Foundations of Academic Librarianship

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The bases of academic library service are twofold: the role of any academic library service is to facilitate access to documents, and the mission of each academic library service is to support the mission of the academic institution it serves. These two bases need to be interpreted for each situation in order to provide meaningful foundations for service. Consideration of the foundations of academic librarianship requires (1) distinguishing of ends from means, (2) examination of values (what good does it do?) as well as capabilities (how good is it?), and (3) description of the nature of these concerns (i.e., theory). After a century of relative stability, a new period of change has started. Library resources in electronic form indicate radical changes in the means of library service. Computer-based information processing of library materials by users adds a new dimension to library service and to the role of librarians.

e view the foundations of academic librarianship as being the conceptual framework and underlying assumptions within which library services are provided in an academic environment.

The foundations of academic librarianship have two basic elements: (1) the role of library service is to facilitate access to documents; and (2) the mission of an academic library is to support the mission of the academic institution served. Interpreting these two general statements for any given situation provides the foundations for effective library service.

The first statement stimulates us to ask how "facilitate," "access," and "documents" should be interpreted and how the role of the library service is related to the roles of others. Hitherto, the dominant interpretation has been the judicious assembling of local collections as the only effective means of providing convenient physical access to documents, augmented by bibliographic tools and bibliographic advice. Contemporary changes in the technology underlying access to documents strongly suggest a need to reconsider how we provide services as well as changes in relation to the roles of others.

The second general statement suggests that what should be done is unique to each specific institutional context, a point noted in early issues of *College & Research Libraries.*[1]

Any examination of the foundations of academic librarianship must meet three conditions:

1. We need to distinguish between means and ends. The purposes of, and justification for, library service should not be confused with the techniques and technologies adopted as means for providing service, even though the availability of techniques and technologies limits our options.

2. We need to consider not only what is good and what is not so good, but also dif-

ferent sorts of goodness. "How good is it?" is a measure of quality or, in effect, a measure of capability with respect to serving some actual or imagined demand. This kind of goodness is appropriate for the evaluation and measurement of means, that is, of the tools and techniques for providing service, as in "a good collection" or "a good catalog." "What good does it do?" is an entirely different question— one appropriate to the evaluation of ends and to the relating of means to ends. A third form of goodness lies in the question "How well is it done?," which has to do with cost-effectiveness, efficiency, and effective management generally.[2]

3. We need to be able to describe the nature of our concerns or, more concisely, we need adequate *theory*. Theory in librarianship and adjacent areas of information science has been ill-treated. In ordinary, general usage, "theory" denotes a description of the nature of something, "a scheme or system of ideas or statements held as an explanation or account of a group of facts or phenomena."[3] Too often this definition has been eclipsed by the narrower sense of theory used in physical sciences as a strong hypothesis susceptible to experimental refutation. Inasmuch as librarianship is not, and is unlikely to become, a physical science, the quest for theory in the narrower sense is predictably frustrating.[4]

In brief, examination of the foundations of academic librarianship is concerned with the ends and means of library service, recognition of the difference between them, exploring the goodness of library service, and developing and refining descriptions of the nature of these concerns.

HISTORICAL CONCERNS

Modern librarianship as we know it was developed in the second half of the nineteenth century and was characterized by (1) the idea of library collections for service, (2) the notion of purposeful book selection, and (3) the adoption of a series of technical innovations such as relative shelf location, improved cataloging codes, more systematic approaches to shelf arrangement and classification, and sus-

tained efforts at standardization and cooperation.

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Since then terminology has evolved, the scale of operation is much increased, and technical refinements have been made. Nevertheless, many of the underlying concerns in the early issues of *C&RL*, fifty years ago, and of the *Library Journal*, another fifty years before that, are still strikingly contemporary.

Yet it seems that the relative stability of the past century is but a prologue to another period of radical change, comparable in significance to that of the nineteenth century with its new techniques. This time the change is enabled less by new ideas than by a change in the underlying technology.

At risk of simplification, three phases can be identified. Until recently library operations (e.g., technical services, circulation) and library materials ("collections") were both based on the technology of paper and cardboard. More recently, library operations have been moved to computer technology, while the library's materials still remain overwhelmingly on paper.

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ingly exist in electronic form indicates radical change in the means of library service. See table 1.

The analysis in table 1 invites comment. What is important about phase III is that the *materials* will increasingly be available in machine-readable form, that users will need access to them, and that access will, therefore, be provided. The eventual balance between paper materials and electronic materials or the prospects for paperless libraries are of little significance compared with the fact that arrangements for access to some electronic texts, images, and other data will have to be provided. Because paper seems unlikely to disappear, we may expect phases II and III to coexist indefinitely.

The change from phase I to phase II, the introduction of computers for library operations, can be viewed as an evolutionary development. Much of the change represents the mechanization of procedures that were previously manual. The changes have been, at least until the provision of online catalogs, mainly for internal efficiency and for the convenience of library staff. In contrast, the future change from phase II to phase III, to library materials in electronic form, can reasonably be viewed as more *revolutionary* than evolutionary in that the implications for the provision and use of library services appear to be more radical.

A long period of relative stability in the means for providing service makes it easy for the distinction between ends and means to become blurred. So long as there is one principal means to an end (even with variations in details), more of the end is achieved by more of the means and the distinction between ends and means has little practical significance. But this blurring of the distinction hinders dealing effectively with alternative means if and when they become available.

THE SITUATION TODAY

Today academic libraries are, mostly, in (or moving into) phase II with the imminent prospect of also needing to develop provision for phase III.

The end being pursued is the provision of access to books, journals, and other li-

TABLE 1
TECHNOLOGICAL BASES OF LIBRARY OPERATIONS AND LIBRARY MATERIALS

	Library Operations	Library Materials
Phase I	Paper	Paper
Phase II	Computer	Paper
Phase III	Computer	Computer

brary materials. Academic libraries do not have a monopoly on this role, because much of what is in demand is also available in personal collections, bookshops, from personal contacts, and, indeed, from other sorts of libraries. Even if they do not have a monopoly, however, they clearly do have a major role.

In addition to the customary difficulties in providing library service, we now face the radical change in the technology of library materials, which leaves the future unclear. In this situation we need to think creatively and to be prepared to retreat to first principles. There is, however, as might be expected of a busy, service-oriented profession, a deeply rooted emphasis, reflected in the professional literature, on practical and technical matters—on means rather than on ends. Indeed, serious attention to ends, such as A. Broadfield's *Philosophy of Librarianship* is the rare exception.[5]

Similarly, works of a theoretical bent that seek to build better descriptions of library phenomena are relatively scarce, especially if one looks for conceptual understanding as well as the description of surface phenomena such as circulation data and fashions in professional opinion.

Nevertheless, there is currently a healthy awareness that major changes are likely and that there is, for example, some convergence between library services, computing services, and telecommunications services.

WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Librarianship may be concerned with promoting "those profoundly human creations: Beauty, truth, justice, and knowledge," but it is so in a fashion that is doubly indirect.[6] Rather than being concerned directly with beauty, truth, justice, and knowledge, we are concerned with texts

and images that are representations of some aspect of beauty, truth, and so on. Furthermore, we are, in practice, concerned less with the texts and images themselves than with physical objects that are text-bearing and image-bearing, for example, books, journals, manuscripts, and photographs. We deal with physical, text-bearing and image-bearing objects in vast quantities. Most of academic libraries' operating budgets and space are devoted to the *assembling* of these collections of objects rather than to their *use*.[7] Any significant change, therefore, in the technology and logistics of text-bearing objects could have very profound consequences.

The shift to computer-based library operations and, more especially, the advent of library materials in electronic form indicate the prospect of radical changes in the *means* of library service. Library materials in electronic form differ significantly from traditional media. In particular, electronic media, unlike paper and microform, *can be used from a distance* and *can be used by more than one person at a time*. The significance of these two differences is enormous.[8]

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Technological trends indicate that the costs of computing, digital data storage, and telecommunications will continue to diminish. At least five major changes are indicated:

1. Since library materials in electronic form lend themselves to remote access and shared use, the assembling of local collections becomes less important. Coordinated collection development and cooperative, shared access to collections become more important.

2. With materials on paper, having copies stored locally is a necessary (though not a sufficient) condition for convenient access. With electronic materials, local storage may be a desirable but no longer necessary condition. Therefore, a catalog defined as a guide to what is locally stored becomes progressively less complete as a guide to what is conveniently accessible. One might as well catalog books published in odd years but not those published in even years. The answer is to shift from catalogs to union catalogs or linked catalogs, and to holdings data linked to bibliographies; this shift reverses our usual perspective on catalogs as bibliographic descriptions attached to a library's holdings records.[9] Arguably, the present day catalog, online or on cards, is more a product of the limitations of nineteenth century library technology than of present day opportunities.

3. Meanwhile, those to be served are changing their information-handling habits. Paper and pen are being supplemented by desk-top workstations that are capable of drawing from a multiplicity of remote sources. This leads to an entirely different perspective, from a library-centered worldview to a user-centered view.[10]

4. These technological changes also invite reconsideration of the professional orthodoxy of consolidating academic library services. The view that a multiplicity of branch and departmental libraries is inefficient might well change. Under different conditions, the decentralization of academic library service might well be regarded by administrators as well as by users as an effective strategy.[11]

5. There is a blurring of boundaries. Differences between the media are dissolving: Sound, images, and text are all increasingly digitized. The functions of the library, the computer center, and the telecommunications office are converging, overlapping, or, at least, becoming more closely related.[12] New patterns are evolving in the relationships between libraries, publishers, and the information industry.

And where, we should also ask, are our users going? Part of the answer is that those whom the libraries are funded to serve are making increasing use of the new information technology of computers and electronic storage, in addition to the

old information technology of pen, paper, and photocopier. The new tools provide powerful options for working with data, text, and images. As examples, consider the reduction in labor now required for the compilation of concordances, for complex simulations and calculations, for image enhancement, and for the analysis of large sets of data. There is, predictably, an increasing departure in information handling from the simple pattern of read, think, then write.[13]

OPPORTUNITIES AND PROBLEMS

The good news is that new, different means for providing academic library service are becoming available in a manner unprecedented since the nineteenth century. But the rational choice of means depends on a clear sense of ends.

We tend to refer to library users as "readers." Their need to read is the raison d'etre of libraries. But reading is much less centrally important to them. Reading is only a means to the more important ends of learning, discovering, and writing. Should we, perhaps, think of them not as readers but as learners, discoverers, and writers? If we did, would that change our perspectives on the ends and, therefore, on the choice of means in academic librarianship? Would our concerns become more directly concerned with the use made of texts, images, and data?

Academic librarianship today is better placed to cope with change than it was in the nineteenth century. Academic libraries are now all staffed by professionally trained librarians. There is a large structure of journals, conferences, professional associations, and schools of librarianship available to facilitate discussion and change.

The usual pressures remain, with the addition of some new ones and some new players—notably from the information industry. We may want to stop the world and suspend service while we ponder these changes, but we cannot.

GUIDELINES

What guidelines might assist us in achieving a better understanding of the foundations of academic librarianship? Four emphases are suggested:

1. *Ends, means, and understanding.* The most basic need is to keep distinctions between ends, means, and theory in mind, even though given ends may themselves, in turn, be means to further, ultimate ends. Another view of these three elements is to think in terms of *the cultural values of librarianship*, the underlying criteria on which decision making concerning ends is based; *library technology*, the means at hand for providing library services; and *library science*, if we use that term in a specialized, narrow sense to denote our understanding of our concerns.

These three elements change in different ways.[14] The values may vary with time and place, but they are, in reality, a reflection of the cultural and political values of each particular situation. Library technology develops with time. Each new technique or technology provides different opportunities and different constraints. In general, "improved technology" means fewer or less awkward constraints. Library science—our understanding of library services, their use, and their context—also improves over time; but since we are concerned with cognition and other aspects of human behavior, progress should be expected to be difficult and slow, except in the more narrowly technical aspects.

2. *Theory.* Theory in librarianship has had a hard time and has been hindered by two unreasonable practices. First, theory has, by tradition, been put in apposition, if not opposition, to practice. If we make the error of allowing theory and practice to be seen as a dichotomy, then, in a busy, practical world where there is much to be done, practice will be emphasized over theory. Second, the high prestige of the physical sciences in recent decades has resulted in the substitution of a restricted definition of theory as a strong hypothesis explicit enough for formal refutation by empirical data.[15] Since librarianship is not a physical science, it is not surprising that little "theory" in this inappropriately restricted sense has been found.[16]

A sensible basis for progress is the use of a normal and more appropriate sense of

theory as the description of the nature of things. Changing the definition of theory does nothing to diminish the importance of honest, careful, rigorous, and constructive theorizing characterized by the active search for contradictory evidence, which is the hallmark of good research and good theory in all fields.

3. *Context*. At most points, library services are intimately related to their context: users and their inquiries originate from the local situation; library materials are acquired externally; the demand for service is conditioned by the alternatives available in the environment; and the very provision of service, in general and in detail, is dominated by the social values of those responsible for allocating resources to and within the library. The mission is, or should be, strictly situational. An understanding of libraries, therefore, necessarily implies an understanding of the context of libraries and of how services do and might relate to their complex and changing environment.

4. *Schools of librarianship*. In 1939, when *C&RL* first appeared, the numbers, roles, and aspirations of schools of librarianship were much more limited than they are now. The Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago, for example, had high aspirations but faced serious difficulties. Gradually the schools have matured, not simply as library schools, but as academic departments. There is scope, now, for a maturer partnership that goes well beyond the schools' role as kindergartens for prospective assistant librarians.[17]

RELEVANT NEEDS

What, then, are the relevant needs with respect to the foundations of academic librarianship?

Firstly, the advent of novel, alternative means for service increases the need to think clearly about the ends of academic library service. The ends may not change very much, but they are likely to need to be reinterpreted and reaffirmed at intervals in a changing world. In any case, responsible selection of means depends on selection of ends.

Secondly, the alternative means need to be explored aggressively, otherwise the options will not be known.

Thirdly, there is a continuing need to return to basics in thinking about libraries in general and librarians in particular. Academic library services have to do with support for learning, both the study of what others have discovered and research to discover what is apparently not yet known. Yet the librarian's role is often very indirect. Rather than knowledge itself, the librarian's concern is usually with representations of knowledge: texts and images. Furthermore, much of the time, the concern is not even directly with the texts themselves, but with text-bearing objects: books, journals, photographs, and databases—millions of them. Somehow we need to maintain our underlying concern with the generation and acquisition of knowledge. The term *information* is itself both central and symbolic in its elusive ambiguity. Information can refer to potentially informative material, to pertinent evidence. It can also refer to the process of becoming informed, of learning what one had not known. As librarians, we must concern ourselves with how individuals use information (evidence) and also with how they become informed.

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The old information technology of pen, paper, and photocopier did not encourage much departure from library use as "read, think, write." In contrast, the new information technology is transforming the use of library materials with computer-based techniques for identifying, locating, accessing, transferring, analyzing, manipulating, comparing, and revising texts, images, and data. A whole new dimension to the use of library services is emerging. What would do more for users, for the de-

velopment of academic librarianship, and for rapport with users, than providing assistance and helping to solve problems in this area? As B. E. Moon has noted, "it is apparent that librarians should be providing a far wider range of services than either they or any other agents provide at present."[18]

Fourthly, if one could, one might wish to postpone consideration of organizational structures, since to impose assumptions concerning organizational structure is to impose constraints. But in practice, the show must go on.

SUMMARY

Academic librarianship has two bases: the role of the library is to facilitate access to documents, and the mission of the library is to support the mission of the academic institution served. These two general statements need to be interpreted and clarified for each individual situation in order to provide proper foundations for academic library service.

What constitutes the goals of service—the ends—is unlikely to change much. Nevertheless, the ends may need to be reinterpreted, reaffirmed, and clearly distinguished from means.

What constitutes good library service—the means—*should* change. New technology and learning from experience should generate new patterns.

The late nineteenth century was a brilliant and exciting period for academic librarianship. A century later, the first fifty years of *C&RL* appear to be a prologue to a new, brilliant, and exciting period, but if and only if our historic preoccupation with technique and with present crises can be complemented and moderated by attention to the foundations of academic librarianship.

How well we play our part depends, in large measure, on how well we understand what we are about and the context in which we do it.

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