

Challenges to the Professional Control of Knowledge Work in Academic Libraries: A Proposed Agenda for Organizational Research and Action

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines contemporary challenges to the professional claims of academic librarians, who historically have been granted authority to organize academic library work. Many arguments for reorganizing library work along less bureaucratic, more market-driven, and more highly technological lines do not adequately consider the effect such changes have on professional authority. To better understand these effects, a review was undertaken of social scientific research on information technology, organizations and professions as it pertains to academic librarianship. It is suggested that we can strengthen our professional authority, practice, and recruitment by expanding our disciplinary knowledge through collaborative research in social informatics.

Introduction: ACRL's Professionalization Project and the Modern System of Professions

Since its founding in 1889 as the "College Library Section of the American Library Association,"(1) the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) has been engaged in a "professionalization project" (2) to raise the occupational status of academic librarianship. This project occurred as part of that general "rise of the modern professions" which accompanied the process of industrialization.(3) As with similar projects, it involved the attempt to acquire exclusive control within a particular occupational jurisdiction based on the claim that librarianship exhibits the core traits of a profession, whose members possess "formally rational abstract utilitarian knowledge"(4) and are ethically committed to applying this knowledge in the provision of a critical and essential social service.(5) Embedded within the broader social economic regime of modern industrial capitalism, advocates of professionalization have engaged in a continuing competition for jurisdiction over particular occupational domains, creating what Abbott has described as a dynamic "system of professions."(6) Today's emerging "information society,"(7) with its "new organizational forms,"(8) and technologies, has created a brave new world of high-tech work(9) and upset the old balance of power within the occupational domain of "information professionals,"(10) as academic librarians struggle with a number of old and new competitors for control over what has come to be called "knowledge work." (a term coined by the founding guru of management consulting, Peter Drucker, in 1959/60).(11)

The Evolution of Modern Industrial Capitalism and the Rationalization of Knowledge Work

We can not adequately understand the contemporary challenges that the various professions face in our "postindustrial society"(12) society until we clarify the nature of the industrial society that gave rise to the system of professions. One of the most attractive and widely acknowledged features of modern capitalist societies is their ability to amass wealth on an unprecedented scale. This has been made possible because wealth is typically accumulated for its exchange value as commodities rather than for its specific use value, leading to a continuously expanding cycle of production, distribution, and reinvestment. A variety of social institutions support this system, all focused on private ownership of the means of production and grounded in the right accorded to the owners of property to withhold it from the use of society and the state if they wish, as opposed to feudal societies with their hierarchical structure of mutual rights and obligations.(13)

This modern form of capitalism arose out of a unique historical configuration in Western society that led to a culture oriented around the core norm of "rationalization," according to "which every aspect of human action became subject to calculation, measurement and control."(14) The resulting system tends to turn everything into commodities that can be bought and sold on the basis of their calculated contribution to the owner's cost/profit margin--the famous bottom line. In this way modern capitalism can be distinguished from other historical types not only by its reliance on free, wage dependent labor and on capital accumulating entrepreneurs, but on the rationalization and centralization by these entrepreneurs of "technology and all other factors of production,"(15) including labor. The combination of private property (and its accompanying right of liberty from governmentally imposed obligations) with the generation of mass wealth (and its accompanying rise of a middle class) strongly encouraged the development of the modern, liberal democratic, nation-state.(16) It also created a built-in tension between the rationalizing desire to calculate means and ends in order to control the world and the entrepreneurial desire to invent means and ends in order to exploit it. Evolving capitalist economies thus exhibit what Schumpeter called "destructive creativity" in which change is an endogenous, institutionalized feature. For modern capitalism, technological innovation functions as the engine of change and capitalist enterprise functions as the engineer, "as it creates new markets through the introduction of innovations and new forms of organization in order to cope with a changing environment".(17)

Bureaucratic organization represents just such a new form. It was developed first as a hierarchical form of governmental administration designed to rationalize the perceived corruption and inefficiency of traditional, paternalistic rule.(18) but soon was taken up by all modern organizations wanting to use the most rational and efficient means possible in the pursuit of organizational goals. Business firms in particular adopted it as a way of rationalizing market fluctuations and inefficiencies caused by bounded rationality and opportunism. (19) Although formal organization has emerged whenever "practical tasks involving information processing, communication, and control [have] exceeded those same capabilities of the unaided human brain," it "did not begin to achieve anything approximating its modern form until industrialization"(20) created a control crisis. This crisis began when large amounts of capital were invested in power-driven machinery and profit came to depend on how fast one moved one's "investments past one's fixed capital."(21) Profit thus provided the "incentive to process matter faster under industrial capitalism, [while] steam power provided the means,"(22) causing uniquely modern problems when the artificially increased speed, volume and complexity of machine driven production and transportation vastly surpassed the ability of naturally evolved human intelligence to coordinate and control the resulting flows of energy and materials. The result was a rapid expansion of qualitatively different organizational forms designed to resolve the crisis, beginning what Beniger has called a "control revolution."(23)

The use of formal organizations as control devices competes for dominance in the world of work with two other major means for embodying expert knowledge: human beings and computers. Each can function as a "generalized information processor" used to control and coordinate the activities of complex systems.(24)

Modern expertise thus can be embodied in organizations (bureaucracies), in professions (persons), and in commodities (technology).(25) Pre-modern, "non-rationalist" modes for embodying expertise and organizing work continue to exist, of course, and post-modern modes may be created. However, they generally don't have a dominant effect in the world of modern capitalist work, where such work continues to be legitimized by "reliance on scientization or rationalization of technique and on efficiency of service" or production.(26) All three modes provide alternative ways of "institutionalizing expertise . . . in a set of social structures . . . governed by certain legitimating norms and values."(27) In particular settings, each of these institutions may be mobilized by interested parties to produce particular organizational configurations that form "negotiated political systems."(28)

As industrial corporations and governmental agencies grew and stabilized into large, established bureaucracies, they invested control into the formal organization itself by using scientific management to systematically extract expertise from pre-modern craftsmen, turning them into modern blue and white collar workers.(29) Simultaneously, in order to maintain a market for industrial capitalism's vastly increased productivity, and to obtain worker cooperation in maintaining that productivity, modern capitalism evolved what has come to be called "Fordism."(30) The dominant organization form became what Mintzberg calls "machine bureaucracy" which "depends primarily on the standardization of its operating work processes for coordination" and in which, therefore, "the technostructure--which houses the analysts who do the standardizing--emerges as the key part of the structure."(31)

Scientific Management and the Professional Bureaucratic Organization of Library Work

As expert knowledge became increasingly important within an industrializing society that was rapidly replacing traditional craft occupations with modern rationalized ones, most upwardly mobile Americans sought to be among the ranks of the managers and technocrats, rather than among the workers. It shouldn't surprise us then to find "an industrial society is a professionalizing one"(32) and seems to lead to the "professionalization of everyone."(33) For a long time, both practitioners and analysts thought of the professions as a sort of species of occupation that was defined by certain unique traits. An occupation that aspired to grow up to professional status would have to follow the "typical process by which the established professions have arrived."(34) Contemporary students of professionalism have largely abandoned these essentialist and natural history metaphors to focus on the process by which social actors use existing social models to reconstruct their status via professionalization projects.(35) Nevertheless, every profession exhibits the history of its origins. One of the reasons that the established professions, such as medicine, have retained so much autonomous authority in the face of continuing challenges, derives from the social inertia and prestige they originally acquired.(36) The current position of North American librarianship in general and of academic librarianship in particular, can be seen to result from a combination of its social origins and its professionalization strategies.

It is well known that library work has primarily been "women's work," placing it among the so-called "semi-professions."(37) Specifically, librarianship originated as "pink collar" clerical work and, while perhaps attaining a higher status than manual labor, remained a relatively low status occupation within a still predominately patriarchal culture.(38) From the very beginning the occupation was practiced within bureaucratic organizations, rather than set up as a private practice. Within this context, library leaders have long been known for their interest in promoting the rationalization of library work--from Melvil Dewey's interest in "business efficiency"(39) to Richard Dougherty's interest in "scientific management."(40) Following this lead, North American librarians, with support from the American Library Association and its affiliates, appear to have followed a professionalization strategy of trying to acquire primary jurisdiction over

key parts of the organizations in which they work--i.e. the "technostructure," "middle line.," and "strategic apex"--turning their libraries into "closed system" forms of machine bureaucracy.(41) Such systems are dominated by a coalition of insiders (based in this case on a common orientation and interest in professional librarianship) who set the bureaucratic rules for the remaining (paraprofessional and support) workers in the organization and who attempt to maintain a carefully controlled interaction with the organization's environment. For academic librarians, this environment has consisted primarily of each library's parent institution of higher education.

A high point in the success of this strategy may have come in the early 1970s with the issuing of Library Education and Manpower, an official ALA document that set professional standards for all librarians concerning educational credentials and organizational staffing.(42) Reeves used this document in his 1974 benchmark study on the library occupation's impact on library work arrangements. He was interested in "the problems of professionals working within organizations,"(43) which problems were assumed at the time to result from "the inherent tension between professional identification and bureaucracy."(44) "The study found that when the staff of a library, both professional and nonprofessional, had a 'professional orientation', that is, were guided in providing library service by the profession's definition of its task domain, the librarians in those libraries had control of their work."(45) Significantly, and in line with their professionalization strategy, he also found that it was the occupation itself, not the organization, that promoted bureaucratic forms of control.(46)

Academic Library Work, Post-Fordism, and the Commodification of Everything

In the same year that Reeves published his study, ACRL's own professionalization project achieved a significant success with the publication of a "Statement on Faculty Status of College and University Librarians,"(47) which encouraged the granting of faculty status to librarians. The document is notable for being sponsored jointly by the Association of American Colleges and the Association of American University Professors, as well as by the American Library Association and the Association of College and Research Libraries. Academic librarians had, it appeared, co-opted their own primary clientele as supporters, rather than as competitors, in the system of professions. If fully implemented, the resulting organizational configuration would approximate Mintzberg's "Professional Bureaucracy,"(48) defined as an configuration dominated by "members of the operating core [who] seek to minimize the influence of the administrators--managers as well as analysts--over their work. That is, they promote horizontal and vertical decentralization. When they succeed, they work relatively autonomously, achieving whatever coordination is necessary through the standardization of skills."(49) This structural configuration is "common in universities, general hospitals, school systems, public accounting firms, social-work agencies, and craft production firms" and tends to be generated when a stable environment and technically unsophisticated production system call for "a coordinating mechanism that allows for standardization and decentralization at the same time."(50)

The literature discussing the implementation of faculty and academic status is immense.(51) One of the more revealing studies by Watson-Boone serves as a "mid-1990s work life benchmark for research on library and university communities currently challenged by various technological and society changes."(52) The author uses qualitative methods to elicit the meanings, values, and preferences that mid-level, non-administrative, professional academic librarians had concerning their work. The comments of her informants suggest that the library faculty model has not achieved dominance, but has been superimposed upon older models, creating a system of multiple classifications including "civil service librarians, . . . faculty service librarians, . . . academic professionals, and . . . temporary . . . one-year appointments."(53) The librarians spent most of their time at traditional library tasks (such as cataloging, reference, and selection), but framed

the accomplishment of these tasks in terms of their professional, scholarly nature requiring autonomous expertise to accomplish. They focused primarily on their own immediate colleagues and work world, with diminishing awareness of larger library, professional, and university issues.

The imposition of a "self-directed, faculty model on the library, a structured, bureaucratic organization, often has created division and fostered adversarial relationships between professionals and paraprofessionals." (54) We now live in an institutional environment of financial constraint and turbulent innovation that has created increasingly sophisticated information technologies and new occupational specialties while at the same time breaking career ladders and withdrawing the resources needed to increase rewards or hire more personnel. In these circumstances the dual labor market that we've created within academic libraries has become dysfunctional for all concerned.(55) Ironically, the political-economic changes that brought this situation about began with the collapse of the Fordist economic era(56) in the early 1970s,--just when ACRL and AAUP were recommending faculty status for academic librarians. The rise of intense global competition and the commodification of information has drawn our systems of higher education more deeply into the market economy and created great pressure on them to increase their efficiency by the further rationalization of operations.(57)

A widespread response of university and library administrators has been to restructure(58) and to "emphasize selective excellence, flexible specialization, and workforce dualization."(59) A major challenge facing professional academic librarians is to find a way to contain this crisis locally--to prevent further deterioration in the quality of working life caused by increased competition and resentment among the various information occupations. The promise of more interesting, more highly skilled, and better paid knowledge work is real, as is the threat of less interesting, less skilled, and lower paid service jobs. Empirical research suggests that which direction particular jobs and occupations go depends less upon what specific organizational or information technology is introduced and more upon the economic, political and ideological context.(60)

Conclusion: The Rhetorical Restructuring of Academic Librarianship as a Vocation and Collaborative Action Research in Social Informatics

Living within this turbulent period, it is unclear whether "we are witnessing the dawning of a new age, the information age . . . or an evolutionary phase of the ongoing Industrial Revolution."(61) The resulting situation of uncertainty produces a high degree of anxiety and a search for magical means to make sense of and regain control over events.(62) Enthusiastic entrepreneurs undertake managerial projects to recreate pre-modern organic forms using post-modern information technologies to go "beyond bureaucracy,"(63) and "reengineer to achieve breakthrough performance."(64) Others undertake disciplinary and occupational projects that promote "post-professionalism."(65) Such provocative arguments clearly threaten the interests of established stakeholders and often create resistance to the very change they advocate.(66) They tell unbelievable stories based upon bad rhetoric using unsupported theories of social change.(67) One can just as easily narrate opposing stories about superficial changes in knowledge work being driven by the same old rationalizing logic of modern capitalism.(68) The result in academia is a civil war between privileged professionals arguing from positions of moral absolutism and beleaguered managers arguing from positions of organizational efficiency as they try to find substitutes for the bottom line in a non-profit environment where intellectual accomplishment can't be measured like commodities.(69) Is it any wonder that university administrators continue to base public claims about the high quality of their institutions' programs on rankings from The Gourman Report,(70) which was exposed as a fraud over a decade ago?(71)

Into this tumult, I believe that we, and other academic professionals, ought to reassert our ethical commitment to the vocation of preserving and advancing knowledge "as against both technocratic professionalism and ideological pseudoprophecy."(72) Rather than uncritically accepting or rejecting the latest nostrums of our modern management "witch doctors"(73) in order to become knowledge "managers," (74) "engineers,"(75) and "workers,"(76) we should build on our experience with cooperative ventures and work with all interested parties on collaborative, interdisciplinary, evaluative, action research projects(77) in order to better understand and guide what's actually happening as we go about reconstructing our libraries.

Everyone agrees that times are changing. Most also agree that information technologies have a great deal to do with these changes. As suggested, we are inundated with widely promulgated utopian and dystopian myths predicting or decrying the inevitable coming of the "information society," and with demands to radically change our ways in order to create "learning organizations," and "virtual libraries." Few of us, however, have access to reliable and valid knowledge about how human beings actually create and use information technologies to change their lives for better or worse. Recently, many of those from a wide variety of intellectual disciplines and occupational practices who are interested in developing and applying such knowledge have come together under the interdisciplinary banner of "social informatics."

Social informatics refers to the body of research that examines the social aspects of computerization -- including the roles of information technology in social and organizational change and the ways that the social organization of information technologies are influenced by social forces and practices. Such research aims to ensure that technical research agendas and systems designs are relevant to people's lives--that technical work is socially driven rather than technologically driven. Such research thus often takes on the quality of action or evaluation research in which participants and researchers work together in order to plan, implement, and monitor change involving the introduction of information technologies.(78)

Indiana University's new Center for Social Informatics offers one source of high quality research on these topics.(78) It brings together faculty, graduate students, and professionals from a wide variety of fields and with a broad range of experience in order to promote research that is meaningful both to practitioners and to theorists. As a major networked research library undergoing significant organizational and technological changes, the IU Libraries represent an example of an organization greatly in need of the knowledge that social informatics research could provide. Likewise, the IU Libraries represent a site rich in research opportunities for those interested in advancing knowledge in the field of social informatics. Thus, an experimental Collaborative Research Program was developed this past year, which aims to provide opportunities for IUL librarians to work with CSI members and associates on problems of mutual concern. A trial collaborative project has been initiated to explore ways of analyzing and improving how the IU Libraries help staff to learn about and employ distributed information technologies. It is hoped that this form of "postmodern" research,(80) by involving a wider range of scholars and practitioners in more richly contextualized research environments, will produce better stories of social and organizational change and thereby improve professional practice.

Postscript

After submitting this paper, Harris and Hannah's *Into the Future: the Foundations of Library and Information Services in the Post-Industrial Era* came to my attention.(81) In a manner similar to this paper, Harris and Hannah also advocate viewing contemporary developments in academic librarianship from a much broader historical and social scientific perspective than is usually taken. More importantly, the structure of their argument closely follows that of this paper, so that they treat most of the same topics--but in the more extended manner befitting a monograph. For anyone interested in examining more deeply the role of librarianship as a profession in post-industrial society, this is the book you should read first.

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