



The ethics of our profession: sustaining our common values

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Today's presentation

1. Brief discussion of library values for context
2. Focus on 2 core values that have been important to the profession (*in my view*)
3. Consider how they are under challenge
4. Suggest potential solutions for addressing these challenges



LIBRARY VALUES AND ETHICS

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Gorman's Enduring Values of Librarianship

1. Stewardship
2. Service
3. Intellectual Freedom
4. Equity of Access
5. Privacy
6. Literacy and Learning
7. Rationalism
8. Democracy

• Gorman, Michael (2000) *Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st Century*.

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Some common values in ethical codes

1. Client/patron rights and privileges
2. Selection issues
3. Professional practice
4. Access issues
5. Employer responsibility
6. Social issues

– (Koehler and Pemberton, 2000, p.34)

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2 of the values under challenge




- Belief in a universalist public library service open to all
- Respect for and belief in the importance of patron privacy
- Both values are crucial to peoples' ability to access information and their freedom of expression



A UNIVERSALIST PUBLIC LIBRARY

1. Belief in a universalist public library service open to all



- The concept of the “library faith” is one shared within the general public also
- “Library faith” was defined succinctly by the US Public Library Inquiry in the 1950s
- At its core is the idea of a high quality library service for all, regardless of where you live, or who you are

The Library Faith (Garceau, 1949)



- “It is a fundamental belief, so generally accepted as to be often left unsaid, in the virtue of the printed word, the reading of which is good in itself, and upon the preservation of which many basic values in civilization rest.”

The Library Faith (Garceau, 1949)



- “When culture is in question, the knowledge of books, the amount of reading, and the possession of a library – all become measures of value, not only of the individual but also of the community.”

Library “Faith” in the UK



- In era of scholar librarians of the 1940s/50s articulation of a library faith prevalent
- “wherever there is civilisation there must be books...wherever there are books, there must be libraries” (L. Stanley Jast, 1939)
- “no other equalities can avail if access to so important a means of individual development is not full and universal” (Lionel McColvin, 1942)

Current concerns



- Modern political thinking focuses on community, and as a result of these influences:
 - Volunteering and charity are both seen as virtuous and enhance a community's wellbeing
 - Community run libraries, Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), mutuals, charitable trusts, are all examples of this philosophy in practice
- The commercial turn
- New models of service are emerging that potentially challenge a universalist library approach

The challenge of 'community'



- "It is not just that the term has been used ambiguously, it has been contested, fought over and appropriated for different uses and interests to justify different politics, policies and practices" (Mayo, 1994, p. 48).
- "...continues to be appropriated to legitimate or justify a wide range of political positions, which might otherwise be regarded as incompatible" (Shaw, 2007, p.24).

LIBRARY PURPOSE...



What is the *telos* of a library?



- In philosophy and ethics the notion of *telos* is vital
- *Telos* refers to purpose, or goal
- Every profession and field of expertise has one
- Threats to *telos* come when the *telos* of other professions or fields of expertise influence fields where they don't belong

Why is *telos* so important?



- "Business infects medicine when doctors become businesspeople who view patients as opportunities for profit" (Haidt, 2016)
- Librarians who view users as opportunities for profit do likewise?
- If you provide a service with a universalist focus, then anything that dilutes that focus, *corrupts* your *telos*

The challenge of 'commercialisation'



- [L]ibrarians with some notable exceptions have been slow to question the growing commercialisation of the public library service. Indeed a number seem only too willing to accept it" (Usherwood, 2007)

Usherwood (2007)



- “Policy makers and professionals responsible for the service must agree on its purpose and be committed to it. It is now time for the library profession to move on from the position of addressing agendas that have been suggested by others, to one where *it* argues what is necessary and valuable.”

McColvin's 5 key principles



1. That public libraries should be publicly funded
2. That they should be administered by public bodies and not private organisations or individuals
3. That they should be freely available to all members of the community
4. That they should embrace the needs and interest of all members of the community
5. That they should be free both financially and intellectually, and provide access to materials without bias or interference (McColvin, 1956, p.24)

PRIVACY AND LIBRARY SERVICES



2. Respect for and belief in the importance of citizen privacy



- Privacy is the “right to be free from unwarranted intrusion and to keep certain matters from public view”
- It is a crucial aspect of personal autonomy and a vital component of individual fulfilment

Privacy & the information profession



- Crucial elements of privacy are in our professional space
- *Informational privacy*: information about citizens, how it is shared, how it should be protected, what rights citizens have.
- *Privacy and access*: what rights should citizens have when accessing knowledge, and what limits should be placed on such access

Privacy and LIS




- Our commitment to patron privacy is significantly challenged by some of our own activities:
 - Internet filtering: direct challenge to the information seeking of our users
 - Use of 3rd parties in service delivery: are we open about who, why, and what they will do with user data?
 - Learner analytics: are we in effect *spying* on our users' activities?

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Challenge of cloud data storage?

- The following DP statement was sent to members of a Scottish public library

██████████ Data Protection Statement ██████████

 I understand and agree that the information collected on this form (including but not limited to my personal data) can be used by ██████████ and third parties approved by ██████████ to enable ██████████ to deliver, improve and develop its services.

To have your details removed from our database please reply to:
unsubscribe@██████████

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What are the issues?

- Not agreeing to the new statement meant membership would have to be revoked
 - Public libraries are a legal right
- Blanket 3rd party exemptions
 - Why should the public have to trust we will not use 3rd parties they would not approve of?
- Such changes to practice play on our trusted role, and arguably abuse it

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More globally....

- Cloud storage of patron data risks building databases of immense value on patron preferences and behaviour
- Use of e-book lending data runs similar risks
- Again, we must debate these developments more for their long term impact
- We should lead the innovation and development, it should not lead us

The reality...



- In the examples cited, we may be required to undertake these activities to be a modern, vibrant profession
- Nevertheless, where has the profession seriously debated them?
 - Our patrons rely on us to protect their interests
 - Their interests are not solely about innovating and/or improving the bottom line

DEBATING HARD QUESTIONS



CILIP's Royal Charter (*my italics*)



- 2. "The objects of the Institute shall be to work for *the benefit of the public* to promote education and knowledge through the establishment and development of libraries and information services"
- 2b. "to unite *all persons engaged or interested in* information science and libraries and information services"
- 2e. "to *promote and encourage the maintenance of adequate and appropriate provision of library and information services of various kinds*"

Our own responsibility in weakening our values



- The profession itself is responsible for some of the most potentially damaging challenges to our values
- I believe this is, partly, a result of us not engaging enough with each other
- By not debating important issues, we allow policy vacuums to be filled by others

To be blunt...



- Reflective practice means being open to criticism
- Equally, scepticism needs to have a constructive focus
- The challenge is on us, then, to engage more with each other in good faith

Solutions



- More engagement within the profession with professional journals and research
- Removing our coterie-based approach to conferences and engagement
- Organise conference debates with opposing figures on key professional issues
- Be prepared to make your case to people who will disagree with you
- Become a profession again of big ideas and not sound bites (*irony noted!*)

Conclusions



- If we cannot reasonably debate important issues within our profession, we lose our moral authority on them
- We must always be aware of our core values
 - Discuss them, debate them, write about them, articulate them, challenge them
- The loudest voices or the most regularly invited speakers should not define our profession for us

Thank you!

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