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# Louder please: how library history can help us claim our future

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Caught up in a changing information environment, pressured to keep up with new technology and to catch up with the for-profit sector, librarians find it difficult to look back. Practitioners have little time to reflect on their profession's past. Programs in library and information science have little space for library history in an already crowded curriculum. Nevertheless, an understanding of the history of our institutions and the work of our predecessors is essential to our profession's identity and continued strength. Lacking historical perspective, we may not understand what is unique and important about the work of libraries and librarians and may be poorly equipped to distinguish librarians from other, more newly minted, information professionals. An extended discussion of the use of 'librarian' versus 'information professional' on JESSE, the listserv of library educators, demonstrated the power of the name we assume. It may be understandable that the general public is unaware of our history but less excusable when we ourselves are ignorant of our past.

My research into the history of American librarianship from 1926 to 1956 examines an era of social and technological change in which librarians struggled to define their role amidst competition from new media and information providers – challenges much like those we face today. This period witnessed the transformation of America from a rural to an urban and suburban nation, the economic dislocation of the Depression, the political upheavals of World War II and the Cold War, and the growing popularity of film, radio and television. For librarians, the period is bracketed by the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the American Library Association (ALA) in 1926 and the passage of the Library Services Act, by the U.S. Congress in 1956. In examining the historical record I ask how librarians met those challenges and, in my courses, I use examples to demonstrate the readiness of librarians to respond to social change, adopt new technologies and engage in the major issues facing their communities.

Over these three decades, librarians developed a professional voice of outreach and advocacy, using the latest means of communication to reach the broadest possible audience. This history provides the *identity* we require to counter the *image* of our profession devised by others.

## Sticking to our last

A traditional view of librarianship was famously stated by Judson T. Jennings, director of the Seattle, Washington, Public Library, in his presidential address at the American Library Association conference in 1924. In remarks entitled 'Sticking to Our Last,' Jennings expressed concern that the missionary spirit of librarians and their strong desire to be of service had led libraries to undertake many activities beyond their central purpose. As Jennings saw it,

Libraries are operating art galleries, maintaining museums, giving lecture courses, operating community centers, and collecting lantern slides. Others install a stage with scenery and drops for dramatics, a moving-picture machine,

or a banquet room with facilities for serving large groups. Still others hold exhibitions of various kinds.<sup>1</sup>

Recounting the accumulation of wildlife specimens and music scores in his own library, Jennings argued 'First, that library work deals primarily with books and reading – *with print*. Our special function is to make the best in print available to every man so that our libraries will be recognized as making a generous contribution toward a better civilization. Until this is done – and done thoroughly, completely, and well – we shall have neither time nor funds for other things and we betray our trust if we use our funds for other things.' Further, he declared, the legitimacy of every library undertaking should be measured by 'its relation to the primary function of promoting reading.'<sup>2</sup>

## Competitors

As Jennings spoke, librarianship, both in theory and in practice, was already moving beyond an inclusive focus on print resources and the promotion of reading. His remarks might have been directed at the Newark, New Jersey, Public Library where its director, John Cotton Dana, probably the best known public librarian of the day, had done all the things Jennings deplored and with great success. Even library pioneer Melvil Dewey was not wedded to the book as the icon of librarianship. During these years, Dewey and other library leaders warned of the increasing competition libraries faced, not just from new media, but from other professional groups and government agencies. At the ALA's 50th anniversary observance, Dewey declared that 'the book is not sacred' and, referring to movies and radio, warned that 'the enemies of the book and reading grow apace'. He urged librarians to 'give to the public in the quickest and cheapest way information and recreation in the highest plane',<sup>3</sup> in whatever medium was most efficient.

Ten years later, American Library Association president, Louis Round Wilson, lamented that cooperative extension agents of the United States Department of Agriculture, not librarians, were using radio broadcasts to reach rural audiences not served by libraries, that public schools, not libraries, were hosting federally funded public forums nationwide, and that university departments of education, not library schools, were training the leaders of the adult education movement. In the late 1940s, the Public Library Inquiry suggested that libraries cede further ground by leaving the provision of popular material to commercial outlets like drugstores and rental libraries.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Judson T. Jennings. 'Sticking to Our Last,' *Library Journal* 49 (June 1924): 614. Jennings went on to say, 'In going about my own library, I have at different times found exhibits of dolls, or embroidery, or bird houses, or even a collection of dead birds, each poor little carcass neatly labeled with its epitaph. We are all interested in music. It is one of the cultural arts and our libraries contain many books about music. But why stop here, we have said. Why not buy and lend music scores; this is print, tho a different language. And so we buy the scores, and then we add music rolls and phonograph records. And next we install pianos and victrolas in order that Mrs. Music Lover may test one of Harry Lauder's masterpieces before she makes the mistake of taking it home. Perhaps we have gone too far in some of these things; on the other hand some we argue we have not gone far enough. Since our libraries lend cook books, should we not provide cook stoves in order that the anxious young housewife may test Mrs. Farmer's recipes before borrowing her delectable book? Since we have laboratories for dramatics, should we not also install laboratories for chemists, machine shops for mechanics, drafting rooms for engineers and architects, and studios for artists?' Frederick Keppel, president of the Carnegie Corporation, depicted exactly this vision of the public library as community center in his reflection, 'Looking Forward, A Fantasy,' in *The Library of the Tomorrow*, edited by Emily Miller Danton. Chicago: American Library Association, 1939, pp. 1-11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Melvil Dewey, 'Next Half-Century,' *Library Journal* 51 (15 October 1926): 888.

<sup>4</sup> Funded by the Carnegie Corporation and conducted by the Social Science Research Center, the Public Library Inquiry delved into the governance, funding, and role of public libraries in the United States.

## Invisible, overlooked, underestimated

Despite their growing numbers during this period and increased activity, especially in adult education and library extension, librarians often felt invisible, overlooked and underestimated, even by library supporters and sympathizers.

In 1934, ALA president Gratia Countryman criticized the omission of libraries from *Recent Social Trends in the United States*, a mammoth study of American life commissioned by President Herbert Hoover and published in 1933.<sup>5</sup> She described the personally embarrassing experience of being left out of lists of participating agencies in some public activity, not because our services were not appreciated but because public officials or leaders did not think of us. ... What have we done or not done that this can be so? Why is it that we have not impressed ourselves, as an important and essential institution, upon the governing body or upon intelligent authors and scholars? Is it in the very nature of our work that it should be so, or is it in ourselves?<sup>6</sup>

At the ALA conference in 1936, adult education leader Lyman Bryson declared, 'I am not sure that librarians have thought out and defined what the unique contribution of the library is or that they have worked out the techniques which will enable them to fulfill that unique function.'<sup>7</sup> In his text *Adult Education*, published in that year by the American Association for Adult Education, Bryson relegated libraries to a late chapter on 'Other Agencies'.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of these challenges, librarians became activists, lobbyists and publicists, terms that our students and the public often do not associate with our profession. By extending the reach and broadening the support of library service, employing new technologies, and taking a stand on social issues, librarians from 1926 to 1956 honed the same entrepreneurial and advocacy skills required in today's competitive information environment. In the process they redefined librarianship. Three examples from this period demonstrate how librarians developed a stronger professional voice and a new concept of their profession.<sup>9</sup>

## Extending the reach of library service

Because libraries traditionally depended on local efforts and tax revenues, in the mid-1920s half the population of the United States still lived in areas without library service. In response, librarians, library trustees and interested laymen became library advocates and publicists. To secure library funding from local property taxes, librarians lobbied state legislatures for enabling legislation to make such taxes possible and then convinced local governments to impose them. In 1923, ALA published *Materials and Plans for a County Library Campaign* that included what were called 'roll your own' press releases and news stories. Library

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Its landmark volumes included Bernard Berelson & Lester Asheim, *The Public Library's Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949) and Robert D. Leigh, *The Public Library in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949).

<sup>5</sup> *Recent Social Trends in the United States*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1933.

<sup>6</sup> Gratia Countryman, 'Building for the Future,' *ALA Bulletin* 28 (July 1934): 386.

<sup>7</sup> Marion E. Hawes. 'The Richmond Conference: Adult Education Round Table,' *Wilson Bulletin for Librarians* 10 (June 1936): 647, 691; Marion E. Hawes, 'Richmond Conference: Adult Education Round Table,' *Library Journal* 61 (15 June 1936): 488.

<sup>8</sup> Lyman Bryson, *Adult Education*, New York: American Book Company, 1936, pp. 176-181.

<sup>9</sup> The title of this article, 'Louder Please,' comes from the name of the conference newsletter at the 1936 ALA annual meeting held in Richmond, Virginia. It was the first such conference publication, and the name, for me, captures the way in which librarians during this period sought to make themselves heard.

advocates could fill in the blanks and submit them to local newspapers to stimulate interest in community library services.<sup>10</sup>

Increasingly, however, the American Library Association came to see library support as a state and national issue. In 1936, the association undertook a sustained campaign for federal aid to support rural library service, a two-decade quest that provides a powerful model of activist librarianship. Propaganda pieces such as *The Equal Chance*, published by ALA, demonstrated the unequal basis for library funding that kept rural, southern states far behind other parts of the country in per capita spending and book circulation. Librarians during this period redefined the public library's community, demonstrating the way in which rural and urban areas were connected and how the lack of library service in one region affected the entire nation.<sup>11</sup>

When the Library Services Act was finally passed in 1956, it not only provided the long sought demonstration funding for rural library service, but also established an important precedent. As the 'temporary' measure was subsequently reauthorized at four-year intervals, it encompassed library construction, library service to underserved urban populations, and library technology. In the mid-1990s, Congress approved a discounted rate for telecommunications connectivity providing a means for poor, isolated communities to connect to the Internet. Librarians need to know that their forbears who campaigned for rural library service devised the rationale for this expanded information access in the electronic age.

## Using new technologies

While some librarians regarded films and radio as distractions or threats, many others enthusiastically greeted new technologies and used them to expand and promote library service. Even as Judson Jennings bemoaned library collections that included music scores and worried that libraries one day might have pianos and victrolas, librarians were creating a new and larger audience through film and radio. In the 1930s, library radio broadcasts and librarian broadcasters were common. At ALA meetings, interviews with conference speakers and local luminaries were first transmitted regionally and then coast-to-coast, starting in 1936 on a National Broadcasting Company hook-up. Librarians used radio broadcasts of such programs as 'Town Meeting of the Air' as the focus for discussion groups held in libraries, and librarians like Jennie Flexner at the New York Public Library provided reading lists for listeners. Librarians broadcast book reviews and author interviews to promote both reading and library usage.

As part of the adult education movement, librarians were quick to seize the potential of film. In the mid-1920s, before 'talkies', librarians promoted book and movie tie-ins. The Cleveland, Ohio, Public Library pioneered the use of bookmarks linking motion pictures with the novels on which they were based. These bookmarks were placed in theaters to promote library usage and in libraries to promote motion picture attendance. Librarians urged Hollywood producers to retain the original book title for the film version to help patrons make the connection between print and film.<sup>12</sup> *Library Journal* regularly listed books with their motion picture counterparts, and in 1935 the H. W. Wilson Company brought out a *Motion*

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<sup>10</sup> Forrest B. Spaulding, *Materials and Plans for a County Library Campaign*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1923.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, Marion A. Wright, 'The Citizens Library Movement,' *ALA Bulletin* 30 (July 1936): 530-533.

<sup>12</sup> Marilla W. Freeman, 'Inviting the Movie Fans to Read,' *Publishers' Weekly* 105 (17 May 1924): 1577-1580; Marilla W. Freeman, 'Tying Up with the Movies: Why? When? How?' *Library Journal* 54 (15 June 1929): 519-524.

*Picture Review Digest* of movie reviews comparable to the *Book Review Digest*.<sup>13</sup> Librarians even produced their own films to promote the library (the most famous being the film about rural bookmobile service in the Fraser Valley of Canada).

In Kentucky, the Louisville Free Public Library assembled a multimedia collection in the late 1940s with major collections of Long Playing records, radio transcriptions, and educational films, framed reproductions of famous paintings. The library had a 'network of wires' to its branches and schools to carry music and radio shows. When television was new and still too expensive for most families, librarian Clarence Graham put a television set in the library lobby so patrons could experience this new medium. In 1950, the Louisville Free Public Library launched its own FM radio station and shortly thereafter won a Peabody Award for broadcasting excellence.<sup>14</sup>

These pioneering efforts to provide information in all formats provide powerful analogies to our thinking about access to information in an electronic age. In 1949, Mary Utopia Rothrock, librarian of the Tennessee Valley Authority and former president of ALA, wrote of the role of audiovisual materials in language equally applicable to electronic information today.

Audiovisual materials can never take the place of books, of course. They should not be thought of as devices for building up the circulation of books. They are useful in themselves, but not for stimulating much more reading of library books. Neither should they be used merely to divert with sound and motion. Their function is purposeful communication. Wisely used they can enrich the library's book services by supplementing them. They can take information and ideas to large numbers of people whom books are not reaching. By increasing the volume and intensity of the library's services they can multiply its community contacts and increase its effectiveness.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the long popularity of films and other audiovisual materials in libraries, this aspect of library history has failed to capture public understanding. Libraries continue to be characterized as repositories of books, even by people who know better. With the coming of the Internet and World Wide Web, some commentators and scholars doubted the continued viability of books and libraries. Meanwhile, librarians went to court to argue that the First Amendment protection that applied to print should govern the Internet as well. As one of the plaintiffs challenging the Communications Decency Act of 1996, the American Library Association joined its practice of providing information in diverse formats with its commitment to free speech in a successful effort to secure the greatest possible access to information on the Internet.<sup>16</sup>

## **Taking a stand**

Events during this period also called into question the traditional view of librarians as neutral information providers who help library patrons become informed citizens and promote democracy while muting their own voice. As community members, however, libraries are also affected by issues and may act, or fail to act, as corporate citizens. When ALA took a position on race discrimination in the mid-1930s, it helped define what we mean by a 'library issue.'

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<sup>13</sup> 'Moving with the Movies,' *ALA Bulletin*, 30 (April 1936): 279-280.

<sup>14</sup> 'Louisville's Library,' *Newsweek*, (6 March 1950): 79-80.

<sup>15</sup> Mary U. Rothrock, 'Wings of Thought,' *Library Journal* 74 (March 1949): 458.

<sup>16</sup> *Reno v. ACLU*, 521 U.S. 150 (1997). The case struck down the portion of the Act that applied to the Internet a decency standard regulating the broadcast media rather than First Amendment protections governing a free press.

In 1936 the American Library Association met in Richmond, Virginia, a southern city that had been the capital of the Confederacy during the Civil War. State and local segregation laws meant that white and African American librarians could not eat together in restaurants, stay in the same hotel, or sit in the same part of the auditorium when the conference met for General Sessions. ALA had acquiesced in these terms, noting that it was only mealtime functions that would be affected, but as at many professional conferences, much of the real business was transacted over lunch or dinner or at the many receptions and social events built into the conference program. Before the conference, and then with gathering intensity, ALA members, both white and black, protested. Stanley Kunitz, editor of the *Wilson Bulletin for Librarians*, directed his anger at the apparent contradiction between such insulting racial restrictions and ALA's professed values.

If you permit this organized insult to pass unchallenged, there is but one conclusion to be made: that American librarians do not, in their hearts, care for democracy or for the foundation principles of decent and enlightened institutions. No elegant platform phrases of devotion to the idea of a free and equal society or to the theory of liberty can be sufficient to obviate that conclusion.<sup>17</sup>

In response, at its next Mid-winter Meeting, the ALA Council resolved not to meet in cities where discriminatory laws would be imposed. Its policy stated that

In all rooms and hotels assigned to the American Library Association hereafter for use in connection with its conference or otherwise under its control, all members shall be admitted upon terms of full equality.<sup>18</sup>

As a result, the American Library Association did not hold another conference in a city of the Deep South until 1956, after the United States Supreme Court ruled that segregation laws violated the U.S. Constitution.

Librarians since have struggled to define what constitutes a 'library issue.' In 1991, a similar controversy arose when the Association of College and Research Libraries was to meet in Phoenix, Arizona. When the state voted down a holiday in honour of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., ACRL, as part of its commitment to diversity, resolved to move elsewhere. But when it selected Salt Lake City, Utah, as the alternative site, feminist members protested the state's restrictions on information of interest to women. In the aftermath of this controversy, ACRL in 1993 adopted a three-part test to determine when, in deliberating social, political and economic issues, the ACRL board should take action.<sup>19</sup> Amazingly, in a debate at the 2004 ALA Conference about whether ALA should take a stand on issues such as the war in Iraq, neither speaker cited these criteria.<sup>20</sup> In overlooking them as a useful analytic tool, they also ignored the way in which a part of ALA itself had already thoughtfully addressed this dilemma in the not-too-distant past.

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<sup>17</sup> Stanley J. Kunitz. 'The Spectre at Richmond,' *Wilson Bulletin for Librarians* 10 (May 1936): 592-593.

<sup>18</sup> 'Report of the Committee on Racial Discrimination,' *ALA Bulletin* 31 (January 1937): 37-38.

<sup>19</sup> 'ACRL Adopts Policy on Social Issues,' [press release] ALA Press Room, ALA Public Information Office, Colorado Convention Center, January 1993. See also ACRL, General Policy Statements 12.13 Social Issues. The three-part test includes whether the issue is of fundamental professional importance, whether it is identified as consistent with the mission and goals of ACRL's long-range plan, and whether the issue is one for which the Association is recognized as an authoritative and knowledgeable source by both its members and the national community.

<sup>20</sup> 'Opposition to Iraq War Pervades ALA in Orlando: Member Meetings Fall Short – Again,' *American Libraries* 35 (August 2004): 66-67.

In the decades between 1926 and 1956, librarians, through practice, came to a fuller understanding of what is unique and important about their profession. Confronted with large areas unserved by libraries, they saw that deficient local service had an impact on the nation as a whole. Seeking federal funds for public library service, they expanded their definition of community beyond locality to state and nation. As new technologies were introduced, they embraced them, expanding the library's realm to include information in the latest formats and using them to promote library usage. Confounded by segregation laws that affected the rights of its own members, the American Library Association adopted a policy in opposition, abandoning a neutral stance and changing the boundaries of 'library issue'.

We librarians ignore our past at our peril. Librarians need to understand how their profession derives its identity from the efforts of their forbears to extend service to meet community needs, adopt new technologies, and take principled stands on societal issues affecting libraries. Recent funding to bring Internet connectivity to rural areas, litigation to secure full First Amendment rights in an electronic environment, and protest to change the sites of library conferences build on these precedents. Librarians are continually in the process of defining their profession through practice. As a profession, we need to adopt an identity distinct from the timid book-bound librarian image of story and film. The current stand of librarians against the USA PATRIOT Act, which allows law enforcement officials expanded access to library records, has elicited a surprised public response. But no-one who has studied the development of the professional voice of librarians should be surprised. This is our history. We need to know, celebrate and share it if librarianship is to retain a claim to the future.

