Redirecting Library and Documentary Affects: From Libraries to "Liferaries"

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Abstract

In this article, affects are discussed as forces or intensive powers causing movements in individuals and groups and their subsequent social, cultural, and material (together and in sum, political) expressions.[1] The article suggests that the movements we should try to produce or support through libraries and other documentary institutions are movements of change toward longer-lasting and more sustainable affects that support life. It is desirable to adopt a production and reproduction model in libraries and documentation centers based on supporting institutional and individual agents that can modulate affects and redirect and create new trajectories toward responding to dire planetary and human needs that are now denied and repressed. This suggests that such institutions may wish to further critically examine how they reflect and how they direct and modulate epistemic and social forces, which forces they act upon and support, and which agents and powers they empower and to what degree they do so, toward long-term generative production and reproduction.

I.

What are the possible affective forces or powers of libraries and other documentary institutions as agencies for power? Do their entranceways and exits for power constitute abilities to respond to social powers beyond the range of documentation and publics as shaped by dominant state forms?

"Affect" in the library and information sciences has been discussed in many ways. "Affect" was confused with "effect" in Warren Weaver's folk-psychology infused "conduit metaphor" (Reddy 1979) reading of Claude Shannon's information theory (Shannon and Weaver 1949; Day 2000)). In Weaver's reading, information is an effect of a cause, the product of

a transmission of meaning from a sender to a receiver. Electronic signal transmission thus became not just a metaphor but an epistemic model for the informational or communicative effects of one person upon another. This epistemology of information per the conduit metaphor, not just in Weaver's work, but in the earlier works of Paul Otlet and in many others both inside and outside of the library and information science (LIS) tradition in the last two centuries, has led to a host of metaphysical understandings of information according to what Bernd Frohmann has called "epistemic content" (Frohmann 2004).

More generally in English, "affect" is discussed as either a performance (a type of force, not necessarily having a direct effective cause) or as a synonym for emotions or "feelings" found as the "content" of selves, their actions, and their aesthetic representations.

Gregg and Seigworth (2010), in their *The Affect Theory Reader*, have suggested a Deleuzian notion of affect, as the powers expressed between entities that lead to their ontological undergoing, becoming, and subsequent expressions and further expressive powers. This is the notion that I will follow. They write,

> Affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. Affect is an impingement or extrusion of a momentary or sometimes more sustained state of relation *as well as* the passage (and the duration of passage) of forces or intensities. . . . Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. (1)

These forces of "in-between-ness" that connect the inside of libraries to the outside world, documents to the world and the world to documents, traditionally take the form of several trajectories for library functions, which compose the agency-powers of libraries. Three of the more common trajectories for academic and public libraries are as follows:

- Epistemic: connecting users to epistemic content ("information") in documents
- Emotional: connecting users to emotional content ("information") in documents
- Serving publics: serving known publics in support of their information needs through collections

Following Gregg and Seigworth, above, I would like to deviate from these traditional trajectories in several ways. First, my analysis of the trajectories of libraries follows affects, rather than causes and effects. Infor-

mation does not exist simply to fulfill the needs of users (and users to be served by established information) for two reasons: on the one hand, because both information collections and users are co-inscribed within cultural forms and the social norms for their deployment (constituting ideological space) (Day 2014, 2017), and conversely, because natural and social powers exceed the natural and social forces that are represented in collections. The Shannon-Weaver "causal" transmission model of information as translated into library and information science (namely, between documentary "information" and users and their information needs), is, on the one hand, a focused restrictive economy of a more background general economy (ideology), and on the other hand, such "information" is exceeded by the empirical givens of the world, which constitute a notion of "information" in a non-, or not yet, documentary form (which I will later discuss as a relation between data and knowledge institutions and knowledge agents). Library and other documentary institutions need to be more than service entities to assumed user groups with their established information collections. They should be entranceways and exits for broader arrays of desires beyond information needs (just as natural collections must support scientific investigations that bring new information into being evident from what is naturally *given* [in the etymological sense of "data"]). Libraries need to be more deterritorialized beyond their documentation boundaries to entities and forces that are unseen, emergent, and particularly, subaltern.

Second, "affect," as Gregg and Seigworth point out, is to be understood as something other than, or at least "beyond," emotions. (So-called rational or intellectual thought moves us as well as emotions, for example.) Third, with the concept of affects, one is dealing with analyzing force or power in terms of waves and undulations, molecular recombinations, intensities, and varying directionalities, rather than direct causal trajectories. This allows for consideration of how an agent or organizational agency can modulate, recombine, and reorganize forces toward various pitches and trajectories that bring unseen forces and entities into existence. And fourth, I'd like to point to documentary institutions as institutions of evidence production (i.e., documentality; see Frohmann 2012), rather than just evidence representation (i.e., documentation).

Further to this last point, I'd like to move beyond the focus of libraries on documentation, as Paul Otlet understood it, namely, the positivist philosophy of documents where information is seen as existing in the "contents" of documents and is understood as end points for knowledge. Instead, I'd like to stress a notion of documentality, where information is understood as something becoming evident and information science is understood as the study of how this occurs. We should shift our vision of libraries and other documentary centers from being only collections of evidence (documentation) to being forces within processes of evidential-

ity (documentality). (They are these anyway, when seen from the point of view of information lifecycles of information creation and use, material culture, political economy, or sociological bibliography, rather than from a traditional bibliographic or documentation perspective.)

Libraries focus and point to (that is, they index) social, cultural, and material forces, distinctly and as modes of production and reproduction, despite being generally understood as holding and supporting neutral representations of these in documents. A library or documentary collection is a collective of cultural, social, and political forces or powers. At this point in the ecological and political crises of productionist paradigms, in this quintessential turning point from which there is no return for the earth, the question for libraries and like institutions is how to direct, empower, and sustain the most life-affirming and generative forces. In short, how to transform libraries into "liferaries."

II.

How, then, can we read libraries as empowering forces of positive change? How can we change them from being rather passive indexes of published reality to more being agents in the creation of life-sustaining powers? Individual librarians may have this goal, but sometimes the institutions can seem somewhat moribund.

Some writers, such as Sloniowski (2016), have discussed "affect" more in terms of the radical and unseen intellectual and social "capital"—the immanent or "virtual" *powers* of libraries—made actual through the labor of librarians. Libraries, in this sense, are parts of forces of expression, which join them to other epistemic and, broadly understood, "affective" individual, collective, and also institutional assemblages.

Sloniowski's work (2016), as it cites the works of 1970s and later feminist workerism in Italy and elsewhere (see, for example, Dalla Costa 2019; Fortunati 1995; Toupin 2018), proposes the notion of affect along two paths: first, specific to the feminist discourse, dispositional powers of expression as given and recomposed within the experiences and knowledge of both individual women and women as a class, and second, more generally, knowledge dispositions and expressive affects generated by the potential resistance and unseen or undocumented powers of subaltern agents and collectives.

Within the feminist discourse she examines, Sloniowski (2016) proposes that libraries are situated within a valorization of "reproduction," a term that combines social, cultural, and biological reproduction into a single political trajectory of life-sustaining powers and concerns. More generally, what her article suggests is that libraries should be concerned with their modes of production and reproduction within a framework of social, cultural, and biological reproduction that responds to problems regarding the continuance and sustenance of life itself. Sloniowski and the

literature she cites suggest that libraries and other documentation centers could better leverage the social and cultural concerns of their workforce for a life-sustaining politics.

This work also raises the issue of the relation of subaltern powers to what is indexed as reality and its institutional states by documentary means. By shifting the focus of libraries to generative reproduction and social and epistemic change, the work offers a critique of libraries and other documentation centers when these are seen simply as collection and support institutions of published documents and known user types—products of political economy within a given state form. Not only should subaltern documents be collected and consulted, but subaltern powers need to be empowered as to their expressions, their affects, and their evidentiary appearances (or not) and their status within the lifeworld. (With this issue, too, we encounter the issue of the relationship of major libraries to less visible community archives and other, "specialized," documentary institutions and collections within given state forms.)

IV.

If libraries index, and so implicitly and explicitly rank, norms of the world through their collections and their assumptions about users and publics, this is even more a problem with the social reach and documentary depth of internet search engines and "new media." Like libraries, internet search engines shape the types and needs of "users" by the availability and types of documentary collections they index and rank. Today, both users and documents are digitally positioned entities of index, rank, and search algorithms (Day 2014).

However, approximately during the past twenty years (and with different media, previous to that), there has emerged a literature that has seen the internet as a revolutionary type of social power. In this literature, there is a well-established theoretical conversation that draws upon, on the one hand, the modern avant-garde's notion of material recomposition (e.g., in Soviet and later constructivism), and on the other, Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of affect and expressionism. In this literature, "language" and its recombinations have been seen as a source for reconstructing both the appearance of the world and the expressions and emergence of subjectivities.

In regard to this discussion of the generation of new subjectivities and new politics through new media, several prominent texts may be mentioned. Before personal computers, there was Félix Guattari's essay "Millions and Millions of Potential Alices" (1984), which argued, from the perspective of the 1977 pirate radio station in Bologna, Italy, *Radio Alice*, for the (politically Left) "autonomist" power of decentralized media. Later, seemingly inspired by Guattari's thought as well as by Deleuze's conception of the "virtual" (in the sense of "potential" [Deleuze 1994]),

but also seeming to take a more capitalist approach on emergence than Deleuze or Guattari would have taken, there was Pierre Lévy's *Collective Intelligence: Toward an Anthropology of Cyberspace* (1997), which argued for decentralized agency and collective expressions via internet technologies. Then, there was Tiziana Terranova's (2004) *Networked Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, which theorized collective expressions on the internet toward a radical politics of emergent new subjectivities (via Deleuzian expressionist philosophy). And in a more US libertarian mode, a bit earlier, there was Howard Rheingold's 2002 *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (2002), which speculated that political mobs or swarms using mobile computers and telephones would shape the future of political struggle.

Such largely Left political optimism toward new, decentralized, media flourished for a short period in terms of actual "independent media" on the internet, too, such as the now nearly forgotten *Indymedia* news service. But with the remediation of the internet by old media portals, news aggregators, "alternative facts," and search engines that serve information needs that are still largely defined in terms of old politics and prejudices, such optimistic faith in the "collective intelligence" of "new subjectivities" via the internet has slowed. Safiya Noble's work (2018) shows how old prejudices are served by new algorithmic techniques. And Neal Thomas's 2018 book, *Becoming Social in a Networked Age* (2018), analyzes new media algorithms in terms of their technical tendency toward supporting logical, effective "possibilities" based in old beliefs and assertions, rather than, necessarily, toward supporting emerging, affective "potentialities" toward new political subjectivities.

V.

The difficulties of producing a library or any other information collection to be "potentially" generative rather than "possibly" inferred (again, to use Deleuze's distinction between these terms in his *Difference and Repetition* [1994]) can be traced back to, in part, the very nature of documentary collections and information retrieval. The problem here is the informational shaping of present and future needs through the indexing and searching of past language forms and their social expressions (Buckland 2012). Document collections and their indexes are collections of past language use and forms of expression. Indexes and contemporary algorithms can and do elevate and silo dominant forms of language and its use within given domains, and so, further shape future "users" and their "information needs" based on past ideologies and habits (Day 2014).

In this context, the heavily digitally mediated "new subject" of the information age has difficulty assembling new language and sites for expression. Particularly when lacking further extensions into the world than the digital screen, the semantic spaces of the internet can limit the reality that a user sees and understands. Viewing any information collection only

as being a site of documentation content (i.e., information) and as only serving the information needs of patrons who are seen as representations of such collections (and so are "users," or as I've called them, "subjects-of-[information]-need" [Day 2017]), is a limiting vision of what libraries and the internet are and can be. Reading is only critical reading if it can escape the horizon of its own semantic space. This is difficult to do if one is almost always online, particularly if what one is online with is constantly self-reinforcing of beliefs. As we know from the days of print, reading by itself doesn't always bring knowledge or an enlightened human being, but rather reading can also reinforce existing prejudices. And reading has been a means of bringing about some of the most totalitarian governments on both the political Right and Left during the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Today, we constantly read. But what we don't do, or can't do, is critically read, and partly this is because we spend so much of our time mediated by a self-reinforcing screen.

Instead of seeing information as textual content or representations about the world, it is more real to see information as a relationship between something given ("data") and what we come to know about what is given, as mediated, collected, and used through sociotechnical information tools and by institutions for knowledge, affect, and inscription (see Latour 1996). Libraries and other documentation centers are not sites where information or knowledge are "kept" or where information and knowledge processes find their endpoint *qua* information and knowledge substances (documents, texts, images, etc.), but rather they are places where information and knowledge are created or made and used in conjunction with other institutions, individuals, and collective groups (such as education institutions, laboratories, research centers, publishers, etc.). The substantive nouns of "information" and "knowledge" do not signify entities, but rather, they signify material, social, and cultural moments of informing and being informed and knowing. Believing the contrary leads to a metaphysical morass that mystifies the functions and processes of library and documentation centers and their workers' labor (as was the case with Otlet's work in the past, and is the case, today, with internet firms).

The internet during the past thirty years has evolved into a multimedia representational medium, not unlike how film and television did previously. With such a medium, often what is given is what has already been mediated by these semantic spaces, with little extension to the world otherwise, and so informational evidence becomes the epistemic and aesthetic reverberations and expansions taking place in these semantic spaces alone. The World Wide Web, for example, is largely used as a site of taste seeking and confirmation, where truth is determined by aesthetic forms and an individual's beliefs and tastes, rather than by knowledge institutions and empirical means. "Fake news," for example, takes place by the absence of journalistic fact-checking or other means of empirically or criti-

cally verifying information, and so it easily leads to, as Walter Benjamin wrote of an earlier era of "new media" involving radio and cinema, to an aestheticized politics of fascism (Benjamin 1968b).

Like Walter Benjamin's angel of history (Benjamin 1968a), instead of dialectical progress through the liberation of the subject by collective potential via new media technologies, the subject-of-(information)-need often stands at the end of a heap of "ideological" language, or constellations of ideas, known as "the collection," or simply, "information." The angel is surrounded by the linguistic and physical residues of habits and powerful norms of thinking, expressing, and doing, much of which on the internet is based on nothing more than beliefs and taste.

The heap comes to a crescendo at her feet, where information technologies have indexed expressions of what has come before, coloring current and future expressions with this past and casting its shadow upon the future. It isn't just the particular words of the past at her feet that most attract the angel's attention, nor even the documents that have been harvested from an index, but rather the index itself, understood as what is present, what is evident, shaped by information and understood as knowledge.

However, the angel can see this from above, as well. She can do this because she can free herself from the indexical point that is the present, free herself to return to the material world from where she came. From above, she can see the beliefs and sociotechnics that presence the present and shape future trajectories of power. She can see the heap as not just either a relativist heap or as a reactionary direction out of it; she can see the index for what it is, namely, the coordination of past and future, documents and information needs and their "users," objects and subjects, according to social and technical functions that serve controlling logics of power. She can see information not as content but as relationships of near and far, past and present and as shadows of what is and will be taken to be evident or not, of value or not, powerful or not.

VI.

With information, the avant-garde's constructivist dream of revising politics by recombining language may be hard to achieve. Community centers, increasingly rare investigative journalism, independent news organizations, activists, and culturally and socially subaltern individuals and groups may be able to offer language and perspectives that more effectively challenge the dominant representations of reality. (This was once the hope for the internet, but it has been remediated back to marginality, its forces recommodified by accumulation.) We must turn to previous political struggles and their use of documentation in social and labor struggles, as well (Wright, forthcoming). A "remix" culture of dominant language isn't enough. Language "itself" is not enough. We need power from subaltern realities and both said and unsaid desires and powers. Semantic and docu-

mentary space must include the material conditions of their inscription and struggles. Semantic space must be dragged back to the muck of the real and include it, otherwise it is a phantasmagoric monster.

This activity isn't naturally inherent to library institutions as documentation institutions, nor is it inherent to the activity of algorithms on the internet, which privilege syntactical and logical functions over semantics and pragmatics (see Badia 2019). Nor is heralding such institutions and media as inherently "democratic" in the midst of their nondemocratic state forms and a media of disinformation enough.

VII.

Libraries need to be challenged as inscriptions of national state forms—that is, as extensions and substantiations of established class, party, and political states of power—as well as extensions of nationalist and imperial ideologies transmitted formally and through cultural reproduction (e.g., "the *state's* part in structuring sentiment" [Stoler 2009]). Libraries must be critiqued when they theoretically or practically assume reified containment forms for social, cultural, and political stasis. Their formal shape as containers reflecting the social through documents and user types needs to be theoretically and practically deterritorialized. The affective powers of libraries and their workers must be recognized within cultural, social, and political dynamics of power and representation. They always have been agencies of stasis or change. They always have been machines for the production and reproduction of both repressive and generative senses of power because they are both products and creators of informing and knowing.

Some issues of documentation lie squarely within the domain of politics, which means that library and information science and its institutions also lie squarely within the conceptual problematics and the real problems of politics. They may represent such in their collections, but those collections are fully located within dynamics of power.

For example, documentary ontologies and social ontologies cross in issues of race through the administrative state and in the dominant social state's everyday assumptions regarding legal and ethical rights, agency, responsibilities, and community for and toward people of different group identities. Segregation is not simply a product of political governance through documentary form, but of documentary form through both political governance and social life. It is not an event of the past alone but of the present in everyday life and thought. Social ontologies are a central concern of library and information science research and also are important practical and theoretical issues for library and other documentary institutions and their professionals.

Another example would be information technologies, particularly online algorithms and their indexes. Much of everyday life is now digitally

mediated. The bourgeois world is one of intense textual mediation since the explosion of media and libraries in the nineteenth century. As I've argued elsewhere, bourgeois life depends on documentary mediation for its values of personal and social progress (Day 2019). Therefore, online indexes are not only documentary indexes but also social indexes; they represent and point to the cultural forms and social norms for representing the world, in the past, present, and into the future. They socially and culturally position us and psychologically and politically direct us through digitally mediated means.

There are many concepts in the practices, theory, and ethos of libraries and library and information science that assume neutral spaces: information, information retrieval, and user needs, for example. Paradoxically, even in the case of system designers, there is the simple goal of connecting users with documents through their needs. But, a context-free liberalism of free will is to some extent only part of a spectrum of a conservatism of existing power, since it doesn't account for the cultural forms (e.g., language, identities), social norms, and the political replication of such in governance structures and in everyday life that shape the "open" or "public" space for "free will."

There is still much work to be done in exploring the relationship of libraries to other documentary institutions, and to knowledge-producing institutions more generally. There is still much to examine in the problematic of libraries' and other documentation centers' relationship to their governmental state forms, and to the form and representation of such institutions as themselves bodies of foundational stability. Viewing such institutions by affects—by way of forces, their modulations, their intensities, their trajectories, and their production and reproduction—is one manner of deterritorializing the body of "the library" and viewing it as a problematic of agency for the selection and further empowering of forces in the world.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. This article is scholarly, but it also advocates for certain directions in library and information science theory and practice. In this latter regard, it reflects my own scholarly opinions and not necessarily those of my institution.

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