information retrieval was also a place for more activist positions and global thoughts about the society.

The items by type of sources also showed an ambivalent place for institutions. Only seven items had a cultural or political institution, such as a museum, governmental website, or governmental agency, as a source. I also could have considered academic journals and research centers as institutions because universities are public in France and the national radio *France Culture*, could be considered a national institution. If these sources are included, then 47 percent of the items were cultural or political institutions.



• **Fig. 3.** Items by type of sources.

Yet, most of the researchers and well as those affiliated with *France Culture*, independent media, and even major media were more apt to express a critical and political thought than an institutional speech. I could say that the tradition of involvement of intellectuals who speak publicly has been to call others to concrete actions and participate with activists in the field. Adding to this, 32 percent of the items clearly sources clearly identified as activist sources such as associations, independent media, and militant journals. The militant position was far away central to this information retrieval.

This reflects the problem of neutrality in French institution workers, including librarians [19]. Civil servants are not supposed to let the politicians dominate? aloud the political discourse. This does not mean that libraries' actions do not have a political influence or stance but this has not to be presented as political. Despite this, the study of the types of sources shows an emphasis on clear stands. In other words, while the selection shows a drifting away from the value of neutrality, it shows maybe a closer proximity to some other collective value for French librarians. The first collective value could be the rejection of right and far-right opinions. More interesting is another collective value related to the role of libraries in the society. If in 2005, D. Lahary [20] defined that the new generation of librarians were de-politized, maybe this generation is only approaching the political role of libraries from another angle that we still have to define. The neutrality of the library does not have to be a principle but the consequence of its assumed political role [21]. In the end, the information retrieval process revealed a critical approach through a questioning of the notion of neutrality, preferring a refocusing on the missions of libraries and their responsibilities.

### 4.3 Action-Based Approach

As we saw earlier, studying the sources of items by type also showed the importance of the academic environment; 27 items were research centers and academic journals: 27 items. I also studied the content of these items depending on their form. Unsurprisingly considering the previous results, I noticed a strong predominance of academic papers and podcasts. This result could even be increased, if we considered that 90 percent of the participants in the radio shows were academics. Librarians seemed to be hiding their actions behind those of academics.

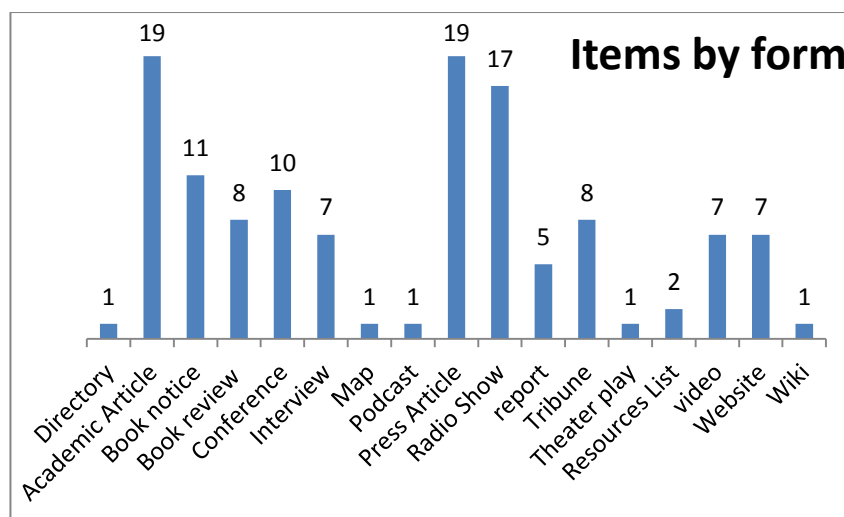


Fig. 4. Items by form

By proclaiming their non-specialist status, librarians remained behind the scene of political action and, in doing so, partly withdrew from it. Indeed, political actors put themselves forward and take responsibility [22].

On the other hand, the information gathered with Diigo was transformed in several ways: (1) into a Scoop.it; (2) into potential participants; and, (3) into information sheets on the topics, for the agents but also later for the public, in particular through the work done with schools and teachers. In this regard, I could say that the steering committee was a consumer-producer [3]. Likewise, some of the selected tools and practices showed the librarians' desire to try different relations with the public and to question the library's capacity for being truly participatory. Facets of the work got close to the way John Dewey analyzed democratic renewal through participation [23]. I saw this in the notion of experimentation, the projection into a future that librarians will be part of, and in the criteria for the selection of the items. I could note a desire "to be situated in the political action and not solely focused on the transmission of knowledge" [24].

Topics like emancipation or empowerment were very present in the information gathered, so it was important not to dismiss them as anecdotal. Indeed, although French libraries lacked any law clearly defining their missions, they agreed to say that their function was to contribute to the emancipation of citizens. Democratization was key in this emancipation, but is largely being questioned nowadays [25]. This information retrieval traced the contours of a different reflection on emancipation, less top-down and more experimental. Librarians seemed to embrace their role not as pillars of democracy, but as active agents. This action took different forms:

- having new democratic forms experienced through participation emancipation inspired by John Dewey [23];
- convincing the public of their ability to act through equality in the intellectual debate through a definition of emancipation closer to the one thought by Jacques Rancière [26]);
- offering a new way to think about goods as common goods, thus a emancipation more based on digital citizenship and texts by philosophers Dardot and Laval [27].

The agents of the BML regretted not being part of a true debate event and saw the *Démocratie 2017* project as a way to fill this void. The point was not just to propose debates but to embrace the intensity or even the possible conflicts of the debates. Accepting this agitation was one of the new orientations that the information retrieval performed by the group seems to be showing, hence the choice of items, strongly oriented towards change, reform, and a renewal of democracy. The knowledge assembled was revelatory of a desire for action, of a will to think the library as a political actor in its capacity to offer places for debate. In other words, to be a true Habermasian public space [28].

## **5 Conclusion**

In a project such as the one undertaken by the BML, the information retrieval done by

the organizing team revealed a new approach to the political role of libraries. It showed us the portrait of a new generation of librarians who accepted their political role as civil servants / citizens, moving further away from librarianship techniques, but moving closer than ever to the assertion of a responsibility towards society. However, this desire to take part in political action seemed to be in conflict with the values of libraries that correspond to another way of thinking the role of public cultural institutions: neutrality, democratization and emancipation through culture rather than through action. This difficult convergence between two representations of libraries does not seem to result from a lack of training of the librarians in terms of informational skills, but rather from a lack of political culture. By this I mean that librarians nowadays had trouble identifying French librarianship thinkers, to position themselves in a tendency, a history, to feel at one with it, while being able to make it their own and criticize it, and adapt it to their current problems, and in a way rekindle their vocation. The tendency in Anglo-Saxon countries toward the development of a critical library science lets us see promising possibilities in the domain of the political action of librarians.

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