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Commentary: Reflections on Social and Cultural Awareness and Responsibility In Library, Information, and Documentation

Michael K. Buckland,
Professor,
School of Information Management and Systems,
University of California,
Berkeley, CA 94720-4600, USA
Buckland@sims.berkeley.edu

ABSTRACT

This Colloquium is concerned with how our understanding of how our understanding of library, information, and documentation phenomena are related to cultural, historical, social, and political contexts and issues. History is a narrative of what has happened in the past. Heritage is what we now have in the present from that past. The heritage of library, information and documentation studies can be considered in four parts: Documents; ideas; complex problems; and technology. Programs in library, information, and documentation are concerned with what people know, are not limited to digital technology, and require wide-ranging expertise. They differ fundamentally and importantly from computer science programs and from the information systems programs found in business schools. Addressing multiple professional contexts is desirable to achieve economies of scale. Being scholarly, being scientific, and being critical are not the same. We need to be all three. Current views of library, information, and documentation place a greater emphasis on semiotic, semantic, and cultural dimensions than previous, more modernist views. Respect, resources, and autonomy are likely to be achieved indirectly from pursuing interesting questions and important problems. This field matters because what individuals know is important. All of the issues raised in this Colloquium require more work.

INTRODUCTION

This Colloquium is concerned with our understanding of how library, information, and documentation phenomena are related to cultural, historical, social, and political contexts and issues. This focus has been achieved in successive presentations concerning the social context of knowledge. Previous speakers have argued that knowledge claims are related to utility in a broader, social context; that, as Niels Bohr wrote, "We depend on words;" that to understand documents we must consider their physical materiality, their social uses and also their cognitive and psychological effects; that the seventeenth century "Republic of Ideas" illustrates how

knowledge is shaped in social structures; that to think narrowly and separately of the history of library science, information science history, the history of institutions, and the history of the book is to simplify excessively and is counterproductive because reality does not fit such tidy categories; and that, just as there are many communities, so also many different perspectives can and will be constructed concerning library, information and documentation studies.

Other presentations have discussed the social context of the field of library, information, and documentation studies, arguing that it is, or ought to be, a unified, unitary discipline, as other respected disciplines are supposed to be; that a central task is the harmonization of the interpretation of a document with the original document; that each discipline, including ours, is permanently in competition with other disciplines for reputation, resources, and autonomy; that library science is a subsystem of the study of organization; and that knowledge management is the application of management skills to information and of human resource skills to individuals.

This colloquium has clearly been successful in drawing attention to a variety of social and cultural aspects of this field. But how to move forward in a unified and constructive way is less clear.

WHAT WE DO

There is a difference between history and heritage. History is a narrative of what has happened in the past. Heritage is what we have now in the present, from that past. The heritage of library, information, and documentation studies, what we now have, can be considered in four parts (Buckland 1 & 2).

1. *Documents*. Our field is concerned with documents in the broad semiotic sense of any object perceived as signifying (Buckland 3). Documents are of enormous and increasing social significance because they influence what we know and how we feel. Governments use them to control us. Teachers use them to educate us. The modern economy depends on documenting transactions. Documents are used to persuade us what to buy and how to live. Religions and politicians use documents to persuade us. Artists and entertainers use documents to provoke and to amuse us. The list is endless. Documents pervade society. To be concerned with documents is to become engaged with society.

2. *Ideas*. We are concerned with ideas, beliefs, and feelings. Documents record our ideas and affect our beliefs. We select and organize documents according our understanding of how ideas are related to each other. And, as in this colloquium, we develop ideas about the nature of library, information and documentation studies.

3. *Complex Problems*. We are necessarily dealing with complex problems because we are concerned with knowledge, understanding, and belief; with social purposes and policies; with human behavior; with the application of technology; and with the providing of a services.

4. *Technology*. Documents are physical objects and, for this reason, we are necessarily concerned with technology. Documents are means, not ends, and so there is plentiful scope for new forms of documents. There is the technical challenge of designing new uses of technology and the managerial challenge of deciding which new technologies to adopt.

WHAT KIND OF SCHOOL

Three kinds of information program

When I am asked how library, information, and documentation studies differs from other kinds of information program, I respond, with some simplification, in terms of three kinds of information program:

1. Computer science programs are concerned with the application of algorithms to digital data. Computer scientists may become knowledgeable about application areas and may collaborate with specialists in other fields, but computer science is fundamentally not interdisciplinary;
2. Information systems programs, of the type commonly found in schools of business administration are largely concerned with the application of computer science to a single organization's digital records. Information systems programs are somewhat broader than computer science programs because they are concerned with the management of technology, the supervision of staff, and the need to perform within an organizational context.
3. Library, information, and documentation studies differ significantly and importantly from both computer science and from information systems programs. First, they are concerned with all forms and genres of documents, obviously including but not limited, as the other two are, to digital bits. Second, they are, or should be, concerned with what people know, need to know, and want to know. Third, because this field is defined by the problem area that it addresses, rather than by a method, it cannot and should not attempt to become a discipline in the narrow traditional sense. It is not mono-disciplinary, like computer science, but draws, as needed, on a very wide range of sciences (e.g. statistics), engineering (e.g. computer science), humanities (e.g. linguistics); and social sciences (e.g. anthropology and economics). Some people like to say that it is an interdisciplinary field. It would be better to say that we need to be multi-talented.

Vocational and Academic Aspects

Schools of library, information and documentation studies typically originated in the need to prepare professionals, primarily librarians, but also archivists, museum keepers, and, latterly, database administrators and website managers. However, it is not wise to define and to design schools in research universities by these vocational categories. A university-based school needs to be built primarily on functional needs: to teach access to documents, the management of public services, the use of technology, information in society and information policy. These functional areas need faculty with real depth of expertise, who are interested in the application of their specialty in the differing professional contexts in which their students will be employed.

Taking a functional approach across different professional contexts has two important advantages: It provides a healthy challenge to the teachers because it requires attention to how well their ideas can fit different areas of application; and it allows for economies of scope, because the same techniques are more or less

applicable or adaptable to quite diverse professional contexts. A disadvantage is that by adopting a functional approach across professional areas, a school risks losing the tight relationship that existed in earlier decades when individual teachers were closely associated with, and often came from, particular professional contexts.

Scholarly, scientific, and critical

The teachers and researchers in the schools need to be scholarly, scientific, and critical. These are not quite the same: To be scholarly is to be careful and, in the humanities as in the sciences, an essential requirement for good scholarship is the search of evidence that might contradict one's favorite ideas. We use "scientific" in the sense of constructing theories and building explanatory models. Being critical is concerned with revealing, examining, and questioning the assumptions and procedures being used in the scholarly and scientific work.

REALITY, KNOWLEDGE, AND DOCUMENTS

In the University of Oulu's recent workshop on classics in our field, one of the classic writers discussed was Paul Otlet and we can adapt a perspective loosely based on his ideas concerning reality, knowledge, and documents to bring another perspective on cultural and social awareness.

Reality, for Otlet, had a rather structured nature, which included, for example, chemical elements, biological species, and physical and social laws (Otlet 5). Human knowledge of reality, however, was incomplete and contained errors and inconsistencies. Documents, being objectified knowledge, were also incomplete. They contain errors and inconsistencies and, also, are duplicative. Documents, if properly organized, could help systematize knowledge and thereby improve understanding of reality and lead, in turn, to better documents. The more tightly they are organized, the closer knowledge and documents would be to reality.

I suggest that the difference between present views and those of Otlet in the early twentieth century is that now we have, or should have, a stronger sense of the importance of the semiotic, the social, and the cultural dimensions of how knowledge is related to reality and of documents are related to knowledge. We use technology, of course, but an objectified, materialized view of mind and knowledge will result without the social and cultural aspects needed to make the model realistic (Day 6, 7).

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Participation in this colloquium implies a rejection of a passive, fatalistic stance. How, then, can we become activist, even interventionist? It was said in an earlier paper that our field, like every field, wants respect, resources, and autonomy (or, at least, tolerance). I suggest that an indirect approach is the most likely to be effective. In my experience, respect is likely to be given to those who address what are considered by others to be interesting questions. Respect helps us to establish our credibility. Resources are likely to be made available to those who have some credibility and who are trying to do potentially useful work on significant, practical problems. Tolerance, rather than autonomy, is likely to follow from having the resources obtained to work on important problems. Our field is important because it matters what people know. What an individual knows is vitally important to the

individual, to other individuals, for organizations, and in society. Our concern is with helping people to learn what they need to know and what they want to know.

The reason why cultural and social awareness matters in library, information, and documentation studies is that any view of our field that does not include it is inadequate and unrealistic. We cannot expect to be either effective or respected if our view is inadequate and not realistic.

As for understanding these issues, the papers presented in this colloquium have introduced a variety of interesting themes. In every case, however, there is a second paper that needs to be written that moves the chosen theme forward towards conclusions, recommendations, and action.

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