

From duality to dilemma

Balancing the library on mission, community, and democracy

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This talk is...

- Middle aged
- Obama-ist
- Meta-inspirational, meta-political
- Not a call to action
- A call to thought
- Thesis: There is a dilemma with no solution, and realizing this helps build peace and democracy

Hmm....

- "It is easier to fit the mission to the community than the community to the mission."

- Facebook status update during a library conference, taken from a presentation the person was attending.

In broad philosophical terms...

- "I should change my desires rather than try to change the order of the world."

-- Descartes' Third Maxim in his *Discourse on Method*

OR...

- "One of the tasks that seems immediate and urgent to me, over and above anything else, is this: that we should indicate and show up, even where they are hidden, all the relationships of political power which actually control the social body and oppress or repress it."

--Michel Foucault, in a 1971 interview

ALA Core Values

- Access
- Confidentiality/Privacy
- Democracy
- Diversity
- Education and Lifelong Learning
- Intellectual Freedom
- Preservation
- The Public Good
- Professionalism
- Service
- Social Responsibility

Mission implies duality

- | | |
|--|---|
| ■ What should be | ■ What is now |
| ■ The missionaries | ■ Those who don't see |
| ■ Good | ■ Bad |
| ■ Us | ■ Them |
| ■ Meaning in life comes from the mission | ■ Meaning in life comes from the private sphere |
| ■ Will make a sacrifice for a public cause | ■ Only make sacrifices for private causes |
| ■ Easy answers | ■ Fewer questions |

How big is the mission?

■ “Intellectual freedom without alternative ideas is a sham.”

- Charles Willett, in a slogan he had made into a button to promote the alternative press in libraries.

A mission within a mission adds up to a big mission. The bigger the mission, the more that needs to change, the more you'll sacrifice, and the greater the gap between you and the mainstream.

Progressive Librarians

- “A progressive librarianship demands the recognition of the idea that libraries for the people has been one of the principal anchors of an extended free public sphere which makes an independent democratic civil society possible, something which must be defended and extended. This is partisanship, not neutrality.”

-- From PLG's Statement of Purpose

Progressive Librarians as an oppositional group

- | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| ■ The Left | ■ Middle of the road |
| ■ A Community | ■ The “Broader Community” |
| ■ Analytical | ■ Market-based |
| ■ Mission-driven | ■ Lip service to the mission |
| ■ Non-commercial | ■ Commercial |
| ■ Openly partisan | ■ Professional neutrality |
| ■ Democracy: First, Liberation | ■ Democracy: focus groups, polls |
| ■ No corporate \$!! | ■ Need that corporate \$ |
| ■ Promoting ideas on the job | ■ Only practical ideas at work |
| ■ Progressive | ■ Postmodern |

Looking beneath the surface

The values that drive the mission...

Never in conflict?

Democracy ... community ... intellectual freedom

... social responsibility ... privacy ...

Always clear what they mean in practice?

Always compatible?

Below the surface, a dilemma...

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| ■ Proactive | ■ Democratic...? |
| ■ Mission-driven | ■ Humility toward the community |
| ■ Social betterment | ■ User-centered |
| ■ Education | ■ Popularization |
| ■ What they should want | ■ What they want |
| ■ What they really(?) need | ■ What they say they need |
| ■ Anti-commercial | ■ Coexists with the commercial |
| ■ Analyzes the larger social context | ■ Trusts the user to define their own needs |
| ■ Personal | ■ Efficient |
| ■ Friction | ■ Frictionless? Really? |
| ■ Social worker | ■ Technician |
| ■ Ends | ■ Means |

The Mission, circa 1895

- “It is expected that a public library will contribute to the general welfare of the people, and be an institution which shall exert an elevating influence on the community. In fact, that it shall assist in the education of the people and the making of good citizens. Unless it does exercise these functions, what justice is there in making it a burden on the taxpayers? What right has it to exist?”

-- George T. Clark, Librarian, San Francisco Free Public Library, in a paper delivered at the 1895 ALA Annual Conference, titled, “Improper Books.”

The 19th Century Library Faith

- "As teachers and pastors of the public library -- the 'people's university' -- the librarian could 'soon largely shape the reading, and through it, the thought of his whole community.'"
-- Melvil Dewey quoted by Dee Garrison in *Apostles of Culture*
- "[The] felt cultural superiority of librarians led [library pioneers] to a concept of the library as a sort of benevolent school of social ethics."
-- Dee Garrison in *Apostles of Culture*

ALA on SR (1970s on)

- "ALA recognizes its broad social responsibilities. The broad social responsibilities of the American Library Association are defined in terms of the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society; support for efforts to help inform and educate the people of the United States on these problems and to encourage them to examine the many views on and the facts regarding each problem; and the willingness of ALA to take a position on current critical issues with the relationship to libraries and library service set forth in the position statement."
-- ALA Policy Manual, article 1.1

SR and the Library Faith

- "The demand for 'relevance' by the Social Responsibilities Round Table, and related movements in the ALA, can be traced back to the nineteenth-century faith in the public library as a social force that would, through the promotion of reading, save mankind from poverty, crime, vice, alcoholism, and almost every other evil to which flesh is heir."

-- Jesse Shera, *Foundations for Education in Librarianship* (1972)

Melvil Dewey...

- "The eternal conflict of the good and the best with the bad and the worst is on. The librarian must be the librarian militant before he can be the librarian triumphant."

-From "The Relation of the State to the Public Library," a paper he presented at the 2nd International Library Conference, 1889. Dewey next sentences were about the market economy's distortion of the news!

Missionaries: True Believers and Critical Theorists

- "The development of cultural institutions for the masses has been viewed by historians in essentially two ways. The 'true believers' tend to see them as instruments in the fight against darkness -- recall the 'library faith.' Critical theorists, however, insist that they are often used as a means for the upper echelons of society to control the masses by guiding their activities in ways that they find acceptable. Questions turn on which was in need of reform: the individual unfortunate or the social system that created him; in other words, are social ills caused by individual problems or are they systemic or structural products of American democratic capitalism?"
-- Jenny Bossaller and Doug Raber, "Reading and Culture: The Challenge of Progressive-Era Beliefs in the Postmodern World," *Progressive Librarian* No. 31 (Summer 2008)

Lawn Care vs. Environmentalism

- A society that needs reform is made up of individuals who make choices.
- Is it more democratic to tell a person that his bad choices are because of society than because he needs to be enlightened in an individual sense? Either way you are telling him he needs to be enlightened.
- What is more important, a neighborhood with nice, even lawns or the ecological system? Clearly the latter, but our users have not asked us that to make that decision.

What is Democracy?

- How are our voting/buying options defined?
- How do people know what they want?
- Is there solid ground for knowing either “wants” or “needs”?
- Should people who don’t know and don’t care count equally to those who do?
- What is the role of a leader?
- Should we counter propaganda?
- Who decides what is democracy?

Media conglomerates

- “The media conglomerates are not the only “industry” whose owners have become monopolistic in the American economy. But media products are unique in one vital respect. They do not manufacture nuts and bolts: they manufacture a social and political world.”

-- Ben Bagdikian, *The New Media Monopoly* (Beacon Press, 2004)

Charlie Robinson

- In 1979, Charlie Robinson and Jean-Barry Molz of Baltimore County Public Library introduced a philosophy called “Give ‘em what they want.”
- Innovation: Use circulation stats to measure the value of the collection
- Fewer classics, more bestsellers and books on lawn care
- It’s the *ideology of popularization*
- Controversial, very influential
- Libraries as handmaidens of mass consumer culture, rather than handmaidens of enlightenment and learning.
- Hated by Progressive Librarians

“Give ‘em what they want”

- Customer oriented (BCPL’s word)
- Buy lots of bestsellers in multiple copies
- Anticipate demand by watching ads
- Merchandizing à la chain bookstores
- Centralized collection development
- Circulation = usefulness of the collection
- Favor branches over research collections
- De-fund cataloging
- De-emphasize reference
- De-specialize professional staff
- Anti-elitism in collections
- In favor of fee-based services.
- “Not Missionaries” (their words)
- Focused on funding

Robinson on Robinson

- “I try not to put too many personal values on anything. But, of course, any library administrator ends up putting values one way or another on almost anything that he or she does. On the other hand, the value of meeting patrons’ expectations when they come to a library, if you want to call that a value, is the driving value that library administrators should follow.”

--Charlie Robinson, in an interview that appeared in *American Libraries* (May 1998)

Dumbed-down democracy

- “The ultimate justification for on-demand book selection is that it gives people what they want. And what could be more democratic than that? The problem with this notion is that it overlooks the fact that consumers’ tastes are largely shaped by what is available, which, in turn, is governed by economies of scale... [T]he producer extends his market ... By catering to tastes shared by the greatest number, and usually the more unsophisticated and simple-minded the taste, the wider the market.”

-- Murray C. Bob, “The case for quality book selection,” (a rebuttal to an article on Charlie Robinson’s “Give ‘em what they want” idea) *Library Journal*, Sept. 15, 1982

What is elitism, really?

- “Since my position is certain to leave me open to the charge of elitism, perhaps I had better define that word... Elitism is when you hold people’s capacities in contempt. As librarians, we show our contempt for people’s capacities by over-emphasizing the lowest common denominator. In the book world, the lowest common denominator is often a big seller.”

-- Murray C. Bob, "The case for quality book selection," (a rebuttal to an article on Charlie Robinson's "Give 'em what they want" idea) *Library Journal*, Sept. 15, 1982

Hmm....

- “It is easier to fit the mission to the community than the community to the mission.”

- It certainly takes less thought, and you don't have to be right. On the other hand, in the end, why get out of bed? Well, maybe the community wants you to.

Charlie Robinson’s Community

- “How do you feel about [15% of your budget coming from fees]?”
- “I feel the same way about it that McDonald's does about those people who can't afford its hamburgers... Where is it written that a middle-class institution, like a public library, serves everyone equally? Believe me, a high proportion of library users, countrywide, are middle-class people. Show me a community that's very rich or very poor and you probably have a lousy library. However, the library profession is full of closet social workers. We're middle-class people serving the middle class.”

-- Charlie Robinson, in an interview with Nancy Pearl, *Library Journal*, September 1st, 1996

How do you define the community?

- Is there one community or many?
- When people don't care about the library, is that their problem or yours?
- Who gets invited to a focus group?
- Who walks in the door and who doesn't?
- Does the community know what it wants from you, and if so, how?
- Is it democratic to influence the community's ideas of what it wants?
- Is a community shaped by mass consumer culture a legitimate community?

Reflexivity

“In the social sciences, reflexivity often refers ... to the problem of accounting for the role of social scientists as participants in the cultures they study. Beyond the question of the personal biases that may affect research, social scientists need reflexive awareness of their impact on the objects of study. An anthropologist, for example, is not a neutral factor in a peasant village...”

-- “Reflexivity,” *Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

Reflexivity and “what they want”

Librarians <---> Readers
Publishers <---> Consumers
Politicians <---> Citizens

Democracy is a reflexive process
(but not a controllable one)

Cognitive Friction

- “Cognitive Friction is a posh term for all that hassle and frustration that we all encounter when using software controlled equipment. Cognitive Friction is a measure of the difference between your psychic thought control (the mental model) of what’s happening against the actual performance which naturally doesn’t match. Experiencing cognitive friction makes people feel stupid or angry.”

-- Alan Cooper, UIDesign.net

UI Designers and Librarians

- UI designers would like to make interfaces that replace us in much of what we do, and to a large extent already have.
- What are the core values of UI designers? Anything like librarians’?
- Does the UI design ethos have an influence in library schools, particularly the i-schools?
- Does the UI design field have a dualistic mission, and “us” and a “them?”
- Is it naturally libertarian?

Cognitive Friction and The Mission

- What goes for UI can apply to libraries
- SR promises friction with a higher purpose
- Popularized libraries want to be frictionless
- Is frictionlessness Democracy?
- Is frictionlessness possible in a diverse community?
- Is there good friction and bad friction?
- Is frictionlessness a core value of libraries? (No.)
- Is frictionlessness compatible with our core values?
- Are critical thinking and rational discourse possible without friction?
- On the other hand, who are we to introduce friction to a patron’s thinking, if they know what they want (even if their desires are manufactured)?
- Different Ends: Patron satisfaction or improvement of the world?

Democracy is the core dilemma

- Progressive Librarians are all about democracy, but we tend to brush over the difficulty of knowing what it is. In fact, it presents us with two conflicting ethical demands:
- Respect the user as he or she is
“Give ‘em what they want”
 - Work for a better world
“[I]ndicate and show up, even where they are hidden, all the relationships of political power which actually control the social body and oppress or repress it.”

Maintain the dilemma

Why it is good to maintain the sense of a dilemma in all its difficulty:

- It helps us keep in mind our own fallibility
- It helps us treat colleagues and patrons with respect when we don’t see things the same way
- It helps us avoid oversimplifying
- *We know with certainty that democracy requires the above, while our knowledge of what the world needs is very limited and likely full of errors.*

Where does Rory stand?

- A higher purpose is a good thing, but we should remember that in the end, if we serve the community the community trumps our individual perspectives, regardless of the intellectual gap.
- Our desire for greater democracy sets us on a mission, but it is better to allow the mission to be moderated than to compromise our original democratic principles.
- People can’t be forced to be smarter or more responsible than they are.
- It is unrealistic not to expect some separation between one’s own intellectual and political work and one’s role in an organization.
- Nevertheless, we should not give up the educational role of libraries. There should always be some point to what we are doing.
- Being an academic librarian makes all of this easier for me, but doesn’t really solve it.