

In its official policy manual, the American Library Association includes in its list of the Core Values of Librarianship the phrase “The Public Good”, without defining precisely what that is. A few other uses of the phrase in the document fail to be more specific about the action elements, but the core values statement on the ALA website calls libraries “fundamental institutions in democratic societies” and refers to “outsourcing and privatization” as relevant issues in relation to this value. This makes it clear that what it means to partake in “The Public Good” is an economic and political issue as well as philosophical one, and the meaning of it shifts as the political and social climate around the library shifts. In this paper, I will look at how the understanding of the public good and its relationship to libraries has changed in the recent past, specifically in the context of the dominant political and economic trends in the United States over the past 20 years -- although many of the trends discussed have beginnings that go back much further.

Literature Review

The word that has been used most often to describe the significant economic policy trends of the 21st century is neoliberalism, which, while not a precisely defined concept, is generally recognized as a belief that competitive markets are the best driver of economic decisions in virtually every sphere. Many authors have written on the pressures this philosophy has placed on publicly funded institutions such as libraries, most directly public libraries but academic and school libraries as well. One of the earliest writings on the subject, cited by several other works in this review, is “A Political Economy of Librarianship?” by William Birdsall. Writing in 2001, Birdsall foresaw that

the technological changes happening in the field of library and information science were accompanied by a change in the political environment, and that these changes were going to affect the economic realities that libraries relied on for their survival. He describes a shift from the premise of “citizen sovereignty” to “consumer sovereignty”, whereby the relationship between individuals and corporations has become more central to everyday life than the relationship between individuals and their community. He calls on librarians to give careful study to these changes and their impacts, and to recognize that to be a public institution means participating in the public process, and to actively advocate for the values of the profession when they are encroached on by commercial entities and their market-driven ideologies.

In “Neoliberalism and Library & Information Science : Using Karl Polanyi’s Fictitious Commodity as an Alternative to Neoliberal Conceptions of Information”, Jonathan Cope expands on the need for activism on the part of the institutions of librarianship by arguing that one of the central tenets of neoliberal ideology, the idea that markets are “neutral” and thus beneficial, is fundamentally flawed. Technological change, such as the Internet, is typically viewed through this lens of neutrality, as a self-regulating system of information, but the Internet has been increasingly shaped by commercial forces through its entire existence, and this commercialization has often been directly at odds with the notion of the Internet as a digital commons. Cope looks at the work of the social economist Karl Polyani, and his core insight that all market economies depend on social rules around ownership. The body of law and debate about intellectual property has grown significantly since the appearance of the Internet, and advocates for public ownership of digital information have tried to insert their voices

into this debate, sometimes successfully (Creative Commons licensing) and sometimes less so (academic publishing models, something many of these authors discuss). This debate does not just affect libraries in relation to the Internet, of course; in the physical world where resource scarcity is not always a manufactured phenomenon, the incursion of market-centric ideology into the debate over what has value in society is even more pronounced. This has resulted in the need for libraries to continually prove their value in the context of the consumer-based mindset of business. In “They Paved Paradise : School Librarians and School Libraries Are Disappearing and We Won’t Know What We’ve Lost Until It’s Gone”, Kelly Ahlfeld writes about the decline of school libraries and librarian positions in public schools, and connects this to the increase in both competition for shrinking public funds and the difficulty in establishing the value of these staff positions in an environment where value is judged in strictly quantifiable terms. Since librarians typically serve an entire school population, it is difficult for them to show evidence of their specific achievements, so despite multiple studies showing that schools serving high-poverty populations with libraries have better overall performance than schools that don’t, librarians can still seem hard to justify when money runs low and funding is based on graduation rates and testing metrics. This is one easily observed effect of the neoliberal insistence on quantification and commodification.

Public education is often described as a contemporary manifestation of “the commons”, a concept from medieval law that declares certain areas to belong to the community as a collective, and one that is often invoked in discussions of the Public Good. In “The Library Commons: An Imagination and an Invocation”, Jennie Rose Halpern looks at the history of this idea, and its status in contemporary discourse.

Defined as the way “human beings learn to cooperate with each other in routine, large-scale ways”, the number of activities that can be seen as falling in the sphere of the commons is large; Halpern critiques the library establishment for too often accepting a limited version of “commoning” that is unthreatening to the neoliberal establishment which many of these institutions depend on for both validation and funding. The definition of what it means to serve the public good becomes a hand-waving abstraction, while in actual practice “patrons” become “customers” and third-party vendors take over an increasing number of core services. There are exceptions, of course; many academic libraries have tried to create alternatives to the aggressive capitalism of academic publishers, and public libraries in many places have established programs that work directly with their local community to create value for their users. Working directly with their community makes libraries less dependent on political and corporate entities that are structurally opposed to their traditional mode of operation.

Tim Huzar, in “Neoliberalism, Democracy and the Library as a Radically Inclusive Space”, also sees a fundamental contradiction between contemporary neoliberalism and the traditional library mission, but in even starker political terms; as he puts it, “the relationship between democracy and the public library should not be understood in terms of the library’s instrumental value to democracy, but rather should be based around the library’s assumption of equality.” Looking at the history of the idea that libraries are fundamental to democracy, Huzar observes that this connection has been mainly associated with the educative function of libraries, and the idea that democracy requires an informed citizenry. Huzar believes this is patronizing; he suggests that if we are only granting membership in our democracy to those who have been ‘properly’

educated, then the library's role is indoctrination, not inclusion. He uses the phrase “the impropriety of the library” to describe what he believes is a more meaningful contribution libraries can make to democracy, that of providing an alternative to the neoliberal establishment’s obsession with productivity and quantifiable value. In the logic of capitalism, the library has no purpose, it is simply there to be used in whatever way the patron desires, within the limits of community standards. Everyone is equal in the library, no one needs to be useful or valuable. Libraries function as sanctuaries in a way that is analogous to churches (though fewer and fewer churches have an open-door policy these days.) Huzar believes that modeling this radical inclusivity is the truly democratic function of the library.

In “Core Values, Bad Faith, and Democracy”, John Buschman similarly critiques the value of neutrality by examining the tensions between it and explicit core values such as democracy, education and social service. He examines the role of the internet in the 2016 election, the abuse of facts by the Trump campaign, and the media’s flimsy and halfhearted approach to fact-checking, as an example of how values are meaningless if they are not acted on. While he is realistic about the abilities of libraries to actively counter political propaganda, he advocates for clarity of both thought and purpose when confronting political realities, including the reality that institutions do not exist in a vacuum, and political and economic inequality is a threat to the library’s mission and perhaps its existence.

In “Information as Capital: The Commodification of Archives and Library Labor”, Jasmine Burns also examines this idea of libraries as “unproductive” spaces, using a Marxist lens to look at the relationship between archives, archivists, and technology.

One of the core functions of an archive, from an economic standpoint, is to turn what Marx calls “unproductive” items and labor into “productive” ones - meaning, in Marxist terms, something that can be exchanged for money. She calls attention to how large corporations can exploit the labor of academics, archivists, and other knowledge workers by commodifying their unpaid labor into an information asset which the corporation then sells, in some cases back to the academic community. In the case of archives particularly, most of the content in an archival collection is by nature decommodified, i.e not for sale. When archives are digitized, a new commodity is created, governed by intellectual property laws which create an artificial scarcity for this new information-based “object”. Because the infrastructure to create these digital commodities is significant investment, this IP often ends up in the hands of vendors, who are for-profit enterprises with no particular interest or investment in enriching the commons or serving the public good - which in most cases is the intended purpose for which the archive was created. Burns urges the managers of archives to carefully consider their vendor relationships and enter contracts for digital archiving only if materials enter the public domain after a reasonable amount of time. In “Let It Flow: The Monopolization of Academic Content Providers and How It Threatens the Democratization of Information”, Dana Lachenmeyer gives a case study of this dynamic by taking a close look at Elsevier, one of the largest publishers of academic journals, and how they have successfully used a range of aggressive business practices such as buying up competitors and using bait-and-switch pricing to put themselves in a position of making extremely high profit margins by essentially selling partly publicly-funded research back to the academic community that created it. Academics are seldom paid

specifically for writing; making money by selling the output of someone else's free labor would be considered exploitation at best in most other industries. Abandoning this system in favor of a more equitable one for libraries is a challenge because so many academics depend on work controlled by Elsevier and the other big publishers, but efforts are being made in many places to create non-profit alternatives. The problem for academic institutions is analogous to that of a person who decides to take their social media presence to a different platform than Facebook or Twitter - if you can't persuade all of your friends to come with you at the same time, you lose most of the content that was the reason you were on a social media platform. The commons depends on being used to maintain its value.

In "Taming the Mob: the Early Public Library and the Creation of Good Citizens", Natasha Gerolami uses a historical perspective to make a similar argument to Huzar: the "Public Good" that libraries have always intended to serve is a category that has often been defined in terms of conformity to social and economic norms rather than personal freedom or political autonomy. In an analysis of articles for *Library Journal* from 1877 to 1917, she finds that the ideals of democracy embodied by the library are enacted by the creation of "good citizens", and the goodness of these citizens is judged by the appropriateness of their behavior as much as by their intellectual development - indeed, the two things are seen as irrevocably linked. In the early 20th century, libraries served the waves of new immigrants entering the country in ways explicitly intended to assimilate these newcomers into American culture, and to make them productive workers. While there were certainly individual voices in the library community that spoke up against cultural and political hegemony, many of them allied with the labor

movement, as a whole the library system represented a very uncomplicated vision of the American democratic ideal, one where existing political structures were to be adapted to rather than questioned.

In “The Political Economy of Information Capitalism”, Dave Ellenwood looks at this same idea of cultural hegemony as it applies to the definition of “Information Literacy”, and how it interacts with many of the concepts discussed by our other authors. If, as the ACRL Framework on Information Literacy states, “Information has Value”, then the creation and distribution of information is an economic activity, and is therefore a political activity, despite the neoliberal ideology that attempts to depoliticize economic activity. Information can be controlled and distributed in a way that seeks to turn citizens into consumers and to consolidate economic power into fewer hands; Ellenwood gives as one example the “prosumer” model of most social media companies, where virtually all of the content (and hence value) of the platform is created by its users, who get exactly none of the profits generated by the platform. The already mentioned academic publishing services are another example of value that is not shared with its actual creators. Because they are nonprofit entities with a mission to serve everyone, libraries create value that is outside of this capitalist paradigm, and as such they should embrace a theory of information literacy that rejects the idea that productivity and commoditization are the benchmarks for the successful use of the resources they provide access to. The values of diversity, privacy, and equity suffer as well when economic gain is the driving principle of a society; the supposedly neutral forces of the marketplace lead to giant companies like Google and Facebook shrugging their shoulders when confronting their own failures in hiring diversity, or when their

algorithms are found to reinforce structural racism. If the notion of the Public Good is to have meaning, Ellenwood says that libraries must be in the forefront of providing alternate structures for both information literacy and information dissemination, actively resisting the forces of consolidation and corporatization.

Conclusions

The creation and rise of the internet is the 800-pound gorilla of the library world; the internet has fundamentally changed society's relationship to information and information professionals will be adapting to this new world for a long time. Adapting to external change, though, is part of what it means to be a public institution, that serves the Public Good - that has always been a moving target. When they were first created in this country, information in the form of books was a precious resource, and those who had both access to capital and an interest in serving the public saw the distribution of this resource as an obvious way to provide benefits to their community. But this largesse was never completely free of the baggage of cultural assumptions - Andrew Carnegie made it clear when he embarked on his library project that in his version of America, better citizens would also make better workers for steel mills. The Public Good has never been a settled category, and loudest voices in the conversation have always been the ones with money and power.

In the open source software community, there is a phrase that has been used for a long time to illuminate an important concept : "Do you mean free as in freedom, or free as in beer?" In the 19th and much of the 20th century, "free as in beer" was a significant part of what defined libraries' mission; physical access to a limited resource

was how information got distributed. “Free as in freedom” was a much more abstract, although not completely unimportant, component of the mission, and most of the conversation around it involved copyright disputes and legal arcana. The library of the 21st century is no longer the guardian of a limited resource; some of the most pressing social issues of our time are a result of the fact that we are all drowning in information constantly, and most of us understand very little about the way that information is created and used to influence us. The ramifications of the “Free as in Freedom” concept are both more complicated and much more crucial for information professionals to deal with. Information literacy has never been as important as it is now, and to successfully navigate the world of “fake news” and “alternative facts”, the notion of neutrality that is an integral part of the librarian ethic needs to be understood as part of a larger framework of values, one that recognizes when political forces opposed to the library's mission need to be actively resisted. The Public Good is not a passive artifact to be guarded; it is an active project that needs to be continually constructed and reexamined.

In an short piece in *Library Journal*, “Libraries : a Public Good”, John Berry defines the Public Good in an economic context by using the example of a lighthouse : it would be impractical to charge money to every ship that uses this resource, but it would be far more impractical, in fact downright ruinous, not to have a lighthouse at all. That lighthouses are also familiar metaphors for truth and guidance is undoubtedly intentional. The neoliberal political climate of the past few decades has revealed its limitations in numerous ways, and the weakening of public institutions and the services they provide to their entire communities is one of the most obvious. Libraries that want to be active in their mission to serve the public good need to formulate a robust

definition of what that means, and be willing to engage with and stand up for that mission when it is questioned.

References

Ahlfeld, K. (2019). They Paved Paradise: School Librarians and School Libraries Are Disappearing and We Won't Know What We've Lost Until It's Gone. *Journal of Library Administration*, 59(8), 927–938. <https://doi-org.dom.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/01930826.2019.1661747>

Berry, John N. (2018) Libraries: A Public Good. *Library Journal*, 143(14), 10.
<https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=LJx180901blatant>

Birdsall, W. F. (2001). A political economy of librarianship? *Progressive Librarian*, 18, 1–8. <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/PL/PL18/001.pdf>

Burns, Jasmine E. (2018) Information as Capital: The Commodification of Archives and Library Labor. *VRA Bulletin*, Vol. 45, Iss. 1, Article 9.
<https://online.vraweb.org/index.php/vrab/article/view/30>

Buschman, J. (2017). Core Values, Bad Faith, and Democracy. *Library Quarterly*, 87(3), pp. 277–286. <https://doi-org.dom.idm.oclc.org/10.1086/692305>

Ellenwood, D. (2020). “Information Has Value”: The Political Economy of Information Capitalism. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*.
<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2020/information-has-value-the-political-economy-of-information-capitalism/>

Gerolami, N. (2018). Taming the Mob: The Early Public Library and the Creation of Good Citizens. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library & Information Practice & Research*, 13(1), 1–15. <https://doi-org.dom.idm.oclc.org/10.21083/partnership.v13i1.3985>

Halperin, J. R. (2020). The Library Commons: An Imagination and an Invocation. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2020/the-library-commons/>

Harissis, S. (2017). The Fight for Public Library Funding: Demonstrate Value or Demonstrate in the Streets? *Progressive Librarian*, 46, 5–11. <http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/PL/PL46/005harissis.pdf>

Huzar, Tim (2014) Neoliberalism, Democracy and the Library as a Radically Inclusive Space. Paper presented at: *IFLA WLIC 2014 - Lyon - Libraries, Citizens, Societies: Confluence for Knowledge in Session 200 - Library Theory and Research*. <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/835>

Lachenmayer, D. (2018). Let It Flow: The Monopolization of Academic Content Providers and How It Threatens the Democratization of Information. *Serials Librarian*,

75(1–4), 70–80. <https://doi-org.dom.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/0361526X.2018.1556189>

Seale, M. (2016). Compliant Trust: The Public Good and Democracy in the ALA's "Core Values of Librarianship." *Library Trends*, 64(3), 585–603. <https://doi-org.dom.idm.oclc.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0003>

Trosow, S. E. (2014). The Commodification of Information and the Public Good. *Progressive Librarian*, 43, 17–29.

<http://www.progressivelibrariansguild.org/PL/PL43/017.pdf>