

Still Struggling for Equality: American Public Library Services with Minorities by Plummer Alston Jones, Jr.
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Social equity has been a perennial issue of interest to scholars in various disciplines. In library and information science, through particularly the provision of Multicultural Information Services (MIS), equal information access has to some degree always been a concern for the American public library enterprise. Libraries, especially in the public sector, have explored the standards of MIS in a multitude of formats. Some researchers examine the characteristics of individual ethnic groups, including their information seeking behavior within unique cultural and social contexts. Others focus on the planning, implementation, and evaluation of multicultural programs. Still others study the impact of information technology, especially the Internet, on existing and potential MIS and different information retrieval mechanisms geared towards multilingual collections.

In general, most research has dwelled primarily on how to provide MIS. Seldom have scholars examined the social and political backdrop that has created the present state of MIS. In other words, factors that have contributed to the development of Multicultural Information Services today are rarely studied. Looking back in history, the concept of equality/equity (with regard to MIS) has never been a fixed idea, but a moving target defined by a multitude of social forces. Thus, ascertaining the fundamental sources of influence on the conceptualization and provision of MIS is crucial to the understanding and future of MIS.

Plummer Alston Jones, Jr.'s *Still Struggling for Equality* is therefore a timely book, which explores how MIS and the library profession in general are shaped by policies, with special emphasis given to the role played by judicial legislation and immigration laws. Jones examines the origins and development of MIS from this most incisive, yet rarely explored, perspective. In the context of a detailed exploration of American legislative activities, he chronicles the development of information services to minorities in public libraries from 1876 to 2003 and he singles out seven eras (1876-1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and the present) to further understand the evolution of public libraries and the provision of MIS. These seven eras individually explicate the entangled social milieu through which public libraries' strategies developed from initial Americanization to assimilation, then to multiculturalism, and finally to globalization. Meanwhile, Jones particularly emphasizes developments within the ALA and the funding role and oversight of government agencies at the federal level. With detailed historical facts, *Still Struggling for Equality* is an excellent introductory textbook for the history of public libraries and the provision of MIS.

It may also function as a reference book in which all judicial regulations related to immigrants and key activities of public libraries can be easily located.

However, in many ways, the book stops short of where it should ideally begin. First, instead of simply juxtaposing immigration laws and library developments side by side, the book could have been enriched enormously with the addition of insightful overviews and analyses of exactly how legislation and social practice (in this case library practice) are intrinsically connected and have interacted historically. At least, some typical examples could have been provided to prepare readers to draw analogies on their own. Secondly, all the special terms (e.g., multiculturalism and globalization) used in naming each of the eras of library evolution might have functioned as much more than simple labels. The origination of the terms, their social implications, and influence on the orientation of the library profession at large (and services to minorities in particular) could have been fully explored to elevate the book to a higher intellectual level. For instance, the term “multiculturalism” has evolved over the years, from simply indicating multiple ethnicities, to embracing a much richer concept, including customs and norms, cultural assumptions, values, and behavioral and communication patterns (Chu, 1997). However, Jones makes no attempt to explicate how “multiculturalism” should be defined in his book and, thus, its implications for the library profession and MIS are left unexamined. Finally, in predicting the future of MIS, Jones provides no insightful analysis or conclusion except for emphasizing the role of federal funding and expressing concerns over the effects of budget cuts on libraries in the past few years.

Jones, Associate Professor of Library Science, at East Carolina University, has previously written an award-winning dissertation, *American Public Library Services to the Immigrant Community, 1876-1948* (1991), and a book, *Libraries, Immigrants, and the American Experience* in 1999. He is the first writer treating the nature of U.S. public library services to immigrants on a national scope. However, compared to his subtle and meticulous treatment of details in previous works, *Still Struggling for Equality* can only be counted as an introductory reference book on public library services to minorities from the fresh angle of American legislation. Regrettably, it reads like a shortened and hasty accumulation of historical facts spanning more than a century with inadequate and clumsy analysis. It misses an important opportunity to: 1) probe the changing nature of public libraries and the unarticulated ideological framework in which libraries and legislation are created and operate; and 2) provide the reader with a mind-opening, incisive understanding of the nature of social equality.

References

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Reviewer

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