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The Role of Libraries, Librarians, and Information in Society

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In the text *Foundations of Library and Information Science* by Richard E. Rubin and the online lectures for LIBR 200 at SJSU taught by Deborah Hansen, the history of information and librarianship is detailed and given scope. Some of the major points that the materials cover are: the missions and values of libraries, the beginning of libraries as institutions, librarianship as a profession, and the advent of technology, specifically, the World Wide Web. This paper will summarize these points as they have been detailed in the readings and then examine them from a personal perspective, one by one. Many interesting points have been raised in the readings, some of it seems counterintuitive, some of it I take umbrage with, and some of it makes me excited to have chosen librarianship as a career.

Ultimately, the material I’ve read boils down to information about information. Everything that this paper relates and reflects on is the study of information and its importance to society. It is my contention that information has always been sought but that the means by which it is transmitted and the breadth of knowledge it comes from have both undergone major changes over the course of centuries. The world is entering a period of time wherein information is so widely disseminated and freely available by the Web that society can glut itself upon the knowledge. At the root of my approach to information is the theory that all knowledge should be free and the role of information in society is to inform.
It is interesting, to me, that information, to inform, and formative are all derived from the same root word. Much of the reading in Rubin and Hansen’s work explores the role in which librarians have power. Power over the information, power to inform the public, and, most importantly, the power to reform the moral good of society. It is occasionally even implied that not only do they have the power, but also the responsibility to effect change. At times, the language stings my love of freedom as I feel it threatened by the moral authoritarian in the form of a librarian who will tell me what to read, what to think, and what to do.

Librarians are, according to the text, “agents of social improvement” (Rubin, 2004, p. 287) or “agents of authority and social control” (Rubin, 2004, 289) who can “shape the reading, and through it the thought, of [their] whole community” (Rubin, 2004, 443). The text, in its penchant for gross over-exaggeration even states that “This power could be used for good or evil” (Rubin, 2004, 443). Furthermore, Rubin cites the views of one of the founding fathers of library science, Mevil Dewey, as believing that “only people with the appropriate ‘character’ should be accepted into the profession; character in this nineteenth century sense meant ‘moral potential’” (Rubin, 2004, 444). Thus, not only are librarians to be agents of the moral good, but they are to shape society to their whims—whether those stem from good or evil impulses.

In this context, the language implies that the role of information in society is defined by the librarian. The librarian is the source of knowledge and the arbiter of how that knowledge is articulated and shared. The mission of libraries and librarians is one of the most important topics the reading covers—at which the heart of the matter is the role of the librarian as a figure of power. The text makes comparisons between librarians and
other nurturing roles—nurses, educators, lawyers, doctors, and clergy—and claims that this type of profession is more worthy than any other. “It is, we should admit, a noble urge, this altruism of ours, one that seems both morally and psychologically good” (Rubin, 2004, 305). Perhaps it was true in the past, however if salaries are anything to go by then a good percentage of doctors and lawyers have abandoned all sense of altruism.

The mission, as I see it, should always be to disseminate information. The librarian is a bastion, a guarder of knowledge, but not a hoarder. As a service oriented profession (which the text also makes a point of mentioning) the librarian is there to serve the community, not rule it. A situation which is anyway quite difficult now with the advent of the web and the freedom of information.

Which brings me to the second major point the readings cover—the origins of libraries as institutions, for, admittedly, there was a time when the printed word was indeed hoarded and used for ill by those that guarded it. In the Dark Ages when the Church controlled information, the common people were denied access and suffered all the more for it (Hansen, 2006). Prior to this, in its heyday, libraries were semi-public under Greek rule, Roman rule, and Middle Eastern rule (Hansen, 2006). However, most of the reading concentrates on the advent of libraries in the United States, so I will now turn to that. Rubin identifies the three main components that are necessary to be in place before a library can be built. These are: centralization, economic growth, and political stability (Rubin, 2004, 260). The reasons are obvious—a society must be centrally located and not nomadic in order to build a library, the economy must be flourishing to afford to build and maintain a library and the political situation must be stable to keep the library from being ransacked and/or destroyed. Rubin identifies all these preconditions
as being present in America in the mid-nineteenth century, when the first major public library was built in Boston in 1854—the Boston Public Library.

However, Rubin also goes to the trouble of showing the dark schism at the heart of this “altruistic” building. There are two sides of opinion on the core mission behind the building of the Boston Public Library. The first being a genuinely good deed and the second being a form of authoritarian control. Rubin states the question in the following manner, “Are public libraries the cauldron of democracy or the tools of social control?” (Rubin, 2004, 289). On the one hand, the Boston Public Library was established as “a natural outgrowth of prevailing social attitudes” (Rubin, 2004, 285). It was built with the needs of the public in mind as one more institution for the self-improvement and education of all. However, on the other hand, the library was built through the efforts and monetary support of a core group of people—“a highly privileged, politically conservative, and aristocratic class that dominated the social, economic, and political life of the city” (Rubin, 2004, 288). There are some scholars, notably Michael Harris, who claim that these rich individuals built the library as “another strategy of elitist aristocrats to maintain class stratification” (Rubin, 2004, 289). Harris attempts to convince his readership that the library was built by the rich for the rich. An attitude that is echoed by African American and Hispanic parties at a later date who feel that a library “engages in the disproportionate distribution of resources to satisfy first the demands of an Anglo society” (Rubin, 2004, 295). However, Rubin as the author of the text also makes a case for libraries being built as a way to quickly integrate immigrants into American life.

These two stances offer very little in common with one another—first he says libraries were only for the wealthy, long-standing social members, and then makes a case
for them being the haven for the very poorest, newly immigrated citizens. I would hazard a guess that both views probably have some truth in them. Furthermore, neither really has altruism as a motivating factor. Elitism is a hoarding of privileged information and rapidly assimilating immigrants is a form of social control wherein their value systems and history are quickly replaced with the chosen ethics of a group of “elitist aristocrats” (Rubin, 2004, 289). Which makes it vaguely ironic that one of the chief proponents of library building and freedom of books and information in the latter half of the nineteenth century was Andrew Carnegie, a Scottish immigrant.

The third important point that the reading covers is the discussion of librarianship as a profession. Again, Rubin attempts to show the two sides to this argument. I still have trouble believing it’s even in doubt. To me, this seems like a simple issue—being a librarian is a job, a job is a profession, hence, librarianship is irrefutably a profession. I’m backed up in my thinking by Melvil Dewey who wrote in his first editorial for the first issue of the first librarian publication, *Library Journal*, “‘The time has come when a librarian may, without assumption, speak of his occupation as a profession’” (Rubin, 2004, 465). Rubin, however, follows up this quote with the following sentence, “Few, however, have accepted this pronouncement as final” (Rubin, 2004, 465).

He lists the historical development of the “profession” and the merits by which it evolved, and then moves on to “trait theory” and “control model.” Trait theory is identified by a list of six traits common to identifying a profession as a profession. Under Rubin’s review, the main trait not correspondent to librarianship as a profession is the lack of control professional library organizations have over their members—they cannot license them or punish violations (Rubin, 2004, 468). Though I see the point of
this as a drawback, I do not believe that it invalidates librarianship as a profession, and Rubin agrees, which is when he moves on to “control model”. A control model, according to Rubin, is when “the nature of the profession is based on the power of that profession and the nature of the control that it exercises over practitioners” (Rubin, 2004, 470). In this sense, librarians are professionals as they fall in the “mediated control category” whereby the power is balanced between the client and the librarian. The client requests information and the librarian facilitates that need while making judgment calls about what information will be most beneficial (Rubin, 2004, 471). While the question continues to fall under debate, the librarian has the potential to become either more or less important to the client with the advent of technological advances, I feel it’s an amazing time to enter the profession. Through specialized knowledge and skills, I believe the librarian has great potential to remain an equal partner in mediated control, which is one reason I’m excited to begin my education at this time.

The last issue I will review and one of the most incredibly important facets of the current situation is one which has a direct impact on the future of librarianship—my future—that is, the explosion of the Web as a personal research tool. Rubin dedicates an entire chapter to this issue, entitled “Redefining the Library: The Impacts and Implications of Technological Change”. Though he also spends time in other chapters reiterating the point of technology forcing an evolution of the library both in redefinition of services and restructuring of physical space to accommodate new resources.

In chapter three of his text, Rubin details the origins of the Internet at the US Department of Defense. Originally ARPANET, as it was then labeled, was designed for high profile institutions to share research and information. However, as Hansen points
out, the scientists used it more for sharing their love of various sci-fi novels (Hansen, 2006). The social nature of the internet was thus begun and it was only a short period of
time before blogger communities were springing up and anything could be bought,
traded, or sold on the World Wide Web.

Of course, it’s not all frivolous on the Web, there are still many practical
applications and the sharing of scientific, historical, and political knowledge. There are
several direct impacts on librarians from these technological break-throughs. One of
these is the card catalog, a former staple of any library, the card catalog is now a thing of
the past due to online cataloguing with computers. Online cataloguing, or Online Public
Access Catalogs (OPACs), signaled the death of physical card catalogs in libraries and
the librarian being the solo individual able to access records (Rubin, 2004, 87). The
process is time-consuming and arduous as each card must be gone through and entered
into the online database, but ultimately the rewards are great and much time is saved in
searching. With the advent of OPACs, libraries can, and have, become fully online as
they integrate seamlessly as Internet pages on the Web. Nowadays, one can freely search
the library’s catalog from the comfort of their own home and as the “virtual electronic
library” becomes a staple of our existence it’s even becoming possible to download entire
texts from the Web (Rubin, 2004, 301).

There are a few issues standing in the way of complete seclusion from the outside
world and all interaction being conducted virtually. These consist of quality, quantity,
knowledge, and preservation. First of all the quality of lone searching on the Internet is
suspect—“Of particular concern is the quality, or lack thereof, of the information
contained on the Web” (Rubin, 2004, 94). This is even more true when combined with
the second problem: quantity. The Web is likened to a “sea of information” that users will feel “adrift” in (Rubin, 2004, 478). In this chaos, librarians merely need to stay abreast of current technologies and searching practices in order to provide the clients with the best service by having a higher quotient of knowledge—thus yielding better service than the clients can do for themselves. “The advantage is obvious for the libraries: if the library can provide easy one-stop access to the world of information, it can remain competitive with a World Wide Web that remains unorganized and unselective” (Rubin, 2004, 98-99). Indeed, ultimately, the librarian may prove to be the best chance an individual has to define and yield a productive search. Certainly that would be better than the following scenario where “The individual searches alone without expert help and, not knowing what is undiscovered, is satisfied” (Rubin, 2004, 101).

The last issue is preservation, in response to which Rubin suggests that books will always be better than any other form of media transference, “It is highly unlikely that any electronic technology…will possess the combination of advantages available in the book in the near future” (Rubin, 2004, 311). He states that “electronic text is impermanent” and questions, “As more and more information appears on Web sites, how do we preserve them?” (Rubin, 2004, 111). Unfortunately for this argument, there is at least one organization already preserving Web sites—the Internet Archive at http://archive.org—which takes snapshots of Web pages in order to preserve them.

However, even this ties in to Rubin’s claim that the technological advances and the changes in library organization and management are a gradual evolution. Perhaps Rubin was unaware of such non-profits as the Internet Archive and their mission, but they saw a need in the preservation of information and filled it. Even as librarians
continue to fill the need for knowledgeable searches and service-centered personal attention. A major philosopher in the history of librarianship, S.R. Ranganathan stated that “It is an accepted biological fact that a growing organism alone will survive. An organism which ceases to grow will petrify and perish” (Rubin, 2004, 309). Thus, change is good; change is necessary. The development of the Web is a form of evolution and the library is adapting to this changing reality. Information, and the free spread of it, has always been at a premium and will remain as an integral and highly important facet of all life. As we evolve and our needs evolve, so too does information, but it will never become less or diminish because it, itself, is an organic, ever-changing entity and a core building block of all human life.
List of Works Cited

