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Technological Change, Universal Access,  
and the End of the Library

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# Technological Change, Universal Access, and the End of the Library

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What should libraries be doing? This seems like an innocent question. But answering this question requires a certain kind of thinking, a certain kind of philosophizing, that generally does not occur in library and information science (LIS). LIS does not lend itself to philosophizing, some think; they say we are better off without it. This may be the case with some branches of philosophy, but political philosophy, particularly classical political philosophy, offers a useful and necessary approach to thinking about libraries, especially if we want to justify rationally their constitution and actions. The Classics thought of social institutions in terms of their goals. This seems fairly straightforward, but is actually quite foreign to most modern political discourse. Thinking about institutions in this way requires asking the questions: what is the final goal of the library; the end toward which we aim? How does this end conform to the larger end of education, society, and government? Classical political philosophy offers librarians a useful tool to critique the goals of libraries as social institutions. In what follows, I will develop the idea of classical political philosophy as a useful resource for a philosophy of librarianship and use that philosophical resource to critique two recurring motifs in the field: the call for constant technological change in libraries and universal access to information as the goal of libraries.

## Teleology and the Philosophy of Librarianship

Zwadlo (1997: 103) argued several years ago that "we don't need a philosophy of library and information science." Near the end of his essay, Zwadlo reaches a conclusion that goes against any larger criticism of philosophy. He asserts that "librarians should use methods that work, that serve the ends of the library, its users, and the community, instead of trying to justify privileged claims to truth" (p. 106). I agree for the most part with this statement, but wonder whether such a seemingly modest goal can be achieved without some philosophizing. How do we know our methods work if we do not know our goal? What are, for example, the "ends of the library"? How do we know what they are? How can we achieve them? We cannot have a philosophy of the library unless we can answer these questions. These are questions for political philosophy, in particular classical political philosophy.

Modern political philosophy rejected classical philosophy for the most part because of the classical insistence that we begin moral and political philosophizing with the end or goal of life (in Greek the telos, hence this view is teleological), in particular with the best end of life. In the *Physics*, Aristotle explains the world according to four aitia or "causes"; the formal "cause" is "the definition of the essence...and the parts in the definition," while the final cause is the "end or that for the sake of which a thing is done." Teleological thinking conflates the formal and final causes; as J.L. Ackrill puts it, "what a thing is is what it is for." In political philosophy, we can explain what we do in reference to our goals. "Every art and every inquiry," Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics*, "and similarly every action and choice, is thought to

aim at some good, and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim." And, as he says in the *Politics*, "every community is established with a view to some good." If we apply this teleological approach to the regime of the library, part at least of any philosophy of the library must include thinking about the telos or end of the library. We must ask and try to answer the question: what is the end of the library?

Teleological moral and political philosophy has fallen out of favor in modern times. Whereas Aristotle argues that "man is by nature a political animal" because humans "cannot exist without each other," and that the state originates "in the bare needs of life" and continues "for the sake of the good," Thomas Hobbes, one of the earliest modern political philosophers, begins his political philosophy in the "desire for self-preservation," which he uses to establish the priority of the individual over society, in effect concluding that in the "state of nature" the individual lived without society, which the classics believed was nonsense. While this view has its own problems, Alisdair MacIntyre demonstrates more problems with modern moral debate because of this shift. MacIntyre argues that under the classical Aristotelian moral scheme, moral discourse made sense because it took place within a three-part framework—1) a conception of human nature as it is, 2) a conception of human nature as it would be if it realized its telos, and 3) a set of virtues educating humans about how to reach this telos. The Enlightenment revolt against Aristotelian natural science with its teleological explanations of natural phenomena also abandoned the teleological conception of human nature, which left us with a conception of human nature as it is, and with a moral language that had originated in a different context, and was no longer rationally justifiable. The Enlightenment project, in MacIntyre's view, tried to rationally justify this moral language, but failed. Hence the modern moral standpoint described earlier. These criticisms of modern moral and political philosophy make persuasive arguments for teleological thinking as a way to escape certain problems of the modern moral standpoint, and I am using these arguments for teleological thinking to bolster my claim that philosophizing about the library and particularly about what libraries should be doing requires thinking about the end of the library.

## Technological Change: The Library as Means with No End

Teleological thinking helps bring into relief some of the problems and issues of library and information science. More importantly, in certain issues of LIS the absence of teleological thinking causes problems. When we do not address political problems teleologically, we may confuse means and ends, and ignore ends altogether. Without thinking of the end of the library, losing ourselves in the maelstrom of technological change, for example, becomes much easier. We can easily dwell exclusively on means and method without considering at what our means and methods aim.

This very problem occurs in some of the calls for radical change often forthcoming in the field of librarianship. The latest trend is probably something like "Library 2.0," but one of my favorites is a decade old, though its rhetoric never stales. Stoffle, et al. (1997) assert that "academic libraries must undergo transformational change or risk" losing importance to their institutions. They put forward their call for change in ringing tones. Libraries must "undergo radical, revolutionary organizational change" if they are going to compete in "the global, knowledge-based society of the twenty-first century." "Every assumption," they assert, every "task, activity, relationship, and/or structure has to be challenged." "Academic libraries must change--fundamentally and irreversibly...and these changes need to come quickly." I could probably find dozens of examples of this type of change rhetoric, but I hope this one will suffice just for example. In considering calls for change like this, we should always consider the end of the library.

They believe that academic libraries must change because social pressures "create a highly dynamic environment where customer expectation and demographics...are changing...,"

forcing corresponding institutional changes. Customers are increasingly demanding." This might seem to imply that the end of the library is to satisfy "customer" needs, presumably those of the students and faculty in the case of academic libraries, which would then require us to consider just what it is that they need, what is good for them, rather than necessarily what they want. But no, the problem is that "the return on investment from both tuition and state appropriations is seen as insufficient" (by whom they do not say), and even, God forbid, "corporate America also is complaining about the quality of college graduates." While they disparage what education is now, they have little conception of what education should be, except that "improved outcomes and decreased costs" will come if faculty will just "use the new technologies to improve learning while reducing costs." One wonders if the educated persons of the past would have learned more with "the new technologies." Would a computer have benefited the students at Plato's academy? Will applying the new technologies really "improve outcomes"? What are the outcomes that we want? The application of technology to education is treated as an end in itself, and as the solution to all problems, and education itself is narrowly conceived essentially as training for a vocation, and preferably those vocations that "society needs."

Education is partly training for a vocation, but it is more than that. Those who have no adequate conception of the end of education can have no adequate conception of the end of the academic library, which surely is to support the end of education. If libraries radically and fundamentally change, and if higher education just as fundamentally changes, what will they change into, and will their new constitution be good—for the students, for the professors, for the librarians, for society, or for that matter even for corporate America?

I agree with Stoffle, et al., that the good for the country and for the society should determine the good of the library. "If all communities aim at some good, the state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good." But they demonstrate no concern with what is the good for society or for the library. If the library does not adopt new technologies and quickly, it will disappear. But what if the technological changes are not good, for the library, education, or society? Or what if only certain changes are good? They do not think this way. They think that because we have rapid social changes, the library and education should automatically change with them, but they do not ask if these are good changes. They argue that the library needs to adapt quickly to social pressures, which just defers the question of whether the social pressures are worthwhile or unsavory. Evaluative distinctions, such as good or bad, have little rational justification in this context, except where they are related to the ends of the library. The new technology inundating America is a tool, and tools are useful only if they have purposes, but Stoffle et al. treat technological change almost as if it was good in itself. But missing from this call for change is the question—toward what should we be aiming?

## **Universal Access to Information: the End of the Library?**

As another example of a teleological investigation, I want to consider briefly a proposition that some take to be the end of the library, the proposition that libraries should provide free access to all information to all persons all of the time. I call this the Universal Access Principle (UAP), and it seems obvious that this principle provides the profession with an ideal. Even though this may seem an impossible ideal, it is shared by many librarians. Consider Ranganathan's laws of every book its reader and every reader his or her book as instances of this principle. Or consider the American Library Association (ALA) "Mission Statement" that the work of the association and librarians is "to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all." According to the ALA, the goal of libraries is to ensure access to information. Which information? I do not think I am reading too much into the statement to say that it implies, ideally, all information.

Traditionally, large libraries focused on “systematic and comprehensive acquisition,” but as the growth of libraries in the twentieth century has made comprehensive collection impossible, there has been an increased emphasis on “access and use.” The focus on intellectual freedom of the ALA is part of the “prevailing philosophy of librarians in the West, to whom the freedom to read [is] the most cherished right in a democratic society.” The opening clauses of the “Library Bill of Rights” imply that universal access to information is the goal of American libraries: “Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves.... Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues.” All people. All points of view. How is this possible without some sort of Universal Access Principle?

But, is the UAP really a worthwhile end? It cannot be justified practically in any library, and it would seem capable of theoretical justification only in certain types of libraries. Though the UAP is considered an ethical principle, it seems sometimes to be less an ethical choice than the evasion of ethical choice. Also, though it may be offered as an end in the sense in which I have been discussing, it stops too short to actually provide an end to the library in a larger sense.

Obviously, the UAP is impractical, though I do not consider this necessarily to be a flaw. But its impracticality is worth pointing out. No library can provide access, free or otherwise, to all persons of all information all the time. For one, there is no such thing as free access. Someone always pays for information, and the belief that it is free is an illusion. Those who argue that this should be funded by the federal government if local governments cannot afford it merely defer the ultimate reckoning. Should a public library bankrupt itself in a quixotic attempt to provide this illusory universal access? No sensible person would argue that it should, and no public library does. Libraries make community-based decisions on what information patrons will be able to access.

Is the UAP theoretically justifiable? I think not. Is it rationally justifiable to support a principle that would allow psychotic murderers to find out cheap and easy ways to prepare nail bombs? Or allow children to view pictures of people having sex with animals? Some might say these are extreme cases, but extreme cases test a theory. One could certainly justify these examples in the name of intellectual freedom and library access, and indeed some librarians might say that libraries should indeed provide this kind of “information.” But for the purposes of argument, I’ll consider them the extremists. Karl Popper argues that a theory is scientific if one can show under what conditions it would be falsified. I think any of the above cases might falsify the UAP. Academic libraries move closest to providing a justification of the UAP, especially with an Aristotelian approach. Aristotle believed that the proper end of human life was acting according to the best in human nature, and the best in human nature was reason, which separated us from other animals. Hence, the best life was that dedicated to reason, and to the theoretical contemplation of all that is. This ideal of the contemplative life justifies in many respects the university, though the university does not always live up to the ideal. Nevertheless, some argument such as this could show the UAP’s validity in academic libraries.

Outside of this academic context, the UAP has little justification as an ethical choice. It has no positive value, and instead defers the question of value to individual persons, most of whom do not have the contemplative life as an ideal. This deferral may not be a bad thing, but it does evade ethical and evaluative questions. Is it a good thing for everyone to have access to all information all the time, or even most information most of the time? Why is it good? What benefits do we gain? A case can easily be made for public libraries providing news and political and historical information, some entertainment materials, and some thoughtful reading, but not for them providing all information.

The UAP seems like an end, but it is not in the sense I am discussing. It would finally have to be grounded in a larger political philosophy with a positive end, if it were to adhere to the classical approach. But instead the UAP is more akin to radical libertarianism and the hyperindividualism implicit in much modern political discourse. This is MacIntyre's modern moral standpoint, a type of politics that cannot make decisions about what is good, because it believes that such decisions cannot be made. Thus we leave the field open, and just try to keep people from hurting each other. We leave the choices as wide as possible. If one person wants to nurse the sick, and another person wants to get drunk and pass out on the sidewalk, hey, that's okay, because we have no way to say one is good or one is bad. The UAP applies the same logic to information access: political information, news, pornography, it's really all the same. If we had a way to determine something is good and something is bad, we could make choices on what information is worthwhile, and what is not. But since we cannot make such a choice, we must leave the access completely open, at least in principle.

But the UAP does not just advocate leaving information free, in the sense that no one is stopping people from accessing the information. The UAP requires that the access be funded; it makes a positive assertion about a negative goal. The belief underlying the UAP allows for no evaluative choices, and yet it is used to justify an evaluative choice--i.e., that citizens should be taxed to support this principle. It is founded upon a radical ethical relativism, asserting that we have no way to decide what is good or bad, and thus we must let individuals decide for themselves, but then it decides for them. Specifically, it decides for the citizens that it is good for them to underwrite ethical relativism, and then, in the name of this relativism, attacks people for having any ethical principles and for not adhering to nihilistic individualism.

Some would argue that this individualism is the foundation of liberal democracy, that our country is founded upon the principle that people must be free to do what they like as long as they do not harm other people, and that they must give a share of the government because no one can decide better what people want (need?) than the people themselves. This political principle assumes a radical moral relativism, and I'm not sure this is really the foundation of our country. Regardless, answering in this way again merely defers the questions. If this radically individualistic and relativistic version of liberal democracy does provide the foundation for our country, is this good? The question cannot be answered from within the framework of moral relativism, and I bring it up merely to point out the kinds of questions we need to ask if we are to provide a philosophy of the library. What is the best social order? How does the library help support this order? Arguing that the library supports a given regime does not answer the question of whether that regime is worth supporting. Unless we ask about the proper end of government, and of human lives within a government, we cannot provide a rational justification for the end of the library.

## Conclusion

I have tried here not to suggest a particular end for the library that should guide our thinking, but instead to suggest that thinking philosophically about the end of the library remains our most fruitful approach to rationally informed action. Should libraries embrace all radical technological changes in a quest to seem relevant? Should libraries act according to the Universal Access Principle? Should they merely succumb to the latest demands from their constituents (the citizens of a township, the faculty and students at a college, etc.)? Unless we want to act irrationally and thoughtlessly, then librarians must reflect on the end of the library, and reflecting on the end of the library also means reflecting on the end of our society.

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