

The Vibrant Library

By Elena Stuart

I like the word “library”. It is warm and capacious and it has passed through centuries. A “*Library*” is traditionally a collection of books used for reading or study, or the building or room in which such a collection is kept. The word derives from the Latin *liber*, “book.” Thus, a library is an institution which holds books and/or other forms of stored information for use by certain people. It is the usual, but not the defining feature of a library, but it also includes the lending of items from its collection to members either with or without payment, and provides various other services for its community of users. This simplistic definition doesn’t do justice to the role that libraries have had in history and need to have now.

Historically, as noted by Harris and Johnson not all societies can have libraries as they require a centralized population, economic development, and a political stability. Libraries cannot exist in nomadic conditions, because they demand a settled population around something stable. Libraries require a certain level of wealth and leisure to read and cannot survive in a subsistence society. And finally, libraries cannot flourish in revolutionary times or political chaos. Many great libraries have been destroyed after the fall of empires or during wars. The greatest example is the Alexandrian Great Library that suffered badly from pillaging and destruction after the decline of the Greek Empire. Another example is the Nineveh library established by Assyrian king Assurbanipal. Murray wrote that after his death and weakening of the Assyrian empire “Nineveh was attacked and destroyed, its people massacred, the city razed to the ground, and a great fire ravaged the library”.

During all times the libraries were a key repository and communicator of a society’s culture and values. Over the centuries the library evolved and adapted to the times accomplishing a lot of different missions. These have included maintaining 1) a records archive mission of the earliest libraries, 2) a religious and practical mission of Egyptian libraries, or 3) a mission of personal status and public use of the Roman libraries among others. Contemporary missions include providing information, supporting

Comment [K1]: You need to provide a more complete reference to the book or article where Harris and Johnson made this point (i.e., a footnote or in-text citation that indicates the page, if available).

education or supporting teaching and research. Thus, they have continued to fulfill a prominent role in the evolution and civilization of a people.

Today the library science profession and libraries have been hit with a fundamental change in how information is collected and retained, but the mere change in the type of repository should not change the fundamental purpose of a library. The future of libraries and librarians is discussed in the context of computers and the Internet. Librarians and libraries are redefining their roles and functions to meet the moving developments and changes. I do not think that libraries and our profession as a whole are under threat. Computers and the Internet are valuable instruments that enhance the librarian's abilities. "More than ever, librarians are expected to provide "information services", related to computers and the Internet. Sorting through the vast amount of electronic data, and understanding how to access it, requires knowledgeable, trained professionals in the library or media center" (Murray).

The benefit from the power of the computer for the contemporary librarian is significant, as inter-library loan searches are easier than ever before – and so is maintaining the catalog. I think librarians are experiencing increased job satisfaction thanks to the work they can get done using computers and other technologies. Particularly in small libraries, the role of the librarian as "technology provider and community educator" is more essential than ever.

The Internet can stimulate a reader's interest in digging deeper into the subject even though many books will be available on desktops or handheld screens. A lot of printed materials will never be digitized, but patrons will be able to find them in library stacks with the help of a librarian who will guide them to what they are searching for. My deep conviction is that "the search engine has not replaced the librarian". Murray also noted that "librarians are needed to help patrons distinguish between authoritative sources of information and the vast quantities of unmediated materials available on the Net". Ainsworth Rand Spofford, the sixth librarian in the Library of Congress, a hundred years ago said that the librarian must be able to "lead inquirers in the way they should go, and to be to all who seek... assistance a guide, philosopher, and a friend".

Now there is the debate over the role of the library. What is more important library science or information science, or the library or the information center? The purpose of a library and the purpose of the information science profession are fundamentally different. The library is an educational institution that encourages reading, literacy, and the diffusion of cultural values and where librarians are educators. We should not forget that the library accomplishes the preservation of cultural heritage for future generations. Wiegand said that the library serves as a “cultural agency in the everyday life experience of ordinary people”. To abandon the term library would be to abandon the purpose and function of the library science profession in society and contribute to the weakening of that culture and society. Information science professionals cannot presume to fulfill the functions that only librarians can do. Winter underlined that librarians classify knowledge to organize it, index knowledge to access it, and they understand the formal and informal organization of knowledge that could be very complicated. Thus, this is “convincing evidence that librarianship is indeed a profession, for these functions cannot be accomplished without considerable knowledge and training, both theoretical and practical”.

Comment [K2]: Nice tie in of the Wiegand article. (You should have a page citation or footnote here.)

This major impact of information technologies and change that the library profession has experienced over the past couple of decades does call for the reexamination of how professionals define and perform their duties. However, this change in technology imposes on the profession a need to effectively communicate the purpose that a library performs in maintaining a society and culture. We have seen what happens in history when libraries were restricted and know through historical evidence the consequences when libraries are destroyed. Certainly the barbarians of history made library destruction a central point in conquest and in the last century we have seen the corruption of Germany resulting from book burning and the restriction of information. The same can be said of the Russian experience when the Soviet leadership insisted on severe censorship in support of the State.

The term “library” is not passé, but it is in a state of change and the profession needs leaders who can clearly define its role, purpose and value to a society. If the profession does not define its role, purpose or cultural value, but permits others (technicians) to do it who do not understand the importance of a library for society then the society will be weakened.

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Elena,

You present a useful historical context for exploring the issue about the relevance of the term "library."

Your references to the readings (and other sources) are particularly effective. Although you focus in on the central debate near the end of your paper, more attention to the main issue in the first half of your paper would strengthen your position and discussion.

Karen

GRADE: 7 points