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On Libraries and the Public Sphere

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Address to the First Provost's Faculty Scholarship Dinner Art Gallery, Rider University March 9, 2004
(Adapted from my book, *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy*, published by Greenwood/Libraries Unlimited, 2003)

I know the Golden Rule of speaking and writing, so I'll start off with my catchiest question right off: why is it that Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" caused such a furor with the public and with Congress? Why is it that the last Presidential campaign ended up focused in part on the violence and coarseness of the typical product coming out of Hollywood? What is it about Jerry Springer and his imitators that makes us draw uncomfortable conclusions about our culture? The answer is the same for all three, and deceptively simple: in our putative information-driven society, when we debate the sources and nature of the information we produce and consume, we're debating the basis and nature of our economy, and as the media scholar John Durham Peters notes, "we're [also] debating democracy by other means." That is why exchanges about such trivial matters take on sharp political inflections, and why as Peters states, the "spectacle of a stupefied TV audience worries us" so. If information and its related sets of critical skills are as important to economic and political participation as we keep insisting, then what information we produce, how we keep it, what we keep, and how it is absorbed or not are crucial questions in our culture - and libraries are important (if undervalued) institutions in this.

Further questions naturally pop up. If this is as important to the economy and our politics as we have been saying, then why are schools, colleges, and libraries so threatened on the fiscal front? Why is it that, of all things in an information society, the existence of a given university or the need for a school library or the preservation of original historical documents is such an open, highly debatable question? Is it because high-quality information in permanent, easily accessible and wisdom-and-intellectual-skills-producing formats for very low cost is universally available? Clearly not, but we are left with a fundamental contradiction. My book was about exploring and trying to solve this - the paramount importance of information, its production, organization and use in an information economy and in a democracy - while at the same time its foundational institutions like schools, universities and libraries are under such threat. In the process I wanted to link libraries in a more fundamental way to the aims and purposes of education and information in a democracy - and not just an economy.

The work of the influential German political thinker and philosopher Jurgen Habermas and his ideas about the development of the public sphere are very important and useful. There is no possible way I can give anything but a sketch of his supple and deep work here. Habermas asked a question not fully considered or answered by historians: how and why did a system of individual rights and democratic rule come out of the closed political system of the absolute divine right of kings? He roots his answer in the ancient distinction between public and private: the public sphere is neither the state, nor a crowd, but rather the historically developed “sphere of non-governmental opinion-making” in his words. This didn’t always exist. The circumstance that gave rise to it was the development of a market economy. Simply put, trade and society grew beyond the ability and authority to govern in the person of a king. The turning point was the 18th century development of mercantile economies in northern Europe.

The *how* portion of this question is the connection to libraries. Habermas locates this change in the commercial and political conversations of the day in new urban public spaces like coffee houses, and most crucially, in the intellectual press of the day. The nature of this type of communication was new, and two crucial things happened as a result. First, opinion became something which was recorded and communicated beyond home and acquaintances and, via its distribution in the press, essentially created a public with opinions separate from government policy. Second, the act of public critique, discussion, and airing of the state’s actions in print and in the arena of the market created the principle of what Habermas calls supervision: the principle that for power to be legitimate, its proceedings must be made public. This transformed the nature of power and its legitimation – and it was formed through the process of rational critique, in a public forum, and the printed word was at its core. According to Habermas, it was also a process that carried with it the seeds of its own extension: power and its legitimate use was thereafter able to be subjected to the rational bases of critique and debate. In high theory terms, Habermas is explaining how the excluded (women, African Americans, immigrants, gay people) have – however slowly - fought their way into the political process and toward equal legal standing in the democratic public sphere.

For my part, I have taken up his analysis, and argue that libraries in their collective existence in democracies embody and enact much of Habermas’s classical definition of the public sphere. For instance:

- Libraries house and further rational discourse through the organization of collections coupled with the principle of unfettered information access.
- The field enacts the principle of critique and rational argumentation through the commitment to balanced collections, preserving them over time, and furthering inclusion through active attempts to make collections and resources reflect historical and current intellectual diversity.
- By their very existence libraries potentially verify (or refute) claims to authority in making current and retrospective organized resources available to check the bases of a thesis, law, book, article, policy etc. continuing the process of debate which lies at the heart of the public sphere and democracy.
- By policy and practice, my field has sought to reach out to those not served - or sometimes not wishing to be served! - to make access to information and education more widely and universally available.

I didn't make these up whole cloth on Habermas's behalf - the ideas embedded represent his elaborations on the means of the historical development of a democratic public sphere. I've linked them to library practice.

In the words of Archibald MacLeish, libraries represent an essential "premise of meaning." We may not be as certain about ends and means as in the past, but libraries remain an "enduring affirmation" that recorded human culture - gathered together, preserved, and organized - "still speak[s] and still seems to mean" in his words. Ours is an incomplete and incompletely-realized mission, but for the last fifty years or so we have supported (sometimes completely alone) a fundamental right of access to information. As a scholar in my field, Wayne Wiegand puts it, capitalism may not appreciate what it is we do, but democracy does. We have a deep and fundamental connection to the needs - however latent - of a democratic society and it is worth reminding ourselves again, when we debate information and communication and the future of libraries, we're debating democracy by other means.

Habermas is the major figure carrying on the work of the Frankfurt School, and he is no starry-eyed optimist. He notes two crucial problems in all of this. First, the public sphere so constituted relies on a highly educated, cohesive class of people. Once that breaks down and democracy becomes more of a mass, society-wide affair in the 19th century, the rational communicative process of public and opinion formation begins to break down. It devolves back to what he calls publicity. Second, the economic half of the development of the public sphere has come to dominate. With formal rights established, the press was "relieved of the pressure of its convictions" in his words, and free to "take advantage of the earnings possibilities of a commercial undertaking." The road to Jerry Springer begins right there: the press and manipulation of public opinion (publicity) becomes a means to administer the public sphere to smooth out the rough edges of an unequal economy in a putatively equal democracy. Habermas called this the "refeudalization" of the public sphere, referring to the political effects of kingly splendor and spectacle that were a hallmark of governmental authority under such systems. If we were meant to be awed and obey the authority of kings through communicating power through spectacle, we are now meant to be confused and diverted by a spectacle like "wardrobe malfunction" from questioning the nature and legitimacy of authority.

We leave Habermas for a bit and tackle the contradiction of a struggling system of schools, colleges, and libraries in an information society. The political scientist Sheldon Wolin has called this an era of a new public philosophy wherein "economics now dominates public discourse. [It] becomes the paradigm of what public reason should be [and] prescribes the form that 'problems' have to be given before they can be acted upon." Economics, as Wolin argues, now "frame[s] the alternatives in virtually every sphere of public activity, from health care, social welfare and education to weapons systems, environmental protection, and scientific research." Historically, this has not always been the case. People shared a common ground about the meaning of power, equality, freedom, and authority, and there was an inherent bias toward treating political and legal questions in moral and ethical terms. This, Wolin argues, was not a golden past, but did have a tremendous grounding effect on American society. There was an "historical skepticism about the motives of businessmen" and we saw a great era of institution

building in the 19th century - all in some measure meant for purposes of public good, democracy, and individual equal opportunity.

The new public philosophy has redefined the circumstances under which all public institutions now operate. The trend has been around for some time, but was greatly accelerated beginning around 25 years ago. Together with schools, universities, orchestras, and museums, libraries share a common fate. Education has been analyzed in this regard the most, and it is generally agreed that the watershed moment for educational policy was the issuing of *A Nation At Risk* in 1983 . Even now, some of the language in that report is familiar but startlingly blunt. There is no question that its language characterizes much of our modus operandi now. *A Nation at Risk* called for an educational “rearmament,” and the purpose of this battle was clear. Quoting from the report:

We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.... History is not kind to idlers.... We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America’s position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer.

The effect of this swing in public policy over time was that “schools [and universities] become important only to the degree that they can provide the forms of knowledge, skills, and social practices necessary to produce the labor force for an increasingly complex, technological economy” (Giroux). This new public philosophy has become the method to reform and shape the practices of our public cultural institutions - importing business methods and management schemes wholesale into non-profits. These broad trends did not stop at the library doorstep. A parallel report one year after *Risk* echoed the need to “reform” libraries for the sake of the economy. Noting its predecessor report’s “message of concern [for] every state of the union” the library report calls for my field to “undertake stringent measures for change,” declaring “America’s well-being ... is at stake. The libraries of the nation can and should be a part of the remedy.” The essence of the “remedy” proposed was to shift libraries of all types away from public funding and toward technological resources, seen as central to what is now called the “new” economy.

The results are familiar and dreary. In an anti-tax, pro-privatization and business public climate, school districts struggle for funds, and in the process, trim expenditures like art education and libraries to both stay within budget and keep a focus on the practical concerns of parents. Museums run blockbuster shows to bring in crowds and their dollars while struggling with funding basic conservation and educational missions. Universities now routinely market themselves to prospective students via their sports teams - with all the attendant problems of the entanglements that come with being the de facto minor leagues for some professional sports and the related high dollar high stakes issues like stadiums, arenas, commercial endorsements, and professional agents in an environment. The search for non-tuition funding sources has become a central truism to institutional survival, always bringing into question the funding tail wagging the academic dog. Private and defense research dollars driving and corrupting scientific research has

been a hot issue for a while now. This is only a partial list, and none of these are unique nor wholly new, but I think we'd all agree that we're in a time when they've become greatly magnified and intensified in practice.

It is happening across librarianship too. The old Library Services and Technology Act funded much of the growth in libraries for a generation, but it has greatly shrunk in relative dollar terms and is narrowly focused on technology now because the environment demands that budgets shift toward the flavor of information at the forefront of economic development. This in turn is shaping collections and the future availability of resources – it is not as if print output has diminished. Library managers widely imitate business practices whole cloth. A colleague at Indiana University (Day) has identified what he calls an imitative “transformational discourse” which takes “as valid the core argument [to] enhance competitiveness, performance, and productivity” resulting in the recasting of library users as “customers,” the library manager as “entrepreneur,” the acceptance of information commodification, and the “imperative” to “reinvent” libraries – all business buzzwords and trends which appear seamlessly in our management literature. Thus does a privatized and economic vision of the library come to dominate discussions and assumptions about its future and define its purposes.

Recently, a small cottage industry within librarianship has developed in the form of articles on the “discovery” of the success of plush, superchain bookstore outlets (like Barnes & Noble) as a place to browse for and read books. In this scenario, bookstores are seen as more successful “competitors,” and a key to their success is their more open and welcoming atmosphere. One article went so far as to suggest that Barnes & Noble’s staffing and pay structure, the quasi-catalog of inventory control systems, and the “reference” knowledge of staff was in all ways more effective than libraries - and they have comfy chairs and sell good coffee to boot. In response we’ve added coffee bars to libraries to “compete” and bring people back after spending millions of dollars to push resources out the door & on to networks. Some in the field have called libraries dying “gigantic mausoleum[s] of old information.” The current thinking is that libraries, “which used to be a major purveyor and ‘keeper’ of information, [are] now just one of the crowd [and are] barely considered as part of the information revolution.” Clearly, we are a public institution struggling to justify our existence in this new environment.

It is now time to bring the two strands of my talk together. By having their purposes recast in economic terms in contrast to their public, democratic function when they were founded, my argument is that we are dismantling what remains of the democratic public sphere by managing libraries in this way. There has been a fundamental change in the purposes of libraries (and, I would argue, of an education too) - one that has come about almost “naturally” and without wide debate. In adapting Habermas’s ideas, I have proposed that libraries embody and enact the democratic public sphere ideal in the form of rational organization of human cultural production. Our acceding to economic models as a public philosophy results in an active deconstructing of the public sphere discourse that libraries represent. For instance:

When we convert print to electronic formats heedlessly, without planning for, paying for, or worrying about preservation of these new artifacts, we are evacuating the historical record for the future. This has actually happened. One of Rider’s flagship science databases estimated that they have a 2% error rate in dropping text from digitized articles. (That’s twenty words

arbitrarily gone from every four pages of manuscript text.) The e-mail records of the Reagan and first Bush Administrations are in a perilously fragile and disorganized condition. A dumpster diver recently rescued some original patent applications by Thomas Edison, discarded because they'd been digitized and the federal agency's archive needed to save space & didn't consider them worth keeping.

When we skew services and collections toward constituencies that “pay,” whether in the form of donations or local businesses or those who will vote for tax support of public libraries or in purely popular collections to pull in foot traffic and “compete” with the mall bookstore, we inherently evacuate historical policies of fairness, broad representation, and public purposes beyond the immediate payoff for the institution.

When library budgets generally don't allow for the robust collection of print and electronic resources, one is cut to pay for another. This means that fewer and fewer copies of books at a consequently much higher cost per volume, with a much higher cost of access through the interlibrary loan systems, are being stretched over a system allegedly running on more, and better, and quicker, and accessible, and cheaper information.

Nicholson Baker has shamed the library field with his expose on late 19th and early 20th century newspapers and his observations of the types of historical information lost when we don't plan for the preservation of even one physical copy. Lastly, the sky-high costs of information, particularly journals, has been driven by its commodification and the increasingly centralized, commercial ownership of scholarly publication outlets.

Mind you, I'm not suggesting librarianship likes or wants this set of circumstances. But what I am suggesting is that our responses, particularly at the national level and among our leadership, have been inadequate. Aping business rhetoric and models doesn't save libraries, it transforms them into something else. We're a profession and an institution in crisis because we have a structural contradiction between our purposes and practices as they've historically evolved and our adaptation to the current environment. My book is about figuring out where “North” is on our professional compasses, and it concludes with a sketch of what I call a sustainable reason for libraries, a theory of democratic public institutions. I ground this in the work of the philosopher Amy Gutmann, particularly her work on democratic education and related definitions of critical literacy. This in turn is closely linked to Thurgood Marshall's (in Katz) idea of the fundamental democratic right to an education—not mere schooling—as a Constitutional principle. Gutmann's work is not blue-sky theoretical: she provides the blueprint for on-the-ground forms of local organization and democratic justifications for these institutions. In this, she is very much in concert with Habermas's ideas.

To sum up, thinkers as varied as the management guru Henry Mintzberg and the media critic Neil Postman have arrived at similar conclusions: we are a society out of balance. One system of thinking about society and its problems and one method of solving them—economics—has come to dominate as a public philosophy. Our historical strength lies in robust sectors of society and the economy which are different, not unlike higher education's traditional strength in the dispersion among public and private institutions and small liberal arts colleges and research universities. Mintzberg sees the lack of alternatives. Postman likens it to an ecological imbalance and as a real threat to our democracy. In turn I think all of us need to be

reminded that the values and effects of a library, like good teaching, are extraordinarily difficult to quantify. They may be profound, but latent for many, many years. Despite our best efforts to crack these secrets, this remains true. It is similarly true that informed deliberation remains the essence of both education and democracy, and libraries play a pivotal role in both. The educational philosopher Maxine Greene writes reminding us that “nowhere is it written” that we are required to organize ourselves “in response to the demands of the Pentagon or to those obsessed with exploiting markets overseas,” To accede to that purpose robs the society we serve of an important, if ineffable, resource:

Who knows better how important it is to look at things, whenever possible, as if they could be otherwise? [We must preserve] the idea of imagination [which is] in part, the capacity to apply concepts to things, to recognize the range of applications, and to invent new concepts. [We must preserve] the possibility to move between ... “spontaneous concepts” and more formal or schematic ones [and] the capacity to make metaphors, to create new orders in experience and to realize that there is always more in experience than anyone can predict.

My book is about setting out a reason for libraries that encompasses these ideas.

As a society, we can afford that public mission and democratic good - and many other public goods as well. As a democracy, we need that potential preserved.

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