Libraries as Bureaucracies

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Two major themes can be discerned in much of the literature on the organization and management of libraries. The first considers libraries in terms of their formal characteristics, emphasizing the relationships of hierarchy of authority, size, rules and the division of labor. The objective of the study of the formal structure of libraries is to find ways to organize the library in order to achieve maximum administrative efficiency. The study of the formal structure is guided by the concept of achieving specific objectives at minimum cost.

The second theme considers the informal processes in the library. This approach seeks to describe the experiences, attitudes and behavior of individual staff members as they participate in a complex organization. The objective of the study of informal processes and unofficial practices is to find those organizational characteristics or elements which inhibit the achievement of the library's goals of service.

Each of these approaches to the study of libraries as complex organizations complements the other. Each tells much about the organization and management of libraries. Rarely are studies of formal structure and of informal process carried out simultaneously, however, for the approaches are derived from different theoretical frameworks and require different methods of research. The management literature has sought to synthesize the two theoretical perspectives, since each contributes to the understanding of organizational behavior. The literature of librarianship, for the most part, has reflected one or the other theme with little synthesis of perspectives into a single framework.

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Bureaucracy as a colloquial expression means inefficiency and red tape; it is used most often in a pejorative sense. The sociological meaning of the term refers to the administrative aspects of an organization; it emphasizes those tasks that maintain the organization and coordinate the activities of its members. The tasks of maintaining the library are considered to be separate and distinct from those which relate directly to the achievement of the library's overall goals.

Max Weber's ideal type of organization is a bureaucracy characterized by a hierarchy of office, careful specification of office functions, recruitment on the basis of merit, promotion according to merit and performance, and a coherent system of discipline and control. Weber is not the only theorist who finds the study of bureaucracies of interest, but it is his work on bureaucracy as an ideal type which has served as a basis for important segments of administrative theory and as a theoretical source for the study of the formal structure of organizations. Weber and others, including the leaders of the scientific management school, identify size as a fundamental characteristic of bureaucracies. Weber suggests that large size leads to greater organizational complexity, more specialization, training and professionalization of staff, an increase in rules and regulations, and an expansion of administrative staff and apparatus.

Weber's theory of increase of size as a determinant of increased bureaucracy guided Paul Spence's systematic study of libraries as bureaucracies. Although there are flaws in his research design and method (for example, the independent variable, size, was controlled by selecting as libraries for study sixty-two members of the Association of Research Libraries, by definition the largest academic libraries in the United States), several conclusions drawn by Spence are similar to those reported by Peter Blau in his studies of governmental finance departments and personnel agencies. Both Blau and Spence find high correlations between the professionalization of staff and the size of the organization's administrative component. It is this similarity of results which makes Spence's study of libraries as bureaucracies so interesting. Librarians often assume that the hiring of experts (defined as professionally trained librarians) should reduce the administrative component necessary to run the library. The professional's authority, stemming from his or her certification as an expert, is expected to prompt others to follow voluntarily the professional's directive, thus eliminating the need for an organizational hierarchy, authority, or specific rules and regulations. Yet Blau and Spence find that organizations which hire experts remain organized in a hierarchical fashion. The administrative components of these organizations are not reduced.
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These findings are of great theoretical interest and can help in the understanding of libraries as bureaucracies.

The work of Weber has greatly influenced the study of the formal structures of organizations. Influential too are the writings of Frederick Taylor, Luther Gulick, Lyndall Urwick, and James D. Mooney, which form the basis of scientific management — an important influence in the management of libraries. Most of these writers were managers who took time to record what they did and then organized their observations into sets of principles. The major thrust of scientific management rests in the attempt to establish normal times for various production tasks through the use of job analysis and time and motion studies. Scientific management became popular in the 1930s and 1940s when large governmental and industrial organizations emerged. Plants or divisions had to be coordinated from the top. New specialists, sales executives, engineers and scientists were added to organizations. The proponents of scientific management, seeking ways to enhance the efficiency of management practices, made the first contributions to the analysis of management in these new and large organizations. Libraries also were growing during this time, and library administrators sought techniques used elsewhere which might help them to administer libraries which were becoming increasingly complex.

In an early review of scientific management in research libraries, several elements are identified which characterize the application of scientific management to libraries. The first is the determination of standards of performance for specific library operations. Such standards, established by the library's administration either through time and motion studies or through less formal means, identify average levels of performance for specific library operations. Another characteristic of the use of scientific management in libraries is the careful definition and assignment of work in each department. Work definition is expected to facilitate the measurement of performance. It fixes responsibility of performance and influences the hiring and assignment of personnel. The efforts to identify and to differentiate the work of the professional from that of the clerical employee reflects this characteristic and leads to a centralization of personnel functions and a codification of personnel policies, both elements of the classical theory of bureaucracy. Work definition and organizational design require careful planning, and the separation of the planning function from the operational function is another characteristic of scientific planning and management.
Library managers seeking useful management techniques to apply in their own libraries recognize intuitively the influence of the size factor on the formal structure of libraries. In the 1950s those libraries with collections over 200,000 volumes were identified as being large enough to apply the concepts of scientific management. Librarians in these libraries were interested in achieving maximum efficiency at minimum cost. They accumulated data on unit costs, particularly costs associated with the cataloging and processing of materials (which amounts to a large part of the library's budget), in order to identify ways which would reduce these costs. Time and motion studies were carried out in many libraries, textbooks were written for library managers, and studies were undertaken regularly to create efficiencies in library operations through time reductions.

The work of Mayo, Barnard and others followed that of the scientific managers and brought to industry (and later, to libraries) the human relations theories, as well as the inevitable attack on the principles of scientific management and on the elements of bureaucracy, such as hierarchy of authority and formal rules and regulations. The influence of the human relations approach in the study of informal processes in organizations has been felt widely in libraries. Professionals tend to chafe under perceived bureaucratic constraints and strive for greater participation in library affairs so as to eliminate some of the constraints. The quest for efficiency and improved performance pervades the organization and does influence the work on participation in libraries. Therefore, many of the demands for greater participation are justified by the argument that the library's overall performance will improve, because greater participation by library staff members in the overall decision-making of the library will lead to greater job satisfaction and better performance.

Library managers seeking organizational efficiency and librarians seeking the best in service programs may disagree on solutions to particular library problems. Although the decisions in many academic libraries to change from old classification systems to the Library of Congress system were for the most part noncontroversial, the decision to switch to the Library of Congress system offers good examples of both the managerial approach to decision-making with a base in efficiency, and a professional expert approach with a base in a service idea. In many libraries the decision to change classification schemes was made on the grounds of greater efficiency, as managers sought ways to reduce the costs in technical services operations. The decision to change sometimes reflected the need for updating the classification schedules for scientific
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materials. Rarely was the decision based on an extensive analysis of classification schemes or on an assessment of how the particular library's clientele used the old scheme to find needed materials and information. The decision was made primarily on the basis of operational costs. Whether the change in classification scheme is an inhibition of any consequence to the library user is a professional concern, but not one which appears to be of any major interest. The administrator strives to achieve maximum efficiency at minimum cost. Whenever the cost of attaining a particular objective rises in terms of time, effort or money, the administrator seeks less to attain that objective.

There has been surprisingly little discussion on the impact of classification schemes. It may be that all librarians, managers or not, are in general agreement that lower technical services costs are of paramount importance and should take precedence in any decision involving cataloging and classification; or, the profession may not understand clearly enough the strengths and weaknesses of particular classification systems; or, the classification scheme may have become only a shelving device, having lost the ability to help users find a variety of materials on a particular subject. In any case, the reasons for the decision on classification schemes are of little importance to the present discussion. The example only illustrates a potential conflict which has its base in a decision influenced by managerial efficiencies instead of organizational goals. Had the decision been more controversial, the conflicts may have been more readily observed.

Bureaucracy and professionalism have several elements in common. Each requires impersonal detachment and specialized technical competence. Each bases its decision-making in a rational application of standards. There are also differences, however. Bureaucratic authority rests not so much on technical skills or competencies as on the official position. Bureaucratic authority requires subordinates to comply with directives under threat of some sanction. Professional authority rests upon possession of expertise. It requires an abstract body of knowledge to support the technical skills. Professional authority is self-governing through an association of peers, professional standards of practice and ethical conduct. Professionalism has a service orientation.

The service orientation of the professional can lead to an opposite approach to work from that based in strict compliance with work procedures, a bureaucratic characteristic, and conflict can occur when these approaches are joined. Conflict can occur when decisions are made on the basis of purely professional standards, ignoring the administrative
requirements of the organization. Yet large libraries, like all organizations of a certain size, are bureaucratic to some degree, even though they are staffed with professionals. There is someone at the top who decides what the library program will be and who assigns jobs. Specializations in tasks are determined and jobs are designed within the library to carry out these tasks. Rules and regulations are introduced and are useful in dealing with organizational issues such as staff turnover, consistency in performance and output. Among organizations the degree of bureaucratization does vary, and interesting questions center on why variations occur. For example, what conditions shape the organizational hierarchy? Does the work influence the division of labor or the nature of rules? How might the qualifications of the library’s staff influence the structure of authority in it? Within large libraries are often found reference departments in which a high percentage of staff are professionals with expert training and experience. The catalog department, by contrast, although staffed with some professional people, generally has a higher percentage of clerical staff. These units should be expected to differ in terms of their bureaucratic characteristics, i.e., authority structures. Reference departments should exhibit a greater degree of participation in decision-making than catalog departments.

The relationship between the professional skills and competencies of the librarian and the bureaucratic authority vested in the hierarchy of office in the library occupies considerable attention and is a useful theoretical issue in the study of libraries as bureaucracies. The organization model which influences the library literature is the model of the autonomous professional. The work of the librarian is most often described in terms of a librarian/client relationship, a one-to-one relationship. Yet much of the work performed in libraries is divided into specialized tasks and is conducted outside the framework of the client relationship. Rarely does a librarian participate in all the tasks required in the selection of materials, in their cataloging and classification, or even in the answering of a reference question. The library profession itself seeks ways to divide the work into those tasks which are professional and those which are clerical in order to reduce costs, achieve greater efficiency, and utilize to the greatest extent possible the knowledge of the professional. Much effort is given to separating the routine tasks from the less routine, and then to designing jobs according to the nature of the tasks. The amount of job specialization will vary in libraries and it is to be expected that the specialization of tasks or the division of labor would be greater in large libraries than in small ones — consistent with Weber’s theory that the larger
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the size of the organization the greater the specialization. Spence, in his library study on bureaucratic characteristics, found no support for Weber's theory of bureaucracy regarding size and specialization, but methodological problems in Spence's study make his results suspect.

Although Weber implies that professional authority, with its basis in technical competence, and bureaucratic authority, with its basis in a positional hierarchy, would exist concurrently in organizations, the prevailing attitude among librarians is that the professional's work suffers from the constraints of bureaucratic conditions. Yet much of the work in libraries is governed by written rules and regulations. The rules are more or less stable, more or less exhaustive, and can be learned. Knowledge of the rules and regulations forms the technical skills identified by Weber as a bureaucratic characteristic. Within libraries, technical knowledge and professional knowledge exist concurrently, although variation in degree will exist.

Some of the support in libraries for the human relations approach and the study of informal processes has its basis in the inherent difference of opinion between library managers and staff members over the type of organizational structure needed to achieve organizational goals. Given the different theoretical perspectives governing the knowledge available about library organization and behavior, such conflict is predictable. The library is an organization in which tasks are arranged in a rational way and one in which a marshalling of scarce resources is the responsibility of management. The literature of librarianship reflects the effort expended by librarians to find and report more efficient ways of getting work done. The library is also an organization in which professional experts seek to provide the best service possible, sometimes with little regard to cost. The recent library literature emphasizes the conditions which affect the attitudes and initiative of librarians and derides some of the bureaucratic conditions which exist in libraries. Nevertheless, every library exhibits the characteristics of a bureaucracy to a certain degree; each has a certain pattern of behavior based on specialized tasks and role design. Libraries are expected to vary in the degree to which they are bureaucratized, i.e., in structural characteristics. Some libraries will have a greater degree of job specialization than others. Some will restrict the discretion of staff members more than others in terms of required adherence to rules and regulations. Some will centralize authority in a small cadre of administrators, while others will delegate authority to the lower levels.

The research conducted so far which attempts to compare libraries or their structural characteristics is inconclusive, though tantalizing.
Research which compares organizational structure by type of library will be even more interesting. In the absence of specific research on libraries as bureaucracies, the studies of other types of organizations must be examined for insights and theories to guide one's understanding.

Although many professionally trained librarians seek work environments which are flexible, democratic and completely participatory, it is rare for libraries to be structured in this way. Such work environments are generally inefficient, and libraries are designed to be as efficient as possible. Efficiency demands a stable and constant environment. The library is heavily influenced by its environment and much of the library manager's time is spent trying to reduce these environmental influences. Library managers commonly use both staff specialists and rules and regulations to cope with environmental problems. Some rules and regulations, of course, are designed to assist the librarians in carrying out their work. Cataloging rules and the like are examples of library rules which are related to the work of the library. Other rules are those which do not contribute to the library's goals and objectives, but are designed to maintain the library itself. Particularly important are rules and regulations related to the hiring of staff. In a completely democratic organization each individual staff member would hire his or her own replacement, since the individual staff member is in the best position to determine the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to do the job. The hiring process, being affected by such outside factors as ability to judge potential successors, union contracts, civil service requirements, affirmative action procedures, availability of a pool of qualified candidates from which to hire, is aided by organizational rules regarding appointments and by staff specialists who are responsible for determining minimum qualifications for various positions and for finding suitable candidates for the position. Libraries often reflect homogeneity in terms of personnel, partly because of geographic reasons and the self-selection on the part of applicants, and partly because of the personnel specialists' determination to hire people with similar backgrounds and characteristics in order to increase predictability, i.e., to limit the uncertainty which a variety of backgrounds inevitably brings to an organization.

Turnover in staff entails other rules and regulations. The efficient organization will codify the way a particular person does a job and make that way the "right way." The codification is designed to minimize the differences in job performance a new person will bring to a position and to reduce the uncertainty and adjustment problems the new person might have. An organization designs many rules and regulations in order to
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Libraries exert control over the external influences upon organizational behavior. Such rules and regulations are described as bureaucratic red tape since they appear to be unrelated to the actual work of the organization. Nonetheless, these rules serve to control and to stabilize environmental influences, enabling the organization to deal with the environment in a more predictable and routine fashion.

The emphasis in most organizations, including libraries, is to make tasks routine, reduce uncertainty, increase predictability, and centralize authority. There is an inevitable tendency toward internal efficiency. The question of efficiency depends on a stable environment.

Libraries are bureaucracies. The bureaucratic elements which critics identify have their sources, not in the red tape or pettiness of officials, but in the attempt of the library to control its environment. The elements of bureaucracy emerge from the library's attempt to ensure its efficiency and its competency and from its attempt to minimize the impact of outside influences. Although variations will exist in the bureaucratic conditions, libraries will remain bureaucratic in form.

References
