viewpoint

Everyone a librarian!?

Some years ago, in a moment of transition in leadership for a major special collections library, I was part of an advisory group where the prevailing opinion was that a faculty member with passionate interests in the research focus of the institution could successfully occupy the position of head librarian. We did not need someone with an MLIS degree, a PhD in a field related to the collections areas would do fine.

I was appalled.

Almost a decade into my appointment to a program whose focus is a professional MLIS degree, I had acquired a first-hand understanding of the many dimensions of the field that answer the question so often paused by outsiders to its activities, "Why do you need a Master's Degree to be a librarian?" Though I had grown up with and in libraries, with my first job being that of a page in the Philadelphia Public Library branch that had fed my literary appetites through my adolescence, I had never really paid attention to the workings of the institution. Like many patrons, I saw the basics of the library as a matter of keeping books on shelves and checking them out. What was so complicated about that? Fast forward many years. I had been a book-based library-dependent academic, but was recruited to an Information Studies department. I had shifted from patron oblivion to awareness through an immersion in the sphere of professional education.

To convince my faculty colleagues—all of whom were humanist academics—of the special experience essential to librarianship, I created a systematic enumeration of the many areas of competency that had become clear to me working with my professional colleagues in the Libraries at UCLA and elsewhere. I brought forward this list to the faculty on the advisory group, simply posing the question, "Who among you knows how to do these things?" The enumeration of these details shifted their understanding.

In brief, here are just a few of the areas I outlined as those in which they would need understanding as a basis for daily decisions about resources and priorities:

- Technical services: cataloguing protocols and standards for OPACs; the justification for copy cataloguing or not; the use of vocabularies from LoC, AAT, Getty, and other sources.
- User services: reading room protocols, scheduling, desk staffing for invigilation; use of online resources and specialized databases for research and search; reference skills.
- Reproduction and rights: management of intellectual property, fair use; workflow for reproduction; image and facsimile standards for print publication.
- Collections management and assessment: development policies, acquisitions, dealer and vendor relations; assessing changing trends against legacy strengths; orphan items.
- Facilities and maintenance: emergency preparedness training (social and environmental threats); security procedures (alarms, guards, access).
- Conservation and preservation: pests, environmental controls, security, prioritization of needs, enclosures and protection.
- Labor issues: workforce concerns and equity; represented and non-represented staff, short-term contract employees, interns; performance incentives and assessments; legal issues.
- Digitization: in-house and vendor contracts, scale and quality control, storage and use, upgrades and forward migration.

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- Infrastructure: digital and electronic infrastructure maintenance for administrative, technical, and user services; kiosks and portals, online catalogue access, and integration with existing systems; security and firewalls.
- Donor relations: gifts, fundraising, friends groups, terms of assessment and value, memoranda of agreement.
- Outreach and community: programming activity, publicity, communications strategies, social media profile and activity; audiences and constituencies.

The room went silent. To a person, the academic scholars who heard this list of activities recognized that to be faced with the challenges of daily administration and allocation of staff time to these activities was completely foreign to their usual work habits. And it was a list of activities for which they simply had no background training and even more, no inclination.

Why was the gap between their concept of a librarian's role and the reality so wide? What image of a librarian had they brought to the original conversation? A special collections library conjures images of a collector's private domain, a hushed and luxurious (if sometimes ignored and shabby) space in which an erudite individual plunges into the leather bound tomes of antiquarian books and follows esoteric lines of inquiry to produce obscure monographs that gradually merit acclaim among their peers. To a great extent, the image is premised on the private library, the tradition of the wealthy man or, more rarely, woman for whom the luxury of free time combined with a passion for ancient history or classical literature or some other traditional discipline. Sometimes this image includes the crackling papers of an ancient archive, handwritten sheets left in folios and sheaths tied with ancient string such as bundles of drawings from travel narratives to exotic and ancient lands, field notes from a voyage or pilgrimage. These images of a Hogwarts-meets-Casaubon-in-his study suggest an escapist world protected by obscurity and wrapped in the reverent silence appropriate to profound and undisturbed inquiry.

This has not been the world of special collections for a long time, and even if individual collectors still possess such rarified spaces in which their bound volumes sit as beautifully arrayed on shelves as their shoes in a walk-in closet somewhere else in their house, the professional world of librarianship that arose in the end of the 19th century has become well-established within the institutional realms of universities, museums, government and cultural institutions where collections have to be managed across a wide suite of services of the kind outlined above. But somehow, this reality did not communicate itself to my fellow academic faculty colleagues. My recounting of the (albeit quite incomplete) list of areas of expertise was a shock, a revelation. They imagined, for the most part, that the life of a librarian would be quiet, filled with days in which rare book collectors arrived with a few precious treasures to donate to the collection, and in which a handful of visiting colleagues would sit in a reading room in decorous pursuit of knowledge, and they themselves would read through auction catalogues and sellers' lists to pick out rarified purchases.

Professional librarians are a relatively recent development, their certification procedures arose late by contrast to that of medical doctors, lawyers, and accountants, but within the same era in which the impulse to subject activities to standards within peer groups became an established understanding. (The only pre-modern professions are those of prostitution and the clergy—the others are the trades and crafts with their own guild-based systems of certification.) The "modern" invention of the profession, as Ronald Day so expertly detailed in his 2001 study, was driven by a combination of factors. Chief among these was the recognition that the explosion of specialized knowledge in scientific fields could not be managed without systematic approaches to its classification and access, and that much that was valuable for the advance of industry, medicine, pure and applied science across other fields risked being lost in the avalanche of output.[1] The need for bibliographical standards beyond the simple organization of knowledge in accord with classical divisions of trivium and quadrivium informed the work of Charles Ammi Cutter and Melvil Dewey in the 1870s, the Library of Congress subject heading creation a little later, and other figures and institutions renowned in world of knowledge organization and classification.

A domain unto itself, this world of systematic and rationalized control has come in for its share of attack for its legacy biases, imprint of colonial exploitation and abuse, and other blind spots with regard to gender, sexual orientation, and a myriad of other topics to which changes in cultural values rightfully pertain. The

1. Ronald Day. *The Modern Invention of Information* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001).

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profession, as a whole, has largely been responsive to suggestions for reform and change, and shifts in collecting policies, vocabularies, standards, recruitment, access and outreach have all reflected these shifts. More remains to be done, of course, but the point is that the profession has existed as a community of certification and accreditation for only a little more than a century. The question is, will it now be lost? Put aside by a combination of absolute ignorance of its specific values and expertise by those who should and could know better—the very academic and scholarly community who benefits from its expertise—and by the general perception that librarians are no longer needed in an era of networked knowledge.

That this networked knowledge is largely made accessible through the efforts of these same professionals who manage it behind the screens of search results escapes the general public. But it should not escape the scholars and faculty who imagine that their discipline-specific knowledge is sufficient to substitute for professional competence. If I study the history and design of automobiles from a cultural perspective, does that make me a mechanic? If I know the details of anatomy manuals within the history of medicine and have studied the minutiae of venoms and poisons, herbal remedies and the origins of modern pharmacology, does that give me a foundation—or credential--for prescribing a drug? I may have read *Bleak House* a hundred times and still not have license to practice before the Bar. The point? When are academics going to recognize the expertise of librarians?

Librarians are not custodians. They are not simply employees with the keys to the best real estate on campus. They are not merely figures at a desk surveilling a space with an eye to repressive discipline. In an era, our own, when expertise is under attack from so many directions, particularly those constituencies who have much to gain by conflating opinion with knowledge, demeaning the value of empirical and peer-vetted practices, belittling science, law, constitutional history, the humanities and its contributions to ethics and critical literacy, I would suggest to my academic colleagues that a recognition of the role of professional librarianship begin with an acquaintance with the areas of expertise that are its exclusive domain. Go back and look at that brief list above, imagine what is required to know how to do these tasks, with professional standards and practices, and what the shape of days would be like organized around their execution even as trends in every area listed continue to challenge many established approaches and assumptions.

Academics who believe their ability to do research, follow a bibliographical trail, and find things in traditional and online catalogues and collections translates into knowledge of libraries are confusing front end experience with back-end expertise. Ask these same individuals how an OPAC works or who can change the definition of a MARC field and they will either shrug this off as unimportant or stare in glassy-eyed bewilderment not even clear about what is being referenced. Perhaps ignorance as much as arrogance drives this disregard, but nothing excuses the devaluation of expertise on which their own work depends. Libraries without librarians means information without organization—or authentification.

The work produced by academics, researchers, government bodies and every other area of cultural activity depends upon professional expertise for its classification, management, access, and authority. Librarians are the community in which the expertise to do this is passed on and vetted, made functional and effective. This expertise needs to be understood and valued. We devalue it at the peril of our collective capacity for informed judgment and ethical engagement with the systems of power and infrastructure through which information and knowledge are made accessible and findable.

Everyone is *not* a librarian.

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