

Constructing the Heritage of Cultures: A World History of Modern Librarianship

Librarianship has a history several millennia long, but our focus here is mostly the last century. During that time, mirroring broader historical processes, the profession has undergone three general transitions. First, with the advent of urbanized industrial mass society in the mid-nineteenth century, librarians in the Anglo-American world ceased seeing themselves as “keepers of the book,” whose principal role it was to preserve cultural artifacts for an elite clientele. In keeping with the needs of the new, science and technology based society and its political and economic ideologies, they became instead members of a practical and pragmatic profession committed to serving the public at large, and to disseminating the new as well as preserving the old. Seeing as their task the development of new techniques to enhance access to useful knowledge they did their work in the service of public enlightenment in the quest for scientific, impartial truth. A belief that this quest was value-free, i.e., free of particular cultural characteristics was very much part of the intellectual climate of the time. In the second of our historical transitions, as Anglo-America hegemony grew, this new professional self-image and set of techniques spread abroad—to continental Europe and to Russia, and, with the growth of colonialism and imperialism, to the rest of the world. Finally, in the post-colonial era, that globalizing process has accelerated: High-tech tools like the Internet and expanding digital collections have changed the library to such an extent that little connection seems to remain between the pre-electronic profession and the present one. And it is not only technology that is changing. The organization and dissemination of knowledge more and more frequently takes place in institutions other than libraries; and, accordingly, graduates of library schools are getting jobs in other, less traditional environments.

Yet contemporary libraries and their offshoots in the information business continue to encounter many of the same problems as did their nineteenth-century predecessors. These problems, which are bound up not only with the broader contradictions of globalizing and modernizing processes, but with the elusive ideal of value-neutrality that is implicit in the ethos of the Anglo-American, and generally Western, library, I have dubbed the “core tensions” of modern international librarianship. And they form the framework for the essays in this volume.

Thee Core Tensions of Modern International Librarianship

a) Inherent Tensions in the Anglo-American Tradition

It has often been claimed that Anglo-American librarianship, with its apparent commitment to unbiased collection building, to equal users access, and to scientific systems of indexing, is free of the ideological bias that marks other traditions. Scientific and there objective (and good), it, unlike its predecessors and competitors, is not, some people argue, culture bound. Such has been the principal justification for its export. But is value-neutrality inn fact always good? And even if it in principle is good, is it possible to achieve?

In response to the first: While it is true that the ethos of value-free dissemination of knowledge to any user may be a powerful force for the good, a belief in the merely technical benefits of modern librarianship can be quite dangerous unless it is coupled with vigilance to preserve universal access. It is one of the ironies of the 20th century that many of the

techniques developed by modern librarianship to enhance access to information—like standardized indexing—were also useful to the hegemony of totalitarian regimes such as those of Nazi Germany and the USSR that had no interest in the free flow of information at all. And, despite the shift away from the keep of the book role, is not the librarian's function as well to help preserve and maintain a culture? (a point to which we shall return). Focusing merely on the technique itself—especially when it is simply assumed to be good, can lead us to neglect the context in which it is used. But, even when most people would agree that neutrality is a force for the good, it is, unfortunately, both in theory and in practice, elusive; On the most basic material level, one need only ask whether libraries can remain unaffected by the aims and values of those that found and fund them, be they national governments, the military, religious institutions, private businesses, foundations, or international organizations like UNESCO—organizations and institutions whose role, where relevant, will be explored by this book's contributors.

More specifically, even the core principles of the defenders of value-neutrality are plagued by ambiguities, contradictions, and constraints: Is not equal access, for example, no matter how noble, conditioned by other civic factors—from leisure-time to transportation to literacy, to say nothing of broader, and often unquestioned, world-views? In the American South, to take but one glaring case in point, racist ideology outweighed the profession's hallowed equal access principle. No less did it shape scientific indexing. Indeed, even the more cursory reading of Foucault, for example, or any other theorist of discourse, shatters the illusion of objectivity in classification and indexing. For without constant comparison with other world views, it is easy to see why we tend to take as universal givens the concepts and categories of our culture. But the problem extends beyond indexing. Take one of the core principles of the Anglo-American school—that of “unbiased” collection building. In 1879 Melvil Dewey came up with a motto for the American Library Association that proudly asserted: “The best reading for the largest number at the least cost,” naively assuming that like number and cost “the best” was an easily defined category, free from cultural limitations.

The relationship between libraries and their cultural context, however, is in no way unidirectional. For once librarians have selected “the best” materials and indexed them “scientifically,” they have, whether consciously or unconsciously, worked to define and reinforce the concepts and categories of their culture. Indeed, for all their pretenses of value-neutrality, librarians—even librarians who style themselves in the Anglo-American mode—are agents of cultural reproduction perpetuating prevailing ideologies. Put somewhat differently, they might even be said to be forging what the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1879-1937) called “cultural hegemony”—a means of building a consensus society that more or less preserves the social and political status quo.

In short, though guided by the ideal of transcending culture, librarians in the Anglo-American tradition nonetheless both shape and are shaped by it. Caught between ideal and reality, they must navigate a civic maze that all too often places obstacles before their goal. And, once their de facto relationship to broader civic culture is acknowledged, they must steer between two other roles that all too often conflict in our rapidly changing global society: that of preserving a cultural heritage and that of organizing and disseminating new information and knowledge.

b) Tensions in Colonial and Post-Colonial Society

The tensions inherent in the Anglo-American tradition were only highlighted by the second and third of the past century's transitions in librarianship—the spread of Anglo-American cultural hegemony to continental Europe and the so-called Third World. For if Gramscian hegemony applies to libraries in Europe and America, it is all the more applicable in the West's colonial empires. The British, the Germans, and the French (who had adopted new models of librarianship), for example, used the export of cultural institutions like libraries, archives, museums, and schools to ensure the replication of their own views and values—the views and values of those in power—rather than those of the indigenous populations. Just how this process operated will be a central theme of this book's regional chapters.

Of equal importance for our book is the fact that when elements of Anglo-American culture—like the modern library establishment with its technical apparatus—became, as the sociologist Anthony Giddens calls it, “disembedded” from its original site and “re-embedded” in cultures for which they were not designed, tensions were created. Especially in the decolonized world the foreign intrusion in their own cultures stimulated many colonial peoples to defend their own heritage. For the librarians tensions arose between the demands of their role as guardians of their cultural heritage and as providers of value-free knowledge.

It was in a new form the old dilemma inherent in the function of the librarian, but much exacerbated by the political demands of that situation. It will be the task of our contributors to examine the problems of adaptation in the regions they study, taking into consideration the peculiar cultural, socio-economic and political make-up and mid-sets.

CONCLUSION:

Clearly, the modern development of librarianship has not solved the clash between its two roles: provider to all of uncontaminated knowledge on the one hand, provider of tools to keep alive (or sometimes forge) a cultural or national identity on the other. After all, the business of providing the records of thinking in these new electronic forms is, just like the pre-electronic library, no merely passive technical activity, but it is deeply rooted in its social and cultural environment. The library, public or catering to specialized interests, is a social institution, and as such it everywhere reflects the influence of the civic life of the communities it serves.

Libraries of the traditional preservation model as well as the modern user oriented variety, have never been passive depositories of records of knowledge. They are creative social and cultural institutions that play an important role in the process of cultural reproduction, the process by which a culture preserves and defends, as well as transforms, its own heritage. The contributors to this book hope to make both practicing and aspiring librarians aware of the cultural determinants of their own profession's history and the opportunities as well as the problems they create.

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