



Social Inclusion of Newcomers to Canada: An Information Problem?

By *Nadia Caidi & Danielle Allard**

Issue

Assessing the Information Needs of Immigrant Communities

Introduction

The needs of newcomers and longer established immigrants range from the satisfaction of basic needs (e.g. housing, job skills, employment opportunities, education, and learning) all the way to increased civic participation and social connections. Government agencies

* For a detailed examination of this issue see: **Nadia Caidi and Danielle Allard**, "Social Inclusion of Newcomers to Canada: An Information Problem?" *Library & Information Science Research*, 27(3), 2005: 302-324.

and community-based organizations have invested much time and effort in providing resources and information for newcomers to Canada in various forms (e.g. ESL classes, settlement and citizenship programs, multi-lingual services, internet learning, and children's programs) (Mylopoulos, 2000, 2004; Papillon, 2002). These efforts aim at enabling newcomers and longer established immigrants to participate at various levels of local life. Increasingly, diverse societies require new directions for information organization and provision aimed at immigrant groups, such as the promotion of culturally-sensitive and relevant resources and services (e.g. web-sites and community digital libraries, and multi-lingual retrieval and access tools) along with involving immigrants in the process of gathering and designing information resources and systems that are meaningful to them.

Without mechanisms in place to ensure that newcomers are adequately integrated in their newly adopted society, these groups may be at greater risk of being pushed to the margins of the democratic process, or feel isolated and lacking opportunities and choice.

It is increasingly clear from the literature that the implications of social exclusion hurt not only those whom are excluded (their needs are not met), but also the broader society and the economy (Warschauer, 2002).

SUMMARY

This paper examines how information service providers, particularly libraries, may assist effectively in meeting the information needs of immigrants. In order to understand information practices of immigrants and cater to their needs, a holistic approach is advocated that encompasses a closer examination of theories and principles of social inclusion and social capital in addition to information seeking behaviour. Only through this holistic overview can one apprehend the role that information plays in the life world of immigrants at various stages of their integration into their adopted society. The issues raised have implications for frontline information providers as well as for policymakers interested in programs, policies and funding priorities concerning information provision and access strategies that enable social inclusion of newcomers and longer established immigrants into the social fabric of Canada.

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POLICY MATTERS is a series of reports focusing on key policy issues affecting immigration and settlement in Canada. The goal is to provide accessible, concise information on current immigration research and its implications for policy development. **POLICY MATTERS** is produced by the Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement – Toronto (CERIS).

While theories of social inclusion acknowledge the exclusion and marginalization of various groups due to their economic, social and cultural conditions, it has not been previously considered that social exclusion may also be an information problem: those without adequate access to information are socially excluded, and that those who are socially excluded also lack access to mainstream sources of information and proper social capital.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada usually characterizes a newcomer as someone who has been in the host country for five years or less. – Authors

This paper examines the literature of information needs and use in light of social inclusion theories and principles. The aim is to build bridges between these two domains of inquiry to comprehend and perhaps redefine what social inclusion means from an informational perspective, and identify how it should be assessed and measured. The issues raised have implications for frontline information providers as well as for policymakers interested in programs, policies and funding priorities concerning information provision and access strategies that enable social inclusion of newcomers and longer established immigrants into the social and economic fabric of Canada.

Information practices of immigrant communities.

Information provision is a key component of social inclusion. Yet, relatively little is known about the ways in which newcomers and longer established immigrant communities locate and access content in forms that are understandable and usable to them. Little is known also about their attitudes, awareness of, and skills in utilizing various information institutions and related technologies. This is due in large part to the fact that immigrants in Canada are comprised of a heterogeneous user group with diverse skill sets, educational levels and familiarity with Canadian institutions and values.

Another aspect of the problem is the dynamic nature of the immigration process, where informational needs can change over time as immigrants pass through various stages of integration and familiarity with their adopted country.

The literature of information seeking behaviour teaches us that different user groups have different information practices (i.e., familiarity with, access to, and uses of formal and informal sources of information such as libraries, archives, museums, media, organizations and individuals). Chatman's theory of information poverty is useful to understand how certain groups have difficulty obtaining useful information for solving everyday life problems. Indeed Chatman's extensive ethnographic studies of female prisoners, female janitors,

elderly women and others contributes to a better understanding of the situated nature of information needs and sources (Chatman, 1985, 1987, 1991a, 1991b; Chatman & Pendeleton, 1995).

The work of Chatman and others shed light on how information needs and their resolution arise out of the particular social, cultural and work environments of people, and are better factors for predicting information behaviour than demographic characteristics. New immigrants also have particular social, cultural, and work environments. Hence, understanding the stages of immigrants' adaptation to the host country, their differing environments, and the situations they face (and for which they have an informational need) can elicit findings about how and to whom they go to in order to find information to solve their everyday problems.

[Chatman] argues that there exists a class of information poor – who lack access to information – and that is characterized by their difficulty or inability to obtain useful information either from people they know (insiders) or outsiders to their group or even from the mainstream sources of information such as the media.
(Chatman, 1985)

Social Networks

Researchers in the field of information studies have also pointed out the importance of social networks as sources of information for so-called

vulnerable or marginal populations. Numerous studies shed light on the value that social networks can provide to frontline information providers and the communities they serve, be they low income communities or particular ethno-linguistic groups (Birkel & Repucci, 1983; Fisher et al., 2004; Gollop, 1997; Liu, 1995).

Chatman's studies also advance the importance of social networks in information seeking. However, her findings show that rather than observing a prevalence of mutual trust and support among members of a given group, there was instead a fair amount of secrecy and cautionary attitudes among group members thus hindering information sharing. The findings from these studies and others shed light on the embeddedness of information practices within broader social structures (Dervin, 1983; MacIntosh-Murray, 2003).

Understanding the role played by social networks in mediating access to information resources contributes to an understanding of the social and cultural context of the information practices of newcomers. — Authors

Newcomers may have differing social network structures, in terms of size, density and strength of ties, which in turn can affect their transition to their newly adopted society. Questions remain as to what constitutes a "quality" immigrant social network and who are the people that play a mediating role, such as "information gatekeepers" (Metoyer-Duran, 1993; Agada, 1999).

New immigrants may not have a fully developed social network upon their arrival to Canada, or one that may not be adequate to facilitate their transition. Furthermore, as immigrants become established in Canada their social networks characteristics may evolve and change. More research is needed that shows how the attributes of the social networks affect immigrants' ability to find information, resolve problems, or to deal with situations in their everyday lives.

It is therefore essential that libraries and other frontline service providers take into consideration what it is that these often-marginalized members of society do know, how they come to know it, and how they make sense of it. Only then can an attempt be made to create better access for and with them, and develop societies that are inclusive and meaningful to their perspectives

Social Inclusion

The literature on social inclusion spans various disciplinary fields. In the immigration and settlement studies field, thinking about social inclusion is often conceptualized in terms of social capital.

A 2001 OECD report defines social capital as the "networks together with shared norms, values and understanding which facilitates cooperation within or among groups (p.41). Social capital has been defined as an asset or a "public good" that resides in the relationships between members

of a society and the institutions of that society (Duncan 2003).

In other words, social inclusion generates social capital whereas social exclusion diminishes social capital by reducing the levels of trust required for a vibrant economy and a well-functioning society. Thus, the better one's social capital the greater the chances of integration into society. However, there has been less research examining how information gained through social networks or otherwise can contribute to or hinder the acquisition of social capital.

Those who are information poor are often marginalized members of society and therefore the knowledge they possess is generated from the periphery of society. Feminist and critical race theorists...argue that what one knows emerges from their social location. (Monhanty, 2003; Narayan, 2003)

Access to information resources or the skills and literacy needed to make use of information enables the social inclusion of newcomers and longer established immigrants, in the same way that it contributes to all citizens' chances to live a self-determined and fulfilling life. Theories of social capital therefore need to acknowledge information and informational resources as an inherent part of what constitutes it.

Rethinking Social Inclusion

The next section briefly reviews the European Union (EU) model of social inclusion in comparison to

the emerging Canadian discourse on social inclusion.

Within European policy rhetoric, social inclusion consists of a series of policies and strategies designed to eradicate social exclusion and thereby maintain social cohesion, although what constitutes appropriate measures to ensure social inclusion have been hotly contested. The United Kingdom, for example, has based its political justification on neo-liberal individualism that focuses on social inclusion policies such as equal opportunity legislation and welfare-to-work programs. France on the other hand, focuses on solidarity, conformity and reinforcing social bonds through social inclusion policies that support community reintegration (Silver as cited in Barata, 2000).

As Atkinson (2000) notes, "exclusion was increasingly being seen as a problem with its roots in wider societal changes, in particular changes in labour markets."

Within Europe, social exclusion was viewed as a major threat to cohesion because it was seen to undermine the social collective identity of nations. In contrast, Canada's agenda of multiculturalism does not promote social inclusion for the sake of social cohesion.

Canada's national agenda of multiculturalism has informed the mobilization of social inclusion principles along the lines of diversity and tolerance.

Canada's *Multiculturalism Act* is an official policy that 'recognizes the potential of all Canadians, encouraging them to integrate into their society and take an active part in its social, cultural, economic and political affairs' (Canadian Heritage, 2004).

The policy acts to position multiculturalism as a fundamental tenet of Canadian society on which other Canadian policies are formulated and enacted. Social inclusion is facilitated within the Act in several sections; in particular, the Act states that it is the policy of the Canadian government to "promote the full and equitable participation of all individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of

Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to that participation" and to "ensure that all individuals receive equal treatment and equal protection under the law, while respecting the value of diversity" (Canadian Heritage, 2004).

However, as Omidvar and Richmond (2003) state, despite Canada's official policies of multiculturalism, anti-racism and immigration citizenship acquisition, Canada's new immigrants have experienced increasing levels of poverty and social exclusion since the early 1990s.

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Social policy theorists have interpreted the associated between multiculturalism and social inclusion in various ways, including questioning the relationship between multiculturalism and social cohesion. Jedwab (2003), for instance, has documented the preoccupation within Canadian policy circles about the point at which diversity in a culture encroaches upon social cohesion, hence the perceived societal resistance to multicultural practices.

It seems essential indeed that people have a voice in what they are included into. Involvement and engagement expresses the right and support of individuals to make meaningful decisions about themselves and their community.
– Authors.

Li (2003) suggests that social inclusion discourses, while claiming to favour multiculturalism and a politics of diversity, often advocate for conformity and cohesion when they distinguish between "deserving" and "undeserving" immigrants based on race and country of origin. It remains to be seen the extent to which social inclusion is possible for new immigrants when they are systematically excluded based on race. Further, if it is not assumed that Canadians might be required to adjust to facilitate the integration of newcomers, social inclusion might actually mean social assimilation.

For researchers at the Laidlaw Foundation, social inclusion is understood as both a *process* and a goal. As a process it “reflects a proactive, human development approach to social well-being that calls for more than a removal of barrier or risks. It requires investments and action to bring about the conditions for inclusion” (Luxton, 2002).

Thus, social inclusion implies more than simply being the vehicle by which marginalized groups are included in the existing organization of society. Instead social inclusion values the perspectives and differences of those on the margins and seeks to transform cultural practices and institutions to accommodate diversities (Luxton 2002).

... those on the margins have access to different information, knowledge, and ways of conceiving the world than those in the centre. – Authors

Inherent in this conception is the notion that those on the margins have access to different information, knowledge, and ways of conceiving the world than those in the centre. Conceived in these terms, social inclusion values diverse identities and fundamentally questions both the process and result of social inclusion. It seems essential indeed that people have a voice in *what* they are included into. Involvement and engagement expresses the right and support of individuals to make meaningful decisions about themselves and their community.

Meaningful involvement and engagement cannot occur without access to relevant information, information that individuals have determined they need. These concerns represent a move away from social cohesion as the motivating impetus for inclusion, and focus instead on outcomes such as well-being, self-esteem and access to social power (rather than employment and poverty levels) (Mitchell & Shillington, 2002).

Social Inclusion: An Information Problem

Despite the diversity of perspectives on the issue of social inclusion, none address the ways in which social inclusion/exclusion can be thought of as an informational problem that has to do with access (or lack thereof) to meaningful and relevant information that fulfills the needs of immigrants, although many of the perspectives hint at ways in which this is possible.

Information provision is a key component of social inclusion. The ways in which newcomers and immigrant communities locate and access content in forms that are understandable and usable to them is essential to their integration into society.

As it was originally conceived, the notion of digital divide meant the division between those who had access to new forms of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and those who did not (Warschauer, 2002).

In recent years, concerns about the “digital divide” within information studies have prompted renewed interest in the isolation of vulnerable populations from mainstream sources of information. While not specifically targeting newcomers, recent literature on the digital divide has begun to understand information provision and access as an issue directly related to social inclusion. The lack of access to technology is therefore positioned within a larger framework of exclusion, reduced resources, and social power.

*In some societies, libraries are viewed as study places where users bring their own books and the library institution tends to be associated with the elites or former colonial powers. In others...there has been a deep distrust of information, which was often equated with propaganda when issued from “official” sources”.
Caidi, 2004)*

Addressing social inclusion through technological initiatives has therefore become a strategy of policymakers within various organizations including libraries. However, if we conceive of the digital divide in terms simply of haves and have-nots, social inclusion policies only require us to increase access to ICTs among marginalized communities. Rendering the digital divide in such simplistic terms obscures the fact that individuals do not *only* need access, but the literacy (technological and otherwise) to use these technologies effectively.

To provide equality of access of ICTs is not an effective strategy for social inclusion because

without proper skills and education, access is meaningless. Indeed, Warschauer (2002) argues that we need to include notions of information literacy into our understanding of digital divide.

Literacy (information, technological and other types of literacies) is often mobilized as an empowering concept that increases social development. By encouraging communities' participation, literacy is both a practice and outcome of social inclusion.

Implications for Information Institutions

Newcomers have varied backgrounds and presumably different experiences with information, its institutions, and its technologies. The information culture in an immigrant's country of origin may have promoted a particular form of interaction with knowledge and different learning styles.

Libraries role and mission vary according to the socio-cultural context and values of the milieu in which they develop. For instance, certain low-income groups do not view libraries as a part of their information-seeking strategies. (Pendleton & Chatman, 1998)

Libraries are social and cultural institutions with specific processes, practices and interaction with information and its users (Buckland, 1992). Libraries role and mission vary according to the socio-cultural context and values of the milieu in which they develop. For instance, certain low-

income groups do not view libraries as a part of their information-seeking strategies (Pendleton & Chatman, 1998).

*... "although community institutions, such as libraries, city hall, and Community Technology Centres (CTCs) are rarely thought of as public spaces like parks and plazas, they certainly function as public spaces, and can be important anchors in neighborhoods."
(Davies et. al., 2003)*

Similarly, newcomers may have had different experiences and exposure to other information institutions such as archives or museums.

Assessing the contextual and situational factors constituting the information environment that defines information practices of immigrants is therefore essential. In the case of new immigrants to Canada, not only do many tend to lack a strong command of English, they are also less likely to be familiar with local institutions and practices relating to the flow of useful information.

Various initiatives have started examining the role of information institutions in enabling social inclusion. A 1999 consultation document, *Libraries for all*, produced for the U.K Department for Culture, Media and Sport identified various key barriers to the use of libraries by socially excluded groups.

Among the barriers identified were institutional barriers (opening hours, availability of library services, staff attitudes, rules and

regulations, and sense of ownership), personal/social barriers (basic literacy skills, low income, and low self esteem), environmental barriers (physical access, remote areas, decay, and isolation) and perceptions barriers (sense of isolation, educational disadvantage, relevance of libraries to one's needs, lack of knowledge about existing facilities and services.

All of these barriers illustrate powerfully the multiple ways exclusion can occur and the myriad of considerations institutions must heed if they are committed to operating establishments that are indeed inclusive.

Libraries as Public Space

Increasingly, information institutions and settlement services realize that they need to increase the services they offer beyond basic ESL courses. – Authors

More recently, a report on *Community Technology Centers as Catalysts for Change* mentions prominently the places of libraries in enabling social inclusion (Davies, Schwartz, Servon & Pinkett, 2003). They argue that "although community institutions, such as libraries, city hall, and Community Technology Centres (CTCs) are rarely thought of as public spaces like parks and plazas, they certainly function as public spaces, and can be important anchors in neighborhoods."

CTCs function well as public spaces because they promote community identity, social interaction, improve accessibility and increase participants' involvement in civil society.

... when we recognize not only that finding information is a necessity for newcomers in a way that might not be for other vulnerable groups, and the way that information seeking is caught up in other "recognized" facets of social inclusion (like the ability to access social networks and social capital), we can infer that information is most certainly an important aspect of social inclusion. – Authors

The report offers recommendations to augment the ability of CTCs to function as effective community spaces. These recommendations can also be extended to other information institutions also. These include:

- enhancing facility design;
- raising the profile of existing centres;
- partnerships and outreach with other community institutions;
- creating programming agendas that target community issues; and
- allowing space for multiple use and mixed purposes.

Increasingly, information institutions and settlement services realize that they need to increase the services they offer.

Omidvar (2001) calls for a "coherent national body of concerned citizens informing and shaping national policies of

settlement and immigration," which, based on notions of participation, would redress how these organizations conceive of their roles and the services they were mandated to perform. In particular, an emphasis is placed on conceiving settlement as a long-term process rather than the provision of immediate and emergency needs (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003).

The particular circumstances of newcomers, the social capital that they have access to, and the environment in which they find themselves often puts them in a vulnerable position and can lead to feelings of marginalization or even exclusion.

The provision of information has not been clearly established as a factor of inclusion. However, when we recognize not only that finding information is a necessity for newcomers in a way that it might not be for other vulnerable groups, and that information seeking is caught up in other "recognized" facets of social inclusion (like the ability to access social networks and social capital), we can infer that information is most certainly an important aspect of social inclusion.

Conclusions and recommendations

It is particularly important for information institutions to collaborate closely with various settlement and other organizations serving immigrants as a means to examine the lived experience of new immigrants. – Authors

The first step in providing social services to immigrants and other marginalized communities would be facilitating literacy of these services.

Fisher, Durrance and Hinton (2004) identified four necessary building blocks in immigrants' positive perceptions of the public library:

- discovery of the library and experience of its safe and accommodating environment;
- awareness of the resources available and acquisition of library skills;
- telling family and friends about how libraries can help them; and
- learning to trust library staff.

The inclusion of the archival material of vulnerable and marginalized communities and other groups such as immigrants enables the creation of a public record and public shared history that contribute to feelings of inclusion within a culture. – Authors

Information professionals, librarians and settlement workers must learn the specific information needs of newcomers. Once these immigrants are in Canada, how do they find the information they need to deal with situations they encounter in their lives? Which kind of information problems do they face? What factors influence where they go to find information? This examination entails a careful look at the *role that one's culture plays in shaping information practices.*

In the same vein, there are ways in which information institutions can make their resources and services more relevant to immigrants. These changes call for both changes in the practices and process as well as the scope of these information institutions. Making information available to newcomers in a way that is both usable and understandable (culturally meaningful to them) is key. This includes providing content in languages other than English or French, as well as going into the community to meet with community members and appropriate mediators, organizing orientation sessions and information literacy programs, providing assistance to immigrant groups and agencies with the selecting and organizing materials and resources that are relevant to the needs of their constituency.

Archiving of a community's records is also a powerful way to establish and publicly record a particular community's memories. The value of using archives to create a sense of social inclusion is often overlooked within organizations attempting to build communities and empower marginalized individuals such as settlement organizations. However, within the last few years, more and more organizations are recognizing the value of seeking out, collecting, and storing records of their own histories and the histories of the community members they represent.

Information (as a resource) and facilitating access to it should be recognized as necessary factors that enable inclusion of newcomers

into their adopted society. Indeed, newcomers are vulnerable to social exclusion because of the risk that they will end up at the social periphery; and it is our hope that information institutions start paying more attention and allocating more resources to this task.

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Information providers and policy makers alike are therefore urged to bridge the gap between social inclusion, social capital and the provision of information resources.

The decisions to be made by information institutions in terms of scope, programming, and processes must be considered carefully and revised on an ongoing basis so as to foster the inclusion of newcomers under the terms by which they desire to be included.

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