Library Theory and Practice
and Information Ethics: The One Defines the Other
A Paper Dedicated to the Memory of Lester Pourciau (1936–2009)

Introduction

Library theory and practice has undergone significant shifts over the centuries. The library at Nineveh was more of records repository. The Library at Alexandria was more scholarly in scope. European monastic libraries from the fall of Rome to the 13th century were focused on stewardship and preservation. It was not until the thirteenth century that private libraries were to begin to emerge together with the more scholarly focus. The library in support of the king or of state was a fifteenth century phenomenon. Libraries for both scholarship and as a cultural repository emerged in the early 17th century. It is not until the mid-19th century that the concept of the publicly funded public library developed. And it was the begin-
ning of the 20th century that not only a more universal access in libraries accepted, but that libraries began to be seen as of value for entertainment as well as self and social improvement.

As library theory and practice has changed, so has the relative order of primary librarian ethics. S.R. Ranganathan’s five laws of library science provide a useful agenda against which to assess that change. The Five Laws are sufficiently broad and sufficiently flexible to include more specific values. Moreover, the First Law, Books are for use, reflects a shift from stewardship to access and service; a shift that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ranganathan’s (1957) five laws are:

1. Books are for use
2. Every reader his book
3. Every book its reader
4. Save the time of the reader
5. The library is a growing organism

The thesis of this work is that the ethics of librarianship and its practice are not fixed and constant. They may be, as Michael Gorman (2000) suggests, enduring. But values change in order and in emphasis. There are some few principles that have persisted with little change from the beginnings of libraries: Stewardship, defined broadly, has been the most steadfast. Others, like intellectual freedom and freedom of expression, are among the most recent and too often the most challenged. Still others, for example, access and the treatment of intellectual property have undergone significant change from time to time and place to place. Just as societies evolve and change, so do the principles that regulate librarians and libraries. Yet, despite their differences, different societies share similar structures and the functions those structures serve for those societies. Perhaps libraries are one of those structures common across societies and across time. François LaPélerie (1998: 68) puts the question thusly: «Is there an essential quality, a wisdom, a savoir-faire, that is universal, that transcends time and civilizations, and that defines the librarians’ craft?»

Key Library Ethics Precepts

Librarians have continuously identified an important set of ethical precepts either explicitly or implicitly both across time and space. There is some contemporary variation, is has been suggested, based on either the specific practice of a set of librarians or because of broader social mores. For example, Koehler et al (2000) found that law librarians tend to place greater emphasis on intellectual property issues and that Chinese librarians rank the historical record as more important than librarians elsewhere. The paper traces the evolution of library practices across several other principles as well. There are significant implications for the near to medium future for information and professional practice. New information technologies are changing our practices. These affect intellectual property rights, stewardship, access, and other ethical precepts. As we observe the history of information ethics and technological change, we can perhaps anticipate modifications to our ethical practices into the future.

Stewardship

Stewardship is perhaps the first among the principles to have been developed by the earliest librarians and maintained by contemporary ones. That principle was followed by «usage» concepts. It was not until the late Nineteenth Century that patron service began to supersede stewardship in most public libraries in the west. In many academic and special libraries, stewardship continues to overshadow usage. For example, the Bodleian Library at Oxford University remains a non-circulating library to this day. From the fall of Rome through the 12th century, monasteries were the primary European repository of manuscripts. They were first and foremost agents of stewardship. It has already been suggested that from the fifth to the thirteenth century, libraries were housed in monasteries. The primary purpose of these libraries was a stewardship that contributed little to a contribution to knowledge, to edification, self-improvement, or to entertainment. These libraries most certainly were reserved for the very limited and very select elite: the cleric.

The rise of the university and of the bibliophile began a transition of a total emphasis on stewardship to a limited acceptance of access and service. The bibliophile, the collector and lover of books, and the

1 Y a-t-il une qualité essentielle, un savoir, un savoir-faire, qui seraient universels, qui traverseraient les âges et les civilisations et qui définiraient le métier de bibliothécaire
private library began to become important in the early 14th century. Richard de Bury, Bishop of Durham, author of Philobiblion extolled the beauty and joys of book collecting. But of greater importance to the readers of books, he also began an appreciation of the collection of manuscripts for use and not just for the purposes of stewardship.

**Access/Equity of Access**

Access to library collection is an idea that emerged as a key library concept in the mid-nineteenth century. Stewardship trumped access in almost all collections through the medieval libraries until the emergence of the publicly funded public library in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1850s. The principle of publicly funded public libraries has continued to develop as a key principle. That concept is undergoing revision as private sector entities, like Google, are begun to enter the information access arena, to include Google Books. Over a thousand years, library practice has evolved from almost stewardship as primary and virtually no access to broad access with reduced stewardship. Stewardship as such has not disappeared, but it is no longer ascendant as a general principle of librarianship.

Equity of access adds a second dimension to access. Who may use, who may have access to information maintained by libraries? Until the mid-19th century, information access was largely the domain of the propertied dominant social group of most societies. By the early 17th century, much concerned was expressed over the qualification of librarians, implying an ethical requirement that those managing libraries possessed the necessary skills and knowledge to do so. Sir Thomas Bodley, for example, would require the librarian to be a university graduate, and at least for Oxford, to be a university graduate (Bodley 1603, 68-9).

In the 19th century, public library theory underwent a significant metamorphosis. The first major shift came at mid-century. Edward Edwards led the British movement to promote public libraries supported by the public purse. His testimony before the Select Committee on Public Libraries in 1849 set the philosophy driving public libraries. Edwards was to become the librarian at the first «rate supported» public library, that at Manchester in 1852. More publically funded libraries soon followed, to include the Boston Public Library.

From the mid-1850s to the beginning of the twentieth century, public libraries underwent a metamorphosis of purpose. According to John Cotton Dana (1920: 2), the modern public lending library was born in 1876. The public library for the public, not just by people making «painstaking research» or scholarship rather than popular use…library to «broaden the minds of common people» «A free public library is not a people’s post-graduate school, it is the people’s common school» (Dana 1903: 123-4). The public library was more than that for Dana. It was also to be a place where all people could not only be edified but entertained. In the United States, for example, library access was often limited to white male adults with sufficient income to support subscription libraries. After the development of public libraries, separate services were often provided on the basis of gender or almost always on the basis of race. It is only in the last sixty years that American public libraries have been open to nearly everyone.

**Service**

Who shall librarians serve? Wayne Wiegand (1989) shows that as societies undergo change so do concepts of library service. We generally recognize that librarians serve specific constituencies. What has changed is that the definition of the constituencies has broadened. Has that definition has broadened, so have the constituencies to be served. The public library of the mid 19th century often limited service to those over a certain age (e.g. 14 years), the sober, the clean, and so on. Most public libraries today actively seek the very young and the very old. In the United States, courts have held that the homeless and the derelict have rights as well.

Service carries another connotation. The range of services a library might offer has broadened. Some of these broadened services have come to be included as expected – reference services, for example. Libraries, too, are often perceived to be technological hubs. Libraries may provide extensive Internet access for patrons. Libraries may expand the materials they provide – from books to DVDs, even sometimes to tools and toys. Libraries have also undergone a significant shift in the kinds of materials in their collections. Public libraries until the early 20th century were expected to educate and edify. The idea that public libraries would support public education persists (see Shera 1949: v or McCook 2004:1). Today they are also expected to entertain and to provide Internet access.
**Intellectual Property Rights**

Intellectual property rights are most certainly in flux. Simon Newman and I (2004) find a growing conflict of interests among authors, intellectual property holders, and intellectual property consumers. The tilt appears to favor the intellectual property holders over creators and end-users. That intellectual property rights are open to different interpretation and application are of no great surprise – American, British, French, and German interpretations of copyright law, for example, differ in the interpretation of its economic and moral aspects. Russian interpretations of the fair use aspects of intellectual property are, it seems, less favorable toward the user than the copyright holder than, say, in the United States. In fact we suggest, as do others, that «information» has become «commodified,» creating both concrete and abstract concepts of a new manifestation of a combined intangible and tangible property.

Intellectual property concepts have undergone a metamorphosis, one perhaps driven by technology. The first copyright law, the British Statute of Anne, 1710, specified copyright over a specific period for authors and their assignees. Until the middle of the 19th century, copyright national in scope. It was not until the end of the 19th century that it became first a bilateral then multilateral right. The right did not become truly international until the United States became party to the Berne Convention in 1988, a multilateral treaty first promulgated in the 1880s. Both the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the People’s Republic of China, also major actors, came later to international intellectual property rights than the United States.

Technology has contributed significantly to copyright. The printing press, it has been argued, precipitated first the need for licensing of publications then copyright. The development of printing and paper-making technologies led to the economies of publication, which in turn, led to national and international markets for published material. Book trade between Great Britain and the United States was exacerbated by publisher in the United States printing the works of authors like Charles Dickens without permission while British publishers took the work of authors like Edgar Allen Poe again without permission. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries much concern has been expressed over the pirating of movies, software, and games; not to mention printed materials.

One result of technological change and economic demand has been a general trend toward greater protection of copyright owners to the detriment of information users. I suspect one consequence of this process may be that intellectual property rights will continue to become more strenuously protected for intellectual property defined as economically valuable, particularly in the software and entertainment areas. There may come a relaxation of copyright application in more academic and personal publishing.

**Intellectual Freedom**

There is a long history and concern with the question of intellectual freedom, freedom of expression, and the control and manipulation of information. Rights of intellectual freedom are integral parts of our publicly expressed culture. These rights are usually defined as both the right to freely express one’s thoughts and beliefs, and as the right of access to information.

These rights are balanced by both social restraints as well as the freedom of others to object to those expressions of value and beliefs. Every society has placed limits on what it will or will not tolerate. Those limits may be policed through the specific application of both positive and negative state sanctions. Or they may be regulated through a more informal interpretation of social mores. Those standards and their targets are constantly changing. Libraries have never been, are not, and cannot be completely immune to these changes. To restate the obvious, what we consider to be «riff-raff» books, inappropriate for the library collection in one age; become the classical, must «have» literature in another age. In the seventeenth century, for example, as Paul Keen (1999) demonstrates, the place of literature in the public sphere was being redefined. Old elites were concerned that new readers were being unduly influenced by a new literature.

Liz Greenhalgh and Ken Worpole (1998: 12) acknowledge that public libraries, at least those in the United Kingdom, are a manifestation, an application of the public sphere and are, as well, important «public spaces.» Public spaces, then should be supportive of a wide diversity of thought, ideas, and opinion. The librarian, in supporting the concept of «every book its patron» and «every patron his/her book» underpins the freedom of the library to provide appropriate services to its patron base.
Conclusion

In this paper, I have touched very briefly on several ethical precepts identified as important to the librarian profession. Each of these important concepts can be incorporated under the five laws that Ranganathan enumerated for the profession. What we must recognize is that while the various values librarians hold have been important to the profession for centuries, the focus, the importance, and the application of the values have undergone change over time and are applied differently in different places, in different circumstances, and in different cultures.

It is necessary to acknowledge that no library can provide a universal set of services and access for all potential users. Librarians should, I believe, use the means available to themselves to best offer those services within the limits within which they must practice. All libraries operate within a social construct; they are elements of the civic culture. Restraints of a social, political, and economic nature exist. Within those constraints, librarians are ethically bound to be guided by the standards by which we practice.

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