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Public Libraries as Institutional Repositories and Stewards in an Historical and Ethical Context

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Abstract

Libraries are by definition repositories of documents that record to a greater or lesser degree the heritage of human culture and knowledge. The paper discusses different institutional regimes or as Justus Lipsius, writing in 1607 put it “The art of writing must have arisen almost as soon as man began to learn and to think; and this art would not have been profitable if books had not been preserved and arranged for present and future use.”

The digital revolution has redefined the functions of libraries in some important ways. We will explore some of those changes, their impact on practice and thereby their impact on professional ethics.

Introduction

There has always been an essential tension between the stewardship role of the library and its access and service roles. These tensions can be understood in an historical context by exploring the relative status ascribed to stewardship and access and service in the library context. If practice can be said to reflect ethics, we can also suggest that professional practice and thereby professional ethics have evolved since the beginnings of libraries. Some of these changes have come as a result of technological change (e.g. invention of writing, of papyrus, the scroll, the codex, the press, rise of literacy, cheap paper, and digitization) and some because the function of the library has been redefined (see Briggs and Burke 2005 for an interesting account). The earliest libraries were records repositories. Public libraries underwent great redefinition, especially in the nineteenth century.

This essential tension between the two primary urges of librarianship, stewardship and service, has helped form and define standards of practice and the professional ethics of library practitioners. We can document these primary urges from then contemporary literature of European and North American librarianship and the writings of library historians. Moreover, I will suggest, while standards of practice may have been well defined in most libraries by the sixteenth century, professional ethics have been more implicit than explicit until very recently.

Lest we become overly critical of sixteenth through twentieth century librarians, we must appreciate the context in which they worked. This appreciation also necessarily applies to twenty-first century librarians and the very different philosophical environments in which they work. Thus a Monastic or Renaissance librarian would be expected to hold beliefs that reflected the age, as would one in the Enlightenment, the Reformation, Romanticism, Modernism, or Post-modernism. We are, as Umberto Eco (2004) so eloquently paints for us, products of both our pasts and the present. How we perceive and interpret are products of our intellectual environment. To understand the works of those who preceded us, we must seek to place ourselves within their frames of reference.

Public library doctrine

I begin this section with a brief exploration of *public library doctrine*. Suffice it to say; what many of us have come to define as public libraries in the twenty-first century is very different from the use of the term until the middle of the nineteenth century. Until the establishment of the Manchester Public Library in the United Kingdom and the Boston Public Library in the United States, public libraries more closely resembled what we have come to know to be academic libraries. The changing definition is developed further below.

Library doctrine has over time shifted to favor the one over the other. S.R. Ranganathan (1957: 351-3, §§ 76-765) provides a brief history of the evolution of libraries that illustrates that essential tension. His library history begins with an incarceration metaphor of “hiding place” or “book prison” prior to the seventeenth century to “limited freedom” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By “limited freedom” Ranganathan means circulation solely *within* the library. The nineteenth

century was a period of “stock-taking vs. stock-use,” or “a period grudgingly lending them out.” Following World War I, libraries began liberalizing their lending policies.

Ranganathan speculates briefly about the future of libraries by citing H.G. Wells’ novel *Men Like Gods*, first published in 1923. In *Men Like Gods* the protagonists, the Utopians, are able to communicate and learn through telepathy. We have not as yet achieved effective information transfer via osmosis but the library as organism has evolved in the digital environment to something not unlike H.G. Wells’ *World Brain* (1938) idea in some respects.

An underlying theme to the argument presented in this paper is necessarily the continuing change to the definition of the term *public library*, and more importantly the term *public*. Service has little relevance until we understand the concept of service to whom. The definition of general public is ambiguous and sometimes a synecdoche where some of the parts define the whole. “Public” can be taken to mean some proportion of the general population: adult men of means only, members of a specific organization, members of a specific culture or race, educated adults, residents of a given political region, and so on. As a matter of general practice, over the centuries the term “public” has tended to become more inclusive. The notion that public libraries should, in fact, provide service to the public, widely defined, is a mid-nineteenth century principle while the concept of the library as entertainment center came into its own in the twentieth century. Public libraries in the many countries have also taken on the role as information gateways to the Internet. In some countries that function is highly regulated and barely regulated in others.

It is therefore critical for us to understand what was meant by the term “public” in different historical contexts before we seek to appreciate the repository and stewardship function of libraries and the ethics associated with those practices. The first well documented reference to the *public* library is a Roman one. In 44 BCE Julius Caesar directed Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BCE) to undertake construction of a public library in Rome. Lionel Casson (2001: 80) informs us that Varro’s work was completed by Asinius Pollio. Pollio’s library, according to accounts, was divided into two rooms – one for Greek manuscripts and another for those in Latin. Roman libraries (and this applies to Pollio’s, one assumes) were open structures, built with reading rooms to accommodate the user (Casson: 2001: 82-3).

Libraries most certainly existed in Europe prior to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Edward Edwards (1859 i: 83-4) described libraries of the middle ages as either monastic or palatial and that the monastic libraries were by far the more important of the two. Monasticism, Edwards (1859 i: 85-6) argued was the dominant social force of a thousand years. The monk was a preserver of culture, a copier of texts, and very rarely original author. Most monastic libraries were dominated by theological and ethical texts, with very little concern for literature as such. Edwards (1859 i: 100) further informs us that the first English library, established in the seventh century by Pope Gregory the Great consisted of but nine volumes. Pre-Gutenberg libraries were for the most part necessarily quite limited.

Gabriel Naudé (1627: 6-7) praised private book collectors who contributed their libraries to the use of the public. Naudé dedicated his life to the management of libraries, first for the President of the Paris Parlement de Thou, then Cardinals

Richelieu and Mazarin. Public libraries should have general and balanced collections, Naudé (1627: 16) argued. That collection should focus on the arts and sciences. “It must also be said that there is nothing more to the credit of a library than that every man finds in it what he seeks ...” (Naudé 1627: 17). The public should be aided by a courteous yet knowledgeable librarian (Naudé 1627: 76).

Johannes Lomeier’s (Montgomery 1962) *De Bibliothecis liber singularis*, first published in 1669, is a discourse on European libraries and their history. John Warwick Montgomery (1962) provides a translation into English of chapter ten of that work, a survey of the most famous libraries extant in seventeenth century Europe. Lomeier did not provide us with a count of all European libraries, but he did suggest that there were many as he asserted that it would have been an “infinite task... Indeed, one may scarcely find any moderately famous city, scarcely any community, gymnasium, university, or monastery where a library has not been set apart for the public use of the studious...

(Montgomery 1962: 12).” On Lomeier’s testimony, we learn that by the mid seventeenth century, there were many libraries available in Europe for serious study and that most of these libraries had their beginnings as private libraries bequeathed to public institutions by their owners.

Johann David Köhler (1684-1755) came into scholarly prominence in a transitional period for European scholarship. From the Middle Ages and into the Enlightenment, European scholars were part of a “common culture of scholarship,” a *respublica litteraria* (Eskildsen 2005: 421). That common culture of scholarship was subjected to a series of nationalistic and religious pressures across the eighteenth century so that as Köhler came into prominence in the eighteenth century, there had been a shift from the pan European *imagined community* to a more parochial nationalistic one (Anderson 1991).

As Köhler wrote, *Die Substanz einer Bibliothek sind die Bücher* (Köhler 1752: 9) or books are the substance of a library. Köhler spent several pages describing different book types. Some are handwritten others printed. Some are in codex format others are scrolls. Johann David Köhler warned his readers that handwritten books were relatively rare, that one is best prepared is one knows beforehand which library held a specific item. One way to locate books is to consult library catalogs. Köhler listed several union catalogs as well as catalogs of individual libraries.

Köhler defined different kinds of libraries. He described these as public and private and open and closed. Open libraries might best be defined as those with open stacks, closed libraries with closed stacks. Public libraries are those that permit the educated public access to their collections. Private libraries are those created by individuals and for the use of those individuals.

Most “public” libraries are associated with educational institutions – both universities and gymnasia or high schools. Most public libraries, as Köhler (1762) defined them, were open to very specific and limited constituencies. These constituencies usually included students, scholars, and gentlemen. For most public libraries, the rest of the general public were not included among those allowed access to the books.

Köhler (1762) distinguished between public and private libraries as well as open and closed library sections. He argued that private libraries were biased according to the interests of individual collectors while open libraries sought a broader representation of thought on given subjects. Some libraries are public in that all learned persons might use them; others were closed to the general public (for a treatment and a translation of Köhler's treatise on libraries see Koehler and Blair (2005)).

In the nineteenth century, Edward Edwards (Select Committee 1849: 1) provided the following as a definition for public libraries:

I would take it as embracing, first of all, libraries deriving their support from public funds, either wholly or in part; and I would further extend it to such libraries as are made accessible to the public to a greater or less degree.

Jesse Shera (1949) describes the evolution of libraries in the United States in great detail. The Puritans brought with them book collections. Learned wealthy men built libraries. Naudé (1627: 5-8) went so far to suggest that earthly immortality could be achieved by leaving one's name on a library. John Harvard left his 400 books to what was to become Harvard Library (Shera 1949: 18). Shera also tells us that there was some sense of community ownership of books that contributed to the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Library in the mid seventeenth century.

The first Boston Public Library was created through a bequest by Captain Robert Keyne in 1655 or 1656 to dedicate a room for a library in a new public building (Shera 1949: 19).

Social libraries were begun in the 1780s (Shera 1949: 54). These were for the most part book clubs. Shera does not credit Benjamin Franklin with the creation of the social library, but Franklin did play an important role.

In what was to become United States, the public library movement began as social or subscription libraries. In his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin (1944: 87-8) provided an account of the founding of the Philadelphia public library in 1730. He recounted that when he arrived in Philadelphia, there were no book sellers south of Boston. Most of Philadelphia's book lovers had by necessity to acquire their books from England. Franklin, noting that there were indeed books in Philadelphia in private hands, proposed that these readers band together in a "public" subscription library, a *junto*, to pool both money and books. Franklin (1944: 88) observed:

So few were the readers at that time in Philadelphia, and the majority of us were so poor, that I was not able, with great industry, to find more than fifty persons, mostly young tradesmen, willing to pay down for this purpose forty shillings each, and ten per annum. On this little fund we began. The books were imported; the library was opened one day in the week lending to the subscribers, on their promissory notes to pay double the value if not duly returned.

The *junto* was, according to Franklin eminently successful and copied by others in other cities. Franklin used the library to further his education and to provide what little diversion he would allow.

The open-access movement of public libraries probably began in the United States in the mid to late nineteenth century. Generally referred to as "reference libraries," these libraries had liberal entrance and lending policies. By the late nineteenth century, open-access reference libraries were also in existence in the United Kingdom.

The public library was often seen as a panacea for society's problems. Daniel Goldstein (2003) finds, for example that the Iowa library movement thrived beginning in the 1890s because the public library and reading were seen as replacements for gambling, drinking, and prostitution. Goldstein further argues that librarian values as they relate to the relevance of the library as a means to control social ills depends on the specific issue and the prevailing social mores (see also Herlihy 2002: 98).

John Cotton Dana should perhaps be considered the great democratizer of the public library. Trained as a lawyer and as a civil engineer, John Cotton Dana began his library career in Denver, Colorado. Dana was author of numerous speeches, essays, and articles in support of liberalization of public library policies. His contributions to practice include broadening the user base of public libraries from subscribers to the general public, open stacks, separate children's collections, foreign language collections to meet the needs of diverse population bases, and branch libraries to support specific interests (e.g. a businessman's library).

Dana (1920: 2-3) stated that in 1876, there were few libraries in United States except those in schools and colleges, but that it is then that "the modern library movement began." It began in part because of gifts from the wealthy for public library buildings. Dana did not specifically name Andrew Carnegie, certainly the greatest single private benefactor to library building programs in American history. In addition, "[t]he growth of print has increased the reading habit (Dana 1920: 4)." Those two factors contributed to the need for libraries, which in turn gave rise to the need for skilled librarians.

Dana was one of the first major proponents of libraries as entertainment facilities. Libraries serve several purposes, among them entertainment and the provision of answers to complex questions (Dana 1920: 10). He (Dana 1920: 9) argued further that:

Most of us lead rather humdrum lives. Novels open doors to an ideal life in the enjoyment of which one forgets the hardships or the tedium of the daily grind. The library can make this reading of more value and help to extend it.

Public library culture underwent significant change in the twentieth century. Melvil Dewey undertook to educate women in library economy. John Cotton Dana promoted the hiring of women as library workers and directors. McCook (2004: 44-5) argues that the injection of women into the library profession has contributed to the moderating of the library as an up-lifter of culture to a nurturing and service based institution.

On Stewardship

Le livre pouvait être comparé à une créature vivante, animée, de sensibilité, de caprice ou d'originalité, exige une manipulation habile, une conservation soignée, une sollicitude de tous instants. (Rouveyre 1899 *i* : 21)

Stewardship has an inherent inner tension. The first is to preserve the cultural history of a society; but second, to conserve that history in a way consistent with the basic

values of that society. If it is inherent in a society to promote diversity of information and beliefs, the tensions imposed on the librarian are minimal. If, on the other hand, social beliefs and values are narrowly defined by a specific orthodoxy, librarians may very well find their roles as stewards conflicted between social orthodoxy and informational heterodoxy.

The duties imposed on the librarian by stewardship can take several forms. In its most core meaning, stewardship means the guarding of the cultural, literary, historical, and scientific heritage of a culture. Not only are librarians directed to insure that their collections adequately reflect their share of cultural beliefs, they are also charged with protecting the vehicles – the documents in their various formats – through which cultural manifestations are communicated. Thus librarians are charged with protecting these documents from disasters man made and natural as well as theft, vandalism, insect infestations, political pressures, and other threats known and unknown.

Important libraries have succumbed to disasters natural and man made. The destruction of the Library at Alexandria has been decried across the ages (see Lipsius, 1602: 42-45). That library disintegrated over time from the Roman defense at Alexandria in the first century BCE through challenges from flooding and fire until its final demise in 638 CE. Most recently, the Iraqi National Library fell victim to war in 2003. The Pacific tsunami of 2004 significantly damaged libraries large and small from Sri Lanka to Indonesia. Fires and floods damaged collections at the University of Georgia and the University of Hawaii within the same timeframe. Almost every library everywhere and in every epoch has experienced vandalism and theft.

We have always been aware of threats to libraries, but it has only been in recent years that recovery plans for both man made and natural disasters have been made more common. Lipsius (1607: 42-3) wrote of the ruin of the Alexandrian Library “A precious treasure! But, alas, through it was the offspring of man’s immortal spirit it was not itself immortal. . . .Shame be to Caesar for having brought this about, even though without intent, this irreparable loss!” He also noted that historians before him were equally appalled at the destruction – Ammianus, Dion, Hirtius, Livy, Plutarch, Seneca, among them (Lipsius 1607: 44-5).

The United States Library of Congress is one of many libraries that have developed stewardship initiatives. In its 1999 Stewardship Report, Heritage Assets, the Library of Congress described its digital collections policy (US Library of Congress 1999: 42-3). The digital policy includes a requirement to “create a culture of technical and strategic innovation to ensure that the Library staff can provide traditional and expanded resources to readers. This vision grounded digital information services on the fundamental principles that librarians are the keepers, interpreters and mediators of information and knowledge, and that all citizens are entitled to equal access to information and knowledge.”

Many librarians until the mid-nineteenth century conceived of their role as one of collection protection rather than patron service. This tradition continues to a lesser or greater degree in some libraries, archives, and museums. Effective stewardship demands that materials be protected. Yet to promote knowledge of the cultural record, library materials must be used.

A Library of Congress Symposium (Merrill 2003) found that stewardship has four key components: preservation and physical security and bibliographic and inventory control.

On Service

If stewardship is the oldest of library functions, service is now recognized as the librarian's primary responsibility (Koehler et al 2000). There has always been a tension between service and stewardship; one giving way to the other as the essential function of the library underwent redefinition.

Sir Thomas Bodley (1603: 84-5) defined a very limited service role for his Librarian at Oxford University. As already indicated, Bodley sought to protect the collection above its use by scholars. While he required the Librarian to treat users/visitors according to their station as scholars, the courtesy of the library did not extend far beyond that courtesy.

James Kirkwood saw the library as an extension of God's design, that mankind was inherently curious but unable to learn as an individual all things. To facilitate learning, "God hath endued Mankind with a Faculty of Speech, whereby they may Teach and Communicat to one another, all such Knowledges and Observations as shall be found out by any of them...." (Kirkwood 1699a: 18-19). God, according Kirkwood, may have provided mankind with the gift of speech, then with writing. Writing, to shorten Kirkwood's argument somewhat, led to printing, then to a proliferation of books. No one could read or acquire all books, hence "...Libraries are absolutely necessary for the Improvement of Arts and Sciences, and for Advancing of Learning amongst us (Kirkwood 1699a: 27)." To bring about this universality of service and access to learning, Kirkwood proposed the establishment of libraries in every parish of Scotland.

John Dury (1650: 42-45) defined the properly maintained and managed library to provide service to scholars and to have an impact on learning, but also to protect the collection:

...his work then is to bee a Factor and Trader for helps to Learning, and a Treasurer to keep them, and a dispenser to applie them to use, or to see them well used, or at least not abused...

In his second letter, Dury (1650: 61) was particularly critical of the Library at the University of Heidelberg. He suggested that the very fact that the Heidelberg Library did not open its collections for scholarship led to its decline as an important library.

Jean-Baptiste Cotton des Houssayes equated service with courtesy (1780: 36-41) toward visitors to the library, whether they were scholars or the merely curious. The librarian's responsibilities include making the faculties of the library open to its users. Indeed, Cotton des Houssayes (1780: 41-2) asks

What ...would the object of these precious collections , gathered at so great an expense by fortune or by science , if they were not consecrated, according to the intentions of their generous founders, to the advancement, the glory, and the perfection of science and literature?

On merging stewardship, service, and ethics

Kathleen de la Peña McCook (1999) reminds us that librarianship (like love) is a “many splendored-” and yet an inherently simple thing:

Librarianship, thanks to centuries of effort, has a simple and clear goal as well. Applying Ockham's Razor, that entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity, the goal is information equity. Inherent in this goal is working for universal literacy; defending intellectual freedom; preserving and making accessible the human record; and ensuring that preschoolers have books to read.

It has been widely suggested in the literature on library ethics that both service and stewardship are among the first of the first principles of librarianship (e.g. Froehlich 2000; Gorman 2000; or Koehler and Pemberton 2000). Service and stewardship, as important as they are as first principles of the profession, can compete with one another. If stewardship policies are overly protective, service may suffer. If library access policies are too overly liberal, the potential exists for challenges to the security of the collection.

We find ourselves at one of those points of punctuated equilibria Frederick Kilgour describes in *The Evolution of the Book*. Necessarily as books evolve, so do libraries. Borrowing from a biological model, Kilgour has charted changes to books, their creation, and use. In recent memory, Kilgour argues that innovations in press technologies in the 1970s and the emergence of digital information represent to such points of equilibria. Offset printing probably did not create a major ethical conundrum for the library community. Digital technologies may well create them.

Digital materials can create new opportunities and new challenges for libraries as they provide access and service to their patrons. As a consequence, the concept of service may be redefined in more expansive terms. Librarians can respond to the needs of a far larger audience with a far wider array of materials.

The digitization of materials also has stewardship implications. Whereas it is true that digitized materials cannot be “stolen” or “destroyed” in the same way as “the real thing,” and therefore support stewardship; they are also vulnerable to “stewardship decay” often outside the competence of libraries to control (e.g. Clarke 1999; Berman 2000; Jacobs 2004; or Ferguson 2004). Digital collections, the collective wisdom would have it, are particularly sensitive to the collapse of companies, economies, countries, or even civilizations. Any one of these may destroy individual or collective collections of information, of virtual cultural heritage. Libraries may cancel an online journal subscription and effectively lose a substantial collection.

The doom-sayers may well be correct – nuclear Armageddon, global economic collapse or an environmental disaster as a result of a sudden and dramatic global warming might destroy digital collections. Short of the collapse of civilization and its infrastructure as we know it, it is imperative that we reexamine stewardship policies and the ethics of stewardship to help insure that at least some of the cultural heritage now being generated persists.

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