ACCESS AS AN ETHICAL AND PRACTICAL PRINCIPLE FOR LIBRARIANSHIP

Paul Sturges

INTRODUCTION

A profession needs a sense of mission to guide its members in their work. Without such a guiding principle the work is nothing more than a set of bureaucratic routines, without any clear purpose or meaning. We all of us know the effect that this kind of bureaucracy has on the motivation, initiative and effectiveness of the miserable souls who are employed to carry out its regulations and practices. We also know the negative way in which the public naturally responds to the neglect and even hostility that it experiences in its dealings with the system. The mutual antipathy between bureaucrat and citizen is one of the most unsatisfactory aspects of modern life. Fortunately librarianship seldom shows the worst characteristics of the bureaucratic mentality. Library staff almost always reveal a feeling for why the library is there and what function it is expected to perform. The problem with librarianship is that there is more than one way of identifying the mission of librarianship, and the dominant philosophy may not actually accord appropriately with the needs of society.

Of the various missions that have inspired the work of librarians, a word about two of them will have to suffice. These two are the protection of the written heritage, and the creation of information retrieval systems. Both of these are important guiding principles, but it will be argued here that neither fully fits the needs of a profession that has the opportunity to serve the whole of society in various important ways. To begin with the second of these two, the development of increasingly sophisticated information retrieval systems has occupied many of the best minds in librarianship for most of the twentieth century. There has been a vision that suggested that with good enough metadata (classification and cataloguing systems) it would be possible to provide automated retrieval that would be better than the human librarian could provide. This magnificent project has to some extent succeeded, but all of the online catalogues, databases and computerised retrieval systems have clearly not answered all the needs of information seekers and library users. In fact, the concentration on the logic of metadata systems in pursuit of the goal of automated retrieval, has arguably neglected the untidy reality of human learning styles and search strategies.

Turning to what is probably the original principle behind the creation of libraries, the protection of the written heritage, it can also be seen as an inadequate principle for modern librarianship. Of course for civilisation to survive and develop, there must be scope to explore the past achievements of mankind and learn from them. A society that forgets its past will repeat mistakes and have a limited basis for future creativity. However, by itself, protection of the written heritage is not enough, and indeed it can be an impossible burden when defined too comprehensively. There are other

professions, those of archivist and museum curator, whose main focus is undeniably on the record of the past. If librarians also define themselves as guardians of the record, they risk an unproductive overlap with their sister professions, and fail to focus on their other concern – the users (and potential users) of the documents of which they are guardians. Certainly there is an undeniable need for what we might call the archival library: an institution that cares for the published heritage in parallel with the work of the archive in preserving the unpublished documentation of human activity, and the museum in preserving the physical objects that reflect the same heritage. However, we need to ask two questions about the archival library:

How many archival libraries can one nation afford?

How many archival libraries does one nation actually need?

The answer to these questions is almost certainly - a very small number indeed. If this is the case, what should all the non-archival libraries be doing? The answered offered here is that they should be concentrating on offering access to knowledge in as many forms as possible to as many users as possible. Access is both an ethical principle, in that it derives from a respect for human rights, and a practical principle in that it offers a way in which libraries can serve the development of a society and a state that functions effectively. What will be suggested in the pages that follow is that by testing the activities of librarianship against the question 'Does this provide the best possible access for the greatest number of people?' a kind of librarianship well fitted for the twentieth first century information society can be identified.

THE RATIONALE FOR ACCESS

The value of access as a principle is that it is essentially dynamic. Dictionary definitions of access list several ways of using the word that are not especially relevant here. However, all include the use of access to mean the finding, retrieving or obtaining of data, files, or information. The definitions essentially make it clear that this is an active, positive process and they convey the sense that it is the engagement between people and information that is the significance of access. Librarianship based on access fulfils the human right to intellectual freedom as set out in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). This right includes 'The right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas', which we could almost interpret as meaning 'The right to a good library'. What is more, there is strong rationale underlying this right.

The development and functioning of the human brain can be shown to be dependent on the flow of information that it receives. The brain's reception of information that ranges from sensory perceptions of tastes and smells, through to the visual and auditory reception of incredibly complex messages coded in language, numbers and other sets of symbols, does not merely inform, it develops and supports the ability to think. For a newborn baby there is initially no set of data against which to check its new perceptions, no patterns into which something newly perceived can be fitted. However, the baby immediately begins to identify sensations, recognise them when they occur, and even predict their recurrence. The work of Piaget (1953) in observing the way children learn, showed that their learning is not passive: they actively

construct and reconstruct their own knowledge. As another of the other great pioneers of modern educational theory, put it,

> Education is not something which the teacher does, but it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experiences in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment made for the child. (Montessori, 1949)

This naturally calls for opportunities and facilities for the child to obtain the information that it knows it needs: opportunities such as the library, for example, can provide.

For the adult, as a mature human being, there is a need to function effectively in society, to be a contributor to economic development, and the democratic process. The economist Amartya Sen argues that involvement in democracy has various virtues:

> First, the intrinsic importance of political participation and freedom in human life; second, the instrumental importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible and accountable; and third, the constructive role of democracy in the formation of values and in the understanding of needs, rights and duties. (Sen, 1999, p.11)

This is an argument mostly from ethical principle, but Sen also suggests that democracy is necessary in practical terms. He memorably argues that no substantial famine has ever occurred in an independent and democratic country with even a relatively free press. This claim, which he substantiates with examples, is perhaps the best claim that can be made for access to information and its democratic context.

Access is, however, a broad principle that needs to be made more specific, and this can be done by concentrating on the specific aspects, or categories, in which access can be divided. Seven such categories have been identified for the purposes of this paper. They are:

- Freedom of access (and combating the suppression of information);
- Intellectual access to content;
- Physical access to information institutions;
- Virtual access to electronic resources;
- Socio-economic access (and the problem of exclusion);
- Access to tacit knowledge;
- Psychological access (and the internalisation and acceptance of information).

Each of these will be sketched out in a little more detail in what follows.

CATEGORIES OF ACCESS

Freedom of Access

Logically this fits well at the beginning of the list, but since the author has concentrated on this area for some years a reader might expect that claim. IFLA specifically bases its core activity on Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression (FAIFE) on Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There is a danger here. If one is able to feel that by saying 'What about Article 19?'a discussion on intellectual freedom matters is effectively closed, then maybe we might be missing something. Just like all principles that are treated as absolutes ('Thou shalt not kill', for instance), closer analysis turns up all sorts of possible exceptions to the rule. This should lead us to question how the principle has been developed and justified, which in turn might point to a need to establish whether a principle is as universal as it looks. In some societies to question the control of information access by those who hold secular or religious power could seem like an unjustifiable interference with vital social stability. It might also be the case that there is a deep seated social acceptance of certain levels of limitation to freedom of access to information.

For instance, during 2005 the parents of a child who had borrowed a book from the Sorbelli Library in Fanano had obtained something that was criminally offensive. Although the book, Scopami by Virginie Despentes, had been put on a reading list connected with an anti-drug campaign by the Ministry of Work and Welfare, charges were pressed against the librarian concerned. Although a court in Modena dismissed the charges, the fact that the case could actually get as far as it did through the legal process indicates that there was a good deal of support for the parents' case. FAIFE issued a statement in support of the librarian, but it was the current climate of Italian opinion in favour of freedom of access that was much more important in the verdict. What are much more difficult to combat are the ways in which those who hold power control the generation and dissemination of information and can suppress it before it even appears. Even in a society that has many of the usual forums and institutions for access (like newspapers and libraries) phenomena that should be reported and should arouse comment do not always do so. Control of a large sector of the media by individuals such as Murdoch or Berlusconi is major aspect of this suppression. The role of FAIFE is to question not only the obvious cases of attacks on freedom, but also to try to help librarians to provide access to information that might be restricted in this type of fundamental way.

Intellectual access

The cataloguers, or metadata experts as we should probably call them now, tend to deal in certainties. They would say that knowledge can be analysed and categorised to allow it to be described in ways that will make possible the accurate retrieval of documents, or even less fixed units of information. This proposition has spawned an enormous volume of research and resulted in the creation of highly effective retrieval systems for libraries and databases, and it has also contributed to better retrieval from the Worldwide Web. However, there is a less frequently exposed downside to this. The analysis, categorisation and description sometimes seems to rely on the faith that there is a universal order that can be relied upon, and a universal mode of perception that can be directed towards this. The problem emerges in the dialogue between multiculturalism and integration of communities that is such a significant aspect of the

broader political climate in so many countries. Should we seek a way of living together based on some generally agreed principles, or should we agree to differ on a great deal? If we agree to differ, do we implicitly accept an information world in which different perceptions and different truths are reflected in metadata just as much as in other cultural manifestations? In such a world, a multiplicity of approaches to the question of intellectual access might be required. Certainly intellectual access based on natural language indexing, the development of sensitive search engines and the semantic web could contribute to this. Furthermore, in pursuing the implications of this, the application of a self-consciously ethical approach might be an appropriate starting point. Interesting material on ethical indexing can be found at http://www.infoethics.org.uk/sourcesandresources.htm#Indexing.

Physical access

Much writing on access to information posits a seeker for information who is free from handicaps and disabilities. While such a perfect individual might exist, it has to be recognised that very substantial percentages of the population of any country would not fall into that category. Visual impairment is the most obvious. Identifying the problems arising from access for the blind, for the disabled, and for those with learning difficulties is researchable in ways that include considerable potential for experimental methods. It has to be admitted, however, that incorporating provision for the disabled in new buildings, let alone in the systems that buildings might house, requires a very serious investment commitment by those who hold the purse-strings. Underlying all the physical access issues are other questions that are only beginning to be answered in a few progressive (and well-funded) institutions in the industrialised countries. Even if everyone were free from obvious disabilities, there is still no standard requirement for space and facilities that applies across all of humanity. This becomes obvious when we examine, first of all, how people learn and, arising directly from this, how they study most effectively. At this point information research intersects fruitfully with educational, behavioural and psychological research. It is quite apparent to the casual observer that some people learn best in isolated silence, some work well with background music and other sounds, others need dialogue and the reassuring presence of other learners, some require a chair and work surface, others prefer to stand up or even walk around for much of the time. Identifying the range of learning preferences, exploring the ways in which they might be culturally conditioned and experimenting with different configurations of space and furniture offers stimulating architectural and design possibilities.

Virtual access

Information institutions, in the sense of four walls and what is to be found within them, might already seem more like a relic from the past than a matter of central concern to the forward-looking information professional. Obviously the physical institution has far from outlived its usefulness, and it is unlikely that it ever will. It is, however, now rivalled by virtual access in the lives of possibly a majority of the population. Libraries that seek to remain print-only institutions will suffer from the declining use of print that can be observed worldwide. Libraries that offer a mix of real and virtual access, seem much more likely to be successful. Despite this,

technology is not necessarily satisfying and easy to use. Certainly young people seem to interact with technology in the most natural of ways, but for many people, particularly the older part of the population, this is not the case. This means that provision of networked computers in a library is seldom sufficient in itself and there is great scope for librarians to contribute to the development of better interfaces, more user-friendly websites and other digital resources. Information literacy has become a significant concern for the profession precisely because of the spread of virtual access and the problems that it brings with it.

Socio-economic access

The exclusion of whole communities, groups and sections of humanity from information access is a fact of life globally. In Europe this tends to apply to migrants, asylum seekers and travelling communities such as the Roma (gypsies). To some extent it is language that excludes these groups and this can be, and is, overcome by any individual who addresses learning the dominant language with sufficient energy and diligence. This is seldom everyone in the relevant group, however. Old people and women are often left stranded with only the hope that other family and community members will share the benefits of access with them. In some communities they may well be disappointed in this hope. Patriarchal societies, in which the role of woman is limited to their work in the home, may well have no impetus at all towards anything like information access that threatens to empower women. In addressing information exclusion, it is first necessary to understand, through research, the mechanisms by which it works. The area is fraught with misunderstandings, but that only offers more interesting challenges. An access agenda naturally includes programmes for social inclusion.

Access to tacit knowledge

The use of the phrase 'tacit knowledge' identifies an approach based on knowledge management. Knowledge management is a misunderstood concept, too frequently treated as a synonym for the type of information management that is concerned with documentation. What knowledge management actually focuses on are the barriers to the effective dissemination and use of information presented by a comparative absence of documentation. A business corporation or other organisation that relies on the tacit knowledge acquired, retained, and used when the occasion arises, by its personnel is in no position to manage its information. What it can try to do is to develop systems that will capture and organise the tacit knowledge for use. Within the organisation there is a need to encourage cooperation between those people who hold resources of tacit information in their memories, by setting up a knowledge management programme, and this can use the tools for knowledge management systems that already exist and are on the market.

Psychological access

It is arguably the acceptance and internalisation of information, and its re-creation in the individual human in the form of personal knowledge, that is the most neglected aspect of access. Most discussions of information services and the patterns of

information- seeking to which the services relate seem to assume that those who are served are rational beings in a basically orderly world. Librarians carefully select documents and other resources, so as to offer users the best information available. Their assumption is that users will therefore come to the library, they will obtain useful knowledge, and then act accordingly in their lives. The problem is that it does not always work like this. Users and potential users have a puzzling tendency to ignore or reject aspects of what is offered to them, although they may pay lip service to its value. When this occurs, we cannot really talk of the transaction between provider and intended recipient as if access had occurred. The possibility of access has been offered, but access has failed to be completed.

The well-meaning librarian is likely to find this very frustrating and the response of the intended recipients is may well be described in terms that include 'irrational'. To compound the frustration, the choices of information that people actually make and the sources from which they obtain it may well to be part of this seeming irrationality. Rumour and folk wisdom obtained from a trusted friend or neighbour may well be preferred to the information obtainable from well-researched publications in a library. The challenge is to make the library the equivalent of a trusted friend or neighbour by providing information in forms that people will find psychologically acceptable. Whilst this is mainly outside the range of the librarian's direct influence, over time the profession can encourage the development of different ways of presenting and distributing information through dialogues with researchers, writers, publishers, distributors and the media. If young people want comic books instead of, or as well as, conventional publications, or if library users prefer popular science writing to technical monographs, then it is reasonable to stock these, or encourage their production if they do not exist in sufficient number. The librarian is potentially aware of what people trust and find acceptable and such awareness can be put to good use if access is the guiding principle.

CONCLUSIONS

Aspects of access such as those sketched out in the preceding pages are only an indication of how an access-based agenda can change and strengthen librarianship as a professional activity. Ideally the profession should work towards a vision of the 'free' library. The English word free has two distinct senses: free of cost to the user; and free from restriction as to content. Both of these are well served by the access principle. A library that anyone can enter and use without cost and which also does not impose artificial restrictions to content, can give positive answers to the question - 'Does this provide the best possible access for the greatest number of people?' Libraries that are supported by public funds, or which have been endowed by benefactors who had the public good in mind, need to be able to answer this question positively. Protecting heritage, or constructing perfect information retrieval systems, are certainly not the whole answer in themselves. The strength of the access concept is that it can incorporate both, and set them in a meaningful relationship with all the other priorities that the library profession needs to consider.

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