
The Social Nature of Information

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ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE SHOWS HOW A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS of the moral value of information can help librarians rethink some aspects of their professional values, especially their commitment to neutrality. A historical discussion of the "fiction problem" shows how changes in collection practices partly account for the current emphasis on neutrality. This historical example shows the importance of using an analysis of the moral value of information as a guide to future changes in professional mission, especially those that result from new technologies. We argue that information is indirectly but crucially important to a person becoming a morally autonomous individual and to a community's ability to self-govern. The social nature of information has direct consequences for the professional mission of librarians.

INTRODUCTION

As librarians enter the new millennium, they are going to be increasingly challenged by the technical and social changes that are altering our world. The advent of the Internet and its consequent challenges to reference service, collection development, and patron expectations, as well as the constantly changing moral character of the United States, must cause librarians to reexamine some of their core values and principles.

This reexamination has led to an increasing number of articles dealing with values and trying to define the core values of the profession (Rogers, 1998; Gorman, 1999). Not surprisingly, the American Library

Association has determined that there is a need for a "Core Values" statement to articulate what the role of the profession is in this time of change.

A key ethical component in all of the core value statements that have been written is the concept of the neutrality of the librarian and the profession. Little discussion has taken place asking whether or not neutrality is still a valid professional position or asking the broader question, is information itself a neutral commodity that allows the librarian or information professional to proclaim themselves neutral in its use or application?

If this discussion is to go forward with any legitimacy, it is essential that even traditional core values be reassessed so that it may be determined whether they remain a help or have become a hindrance to the future of professional librarianship. The concept of neutrality itself was not developed in a vacuum. It evolved as a result of interaction between the library profession and the culture over time. In these new times and changed culture, it is now necessary for us, while learning from the past, to cast a vision for the future that seeks to maintain both the existence and integrity of our profession. While the role of visionary is not one that comes easily to the rational fact-based profession of librarianship or to newly empowered "information scientists," it is necessary to project and reflect on what the profession and libraries will be in the future.

In reflecting on the future, inspiration can be found in Peter Drucker's (1999) article "Beyond the Information Revolution." Drucker asks the reader to think beyond the typical view of the industrial revolution and look not at the primary technology involved, the steam engine, but at the more profound changes in the interactions of people, the production and distribution of goods, and how the world was viewed. Technology made these changes possible, but it was the technologies' engendering of social change that became the true legacy of the steam engine.

The "future problem" for Drucker is that people often try to predict the future by focusing on inventions without thinking first about how new technology enables or forces social change. The first steam engines were not initially designed to pull passenger trains, but the genuine social revolution of the steam engine was the way it altered commercial and social relationships. For most information professionals, it is a given that the information revolution will have profound effects on how libraries operate and how librarians will do their jobs. The traditional card catalog and the dependence on traditional paper information sources are not coming back, but the adoption of their electronic equivalents did not really change the essence of what the catalog or the index was, only the format and the ability of librarians and patrons to access the same information more quickly and easily.

As the steam engine changed factories in the eighteenth century, the computer will change libraries in the twenty-first century, but the real challenge is to determine how its use will change librarians, especially

how they think about information and interact with library patrons. In all of the excitement about the immediate, though less profound, changes that computers have brought, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are not merely passive observers but rather have the ability to shape the discussion and influence the decisions that must be made. In order to take part in this discussion and reach an informed decision, it is helpful to look first at our shared history.

The "fiction problem" serves as a case study for how the library profession reacted to a change in technology and the cultural changes that resulted from that technology as well as providing a partial explanation for the development of the neutral position. In the middle of the nineteenth century, rapid improvements in printing technology greatly increased the output of the publishing industry. Lower printing costs combined with an increasingly literate public meant that a much wider variety of materials were being published. Among these was the rise of what was known as pulp fiction. This change in technology and culture created a new challenge for the library profession. Should these new mass marketed works of fiction be included within the library collection?

The decision to actively pursue fiction as a core component of the library collection was a hotly debated issue at the turn of the century. The historical reality, however, was that the profession could not ignore this new wave of publishing. In the end, libraries tried to retain their traditional role as a core educational institution, but the increasing number of fiction titles and their large circulation numbers meant that libraries became more and more an outlet for entertainment.

The librarian moved from educator to the role of reader's advisor, keeping up on new titles and genres and recommending books to the reader for recreational reading. This move from education to entertainment was a reflection of changes taking place in technology and culture. Adding fiction to collections also meant that the librarian now shifted from a professional with certainty about the inherent moral value of information to being in the position of selecting and recommending to patrons material that previously did not meet professional standards for quality or value.

When this shift occurred and librarians were put in the position of recommending popular fiction, they faced the new question of how to determine what was proper to recommend and what was not, and what was the role of the librarian's personal value structure and taste in these recommendations. This difficulty concerning personal judgment was one of the contributing factors in the now institutionalized and codified stance of professional neutrality regarding information. It increasingly became easier for a librarian to adopt a code of neutrality rather than constantly defend professional decisions regarding collection development and appropriate patron reading material.

FROM THE FICTION PROBLEM TO THE INTERNET PROBLEM

The "fiction problem" was a problem because it forced the profession to make decisions that, prior to this technological and cultural change, had not been necessary. Before this technological and cultural shift, the librarian's job was to make not just judgments about the quality of the information but also about its moral value and its value to the community as a whole. Librarians did not feel the need to apologize for saying that fiction was not worthy of inclusion in the collection. After this debate, it became increasingly accepted that, while librarians may have private views on what information is good or bad, moral or immoral, it is no longer their job and responsibility to reflect those views in their collection or share those views with their patrons.

The adoption of a position of neutrality affected collection development by opening the floodgates for the inclusion of many types of material into the collection that had not previously been there. Yet the library did not open the gates to all materials because it was still working with limiting factors such as money that necessitated collection development guidelines and the continuing influence of local community values on the library system.

A position of neutrality was more easily adopted in the area of public service, first, because the collection was still limited in scope, and second, because it made the job of the librarian easier. It was no longer necessary to question the patron's need for, or possible use of, the information requested. The skills of the librarian became less dependent upon any ability to discern but rather upon technical skills of retrieval.

By the 1970s, the library system had achieved a certain balance in regards to these issues. Collections had been broadened and enhanced by the inclusion of previously excluded groups and by the greater variety of media resources available in the library. Restrictions on patron access had been eased or eliminated, library conflict with communities and local values had become relatively isolated, and procedures had been established to deal with these challenges.

Today that balance has been destroyed; we now face the "Internet problem" which is similar to the "fiction problem" of a hundred years ago. How do we deal with the great wealth of new information that has become available because of this new technology? The easy answer is to rely on the answer of the past, which is largely based on the value of neutrality. The problem is that neutrality does not seem to be a sufficient answer. Take, for example, article two of the *Library Bill of Rights* (1996): "Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval." This is a very strong expression of neutrality and, as we have pointed out, it was functional because, though it argued for no exclusion, the reality of the situation excluded

large classes of material. One example would be pornography. In the pre-Internet era, while neutrality might dictate that partisan or doctrinal influences should not keep a particular item out of the library, the reality was that one could exclude it from the library on the basis of collection development policy and limited resources. With the advent of the Internet era, pornography can now enter the library free of cost without being subject to the criteria of collection development. The Internet then becomes the portal for content to enter the library without any professional assessment or evaluation.

The profession cannot return to the “good old days” in our diverse and changing social and intellectual climate. It is unacceptable for anyone to curtail or dictate others’ reading based on personal moral values or opinions about literary quality. But now, with the possible effect of the Internet on collection policy, we are faced with generalizing the current stance of professional neutrality to all information. Doing so may have huge unanticipated consequences for the next generation of librarians just as the move to professional neutrality had for the generations following the “fiction debate.” Specifically, the quest for neutrality in the information age could deprofessionalize librarianship by making librarians deskilled technicians serving increasingly automated expert information systems. Such a change would favor the types of information that automated systems are equipped to handle; it would favor discrete factual information over complex reflective inquiry.

The changing priorities of libraries and the library profession in the twenty-first century are driven by the same concerns as those at the turn of the last century. Librarians want to keep their constituents happy and that means giving them what they want, when they want it. Discussions now center on how to provide online 24/7 reference service to patrons, find money for e-books, and increase Internet access. Many of these discussions are taking place in libraries not only because assumptions are made that this is what patrons want but also because there is a fear of being seen as unnecessary, old fashioned, and consequently not relevant or needed. Ironically, in an effort to incorporate advanced information technology, librarians may hasten the public perception that the “public” resources of the Web constitute a library. The dangers in this perception should be obvious—the Internet is not a library; it is “public” without necessarily being in the public’s interest, and if online information were perceived as a “library,” why would the public support a library?

Given this challenge, discussing the nature of information and its moral character becomes a fundamental theoretical challenge for the professional. If the profession still espouses neutrality and intellectual freedom as its core values, then it needs to have a more complete sense of why neutrality is a worthy goal or even a possibility.

LOOKING FOR THE MORAL CHARACTER OF INFORMATION

To better understand some of the choices that face librarians in the information age, a deeper understanding of the importance and value of information is needed. Initially, this appears to be an easy task. Information is so crucial to almost every purposive human activity that we are tempted to say that information has a central importance to human affairs and leave the matter at that. But our task is not simply to understand the *general* value of information but to understand it as a *morally important* phenomenon. After all, information about home security systems has a general value to both homeowners and burglars, but it has no morally legitimate value for the would-be burglar. After the analysis of the moral importance of information, we will attempt to revise the mission of the information age librarian in a way that moves away from simple neutrality and toward an active role for librarians as "public intellectuals," valuing intellectual integrity, personal growth of the patron, and the development of their community's reflective skills. Much in this vision may strike the reader as controversial or radical. The warrant for this conclusion, however, lies in the account of the moral importance of information to which we now turn.

Information is easy to define precisely but hard to understand deeply. Before trying to characterize the moral value of information, we might try to explain what we mean by a *quantity* of information. After all, a convincing model for measuring something might lead you to an understanding of what it is you are measuring. In this endeavor, communication theorists were right to focus on Claude Shannon's (1948) formulation of the mathematical definition of information as the most precise and succinct characterization of the nature of information. Shannon defines information as the resolution of uncertainty. Specific pieces of information carry more or less information depending on how much uncertainty they resolve. Uncertainty can be understood in binary terms. The more yes/no questions you have to ask in order to resolve your uncertainty, the more information you are receiving. In general then, a quantity of information is the average number of binary operations (analogous to yes/no questions) needed to transmit a message.

There is something brilliant and yet puzzling about the mathematical theory of information. Shannon's fundamental insight allowed him to make a theoretical connection between our intuitive sense that information is about reducing uncertainty and a technical—ultimately computational—way of quantifying uncertainty in binary terms. If information is thought of purely as an object being transmitted between two relatively unintelligent machines (like a transmitter and a receiver), then the mathematical theory of information gives a complete characterization of information.

This objective characterization of information could also be an appealing model for librarians. After all, patrons enter the library with un-

certainty: What should I read next? Will the book I want be available? How much is my used car worth? Maybe the librarian's job is to reduce that uncertainty, either passively by creating a system for patrons to find their own information or actively by working directly with patrons' needs. Given that librarians and the public both perceive the role of libraries in terms of delivering information quickly and conveniently, why not simply conclude that the professional obligation of librarians is to value information for its ability to reduce uncertainty and that libraries ought to be valued in terms of their ability to do the same? This approach would give libraries a clear and precise mission with a measurable goal.

While this is a superficial and incomplete understanding of the value of information in librarianship, there is, of course, something basic and valuable about being able to find answers to specific questions quickly and efficiently. From an information science perspective, databases and search algorithms that return relevant information quickly are to be preferred over those that do not. Anyone who has found information from a Web site with three "clicks" as opposed to twenty can attest to this. Likewise, a highly predictable and intuitive thesaurus of search terms is often preferable to one that requires elaborate rethinking of concepts to match information needs with results. When the goal of information retrieval is "transparency," putting as few layers of mediating information between a question and an answer, the mathematical theory of information gives us the most powerful model for thinking about information and evaluating the success of our efforts to organize it.

We go wrong in our thinking about libraries when we take the ideal of transparency to be definitive of the mission of the library. If we think more carefully about the mathematical theory of information, we will see its shortcomings for a comprehensive view of the value of information for human beings. By correcting these shortcomings, we can justify and describe a more compelling vision of librarianship, one that integrates the best technical achievements of the information technology revolution with a profound understanding of the moral value of information.

First, what is wrong with "transparency" as the fundamental information value for librarians? An exclusive focus on answering patrons' immediate information needs with as little mediating involvement as possible assumes that the demand for information is already well-formed in the patron, and that the information sought is discrete. This might adequately characterize the reference interview when the patron is seeking information about used car values or when a patron seeks a particular book title, but it does not capture the needs of a patron who has less well-formed goals, more complex needs, or more open-ended projects. In these cases, the reference interview often requires librarians to ask questions that, temporarily, *increase uncertainty* in the patron. We might ask, for example, if the patron has thought about a particular aspect of the topic. We also

make judgments about the scope of the patron's inquiry. Are they just looking for a book to get started, or are they planning to spend a few hours going through a variety of sources? Most significantly, we might be tempted to *discuss* the topic with the patron—until, that is, our “professional neutrality” checks us. On the mathematical theory of information, increasing uncertainty is technically a negative quantity of information. Assessing the patron's subjective situation and engaging in dialogue are both undefined within the quantitative model.

Shannon's description of information adequately characterizes the actual transmission or flow of information. Even within each of the examples above, you could identify a moment of uncertainty triggered by a question and then analyze the resolution of that uncertainty in terms of the amount of information needed to resolve it. That is why Shannon's insight is so useful to communication theorists. It works as well when describing information flows between computers as between humans. Indeed, there are common features to both types of communication.

The problem is that it does not characterize the complexity of human inquiry. Inquiry involves information flow but within the context of human goals and purposes. When I engage in inquiry, I must be open to a more circuitous path toward the resolution of uncertainty. Along the way, I may need to tolerate increases in my uncertainty, especially if my inquiry takes me into unfamiliar areas. Also, the inquirer must be open to questioning and reflecting on his or her orientation to the inquiry. While librarians must be respectful of the patron's right to control the relationship, they should not allow their neutrality commitments to foreclose meaningful interaction with the patron.

Another way of characterizing the problem is to say that, in human inquiry, the formulation of the problem is often fluid. In complex issues, we often do not know what sort of a problem a question really involves until we begin studying it. Our model of the problem changes during the process of inquiry. These shifts in our understanding of a problem or issue under inquiry often come as the result of acquiring new information and bring with them heightened uncertainty. If we were to graph the relationship between uncertainty and information during the process of inquiry, we would see, with inquiries of any complexity, a nonlinear relationship, with many changes in the direction of the data trends.

Inquiry also requires complex guidance. Like a good teacher, a good librarian constantly evaluates feedback from the patron to determine the appropriate directions to suggest for further inquiry. Assessing the maturity and interest level of the patron is something that our neutrality oriented library culture has become uncomfortable with, but value judgments are crucial to both reference work and collections. As we argued in the first section of this article, the current emphasis on information technology in librarianship could put further pressure on librarians to maintain

strict value neutrality in patron interactions. An exaggerated concern for neutrality might lead librarians to favor new information technology that emphasizes the speedy delivery of “neutral” information to the patron over the more complex involvement with a project of inquiry. The guidance required to lead a patron through a complex inquiry is labor-intensive and requires librarians to make substantial subjective judgments about patrons. Since we are rightly concerned about making prejudicial judgments, we might favor a heightened neutrality in which we simply work to increase transparency between patrons and their self-guided inquiries. But, as we noted at the outset, this may lead us unwittingly into a very different conception of librarianship than is needed to support the complex needs of patrons most of the time. “Hyper-neutrality” favors discrete objective information over reflective inquiry.

Most of the limitations of the mathematical definition of information come from its assumption that the person transmitting information already knows what he or she wants to communicate. When librarians are responding to direct inquiries from patrons, the patron’s needs do (or should) determine the content of the librarians’ responses. But librarians are also professionally engaged in a much more open-ended, less determinate task—deciding what to collect. In this endeavor, the question is often “What should the patron want to know?” rather than “What does the patron want to know?” The technical understanding of information can help with the second question but not the first. As we will see much later in our argument, if we appreciate the social nature of information, we will understand how central normative questions are to librarianship.

If the mathematical concept of information cannot provide the basis for understanding the moral value of information, what approach can? Progress on this question is only possible if we think about patrons as engaged in the morally significant task of leading an effective, responsible, and productive life. Before moving on to that account, we should note that the current approach was not a complete failure. However complex the process of inquiry, it will always take place within a general structure of resolving uncertainty. Also, even if the complexities of human interaction prevent us from focusing exclusively on transparency and neutrality in information delivery, we will still want transparency in the data structures and search tools we use to serve patrons. We can conclude, however, that a purely technical conception of information fails to ground a complete understanding of what librarians in fact do.

INFORMATION, AUTONOMY, AND COMMUNITY

The moral importance of information cannot be appreciated from a purely objective characterization of it such as we found in Claude Shannon’s (1948) view. Rather, we need to examine the role that information plays in an individual’s and community’s effort to lead an effective, responsible,

and productive life. In moral philosophy, such accounts often begin with an explication of the centrality of autonomy. This will lead us to two conclusions: (1) information plays a crucial role in the developmental task of leading a self-governing life, which is what we mean by personal autonomy; and (2) there is an analogy between the ability of a person to become self-governing and the ability of a community to self-govern. In the language of a previous generation, the personal is the political. But then Plato already made this point by articulating the analogy between virtue in the individual and virtue in the state. Understanding the role that information plays in the social life of a community will help us appreciate the larger mission of the library in the life of the community.

In moral philosophy, autonomy is simply the ability or duty to self-legislate one's conduct. Of course, there are many ways of doing this and not just any set of rules will do. What set of rules should one adopt to govern one's conduct? This may be the most fundamental practical question in moral development. The famous political and moral philosopher, John Rawls (1999), answers the question this way: "Acting autonomously is acting from principles that we would consent to as free and equal rational beings, and that we are to understand in this way" (p. 453). What Rawls calls attention to is the way that people need to be situated in order for their behavior to be called autonomous. The hope is that "free and equal rational beings" would voluntarily choose to act from principles that are mutually compatible and which work to promote positive human values. The alternative to this way of thinking about the basis of moral conduct is to either imagine the principles of our conduct coming to us from outside our will and being imposed on us or to imagine that the mere fact that *we* choose some principles to act on justifies them. For various reasons, neither of these alternatives is appealing, so we try to theorize moral autonomy as an ability to *freely* choose personal principles of conduct that still make sense from a social or universal standpoint.

Much in our moral upbringing and socialization is designed to encourage us to adopt the special standpoint of "free and rational" beings from which the choice of principles is supposed to take place. We encourage children to act on fair rules of play, to understand what respecting others requires, and to understand the importance of avoiding arbitrariness and irrational preference in the way they interact with others. This is all part of the direct and self-conscious moral education in human cultures.

But what does this have to do with libraries? Are libraries instruments of moral education? Do we really want to give librarians such a mission? Probably not. Certainly primary school librarians are as engaged as other primary school teachers in the direct moral education of children, but it would seem odd to think of most librarians as having such a mission. Librarians correctly perceive themselves to be providers of library services to patrons, not in directing moral education.

However, direct moral education is only part of the development of autonomy. Many of our interactions with others have a less obvious moral component, one that is related to autonomy. Autonomy should not simply be thought of in the narrow sense as the development of moral principles of conduct. Broadly, our sense of our own autonomy is concerned with a general competence to understand the world and make prudent decisions in it. Clearly, the development of this competence is not limited to a particular stage of a person's life. While most of us consolidate moral autonomy by the time we reach adulthood, the more general competence we cultivate in dealing with the world successfully is a key part of our sense of personal identity and power. It is here that the information provided by libraries plays a morally significant role in people's lives. Libraries empower individuals by creating an information-rich atmosphere within which the patron can experience a sense of possibility and a belief that a growth in personal autonomy is possible. Whether the patron is pursuing practical goals, such as learning how to refinish furniture or find a job, or more speculative goals, such as understanding new theories of the cosmos, the *moral dimension of inquiry* is its effect on an individual's ability to make better choices of action and principles of action. The moral character of information is its ability, in the context of expert guidance, to produce this effect. Or, to put the conclusion more precisely, information itself is morally neutral but, in the context of guided inquiry, it supports the development of personal autonomy and personal agency. Personal autonomy goes beyond moral autonomy to include the general ability to understand reality in a way that improves choice. As we will argue later, to realize this moral value of information, librarians must understand themselves as supporting a value-rich, rather than value-neutral, learning atmosphere.

It might be posited that this way of thinking ignores just how mundane much library use is. Perhaps in trying to find the moral significance of information, we are overstating what is happening when patrons use their libraries. After all, a good deal of circulation might be attributable to the patron's desire to take care of life's ordinary chores or to find an entertaining book. Why talk about enhancing "agency" and improving decision-making if the patron is just looking for escape fiction?

As reasonable as the objection may sound, it assumes a simple relationship between the moral and the practical that, for good reasons, contemporary moral theorists are increasingly abandoning. Most people think of moral questions and issues as problems that intrude upon their practical lives and, indeed, moral crises and moral dilemmas have this character. But morality can also be seen, from a naturalist perspective, as part of a general strategy humans use to further their survival and to flourish. We can see this in fundamental moral values like autonomy in which the same virtues of self-reliance and rational choice help with both specifically moral conduct and with being a generally effective individual. In other words,

the relationship between practical living—being an effective person leading a rational life—and distinctively moral conduct, such as deciding whether to lie or to honor an agreement, is more seamless than might be supposed. So while the library patron researching a consumer product is probably not solving a moral dilemma, she is using information to rationalize her choices and increase her practical autonomy. On some days, the task of living well involves reducing stress by finding an easy escape into fiction. Part of the librarian's mission might be to model a holistic "diet" of information, but one that will require substantive judgment, not strict neutrality.

The last step in our argument about the social nature of information is to show the connection between the moral value of information to the individual and its role in community life. In an individualistic culture such as ours, it might be thought that this connection is hard to show but, if we borrow a metaphor from management information science, we can make the relationship clear.

Management information theorists often talk about the value of integrated information systems in business in terms of "decision support." Simply connecting various databases and data streams in a business enterprise is not particularly valuable to business strategy unless you can show that it allows you to make better decisions. Of course, integration can still improve some business *functions*, but to really affect planning and development, information technology has to make inquiry possible, especially open-ended inquiry about uncertain futures.

Just as individuals can use their libraries for purely discrete factual questions or for more substantive inquiry and personal growth, so likewise communities can look to libraries to provide decision support to help the community "self-legislate" its future, thereby becoming more autonomous. While we tend to view social decision making as part of the political process and, as such, a purely practical function, we should consider its moral component, just as we did with personal autonomy. Like individuals, communities have relative abilities to self-govern and to choose courses of action that satisfy principles of rationality and morality. Just as individuals often look to authorities for guidance, communities often depend on the abilities and foresight of their leadership. However, libraries are almost as well suited to lead communities in inquiry as they are to lead individuals in inquiry.

As we discussed in our book, *Information Ethics for Librarians*, libraries sometimes avoid this public interest mission out of concerns for value neutrality (Alfino & Pierce, 1997, p. 10). Indeed, there are reasonable concerns about "politicizing" public libraries, just as there are inescapable value conflicts over collection development in relation to individual tastes and preferences. But in light of our analysis of the moral importance of information, especially its social role in promoting good community deci-

sion making, librarians should reconsider their commitment to neutrality. In its place, the profession could cultivate a reputation for intellectual integrity and fairness in the presentation of issues of social and political importance.

CONCLUSION

We have argued, in a case study of the fiction problem, that librarians sometimes allow the law of unintended consequences to steer their sense of professional identity. By allowing popular fiction into their collections, librarians did "choose" to adopt a stance of neutrality regarding the ultimate value of this material, but this choice took on a life of its own, ultimately elevating neutrality to a higher status than it perhaps deserved. To understand the values that should govern library service, we looked at the nature of information and argued that information is morally valuable because it plays a crucial role in establishing an individual's moral autonomy. Ultimately, autonomy is a social good because it enables individuals to choose principles of conduct for themselves in relation to others. Communities, we argued, also pursue a project of autonomy for which information is crucial. This analysis suggests that librarians, as information specialists, should see themselves as involved in the kind of complex inquiry-based relationships with patrons that autonomy demands. Likewise, librarians should rededicate themselves to the role of "public intellectuals," leading their communities in the discussion of issues affecting the area which they serve.

How does this argument change the librarian's mission on a practical level? Most librarians probably share a common faith—i.e., by providing open access to good resources, patrons will be empowered in their pursuit of personal growth. Nothing in our argument changes this fundamental hope. However, by changing our approach to neutrality, we feel that librarians can pursue this goal more effectively. To give a more concrete idea of the shift in professional values that might come about from this change, we identify some specific behaviors in patron interaction, some values in the use of technology, and some values in public library programming that might be emphasized as a consequence of our argument.

First, we need to become more aware of the way in which our interactions with patrons reinforce our openness to engage in shared inquiry. Library patrons approach the reference desk with a variety of assumptions about the kind of help they should expect. If we limit our responses to patrons to narrow answers to their questions, we reinforce the idea that the reference desk is only for answering technical questions about resources in the collection and search techniques. Likewise, centralized online or telephone reference, sometimes offered on a 24 hour, 7 day a week basis, has a bias toward discrete information requests in which the patron is further insulated from acquiring information search skills. In our view,

the reference desk is a place where patrons can receive substantial guidance in shaping and pursuing an inquiry. Even discrete information requests offer librarians a chance to teach *some* search skills. When we encourage patrons to see reference help primarily in terms of factual information retrieval and technical assistance with computers, we miss opportunities to show patrons the difference between a library and a collection of networked information resources.

Professional librarians spend a good deal of time choosing hardware and software technology for their collections. Indeed, an increasing amount of collection development is about collecting electronic resources, both by purchasing resources in electronic form and by agreeing to purchase access to remote content. This shift in collections media has already brought patrons a wealth of new information, but our choices of search interfaces and our response to the Internet as a search medium can reinforce an impoverished conception of inquiry. For example, an increasing reliance on keyword searches, as opposed to structured subject index-based searches, reinforces the patron's perception that inquiry does not depend on making contact with an organized body of knowledge. Search products that emphasize recall over precision initially impress patrons with the *amount* of information returned, but in the long run these products will reinforce a negative perception of organized inquiry. De-emphasizing "search formulation" may speed more patrons through the library and may reduce the staffing needs of the reference desk, but it will ultimately reduce the competence and personal autonomy of the patron. Already we have anecdotal evidence of patrons who see little difference among such diverse resources as the electronic card catalog, periodical databases, amazon.com, and altavista.com. Instead of making inquiry seem as simple as the search box on a major Internet search engine, we should help patrons see the crucial differences between structured and unstructured searching.

Finally, in public programming, especially in public libraries, we have an opportunity to realize the library's potential for increasing community autonomy. Traditional efforts in the area of story times, literacy, and summer reading programs already contribute to the development of future patrons. Also, when public libraries offer workshops on gardening, travel, and used car purchasing, they are both showcasing the usefulness of their resources and increasing the personal autonomy of their patrons. Because of reactions to controversial library displays and because librarians are overly concerned about neutrality, libraries have generally avoided programming on political and social issues. But these are just the areas of public life in which community autonomy can and should be improved in a democracy.

Using the collection and professional library skills to promote discussion of important social and political issues will necessarily place the li-

brary at the center of numerous competing interests. Of course, in quieter ways, collection policy already does this. As long as librarians have confidence in their intellectual integrity and in their ability to persuade the public that they are presenting information in a fair and balanced way, the library can and should develop programming that is targeted to the needs and issues facing its community. If information is morally important in the ways we have described, then librarians should become "public intellectuals," guiding communities through issues of the day with on-site and online presentations of public issues. Librarians will need tenure-like job protections to do this work, and they will need to distinguish between their expertise in evaluating sources and their lack of expertise in the content areas into which they delve, but ultimately the risk is worthwhile. Libraries that can provide high quality "decision support" to their communities will strengthen democratic institutions, offer correctives to biased information sources, and promote a higher quality of discussion in their communities.

Librarians face far more profound choices today than those posed by the new technologies they purchase. Librarians must choose between two important and different ways of modeling information virtues. We could become more like the electronic technologies we buy, emphasizing discrete information retrieval and neutrality with respect to the patron's project of inquiry. Or, we could stock our libraries with these same technologies but move our standards of service in a different direction: focusing on qualitatively rich interactions with patrons and emphasizing the differences between electronic searching and human inquiry. Our preference for the second alternative is based on the social value of information in human inquiry.

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