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## Chapter 1 The Heritage of Public Librarianship

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### Abstract

Public library research is seen as fragmented and in need of a more coherent sense of context and a more unified understanding. Three questions are addressed: What kind of work do we do? How can we do our work? Why do we do our work? Libraries are based on documents, which can affect us aesthetically and emotionally. Public libraries are concerned with culture, ideas, and complex problems. Every public library enacts a cultural policy. Public libraries are important because it matters what people know.

### Introduction

The call for papers for this Seminar says that, “Current public library research seems to be fragmented across countries, institutional contexts, and academic communities.” This statement implies a need for a more coherent sense of context and a more unified understanding of what we do. So I will talk in general terms about three questions:

1. What kind of work do we do? In effect, What have we been doing? What is our heritage?
2. How can we do our work?
3. Why do we do our work?

### What Kind of Work Do We Do?

What kind of work do we do? Or, rather, what have we been doing? What is our tradition, our heritage? I use the word *heritage*, not history. Heritage is the present effect today of the past. One speaks of cultural heritage, of patrimony. Heritage is what one inherits, what one receives from one’s parents when they die. Some of it is useful; some of it is not. The challenge is to make the best use of it.

When we look at what we have been doing, what can we say about our activity in librarianship? We can say that we are concerned with documents: Texts, images, sounds, statistics, books, newspapers, databases, music recordings, manuscripts, any thing of any genre and in any form regarded as signifying, as something worth collecting. Society is full of documents. Educators use textbooks and instructional media to change what students know. Lawyers and law courts use documents as evidence to decide whether or not we are guilty of a crime. Scientists use documents (articles, datasets, laboratory notebooks) as an archive of achievement and for personal status. The mass media use documents to persuade. Governments use

documents to exercise social control. Religions use documents to assert authority and to make us change our behavior. Artists use documents (images) to challenge and to inspire us. Commerce depends on documented transactions. Modern society exists on a foundation of documents. Libraries are based on the use of documents and public libraries have been hospitable to different forms, such as music recordings, maps, and games.

The high social prestige of the mathematical and natural sciences has encouraged researchers turn away from social and cultural traditions of scholarship and to make algorithmic and quantitative approaches their scientific ideal. As a result the desire to be respectable and “scientific” steers attention towards what is quantifiable and away from important human and social aspects. Librarians who work in public libraries understand better than other librarians, and better than most theorists of information, that documents, signifying objects, are not simply a form of recorded, objectified knowledge from which we may learn. Documents also can affect us aesthetically and emotionally. This “affective” aspect of documents, and, therefore, of libraries seems to have been neglected among researchers. The pressure on researchers to be “scientific” limits their range.

Culture is built through communication, through the sharing of experience and the negotiation of shared meaning through communication. For this reason, communication, whether discussion or the exchange of documents, is constitutive of culture. The use of documents is invariably a cultural activity and every public library enacts a cultural policy. That is why there are so many controversies over documents. Any document may change belief and behavior, which brings us to ideas.

## Ideas

Libraries, especially public libraries, are concerned with ideas, beliefs, and feelings in three ways:

1. We are concerned with documents and documents would not be documents if they did not signify something. That is to say, they are perceived as meaningful. They are related to ideas.
2. There are many documents and many different kinds of documents. Our responsibility is to organize documents in the most meaningful way. We can ask, meaningful in relation to what? We select, collect, arrange, and recommend documents. Vesa Souminen, in his book, *Filling Empty Space*<sup>1</sup>, asks the question: What does it mean to be a good librarian? His answer is that a librarian’s task is to create arrangements of documents that are meaningful for readers. This implies that the arrangement should be related to the users’ ideas. A good librarian is, quite simply, a librarian who does that well.
3. Those who do research, and those who teach, as I do, should think about the nature of what we teach about. What kind of activity is librarianship? What does “information service” mean? There are thousands of books on *how* to do things, but not enough on the nature, character, and purpose of what we do. Developing theory is difficult and those try tend to receive little recognition. But there are a few people who make the effort.

Writing history, making narratives, is a kind of theorizing. But the historiography of our field is very incomplete. There is good work on the history of libraries and on the biography of librarians, but not enough on the history of ideas, on the history of techniques, or on the social, interpersonal networks by which ideas and influences emerge, spread, change, or become forgotten. (We welcome the efforts of the Special Interest Group in the History and Foundations of Information Science of the American Society for Information Science and Technology, e.g. Hahn, T. B. & M. Buckland<sup>2</sup>; Bowden, M., T. B. Hahn & R. W. Williams<sup>3</sup>).

## Complex Problems

Anyone who is interested in what human beings know is necessarily dealing with very complex matters: human understanding and belief; information technology; social policies; and human behavior. That is why even the smallest public library deals with complex matters.

There are important consequences here for the schools of library, information, and documentation studies. Disciplines are defined by the problems they try to solve. We deal with the socially important problem of assisting in the creation, distribution, and use of knowledge and any convincing definition of knowledge includes beliefs and attitudes. For this we need to have a wide range of techniques. Our discipline is broadly-based. Rhetoric about how we are interdisciplinary can distract us from the unity of our purpose and from the important question: What range of expertise do we need and can afford? Instead of saying that we are interdisciplinary, we should say that we are multi-talented.

## **How Are We To Do Our Work?**

How we are to do our work is a question for everyone, including the schools of library, information, and documentation studies. The schools need to define their curriculum. We typically find four basic components: Organization of information; Information in society and information policy; Technology for information services; and Management of information services.

### **Organization of information**

The organization of information, or, as I prefer, of documents, has two aspects: (i) Selecting and collecting, which is the privileging of some documents over others, either because people will ask for them or because you decide that some documents are better than others for the purposes of your library; and (ii) Organizing, arranging, categorizing, indexing, and providing support for filtering and retrieval.

There are important needs here. Webpages, for example, are documents. Websites are collections of documents. Webpages need the same kind of selection, arranging, indexing, and support for searching as other collections. If we see the worldwide web as a kind of publishing universe, then the people who need books also need guidance in finding the best relevant webpages. A guide to websites is a bibliography. A selection of links is a kind of library.

Birger Hjørland rightly stresses the existence and the importance of specialized communities of discourse<sup>4</sup>. Any broad bibliography or general collection includes smaller domains of discourse, each with the stylized language of that specialty. At Berkeley we have been experimenting with the creation of multiple indexes for the same collection, with different indexes for different communities of user. Preliminary results show that searching can be significantly improved in this way<sup>5,6</sup>.

### **Information in Society and Information Policy**

The two topics, information in society and information policy, go together, because information policy is concerned with efforts to influence the distribution and use of information in society. I take information policy to include all the different kinds of decisions, especially government decisions, that influence what people know and what they do not know. Many groups have an interest in influencing what you know. Public libraries, serving a community, have an important role to play in complementing and balancing the effects of the information policies of other groups.

### **Technology**

Librarians have always been interested in technology and have often been early adopters. New

technology offers new possibilities for providing new kinds of service and also specialized services for special groups, raising new questions about our priorities. A challenge is to remember the difference between means and ends, between process and purpose. There is also a basic difference between *invention*, which is the designing of new methods, and *innovation*, which is the managerial challenge of selecting and implementing new methods. Being a librarian today is made more exciting by the arrival of new methods. We are in a position not only to perform existing services differently, but also to develop different, better services. We are in a situation to redesign library services, but this is as much a management challenge as it is a technological challenge.

## Management

Management includes specific skills such as budgeting and project management, but it is also the art of achieving results through other people and how to survive and thrive in a political and economic environment.

A significant example of public library research was conducted in California after a financial crisis in local government. Some public libraries were closed. Others had their budgets greatly reduced. The researcher, Snunith Shoham, found that the most important factor in the economic health of the public libraries that she studied was political, the relationship between the public library, especially the director, and the community<sup>7</sup>. The more actively the library and its director were involved in the community and in the rest of local government, the better the library's budget. The more separated and isolated the library was, the weaker it was in a financial crisis. This is a very simple lesson for all of us.

## Looking Forwards: Why Does It Matter?

Why is our activity important? Why should we have public libraries? And why have schools of library, information, and documentation? Is it because there are so many documents? Is it because information services and information technology needs to be managed? My answer is that *it matters what people know*. When you need a doctor, a lawyer, or an automobile mechanic, do you want one who is ignorant? Your business will not succeed if you do not know what you need to know. Teachers should understand what they are supposed to teach. In California there is a slogan: "If you think education is expensive, consider the cost of ignorance." What people know is important to the individual, to an organization, and to society. Public librarians understand that there are different kinds of knowledge. They try to support not only technical knowledge, but also cultural understanding, aesthetic insight, and affective experience. So our concerns are important, but we do not have a monopoly. School, museums, the media, governments, publishers, commerce, and many others have an interest in what people know: to help them, to influence them, to control them, and to exploit them.

Librarians and information managers have a particular role to play. We are concerned with understanding. One can think of three kinds of memory: Private memory; social memory, that part of culture that is shared, the stories that we tell and share to create our shared identity; and external memory, the records, documents, texts, and so on, which is our specialty. And our purpose is to serve some community, which means that we must relate to the priorities and values of our role in the community, our political and economic purpose.

So we have a history, a heritage, and professional skills, and we need to study all three. We need to know why libraries and librarians are important and we need to explain that to others. We are at a wonderfully interesting situation in which changes of technology allow us to redesign what we do, yet technology is only a means to our ends. There is a wonderfully rich agenda for public library research.

## Notes

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