

Libraries and the Communicative Citizen in the Twenty-first Century

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Modern American Librarianship, a model for much of the world, is based on the concept of the informed citizen. This concept can no longer sustain the library and librarianship in a twenty-first century of expanding global electronic interactive communication and expanding universal human rights. It is argued that a renewed librarianship must shift to the concept

of the communicative citizen grounded in a universal human right to communicate. The right to communicate provides a framework for a new conception of the library and of librarianship that builds on the accomplishments of the past but addresses the needs of the individual and the community in an electronically connected world.

Introduction

The closing decades of the twentieth century witnessed the winding down of a golden epoch for libraries and modern American librarianship. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the tax-supported library became entrenched as one of the enduring symbols of both American small town communalism and urban individualism (Birdsall 1985). The library as place was central to the American civic institutional imagination. As a physical public space it was given prominence as a symbol of civic pride. It was out of this period of institutional success that modern librarianship emerged in the closing decades of the nineteenth century and achieved professional status in the twentieth. While twentieth century librarianship was forged in the United States, its values guided the development of librarianship throughout the world, even in countries with opposing political systems than that of the U.S. (Audunson 1997).

The success of the library as a public institution and librarianship as a profession is largely due to a concept central to the role of the library and the philosophy of librarianship: the informed citizen. The concept of the informed citizen became

the central mission of libraries of all types. An American Library Association (ALA) interpretative statement on the ALA Library Bill of Rights states:

A democracy presupposes an informed citizenry. ... The publicly supported library provides free, equal, and equitable access to information for all people of the community the library serves. While the roles, goals and objectives of publicly supported libraries may differ, they share this common mission (American Library Association 2004).

This commitment to the informed citizen, adopted worldwide by library associations, is reflected in the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)/UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (adopted in 1994) which states:

Freedom, prosperity and the development of society and of individuals are fundamental human values. They will only be attained through the ability of well-informed citizens to exercise their democratic rights and to play an active role in society (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions/UNESCO 1994).

In my view the concept of the informed citizen is no longer sufficient to sustain the library as an

institution and librarianship as a profession in the twenty-first century. We are at the end of an epoch of great achievement. However, there is a prevailing confusion throughout librarianship about the role of the library as place and of librarianship as a profession. For example, there is uncertainty about what constitutes a library as reflected in the profusion of characterizations that emerged over the past decade or more: electronic library, virtual library, digital library, hybrid library, distributed library, and so forth. The confusion is reflected in the steady stream of books by prominent library thinkers striving to find a balance between tradition and change in the role of the library and in library values (Harris, Hannah and Harris 1998; Molz and Dain 1999 ; Gor-man 2000, 2003).

The passing of the closing epoch of modern librarianship should not be lamented or freighted with nostalgia. Its achievements should be celebrated and its end a foundation upon which to build a new epoch of librarianship. To do so I argue that librarianship must move from the concept of the informed citizen to that of the communicative citizen. I examine in this article how the foundation for this new conception of the library and of librarianship is the human right to communicate. To begin, I examine why I have concluded the concept of the informed citizen can no longer sustain a vital librarianship.

The informed citizen

The concept of the informed citizen has been traced to the very founding of the American republic (Brown 1996). Eighteenth century American revolutionary leaders sought support among the populace for their cause by advocating an inclusive democracy characterized by a broader franchise to vote, although one limited primarily to white, land-owning *well-informed* males. With the success of the revolution there was a need to consolidate that success among the general public by expanding over time the inclusion of those eligible to vote (a process that continued well into the twentieth century for women and blacks). As the right to vote expanded, the need for an informed citizenry remained a central ideological premise in order to ensure a stable society and a strong democracy. The drive for an informed citizenry fostered the development in the nineteenth century of tax-sup-

ported institutions expected to contribute to an informed citizenry. The public school and the public library are prime examples of such institutions.

The growth in the number and size of public libraries provided the institutional base for the emergence of the profession of librarianship. The institutional role of the library as an agency for insuring citizens are well-informed provided the central social ethic of the profession of librarianship and the foundation of its professional ideology. Such traditional professional commitments of librarianship to intellectual freedom, access to information, literacy, services aimed at a diversity of clientele, and so forth arise out of the fundamental commitment to the idea of the informed citizen. In time, the idea of the informed citizen evolved to include not only being sufficiently informed to meet one's civic commitment but also possessing the skills and knowledge to meet the needs of a growing industrial economy and other social goals. The services and programs of libraries expanded in response to this extended concept of the informed citizen.

The commitment to the informed citizen, universally enunciated in library and professional rhetoric to this day, served libraries and librarianship very well as a professional philosophy and for political leverage during the twentieth century. Librarians have been successful in gaining political support for their institutions among the general public and funding at the local, state, and national levels of government. They have developed a strong commitment to service and a wide range of services to meet the needs of a diversity of users. However, in my view, the concept of the informed citizen, conceived in the eighteenth century and refined in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, can no longer sustain libraries as a public institution and librarianship as a profession in the twenty-first century. Why do I make this claim?

As the right to vote was expanded to an ever-larger proportion of the population it became increasingly difficult to define what constituted an informed citizen, to measure being informed, and to show how being informed contributed to a thriving democracy. With regard to the role of the library specifically, it has been difficult to demonstrate through empirical research how and to what extent libraries contribute to an informed citizenry. For example, a recent study on the use of

Internet terminals in a large public library found that there was almost no seeking of information to meet civic needs (Balka and Peterson 2002). Claiming that libraries are central to an informed citizenry has become especially tenuous as more and more people turned to the electronic mass media for their information.

I am not advocating that the contribution libraries can make to an informed citizenry be abandoned. However, I do not believe that in the emerging world of global electronic communications the concept of the informed citizen is sufficient to sustain the library as an institution and librarianship as a vital profession meeting real social needs. Thus, we do not need to abandon the idea of the informed citizen; rather, we must transform it into the concept of the communicative citizen. There are two major developments that provide the context for a twenty-first century librarianship based on the concept of the communicative citizen: the global universalising of communication and of human rights.

Global communication and human rights

Throughout human history there has been an interaction between the human need to communicate, the development of communication technologies, and human rights. As McIver and Birdsall argue:

Communication is a fundamental social process necessary for individual expression and for all social organization. The ability to communicate is the essence of being human. Human rights are those rights one has by the very nature of being human; they are inalienable. ...Throughout history, humans have expanded their ability to communicate through technology. Therefore, technology joins with communication in a complex inter-relationship with human rights (McIver and Birdsall 2002).

The combination of satellite and global telecommunications with the invention of the personal computer greatly expanded the ability of an individual to carry on interactive global communication with any other individual or group. This process took a quantum leap in the 1990s with the invention of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee and the introduction of the commercial Netscape browser. Abbate observes in her history of the Internet:

The Web would fundamentally change the Internet, not by expanding its infrastructure or underlying protocols, but by providing an application that would lure millions of new users (Abbate 1999, 213).

The import of the Internet and the Web is not so much their technical features but their social implications. Indeed, Berners-Lee himself emphasizes that the Web "is more a social creation than a technical one" (Berners-Lee 1999, 123). Over the past fifteen years Berners-Lee, as Director of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), has been overseeing the development of the standards and tools needed to implement his broader vision of what he calls the Semantic Web, "a single Web of meaning, about everything and for everyone" (quoted in Frauenfelder 2004). The concept of the Semantic Web envisions people having universal access to applications that will allow semantic linking between concepts embedded in Web pages. The Semantic Web would allow one to pursue information, ideas, and concepts through a web of meaning. I dwell on Berners-Lee's effort to create the Semantic Web to demonstrate that the vision driving Berners-Lee and many others is a commitment to the universal, interpersonal communication of information and knowledge.

If the last half of the twentieth century witnessed a dramatic expansion in global interpersonal electronic communication, there was just as dramatic expansion worldwide in the spread of human rights. This phenomenon was accelerated with the adoption by the United Nations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. Prior to the UDHR there was recognition of what were characterized as "natural rights" expressed as individual civil and political liberties or freedoms such as freedom of the press, speech, assembly, and religion. These freedoms were proclaimed in such historically significant eighteenth century documents as the United States Bill of Rights and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

It was out of World War II that there emerged the new conception of rights as universal *human* rights. Universal human rights are those rights one possesses by the very nature of being human (Donnelly 1989). Since the adoption of the UDHR, individuals and nations all over the world have looked to the UDHR, which has been translated into over 300 languages, as an inspiration and guide

in their attempt to achieve fundamental human rights. The UDHR is a non-binding document. However, the rights it embodies have been given legal status in two major international treaties. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) has been ratified by 151 countries. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) has been endorsed by 154 countries. In 1993, 171 countries reaffirmed their commitment to the UDHR at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. While the struggle for human rights continues in all countries of the world, during the closing decades of the twentieth century there has been a great expansion in the spread of political, civil, social, economic, and cultural rights throughout the world.

In 2000, a United Nations report noted that:

One of the 20th century's hallmark achievements was its progress in human rights. In 1900 more than half the world's people lived under colonial rule, and no country gave all its citizens the right to vote. Today some three-quarters of the world lives under democratic regimes (United Nations Development Programme 2000, 1).

During the 1980s and 1990s about 80 countries made significant movement towards democracy and over 140 countries out of almost 200 hold multi-party elections (United Nations Development Programme 2002, 1).

Thus, during the last half of the previous century there has been a growing universalisation in personal interactive electronic communication and in the spread of human rights. This brief review of the spread of global communications and human rights serves as the prelude to examining how these two phenomena have become linked in the concept of a right to communicate. I will then conclude by demonstrating how the right to communicate can serve as a foundation for a twenty-first century librarianship.

A right to communicate

The credit for explicitly linking the developments in global communication and human rights goes to Jean d'Arcy, a pioneer in the development of French television in the 1950s (Pierre 2003), and subsequently the Director of the United Nations Radio and Visual Services during the 1960s. While at the UN and involved in international meetings dealing with direct broadcast satellites, d'Arcy per-

ceived the potential of communication satellites to transform global communication. He called for a rethinking of traditional communication freedoms as enunciated in the UDHR. The key article in the UDHR on communication freedoms is Article 19, which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression: this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 19 reflects the post-war concern with ensuring the free-flow of information or content through the mass media. Jean d'Arcy challenged this conception of communication. For him Article 19 was inadequate in an emerging environment that possessed the potential of individual interactive global communication. In an article published in 1969 on "Direct Broadcast satellites and the Right to Communicate," d'Arcy stated that the UDHR would have to encompass a right broader than those enunciated in Article 19: a new universal right to communicate (d'Arcy 1969).

Critical to d'Arcy's thinking is the distinction he makes between information and communication. Traditional communication freedoms of thought, speech, assembly, and the press arose out of specific social, political, and technological structures surrounding separate sectors or modes of communication. These freedoms were based on the unilateral, top-down, one-way modes of transmitting information or content, especially with the rise of print and broadcasting mass media. Each new communication technology generated its own concentration of ownership in a mass industry. According to d'Arcy this concentration was evident in nineteenth century publishing due to the rotary press, and subsequently in the radio, film, and television industries. This development gave rise to what d'Arcy called the "mass media mentality." Writing in 1983, he claimed that "For almost a century, people in this age of mass societies have become conditioned by their 'mass media mentality' to accept as normal and ineluctable a unilateral, vertical flow of non-diversified information" (d'Arcy 1983, xxi).

For d'Arcy the vertical, top-down, one-way mass distribution of information dominated by a few major media corporations was not genuine communication. And because these older communication structures focused on the distribution of information, the rights associated with them were

concerned with the one-way flow of information not with two-way interactive communication. However, d'Arcy's insight was that the convergence of satellites, global telecommunications, and computers has the potential to foster new social, political, and technological structures based on the individual having access to personal, horizontal, interactive, and multi-channel communication with other individuals or groups through global electronic networks. This new environment does not nullify the traditional freedoms, but it does call for their encompassing into what d'Arcy called an "ascending progression" of freedoms and rights culminating in the right to communicate (d'Arcy 1983, xxvi).

The articles of the UDHR that would fall within this "ascending progression would include:

Article 12 – Right to privacy;
Article 18 – Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion;
Article 19 – Freedom of expression and the right to seek, receive, and impart information through any media;
Article 20 – Freedom of peaceful assembly;
Article 26 – Right to an education; and,
Article 27 – Right to participate in the cultural life of the community as well as intellectual property rights (Birdsall, McIver and Rasmussen 2003)

The new rights regime based on a right to communicate is a fundamental shift from a focus on the transmission of information to the *process* of communication.

The right to communicate, then, provides a new conceptual framework to re-examine such traditional issues as access to information, government information policy, intellectual freedom, property rights, literacy, cultural and linguistic rights, and privacy in a new technological, political, and social environment. The most fundamental question it raises is: How can communicative opportunities be assured so that all citizens can exercise their right to communicate? Any consideration of access, property rights, and so forth must start from the recognition of the communicative citizen's right to communicate. While debate continues over a precise definition of a right to communicate, its essence includes

"the right to inform and be informed, the right to active participation in the communication process, the right to equitable access to information resources and information, and the right of cultural and individual privacy from communication" (Richstad and Anderson 1981, 26–27).

A crucial point is that the right to communicate is a *positive* right. Rights are often characterized as either negative or positive although it is recognized these categories are not mutually exclusive. Negative rights are typically those civil and political rights (e.g. freedom of speech, assembly) that protect individuals from restraints imposed by the state or some other authority. Positive rights are typically those social, economic, and cultural rights (e.g. education, health, social security) whereby the state is obliged to provide the means that insure all citizens can exercise such a right. The right to communicate is conceived as a positive right, that is, the state is obliged to ensure that citizens have access to sufficient communicate opportunities to exercise their right to communicate. It is this conception of the right to communicate as a positive right that provides the legal foundation and philosophical basis for a new conception of the library and librarianship in the twenty-first century. The library becomes one of the public policy tools available to the state to enhance the communicative opportunities of its citizens.

Libraries, librarianship, and the right to communicate

Central to the professional ethos of librarianship is the support of information rights as expressed in the IFLA Statement on Library and Intellectual Freedom and the numerous similar statements from individual countries (for links to such statements see URL: <http://www.ifla.org/faife/ifstat/ifstat.htm>). However, I would argue these principles are based on the objective of the informed citizen. They were adopted in the context of the mass media mentality identified by d'Arcy and, therefore, are concerned with freedoms surrounding the one-way flow of information. However, freedoms can be bestowed or taken away and the one-way flow of information is subject, as d'Arcy asserted, to dominance by elite political, cultural, and economic interests. In contrast, the right to communicate is concerned with an inalienable right that is inherent to the individual *and* groups. It is a communication right that is participatory, interactive, horizontal and multi-way (Harms n.d).

Within a human right to communicate framework, the roles of the library and of librarianship shift from serving the informed citizen to serving the communicative citizen. This rights-based

framework requires a new conception of the library. In this new conception, the legal foundation for the institutional role of the library is the right to communicate. The social role of the library is to ensure all citizens have communicative opportunities to exercise their right to communicate. The library is the institutional embodiment of the right to communicate serving the communicate citizen (Birdsall 2004, 161–163). The role of librarianship is to enhance the communicative opportunities of all citizens through the institution of the library. This rights-based construct of the library as an institution and librarianship as a profession is a conceptual framework independent of whatever actual material or virtual form the library takes.

This human rights conceptual framework also provides a new perspective on how to organize and operate libraries.

- It establishes a legal foundation for the library that is in accord with the global expansion of electronic communication and human rights in the twenty-first century.
- It provides a framework for re-evaluating and transforming traditional library values to meet the needs of the new communicative environment.
- It envisions a social role for the library as an institution that continues to meet the needs of the individual and the community regardless of its material or digital form.
- It stakes out a role for the library as an important component of global communication networks.
- It shifts the focus of the library and librarianship from information to communication, from content to process, from the informed citizen to the communicative citizen.
- It serves as a basis upon which to develop library organization and operations focused on dynamic communication processes and services rather than the traditional focus on passive content and collections.
- It means libraries should be evaluated on the quality of services they provide rather than the size of their collections.
- It assumes the primary resource of the library is the staff rather than the collection.
- It opens up the possibility of attracting a more inclusive clientele for libraries.
- It is the foundation for creating political alliances with other groups having a stake in promoting communication rights.
- It provides a concept of the library that forms the basis for professional collaborative initiatives with researchers and practitioners in a wide range of disciplines including library and information studies, communication

studies, computing science, law, public administration, journalism, and so forth.

Adherence to the concept of the informed citizen arose out of the particular political and cultural values of the United States that placed a great emphasis on individual freedoms, freedoms that remain as valid as ever. However, the concept of the right to communicate arises out of the convergence of global, inter-personal electronic communication and universal human rights. Therefore, we can anticipate that efforts to construct a twenty-first century librarianship based on a right to communicate will of necessity be an international movement, although one which will reflect national differences. As such, no one country will necessarily emerge as the source of the new century's librarianship.

However, I do think Canada provides a particular milieu for Canadian librarians to provide leadership in promoting a right to communicate as a new foundation for a twenty-first century librarianship (Birdsall 2004). Earlier I stressed the importance of the universalisation of communications and of human rights as the global framework for librarianship in the new century. Canada is fully engaged in these global phenomena. A communication consciousness pervades Canadian culture. From the building of the trans-continental railway in the nineteenth century to the building of the information highway in the twentieth century, communication technologies have been a central component of government nation building public policy. With their high telephone and Internet household penetration rates, Canadians are among the most "connected" people in the world. Canadian intellectuals, including Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Dallas Smythe and many others form a distinct school of communication theory (Babe 2000). Canadian culture is rich in communications experience, knowledge, and values.

With regard to human rights, Canadians are strong rights advocates and practitioners. It was the Canadian John P. Humphrey, first Director of the UN Human Rights Division, who composed the initial draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Morsink 1999). In 1982, the Canadian government adopted a Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms that has generated a rights revolution in Canada (Ignatieff 2000). This Charter is noteworthy in the extent to which it en-

trenches language and multicultural diversity within Canada. Canada has ratified all the major United Nations human rights covenants and treaties. Canada was an active participant in the formation of the International Criminal Court and Judge Phillippe Kirsch of Canada was elected the Court's first President. The Canadian commitment to universal rights is reflected in the universal provision of public services and a respect for the rights of both the individual and of groups that attracts emigrants from around the world.

This dual background strong in communications and human rights give Canadian librarians an opportunity to take a strong leadership role in promoting a right to communicate and in reformulating the values and objectives of librarianship. This is not to advocate a universal librarianship based on a Canadian model. Just as a right to communicate respects the individuality of persons and groups, it is anticipated twenty-first century librarianship will reflect the cultural and political diversity of nations.

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted shortly after World War II, much has been achieved at the international level in formulating, promoting, monitoring, and achieving human rights. The efforts of international organizations, of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), of individual governments and alliances of governments, and others will continue to play a crucial role in the continuing struggle to advance human rights for all. However, the implementation of any human right must ultimately be achieved at the national level. Concise enunciations of human rights in declarations and covenants establish a global policy framework for those advancing human rights. But, as the human rights scholar Jack Donnelly correctly states, "Human rights are ultimately a profoundly *national*, not international, issue" (1982, 266). Thus, we can expect that even with an international acceptance of a right to communicate, its implementation must occur at the national level (Birdsall, McIver and Rasmussen 2003).

An action plan

What course of action can librarians take to promote a right to communicate and to use it as a foundation for a twenty-first century librarianship? Since d'Arcy proposed the idea of a right

to communicate over thirty years ago there have been ongoing efforts to define such a right. In the 1970s and early 1980s such efforts were undertaken under the auspices UNESCO. This initiative collapsed in the Cold War and the North-South politics of that era (Fisher 1982). Nonetheless, non-governmental agencies (NGOs) and others have continued to pursue the idea, most recently within the current undertakings of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). However, as Canadian constitutional lawyer and public library trustee leader Merrilee Rasmussen states:

It is now clear that the right to communicate cannot be defined in specific terms, but must be understood, as are the original fundamental freedoms, more generically so that it can adapt to the fast pace of changing technology. ...[Furthermore,] It is also clear that the generic nature of a right to communicate can only attain specific meaning in the context of individual cultures and communities (Rasmussen 2004, 137).

In this context librarians can undertake interdisciplinary research to formulate a right to communicate to meet the communicative needs of their particular culture and nation. Further, they can take the lead in advocating the entrenchment of a generic right to communicate in international declarations and at the national level in legal, judicial, and public policy structures. They can undertake this research and advocacy in alliance with the many other groups who support communication rights. These groups include journalists, computing professionals, women's groups, the disabled, ethnic and indigenous groups, lawyers, and many others.

With regard to librarianship in particular, librarians can re-examine their professional values and policies and revise them within the framework of a right to communicate. This effort should conclude with a new philosophic foundation of librarianship and body of policies for the library profession in the twenty-first century. Through their research, advocacy, and professional renewal librarians must establish in the public mind and in concrete legislation the concept of the library as the institutional embodiment of the right to communicate.

The right to communicate as the foundation for a renewed, genuinely international librarianship builds on traditional liberal freedoms and the library's longstanding role of meeting the needs of both the individual and the community. However,

a right to communicate serves as a bridge to the global, electronically connected world of the twenty-first century and provides a new conceptual framework for defining the role of the library vis-à-vis the individual and the community. As Rasmussen asserts: "The right to communicate embodies the individual's right to belong to a community in an era when the nature of community is changing." Global electronic communication makes it possible for individuals to form new modes of community and, thus, "The right to communicate grounds the very idea of community" (2004, 142). Based on the human right to communicate, libraries and librarians will continue to serve, as they always have, the needs of the individual as well as serving as a bulwark of community by providing communicative opportunities for all citizens in a global context.

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